

PERSPECTIVE

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FAITHFUL LIVING

WHETHER THE CHURCH IS
PRIVILEGED OR PERSECUTED



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Faithful Living, Whether the Church Is Privileged or Persecuted

Stop your average Christian at church on Sunday morning and ask him if he knows anything about Diocletian, and you will get a blank stare. We are a live-in-the-moment kind of people. But in the late third and early fourth centuries, every Christian would have known his name.

Diocletian rose through the ranks of the Roman army to become emperor in AD 295. His reforms brought esteem and power to an office that had been languishing in prestige for some time. He reorganized the government, demanded absolute obedience, and renewed the persecution of Christians.

Diocletian expelled believers from the Roman legion and excluded them from government service. He ordered them to turn over religious books. He arrested church leaders. The climax of the persecution came when he made every Christian sacrifice to the pagan gods. A refusal to obey led to torture and often death. The book of martyrs was filled during this awful era.

Thankfully the policies changed after Diocletian. The next emperor, Galerius, chose to tolerate the Christian faith. His successor, Constantine, took it a step further. He claimed Jesus Christ granted him victory in battle and, as a result, Constantine made Christianity a favored religion.

What a difference an emperor makes! In short order, the church persecuted became the church privileged. Constantine gave money for the construction of church buildings. He exempted pastors from taxation, forbid gladiatorial games, made Sunday a holiday, and prohibited idol worship. Though Constantine would not be the ruler who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, he was Christianity's first BFF.

Materially speaking, the church had never been better off. However, spiritually speaking, it suffered. Bearing the name of Christ became socially prestigious. I'm reminded of a deacon who listed his church service on his resume. Why? Because he lived in a culture where employers saw Christianity as a badge of public honor. That was life under Constantine.

But all was not well in the church. A privileged church is a lazy church. As the line between the church and the world thinned, so did the holiness, piety, and zeal of God's people. Justo Gonzalez posed the questions raised by Constantine's accommodation of the church:

When the church joins the powers of the world, when luxury and ostentation take hold of Christian altars, when the whole of society is intent on turning the narrow path into a wide avenue, how is one to resist the enormous temptations of the times? How is one to witness to the Crucified Lord, to the One who had nowhere to lay his head, at a time when many leaders of the church live in costly homes, and when the ultimate witness of martyrdom is no longer possible? How is one to overcome Satan, who is constantly tempting the faithful with the new honors that society offers? ⁱ

Many Christians in Constantine's day sounded a retreat. They left the cities and, quite literally, moved to the desert to pursue a monastic life. Fearing they could never be close to God in a culture that embraced the Christian faith, they founded the fourth-century equivalent of a holy huddle.

Constantine Has Left the Building

Ever since Constantine's takeover, Christians have wrestled with the question, "How can I be a faithful Christian and citizen?" To borrow Augustine's terminology, "How can I live in the city of God and the city of man?" After all, Paul tells us we have been "seated . . . in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). So in a sense we are in the city of God. But we are also right here, in a fallen world, left to figure out what it means to, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:13-17; see also Matt 22:15-22; Luke 20:1-26).

As I write these words, the Supreme Court is preparing to hear oral arguments for making same-sex marriage the law of the land. Whether this happens overnight or incrementally, most pundits believe it is inevitable that the United States Government will decide that the institution of marriage is not limited to a man and a woman.

This is the most sensitive, ethical decision to face our generation. As vocal as the pro-abortion lobby has been

about the right of a mother to terminate a pregnancy, there has usually been some semblance of respect for the pro-life position. If you believe that an embryo is a life, the only consistent action is to advocate for his or her right to live. You don't have to be a Christian to appreciate this line of reasoning.

To those outside the church the argument for exclusively heterosexual marriage lacks the same gravitas. "Everyone has evolved on the issue of same-sex marriage," they say, "why can't you?" And when we reply, "The Word of God does not give me the freedom to redefine marriage," they remind us of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which declared school segregation unconstitutional. And they close with one last question, "Do you really want to be on the wrong side of history?"

The problem with the segregationists in the 1950s is not that they were on the wrong side of history; they were on the wrong side of God! That Supreme Court decision was just and good and every American and every Christian can be thankful for it. The fact that opposition to same-sex marriage is now equated to opposition to integrated schools shows just how hardened the culture is becoming to the historic, Christian view of marriage. The evangelical church is holding its breath and preparing to live in a world where our neighbors equate upholding traditional marriage to upholding Jim Crow.

In short, historic Christianity is on the cusp of losing any sense of social privilege. Constantine has left the building.

How Should the Church Respond?

My prayer is that the following points help us respond in a godly manner to those who would disagree with us, those who abhor our position, and even those who would hate us for holding to a traditional view of marriage. My sense is that many evangelicals today see themselves as weary saints in a nation losing its soul. I offer this counsel in the attempt to provide faithful, biblical instruction in changing, difficult times.

Whether this happens overnight or incrementally, most pundits believe it is inevitable that the United States Government will decide that the institution of marriage is not limited to a man and a woman. This is the most sensitive, ethical decision to face our generation.

First, there is never an excuse not to love your neighbor. After loving God, the most important commandment for the Christian is to love his or her neighbor (Mark 12:28-31; Matt 22:34-40). As we learn from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbor is anyone in need (Luke 10:25-37). It's important to remember that we are

called to love our neighbors, and for the purposes of our present legal disputes, this means loving our country—loving *all* Americans.

It is easy in a politically-charged climate to fall into an "us versus them" mentality. This does not serve the cause of Christ. We have serious and deep disagreements over the definition of life and marriage. These convictions shape our approach to birth control, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage. Inevitably, the faithful Christian will find himself at

odds with his neighbor over principles and policies.

But these differences of opinion, however serious, must not keep us from seeing our critics as made in the image of God and thus worthy of respect and love. The moment we yell at our neighbor or simply harbor resentment in our heart—whether he is a talk-show host, a presidential candidate, or a family member—is the moment we fall short of the Master's will: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44).

Second, love demands a concern for your neighbor's soul. Evangelicals are, by definition, an evangelistic people. We have a message of urgent importance: eternal salvation depends upon joyful submission to Jesus Christ. It is our greatest desire to glorify the Lord by spreading good news. Our goal in life is not to make bad people better. We aim to see sinners forgiven and reconciled to God through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

We must take every opportunity to "do good to all men" (Gal 6:10). However, it is of no eternal value to feed someone's belly or straighten out his or her politics. The best "good" that we can do is to persuade a fellow human being to follow Jesus. More than one Christian

has noted that Jesus Christ did not come to earth as a social revolutionary. Instead, he preached the gospel. He lived in an empire mired in injustice, but he didn't found a non-profit—he preached the kingdom of God. Is this because Jesus didn't care about society? Is it because he didn't care about making people's lives better? Not at all! It's because love demanded he make one thing clear: without the gospel everything we do is in vain.

Our most important battle is spiritual. It is not with the Supreme Court, the Justice Department, or the ACLU. Our battle is with Satan who will do anything he can to keep eyes blinded to the glory of Christ. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

As you seek to live out the gospel in a fallen world, remember that your priority should not be to win people over to a political platform or policy—as true and right as your position may be. Aim to persuade others that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that it is worth giving up the world to follow him.

Third, exercise your freedom to speak truth to power. God has given each of us unique roles. I'm a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a pastor, and a citizen. Each of these roles carries with it a separate set of responsibilities. As a husband I am to love and serve my wife. As a father I'm to shepherd my kids. As a son I'm to honor my parents. As a brother I'm to serve my siblings. As a pastor I'm to devote myself to the ministry of the word and prayer. And as a citizen I'm to give to Caesar what belongs to him.

I was helped a number of years ago by an observation Russell Moore, now president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, made. He noted that in America we are Caesar! America is a representative democracy in that we elect men and women to pass laws that govern us. Therefore, under this system of government, we have a voice. Those we elect will inevitably vote their conscience, but because we elected them we have an opportunity to inform them of our views.

You may not have a strong opinion about whether your city should install a traffic light at the corner of 5th and Main. No need to petition your representative there! You may have a strong opinion about whether there should be a traffic light installed, but you may recognize that the decision is not that important. You probably

won't call your congressman. No problem. However, if you are a Christian you care deeply about issues relating to the sanctity of life and the definition of marriage. Those issues are important both for biblical fidelity and human flourishing. Therefore, take advantage of the freedom you have to share those views. Write letters, make phone calls, and reach out to your elected representatives. This is your responsibility as a citizen.

How you speak truth to power is important. As Paul told the Colossians, "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Eph 4:5-6). Freedom to disagree is not freedom to berate. Love demands we exercise our freedom graciously.

Fourth, be diligent in prayer.

America has a long and rich history of marches to garner interest and to make a public statement. A march can be an excellent way to speak truth to power. However, we would be foolish to neglect the power of prayer:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1-4).

Paul knew that the ability to have "a peaceful and quiet life" is ultimately in the hands of God. "Kings and all who are in high positions" do not have ultimate power, God does. And so we pray for them—for Supreme Court justices, presidents, senators, congressman, governors, and mayors. We pray because whether they know it or not, they have been appointed to a position of authority by God himself (Rom 13:1). Their leadership has been ordained by God for the peace of our communities. Pray these authorities would be wise and just in their leadership. As you pray, trust that whatever decisions they make will ultimately work together for the good of God's people (Rom 8:28).

Christians may disagree about how politically active we ought to be. But there can be no disagreement about the call to prayer. Paul is specific: we are to pray for our leaders. We are to pray specifically that under their

leadership the gospel would be freely proclaimed so that many would be saved.

You may be blogging, tweeting, and posting on Facebook about the current political environment. But are you praying?

Fifth, let the church be the church.

Yesterday I visited my town's Anne Frank museum. This young girl and her family fled Germany for Amsterdam, but the Nazis followed. They hid for two years, never stepping outside in the sun, only to be betrayed, found, arrested, and ultimately murdered in a grisly concentration camps. Only Anne's father, Otto, survived. I'm Jewish and had I lived during the Nazi regime I would have been the target of the same hate.

Through it all, with few exceptions, the church in Germany refused to be the church.

The church is one institution on the face of the planet charged to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Paul declared the whole counsel of God to the church in Ephesus, and he expected the elders of that church to follow suit. And now, every church operates with the same mandate.

What does it mean for Paul to preach the whole counsel of God? D. A. Carson explains:

He taught the burden of the whole of God's revelation, the balance of things, leaving nothing out that was of primary importance, never ducking the hard bits, helping believers so to grasp the whole counsel of God that they themselves would become better equipped to read their Bibles intelligently, comprehensively. This doubtless included not only what to believe, but how to act.ⁱⁱ

The same message must be preached in every pulpit by every pastor in every country in every era. That is what it means for the church to be the church. And just as Paul addressed specific problems in the churches of his day, so elders today must address specific problems with the whole counsel of God in their tool belt.

How would history be different if more pastors in nineteenth-century America gave their congregations a biblical-theological framework explaining why slavery is unjust? What would have happened in twentieth-century Germany if congregation after congregation

exposed Hitler's scheme as Satanic? For a southern pastor in America, this would have most likely meant losing his church. For German pastor this would have meant forfeiting his life. There is no guarantee that faithfulness to preach the whole counsel of God will improve society. That's not the point. This is what it means for the church to be the church.

The church is not a political arm of the state. It is not the church's job to elect leaders. Nor is it the church's job to celebrate America. I think July 4th celebrations are best left for the city steps, not the church pews—every local church is a church for the nations. But for the church to be the church she must, as Carson put it, stop “ducking the hard bits,” even if those bits raise the ire of our neighbors and buck the moral compass of our nation.

Sixth, don't be afraid to be in the minority.

One of my heroes is a man by the name of David Barrow. In 1805 a group of pastors excluded Barrow and his church from its fellowship because he preached against slavery. They exhorted him to stop, but he refused. He saw slavery as a sin to God and a danger to the community: “I believe it is acknowledged by all men of understanding that the strengths and riches of a civil community, principally consists in the number of its *free*, virtuous and industrious inhabitants.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He wasn't afraid to be part of the moral minority. Should the evangelical church find itself despised by our neighbors for our Scriptural views, we wouldn't be the first believers to suffer unjust condemnation.

Though we should not pray for persecution, it is important to see how God uses persecution to strengthen the church. Persecution can make the Bible come to life when we feel the animosity faced by our forefathers and our Savior himself. Persecution leads us to long for heaven more passionately as we share with John in the joy of praying, “Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20). Persecution reveals how desperate we are for God's help. Maligned for biblical conviction we know better how to declare, “The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped” (Psa 28:7). Accused of wrongdoing we go to God in desperate need, “Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy” (Psa 86:1).

When Constantine came to power, the church grew soft. It forgot the sweetness of knowing Christ in the midst of opposition. That's why some fled the cities for the desert where they could work on their personal walk with the

Lord. Fleeing a world in need is not the way to go—in days of persecution or privilege. But as the church is less and less privileged, if faithful Christians gain minority status, let's be ready to face the fire with a renewed commitment to the pleasure of simply knowing God for who he is and not for what he gives us.

Seventh, honor Caesar, but honor God more.

On March 28, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went on Meet the Press. When asked why he would ignore a federal injunction against leading a protest march, King said there are two types of laws, a just law and an unjust law. We have a moral obligation, King argued, to disobey an unjust law. He put it this way, "Noncooperation with evil is as much moral obligation as cooperation with good." King went on to say that when one's conscience leads one to disobey an unjust law, it must be done "openly . . . cheerfully . . . lovingly . . . civilly . . . and with the willingness to accept the penalty." He then noted how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to break the law because they had to stay "true to a higher moral law."^{iv}

Certainly this is true. Daniel's friends refused to bow the knee to Nebuchadnezzar because they believed no human being could demand from them that kind of allegiance. They were willing to honor Nebuchadnezzar, but they were unwilling to give him the honor due only to God. Even if it meant death, they could not deny their conscience. The three believed God would save them, but they didn't require it: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. *But if not*, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Dan 3:18). They loved God more than their safety.

It is the Christian's duty to be faithful to God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. This means honoring Caesar by obeying the law but never putting the law above God.

Who knows what the political landscape in America will be in a month, year, or decade? As we work through changing attitudes toward marriage, Christians will inevitably disagree over the best way to honor the Lord in a world that has taken a stance on marriage opposite to the one we find in the Bible. Some Christians will say they can provide flowers to a same-sex marriage without violating their conscience, others will say they can't. Every Christian and every local church will have to wrestle with the details of practical, daily obedience.

In the meantime, this much is clear: Caesar has no right to steal the honor reserved for God himself. Regardless of Supreme Court decisions, Senate votes, or Twitter frenzy, let's hold firm on God's design for marriage. And whether the church is privileged or persecuted, let's love our neighbors to the very end.

~Aaron Menikoff

ⁱ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Harper, 1984), 136-37.

ⁱⁱ D. A. Carson, "Challenges for the Twenty-first-century Pulpit," in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Crossway, 2007), 178.

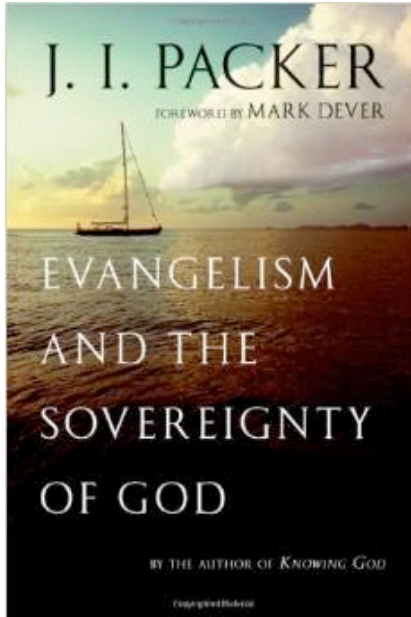
ⁱⁱⁱ David Barrow, *Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual . . . Slavery, Examined* (Lexington, KY: D. & C. Bradford, 1808), 11. Italics added.

^{iv} "Martin Luther King, Jr. On NBC's Meet the Press (1965) Archives NBC News. Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAtsAwGreyE>. Accessed 22 April 2015.

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Written by J. I. Packer

Bookstall Price \$14



Paul writes to the Romans concerning God's salvation, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those who he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30). If God is totally sovereign and only those he has predestined and elected will come to salvation, how can man be responsible for his unbelief? Yet both of these truths are evident in the Bible.

J. I. Packer tells the reader that

"C.H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. 'I wouldn't try,' he replied; I never reconcile friends" (p 43).

In *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer says, "The supposition seems to be that you cannot evangelize effectively unless you are prepared to pretend while you are doing it that the doctrine of divine sovereignty is not true" (p. 14). Then he refutes the idea that belief in the sovereignty of God impedes evangelism by taking the reader chapter by chapter explaining the reasons that belief in God's sovereignty produces confidence and enthusiasm in the witness of a Christian. He explains what evangelism is and is not; the key elements that the gospel message must contain; what motivates us to evangelize; what means and methods should be used in evangelism; and why the belief in God's total control in this process produces a kind, respectful, and patient witness to unbelieving friends, neighbors, and family. This 135 page book will inspire any Christian reader to increased love and concern for the lost and a greater enthusiasm for evangelism.

— RECOMMENDED BY RODNEY BARRY

Excerpts from the Book

1

"I do not intend to spend any time at all proving to you the general truth that God is sovereign in his world. There is no need; for I know that, if you are a Christian you believe this already. How do I know that? Because I know that, if you are a Christian, you pray; and the recognition of God's sovereignty is the basis of your prayers."

— Divine Sovereignty, p. 17

2

"But the way to tell whether in fact you are evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness. It is to ask whether you are faithfully making known the gospel message"

— Evangelism, p. 50

3

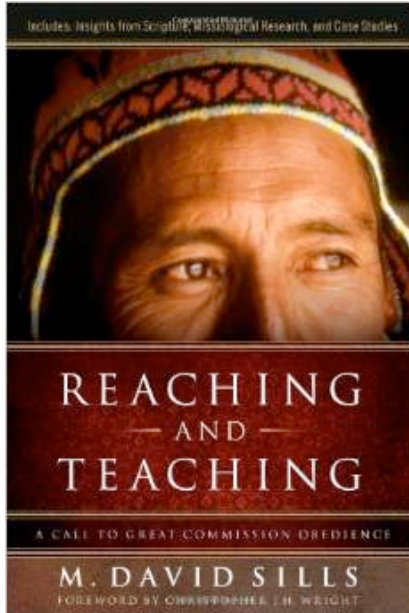
"The gospel starts by teaching us that we, as creatures, are absolutely dependent on God, and that he, as Creator, has an absolute claim on us. Only when we have learned this can we see what sin is, and only when we see what sin is can we understand the good news of salvation from sin. We must know what it means to call God Creator before we can grasp what it means to speak of him as Redeemer."

— Evangelism, p. 67

Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience

Written by David Sills

Bookstall Price \$14



Jesus has given an explicit mandate to the church to take the gospel to all people groups in the world. Matthew 28:18-20, says, “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” Dr. David Sills, an experienced missionary and professor of missiology at

Southern Seminary, has penned a work that is provocative, critical and challenging. *Reaching and Teaching* is a critical assessment of modern era missions and is replete with challenges for all to be biblically obedience to making disciples and teaching them.

Who should read this book? The answer is that this book not just for missionaries or seminary students but should be read by every serious bible-believing Christian who takes serious the commands of Jesus. This book is a vitality important work, so vital that the Elder Mission Team at MVBC is reading through it together so that we may better understand the current missiological landscape and be able, as Elders, to steward well the resources God entrusts to us for obedience to the commands of Christ.

Reaching the unreached is mandated, but it is also exciting and cutting edge. Yet Sills challenges the reader to consider the type of churches we are we raising up. Without the proper attention to teaching and discipleship, will the indigenous church last beyond one generation and be able to multiply? Obedience to the Great Commission is not just for some Christians and some churches. It is a universal mandate for all Christians and all churches. *Reaching and Teaching* will help every Christian better understand the necessary balance of reaching people for Christ and faithfully teaching them to become obedient, biblical followers of Christ.

– RECOMMENDED BY BRYAN PILLSBURY

Excerpts from the Book

1

“Over one-third of the world – more than two billion people – has never heard the gospel. Approximately one-half of the world’s people groups remain unreached. Among those we reached in past decades, new generations are questioning the shallow and often syncretistic versions of Christianity that their parents believe.”

– Teaching Them: The Great Omission of the Great Commission, p. 16

2

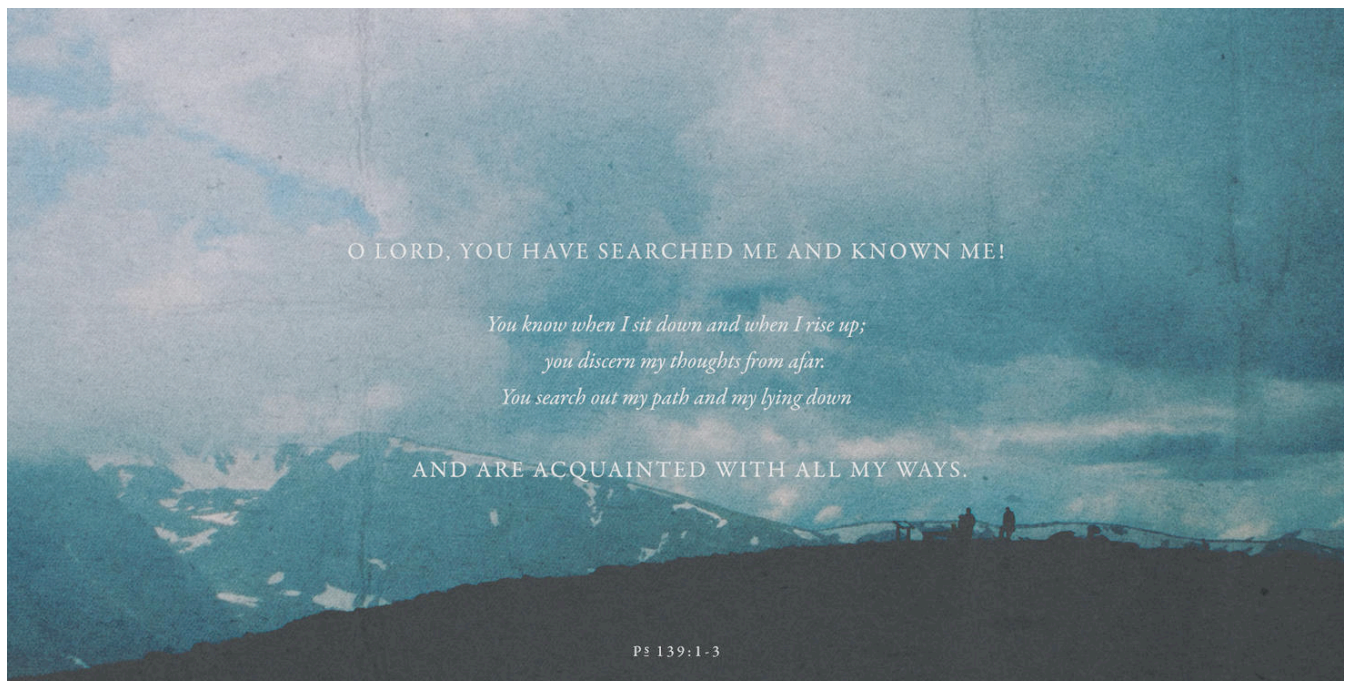
“If we are not training national believers to believe biblically sound doctrine and to interpret the Word of God correctly, the day will soon come when those who represent Christ in this world will be preaching a gospel that Jesus never gave.”

– Teaching Them: The Great Omission of the Great Commission, p. 29

3

“There is a God who has clearly communicated what sin is, and His Word is authoritative in every culture – no matter what the local culture may think.”

– Critical Contextualization: The Balance Between Too Far and Not Far Enough, p. 199

**To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.**

O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
— Psalm 139:1-3

Relationships are built on the knowledge that people have of one another: the deeper the knowledge, the more intimate the relationship. Such relationships are made as we reveal details about ourselves to others, and we reveal them only those that we trust to use them for our good. That is the basic pattern of human relationships: intimacy comes from knowledge revealed from trust.

Yet, it is not so with our Creator God. Yes. He has revealed himself to us in His Word. But we need not reveal ourselves to him for he already knows us better than we know ourselves. The Lord is all-knowing, as David implies in these verses. However, the psalmist is not leading us to marvel at the breadth of God's omniscience. Instead, we are told to marvel at how intimately personal his omniscience is of *us*. The Lord searches and knows *me* and all there is about *me* – my thoughts and my ways.

That may be a terrifying truth to some for their secrets are not as hidden as they think; the shroud of darkness is

thinner than they perceive. Unbelievers should fear the Creator's omniscience for he is also their Judge, to whom they will give an account for all their wandering thoughts and rebellious ways. A judge decides a verdict based on the knowledge he has from the facts presented. But no prosecutor is needed to present facts in order to enlighten their Judge to the details of their crime. It is known and the sentence is decided before the hearing takes place because the Judge is well acquainted with all their ways.

But Christian, there is comfort for you in David's words for the Lord knows you as your perfect heavenly Father. Because Christ stood in your place as your advocate before the holy Judge, God now treats you as his precious son and daughter. A young child confidently holds the hand of their father as they hike the trail because the father knows where it leads. So it is with your heavenly Father. Your ways are laid out and your path is well-worn by his omniscience. So let the depth of God's knowledge lead you to a more intimate relationship.

— BRAD THAYER

Graphic courtesy of The Verses Project. For more devotional material and memorization tools, visit www.theversesproject.com.



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