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# Ecclesia

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# Editorial

Tessa Tangen

In my early twenties, I spent two years living in England. It was long enough for me to start saying things like “bin,” “boot,” and “hoover” so as to not draw even more attention to my distinctly North American way of speaking. It was long enough to turn acquaintances into dear friends and learn what is and is not socially acceptable according to British standards. Most importantly, though, it was long enough for me to attend a few churches, which provided me with a glimpse of the spiritual context in England.

In my mid-twenties, I met a wonderful man who hailed from Seattle, Washington. Being from just north of the border myself, our long-distance dating relationship was not all that long geographically-speaking, but it was long-distance enough that we were in separate countries. Whenever I visited him I became a foreigner for a time, noting everything that was unfamiliar. We are married now and live here in Canada, but part of our family (and therefore our lives) remains in the United States. This means that, with the passing of time, my picture of American culture, context, and Christianity is becoming more clear.

While my increasing knowledge of these two countries has increased my love for them, it has also increased my awareness that they are different from the country we call home—Canada. This is by no means a revolutionary thought, I know, but it is an important one for us to keep in mind as we inaugurate this journal. For the questions will inevitably be begged: Why a journal? And why *this* journal? Allow me to address both of these individually.

Those of us doing ministry in the true north can testify that Christianity in Canada falls in a unique place along the spectrum of a Post-Christian context: somewhat behind the United Kingdom and somewhat ahead of the United States. It follows, then, that we should easily be able to find uniquely Canadian content, addressing us

(pastors, leaders, congregants) where we are. Reality tells us otherwise, however. What we have instead is an abundance of British and American content, some of which is helpful and some of which is not. When seeking out resources to share with our congregations or students, or to inspire us in our writing of sermons, blog posts, or Bible studies, we find ourselves poring over articles and listening through podcasts, seeking to catch the bits that are relevant and discard those that are not. While we undoubtedly overflow with gratitude for the ministry of our brothers and sisters abroad and the insights they provide, we find ourselves longing for something a little closer to home—both geographically and spiritually. We crave the insight of our fellow Canadians. Simply stated, we have noticed the gap of material written *from* a Canadian context *to* a Canadian audience, and we aim to help fill this gap.

But why *this* journal? The front cover states that we are a publication of the Northview Leadership Institute. Northview Community Church, located in Abbotsford, British Columbia, is the church where myself and my journal colleagues do ministry. By God's providence, Northview exists to make disciples of Jesus through the multiplication of healthy local churches. The primary means of doing this is by developing leaders that we can send out to serve in, plant, or replant churches across Canada. While part of our job is to equip these leaders-to-be to shepherd a flock well, another aspect is to encourage them to think well, and deeply, about the things of God. For, as A.W. Tozer once wisely wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>1</sup> And what we think about God, His Word, and His Church, will come to bear on every aspect of ministry. In essence, then, the idea for this journal came about because we want to provide a platform for our pastoral interns to share the results of their deep thought and careful research. We also dream of a future where we receive submissions for this journal from Christian thinkers across Canada, so that we can

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1971), 7.

learn from the contributions of people not associated with our particular local church.

So, tying this latter motivation with the former, what we have is the first issue of a journal that seeks to give voice to Canadian church leaders, young and old. Not just for the sake of putting words on a page, but for the distinctly Christian purpose of bringing glory to God, “[our] Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (Rom. 1:25).<sup>2</sup> In every article, we point to the One who has given us the minds to think and the words to write, and who has placed us in this context at this time. Flowing from that, it is our great desire to edify those doing ministry in this diverse and beautiful country, spurring others on to think well and deeply about God. On a practical note, we aim to be consistent in our delivery of the promise that all articles are scholarly in nature, applicable, for the church, and written in language that is sophisticated yet accessible.

With this mission in mind, we set out on our journey and invite you to follow along. May the Lord lead us where we ought to go.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural passages are from the ESV translation.

# Editorial

Marc Lapointe

As I write this introduction to our inaugural issue of *Ecclesia*, there is war in Ukraine; the COVID-19 pandemic persists; questions of gender and sexuality dominate the cultural landscape; mental health issues are on the rise; and not only are we, as Christians, facing pressure from the wider, secular culture, we are also experiencing tension from within. Little wonder that more and more faithful leaders in local churches are exhausted and stepping away from ministry. I wouldn't blame Christians—particularly in Canada—for feeling discouraged as they survey the world around them. The purpose of my short editorial, however, is to not lament but, instead, to exhort. In other words, this is a call to action.

As Christians we must come to grips with the reality of being disciples of Christ: in this life, suffering and hardships come with the territory. Jesus could not have been more clear about this when He declared: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12).<sup>1</sup> Yet, Scripture also teaches that, regardless of how things may appear, God is sovereign and all things are accomplished according to His will: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). While it may *feel* as though things are unravelling around us, the truth is that all of creation—including humanity and its institutions—is subject to the will of God. This means that we can go into the world and boldly fulfill Christ's Great Commission knowing that, whatever obstacles and difficulties lay ahead for the church (and there *will* be

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural passages are from the ESV translation.



obstacles and difficulties), “...the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

It is with this call to action in mind that *Ecclesia: Journal of Practical Theology* was born. The Northview Leadership Institute exists to train both lay and vocational leaders in the church, and so it is our desire to provide a resource where pastors, students, and church members can engage with a host of topics relevant to the local Canadian church. Our hope is that it not only serves as a vehicle through which readers can reflect more deeply on the issues of the day, but also as a way to exemplify how God’s Word should serve as the *primary* lens through which Christians are to engage the world around them. For our first issue, our editorial team has sought to showcase articles that incorporate the range and diversity of topics that readers of *Ecclesia* can expect to find in future issues, from scholarly arguments and pastoral guidance to personal experiences and testimonies that are meant to exhort and encourage. Accordingly, our contributors bring with them a variety of ministerial contexts, each one seeking to lend their experience and expertise in hopes of providing greater knowledge, more profound reflection, greater application and, most importantly, a deeper love and passion for God and His Word.

# Calling to Ministry:

## A Young Pastor's Perspective

Levi Friesen<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article seeks to accomplish three purposes. First, to articulate my understanding of the heart of Christian ministry as a young adult just beginning in this kind of work. Second, to show there is both a general and particular call to Christian ministry. Third, to present to other young adults considering ministry the significance of receiving formal pastoral and theological training, particularly within a Canadian context.

**Keywords:** vocation, ministry, theology, worldview, pastoring, Scriptures, training

## Introduction

There are many ways in which people have spoken about being called into vocational ministry over the years. Some have helpfully outlined what are often the defining experiences of a genuine calling into ministry, as has been done by Charles Spurgeon.<sup>2</sup> However, that is not what this article seeks to do. Rather, it will consider the Scripture passage that has been significant for me as I understand my being called into ministry, and to consider how all Christians, but young adults in particular, are called to engage in this

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<sup>1</sup> Levi Friesen is a Pastoral Intern at Northview Community Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "The Call to Ministry," in *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), 22–41.

kind of ministry, potentially through formal training in pastoral and theological areas.

## The Nature of Ministry

My understanding of what “doing ministry” entails has shifted the more I have learned about the way Scripture describes ministry. Early on, my definition would have sounded something like “being paid by the church to teach, preach, and counsel.” While this is certainly a general survey of the tasks of ministry, I have come to understand that this definition is inadequate. Ephesians 4:11-16 articulates well the overarching call of Christian ministry.

“[God] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11).<sup>3</sup> Here is expressed the range of those who are given to the church, and the purpose for which they are given. Those who engage in ministry do so in diverse ways, yet having a single purpose: “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11). The success or failure of any ministry will be measured—in no small part—by this criteria. This is a marked shift from my initial perception of ministry work, but it is a shift that corrects the errors of an overly numbers-oriented approach to ministry. The goal is to build the church.

Paul also describes ministry as “building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11b-13). To see ministry as a call to simply meet pragmatic metrics—like an increase of people, financial targets, or even a number of churches to be planted—is to have a rather superficial view of “building up the body of Christ.” John Stott articulates this by saying that “the church’s goal is... its own maturity in unity which comes from knowing, trusting and growing up into

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

Christ.”<sup>4</sup> To grow a church in any way other than growing up into Christ is like growing a body without a skeleton or muscles; such a church is doomed to never be faithful and healthy. Scripture sets the goal for us to strive toward. Building the church looks like growing its members in maturity.

This, in particular, is what drew me into ministry. I have long had a desire to learn and deepen my understanding of God and His word, but that in and of itself did not constitute a compatibility for ministry. Seeing that the Scriptures call me to use my knowledge and experience to help others follow Jesus was where I recognized a clear calling to ministry. That calling was affirmed upon realizing that this is a significant way I could contribute to the building of the church (Eph. 4:11). The desire I have to learn and grow fuels my ability to help lead others to grow in maturity.

The need for Christian maturity is also placed before us in this passage. We are to mature “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph. 4:14). Here Paul diagnoses the situation around the church; we are in the midst of a stormy sea, facing all kinds of different teaching, each claiming to be the way we ought to follow. We need knowledge of both the waves themselves and how to sail through them. Those who are called to ministry are called to be able to assess the treacherous conditions and reach the shore safely. We are to discern between false and good teaching as we minister in the tides of the world, because this is a life-and-death situation. People believing false doctrine is not merely an academic issue; it has eternal ramifications. Thus the call to ministry is a call to participate in the means God uses to keep His children from drowning.

This unique contour of Ephesians 4:11-16 is what embedded my call to ministry at a heart level. As I looked at friends of mine who have walked away from their faith and have ended up believing all kinds of things that will not sustain them when difficulties come their

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, vol. 44 of *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 169.

way, I saw that there is a tremendous need for people to be taught good and solid doctrine in a manner that speaks not only to their intellect, but also to their heart. I know that there are people in every church who are sinking and do not realize it, who need to be taught what is good and true. I also know that every church has people who are unaware of the nature of the drowning hazards around them, who likewise need to be warned of the danger and taught the truth. This is the primary way that I see Ephesians 4:11-16 shaping my calling to ministry. Having pastors and leaders who have given their lives to serve a congregation by teaching these people true doctrine and warning about false doctrine is absolutely essential to the life of the church.

Paul contrasts being tossed by the waves with “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15-16). Both message and manner matter to Paul; truth and love are needed together. The church finds its anchor in Christ, anticipated in the God-breathed Old Testament, presented in the inspired apostolic writings of the New Testament. The truth of Christ is of the utmost significance for the Christian. In Christ, the church is joined together—a community reconciled to God. This joining work necessarily creates a new social situation, wherein there is a life of love that reflects how it was God’s love that formed the church in Christ. This is the life of love that the church “builds itself up in” (Eph. 4:16b). Thus the call to ministry is neither a call to exclusively present and defend truth, nor a call to only train people to love—it is both at once. The truth of who Jesus is and what He has done necessitates a response of love in those whom He has saved. The call to ministry is a call to equip the saints to be a self-perpetuating community that embodies the truth and love of Jesus, and this is the very call that has warmed my heart towards pastoral ministry.

## The Scope of the Call to Ministry

There are two levels, in light of the nature of ministry described in Ephesians 4, at which we ought to consider who is “called to ministry.” At one level, we are all called to ministry. Ephesians 4 speaks of a general kind of ministry that all believers are called to, as we all do the ministry of “speaking the truth in love [in order that we] grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). The whole body grows as the whole body speaks the truth in love. We all do this “in different ways, in different contexts and with different levels of effectiveness, but the basic methodology of body growth is that all the members ‘speak the truth in love,’ one to another.”<sup>5</sup>

The rationale for this level of ministry is that it is the natural response to the truth and love we have received in Christ. When we are made to see ourselves for what we really are—created by God, plunged into darkness by our sin, redeemed in Christ, renewed by the Spirit—how can we do anything but speak this truth? When we see that this whole story—which finds its culmination in the Son of God dying a sacrificial death in place of His people—unfolded as it did because of God’s love for His people, how can the manner of our truth proclamation be anything but loving? All who are God’s are called to this ministry.

The second level of ministry is defined more narrowly as those who “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). These are those who are gifted and called by their church to train the saints to speak the truth in love. It is their work that undergirds the general ministry of all the saints, defining what truth and love are, over and against the waves that crash around us.

These are two aspects of the single ministry of God’s people—the general call to speak the truth in love as youth leaders, parents, siblings, Sunday school teachers, and small group leaders, and the specific call to equip the people of God to do that general ministry well. The church needs both.

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<sup>5</sup> Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Youngstown: Matthias Media, 2009), 45.

## The Significance of Training for Ministry

In light of those two levels, there is benefit to be found in formal training for all Christians. At the general level of Christian ministry, formal training of all kinds will reveal the many aspects of the “truth” (Eph. 4:15) that we are to speak. The reality of who God is and what He has done impacts every aspect of our existence, and the total nature of this truth is one that is inexhaustible. Formal training helps to show the breadth and depth of this truth, as one examines how it is articulated in the Scriptures through the work of Biblical interpretation, and considers the overarching teachings of the Scriptures through the work of theological reflections.

This is also the case with what is meant by “speaking the truth *in love*” (Eph. 4:15, emphasis added). Formal training helps with the task of understanding the kind of love that Christians are called to in the Bible. In this way formal training is immensely practical, as it ensures that we see and understand the world around us in a way that lines up with reality, and teaches us how to engage in the world with biblical love, day by day.

Returning to the dominant metaphor of Ephesians 4, the context in which we build up the body and mature believers is in the midst of waves which toss “to and fro” (Eph. 4:14). There are a number of ways that formal ministry is a tremendous buoy for those who minister in these stormy seas. First, given the unique nature of our context in Canada, formal ministry helps us consider the types of waves that we are encountering, which is especially helpful for young adults, who simply have not seen much of the world or been able to think deeply over long periods of time. Philosophical and theological training allows us to engage with the nature of the truths claims communicated through all aspects of our society, whether communicated explicitly through legislation and activism, or implicitly through our storytelling mediums of movies and music. It teaches us to understand the beliefs that underlie the various actions of our culture. This is as true of the thinking of the atheistic world as it is of the many other modes of thinking that are represented in our Canadian context.

Second, in addition to helping us understand the waves we are facing, formal training also helps us know how to follow the good path set for us through the waves. It equips us to integrate those cultural messages with what we find to be true in the Scriptures. We need to be equipped “to spell out the bearing of these epochal events [creation, fall, incarnation, Jesus’ death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, and the final judgment and consummation] on how we should think about the relations between Christ and culture.”<sup>6</sup> As noted earlier, this kind of education deepens and broadens our understanding of the heart of the Christian faith, which is truth and love.

Formal training also helps us to minister among the waves by leading us to consider how our ministering to our unique Canadian context in the present can be informed by those who ministered amidst their own waves in past generations. Formal training intentionally exposes us to those who have walked the pastoral path before us, such that we can learn from both the wealth of wisdom and Spirit-inspired work that characterized their ministry, as well as the various errors and imbalances that they stumbled into. Even if the waves they faced are not the exact waves we face today, formal training shows us that we are not treading unprecedented ground, and that we are surrounded by many who have done this important work we are embarking on.

## Conclusion

The Bible calls all the people of God to ministry. All are called to a general level of ministry, wherein we all build up the body of Christ by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Some are called, like I have been, to a further level of dedicated ministry, wherein their lives are spent “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12), such that the church will no longer be “tossed to and fro by the waves” (Eph. 4:14). Thus, formal training is valuable for all

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<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 44.



Christians, and especially so for those young adults who are called into the second level of vocational ministry.

# From Being Retained to Being Retrained: How God Led One Lawyer to Ministry Life

Eric Heath<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This personal story tells of my practice as a lawyer, and how God called me to use my skills, gifts, and knowledge in service of vocational ministry. It concerns how God is at work in the lives of ordinary believers who might have never considered vocational ministry, and encourages those who are prompted by the Spirit in this direction to heed that call.

**Keywords:** ministry, vocation, testimony, personal, story, calling

I spent ten years of my life as a lawyer. This is not a confession, although it sounds like one. As a lawyer, I worked predominantly as a litigator (trial counsel) but supplemented that with solicitor's (planning) work. God used moments in both aspects of my legal career to call me out of it and into vocational ministry.

My solicitor's work involved estate planning, which included preparing clients' wills—how their assorted possessions would be distributed at the eventuality of their death. One client who came in to have a will prepared was a very mild-mannered older gentleman. He had been divorced and had a son and daughter. He saw his daughter only infrequently, he told me, and he and his son had mostly been on good terms, but some financial issues between them had frayed the relationship of late. He explained in our appointment how he lived alone and spent most of his time tending to his coin collection. When he came back to sign his will after I had prepared it, he gave me a sleeve of vintage foreign coins, each with a paragraph written about

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Heath is a Masters of Divinity Student and Pastoral Intern at Northview Community Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

their history and quality. He found reasons to pop by the office a few times over the next couple of weeks, leaving a gift every time. He was clearly desperately lonely, but my role was to competently draft his final wishes, which I did.

A few months later, a younger woman came into my office and asked to meet with me. She was clearly agitated when I met her, and she explained that she was this man's daughter. He had neatly arranged all of his possessions so they could be divided according to his plans and ended his own life in the basement he rented. My role, however, had been to competently draft his final wishes, which I did.

Some time later, I represented a man in what was, ostensibly, a family business dispute. Though he had been made co-owner and manager of the family business by his mother, she continued to rule the operation by absolute fiat. When she decided that her son (who had worked for the business since he was in elementary school) had not given enough to it, she unilaterally withheld his part of the profits to "reinvest them" for him. Her behaviour was, frankly, atrocious and unlawful. My client spoke in our initial meeting about how he "hated" his mother and wanted to "get his revenge." Once again, I was retained to provide my services to seek legal redress, which I did.

After two years, the matter proceeded to a lengthy trial and my client ended up recovering all that was due to him. In the end, however, he had not "gotten his revenge." He clearly hated his mother even more after the trial, because now all of his worst suspicions about her had been proven true. I, however, had been retained to provide services to seek legal redress, which I did.

Both of these stories sat uneasily with me. In each of them, I had done nothing wrong—in fact, I had done a pretty decent job! Yet, as I reflected on both of these situations, the Lord stirred in me the realization that while I may have solved these clients' financial and legal problems, both of them had much deeper hurt and suffering in their lives that I had not addressed. After all, those were not the services that I had been retained for.

Still, in many ways my work was rewarding, and I especially enjoyed the intellectual challenges that formed the meat of the

practice of law. I had no plans to change my career. However, while my heart may have sought to plan my own way, the Lord was busy establishing my steps in a much different direction.

On a sunny Saturday morning in March, while I was (of all things) washing my car in the driveway, the Lord, in His wisdom, communicated those plans to me. I am neither a charismatic nor the son of a charismatic, but for the first time in my life since my conversion, I sensed the tangible presence of God around me, giving me a picture (albeit through a glass darkly) of myself teaching the Scriptures to a group of people, with my legal practice in the hands of a longtime friend and law school classmate. Though the details were not filled in, the call to me was clear—I was to pursue vocational ministry. I had no choice but to consider my steps as having been established.

From an objective viewpoint, I was not the prototypical candidate for vocational ministry. Having come to faith in my early twenties, I did not grow up in church and had no formal theological education. Still, the Lord had placed this call on my heart and was making it evident to me that His call was indeed clear, and that it was one that was necessitating urgent action on my part.

I have come to understand that this is the way God often chooses to work. When Jesus started out His earthly ministry, here is how Mark records Him calling His first disciples:

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father

Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)<sup>2</sup>

I note two things from this account of Jesus calling these men—laymen who, like me, did not have any formal theological education or seemingly any ministry experience. First, they *immediately* followed Him (and that is not just due to Mark’s love of the word “immediately” in his gospel account; Matthew 4 uses the same adverb). These men, by God’s grace, recognized the urgency of the situation and responded accordingly. However, what stood out even more strongly was how Jesus drew directly upon the life experience of these men in calling them. “Follow me,” He said to these men who had known nothing professionally but a life of being fishers of fish, “and I will make you become fishers of men.”

The Barristers’ and Solicitors’ Oath of the Law Society of British Columbia requires lawyers, among other things, to “uphold...the rights and freedoms of all persons according to the laws of Canada and of the Province of British Columbia.”<sup>3</sup> My job had been to advocate for people to receive everything that was due to them according to their rights, but it seemed that Jesus was now calling me to encourage people to receive everything that was promised to them by being right with God.

I do not mean to overstate my case, or put myself in the company of the first disciples on account of my experiences. That said, it does not surprise me that our unchanging God uses the same method today that He has throughout redemptive history: calling the foolish and the weak to plainly proclaim the testimony of Jesus. For me, however, this is a paradigm shift—God has shown me that I am to use the skills that I have developed advocating for my clients to get every last penny due to them to instead convince people to follow the example set by the One “who, though he was in the form of God, did

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<sup>2</sup> All scriptural references in this article are to the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> Barristers’ and Solicitors’ Oath of British Columbia, pursuant to The Law Society of British Columbia, *Law Society Rules 2015*, r 2-84

not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

And so, God has laid it on my heart, as He has with many throughout the generations, to call His people to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. Colossians 3:17 has been a lodestar verse for me as I have sought to be faithful to this call, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” It is a reminder to me that Jesus is the Lord of my life in all things, and there is no area that His counsel and the Scriptures do not touch. In every area, I am to consider whether my words and actions are honouring and glorifying God.

He has been good as I have walked out the call so far. That classmate of mine that God showed me taking over my practice? That picture became a reality within seven months of that fateful car wash. The trials occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, while sometimes maddening, have given me ample opportunities to think and pray through the intellectual and spiritual questions that come from being a leader in the church and follower of Christ in a time of tumult. I have seen God at work in many ways that have been made explicit, and know He is at work in myriad other ways that He has, in His wisdom, not yet shown me. He is truly Lord of all.

This is only my story. It may not be yours; indeed, one of the beauties of the diversity of the body of Christ is that we are all gifted in different ways, and the Lord will use each of us as He sees fit. Maybe, though, you are in a position similar to me, where you have been prompted by the Spirit to use your gifts in a different way than you do now. Perhaps you know someone who has sensed a calling to something beyond what they have known, and they are unsure of how to proceed. Do not forget that God does not conform to the wisdom or the patterns of this world; sometimes He calls fishermen to do His work, sometimes He calls tax collectors to be His apostles, sometimes

He even calls lawyers to help share the key to knowledge, and to help others enter His kingdom. His call, when it comes, is always urgent. My (non-legal) advice? Follow it.

## **Bridging the Divide:**

### The Pastor-Theologian in Church History

Colin Fast<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The primary location for the theological task has historically been the pastorate. The founding of universities at the turn of the millennium results in professional theologians divesting themselves of their ecclesial settings and finding a new home detached from the church. While the trajectory began long ago, the ramifications of such a trajectory change are being felt in the present day. The church of today is theologically averse and pragmatically driven, resulting in a biblically and theologically deprived church. The pastor-theologian must be recovered in order to infuse the church with rich, biblical theology once again.

**Keywords:** church history, pastor, theologian, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm

## **Introduction**

When thinking of the pastoral office, the first thought that comes to mind for many might be that of a business manager, a counsellor, a communicator, an administrator, or an amalgam of all four; rarely will one think of a theologian. The past two centuries of Christian history has seen an unprecedented bifurcation between professional theologians and those within the pastorate; this is a bifurcation which ought not stand. From the early days of the church, the primary purveyors of the theological task were pastors. In recent

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years, there has been a trend towards resurrecting this vision of a unified pastor-theologian, seeking to recover that which was assumed early on but has since been long forgotten.<sup>2</sup> What follows is a survey through church history to understand the central role that pastor-theologians have played from within the church. By recovering an understanding of the role pastor-theologians have played in Christian history, one will be given an idea of what a resurgence of this vision could mean for the present-day church.

## The Pastor-Theologian in the Early Church

Following the death of the apostles, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp were some of the first non-apostolic elders placed in the first century church. These titans of church history produced theologically rich writing for the edification of the body of Christ. Following after the manner of the apostles, their theological output largely consisted of letters written to churches, which formed the foundation of much that followed after them.<sup>3</sup> There are many faithful and significant pastors standing in line behind these luminous church fathers, none of whom have made as significant an impact on the church as Athanasius and Augustine.

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<sup>2</sup> A few notable attempts to articulate and resurrect such a vision are The Center for Pastor-Theologians founded by Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, who also authored *The Pastor-Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015). Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan recently wrote a similarly titled book, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015). These aforementioned titles, paired with a study of church history, have strongly shaped this author in his understanding of the necessity of pastor-theologians. Their work has helped to shape the structure of this article, especially the appendix in Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor-Theologian*, which includes a table of significant figures in church history noting whether such figures were “clerical,” “nonclerical,” or “monastic” in focus.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).

As the church approached the fourth century, Athanasius, bishop of the church in Alexandria, spent his life as a pastor in theological conflict. As one fabled to have entered at a young age under the care of Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius was long known to be a churchman.<sup>4</sup> Athanasius is known today primarily for his theological contributions in articulating the Trinity against the Arians, his role in the Nicene formulation, and his short book extolling the necessity of Jesus as the God-man, *On the Incarnation*. After forty years in ministry and three exiles, Athanasius stood victorious over his defeated foes, Arius and the Arians.

Overlapping somewhat during Athanasius's later years, Augustine, bishop of the church in Hippo, is known for his vast theological output, including his most famous work, *The Confessions*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to *The Confessions*, Augustine wrote the extensive theological treatises *On the Trinity* and *The City of God*, alongside shorter works such as those written against Pelagius or the Donatists. By all measures, Augustine was a great theologian who inspired many towards the task of thinking deeply and writing well. If the story of Augustine is left here, however, a significant foundation for his theological work will be missed: his love for the church. In addition to Augustine's voluminous theological writing, his most

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<sup>4</sup> Archibald T. Robertson, "Prolegomena," in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 4 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Some estimate Augustine's writing output to be somewhere near 5,000,000 words, which not only placed him as one of the most substantial authors of his time, but one of the substantial authors in history. For further reading, see Shari Boodts, "5,000,000 Words: How St. Augustine's Works Made It into the Middle Ages," *Medievalists.Net*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.medievalists.net/2018/04/how-st-augustines-works-made-it-into-the-middle-ages/>.

significant source of written work comes from his writings on Scripture, whether taking the form of commentary or sermon.<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, Augustine can be viewed as the archetypal pastor-theologian. Deeply rooted in a local congregation, regularly preaching, teaching, catechizing, and evangelizing, Augustine was a pastor as everyone would understand the term. The scope of his ministry, however, was not singularly focused on the needs in Hippo, but broadened from his specific locale to the church at large. Augustine recognized that issues facing the church from abroad never stayed abroad; they always wind up in neighbouring cities and local congregations. Pelagius, one of Augustine's main theological opponents, may have begun his ministry in modern day England, but his writings undermining original sin ended up in North Africa and could not be ignored—the church needed its pastor to be able to defend the good deposit against wolves, a task which is primarily theological in nature.

## The Pastor-Theologian in the Medieval and Reformation Church

As this initial, brief sampling shows, from the very beginning of the church those who played the role of theologian were predominantly pastors.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, the distinction between a pastor and a theologian would have been nonsensical. To be a pastor was to be a theologian, and to suggest otherwise would be a misreading of the first millennia of Christian history. While there were certainly those who wrote theologically from outside the pastorate, these rather exceptional cases prove the rule (here one

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine wrote many commentaries and sermons, including those which are still accessible today, on Genesis, the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of John, and John's first epistle.

<sup>7</sup> While this sampling from the early church only consists of five figures in history, it is representative of the state of affairs for the first thousand years of the church, as can be seen in the appendix to Hiestand and Wilson's *The Pastor-Theologian*.

might think of Justin Martyr, Origen, or Boethius). However, after the turn of the millennium, coinciding with the rise of universities, there was a rise of theologians detached from formal ecclesial roles who were, nonetheless, ecclesiastically minded (e.g. Abelard and Aquinas).

Bridging the gap between the first millennium and the modern day, the pastorate was still filled with many of the sharpest theological minds of the day. In the early days of the new millennia, Anselm, bishop of Canterbury, stands out as a figure who was rooted in the church while staying true to the call for pastors to be theologians. Anselm was a pastor writing theology from within the context of the local church, and was able to produce works of deep theology, penetrating prayers, and astute apologetics.

Closer still to our current day, the reformation and post-reformation time period was another marked by closely tied pastor-theologians. Martin Luther and Martin Bucer both stand out during this period as theologians who were not ecclesiastically based, but a majority of those who come to mind during this time period were within the pastorate. John Calvin, a lawyer and second generation reformer, is renowned for his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which is prefaced with Calvin's statement that such a writing was intended as an introduction written for the edification of the church. The Puritan, John Owen, the English revivalist, John Wesley, and the American revivalist, Jonathan Edwards, all fall into the canon of theologians rooted in and labouring for the church while producing high quality theological tomes. While some figures in post-reformation history were more likely to have placed a foot in either academic or ecclesial settings, a majority were still pastor-theologians rather than mere pastors or mere theologians.

## **The Pastor-Theologian in the Modern Church**

Looking to the modern day, the division between the university and the pastorate has grown. Where there once was a ditch, there now stands a chasm; erosion has done its work. Where it was once an exceptional thing to find a theologian apart from the

pastorate, the exception has now become the rule. The modern day is marked by theologians given to the task of theology and pastors given to the task of management. Despite the chasm, some pastors and theologians have been able to straddle between the ecclesial and academic worlds.<sup>8</sup> While standalone theologians apart from a formal pastoral office have their place, and likewise many in the pastoral office have no desire for the theological task, if this brief overview has taught us anything it is that the current divide between pastors and theologians is a historic novelty.

Pastors in most recent history have a pattern of not merely lacking theological vision but, in many cases, having an outright theological aversion. Theology has become pragmatized, and if a theological concept is not immediately applicable then the task of theology is seen as a waste. For many in history, life in the pastorate was a draw because it was one of the few vocations that afforded one the opportunity to study, think deeply, and write. While our modern day may have many vocations that can afford one such opportunities, the pastorate is, nonetheless, the most obvious place from which the task of theology ought to be conducted. History has displayed the synonymy between the office of pastor and the work of theology, and a recovery of this vision could have significant implications for the present-day church.

## **The Pastor-Theologian in the Future Church: Recovering an Ancient Ideal**

As the church recovers the idea of pastors as theologians, the body will likewise recover a more robust biblical literacy. As goes the head, so goes the body. As goes the king, so goes the kingdom. As goes the shepherd, so goes the sheep. Where the church was once a bastion of biblically and theologically astute members, the current

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<sup>8</sup> John Piper and N. T. Wright come to mind as those who sought to remain in the pastorate while engaging in the theological task and conversation.

church faces a battle against theological anemia.<sup>9</sup> When theology becomes a question of pragmatics, the church begins to understand that anything less than the immediately practical is utterly pointless. When the church becomes the main place for evangelism and attraction rather than the gathering of God's people meant for edification, theology is pushed aside in favour of something more flashy.

As pastors recover their God-ordained role as theological shepherds of God's flock, they will be more readily able to push back against the proliferation of unbiblical ideas. When the wolves come creeping into the church, espousing ideas contrary to the biblical witness, the one whom God has placed to protect the flock is not the detached theologian but the pastor who is a theologian. Athanasius *contra mundum* goes the common saying, not Athanasius *contra ecclesiam*.<sup>10</sup> The pastor is tasked to be for the church, for the sheep, guarding the good deposit, and passing it down; not standing in opposition against the church, or apathetically beside the church. In short, the primary task of the pastor is one of biblical-theological education and edification through the proclamation of eternal truths as laid down in God's Word. Pastoral neglect towards the task of theology is tantamount to pastoral neglect in shepherding the sheep of God; a recovery of the pastor-theologian will, likewise, result in a recovery of the pastor as shepherd.

As theologians recover the purpose for which theology exists, namely to worship God and edify the church, they will be drawn back to the basic institution of God's people: the church. Just as the church is in need of theology, so too are theologians in need of the church—the institution for which all theology ought to be done.

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of the church being theologically anemic is from Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor-Theologian*, 53. They later go on to describe academic theology as being ecclesiastically anemic.

<sup>10</sup> That is, Athanasius “against the world,” not Athanasius “against the church.” While it is true that many of those whom Athanasius was standing against may have been located within the church, Athanasius was never against the church but was always fighting for the church.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout history, the pastorate has been the primary seat from which theology has been written. From the first century to the collapse of the Roman Empire, from the middle ages to the reformation and beyond, theology has by and large been done by pastors. The rise of the university at the turn of the century led to professional theologians detached from the church which, in the millennia since, has led to a church that is theologically averse and unable to answer the questions of the day. Looking back through history provides an opportunity to assess, course correct, and Lord willing, bridge once more the pastor-theologian divide.

# Elders as Lay Theologians in the Contemporary Church

Graham Nickel<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Theology is often regarded as a task best left to professionals, but there are both biblical and historical precedents of lay theologians playing an active role in local churches. Lay elders may have some formal theological education or be mostly self-taught; churches nurture those gifts by discerning, expanding, and honing the skills needed to equip lay leaders for the task of shepherding the Body of Christ. Educational opportunities and resources for dedicated amateur theologians abound today and churches are an ideal context for taking advantage of this development.

**Keywords:** elders, theology, governance, training, education

## Introduction

The lay theologian has a historic pedigree, especially in the Evangelical and Anabaptist tradition, and should be the norm in church eldership. Never before have there been so many opportunities for theological education or better access to resources than in the internet age. Churches can and should develop theological training ministries to equip lay leaders while providing scaffolding frameworks that not only build up amateur scholars but also rein in the pitfalls of autodidacticism. Traditionally, many free church movements have eschewed formal study for their pastors and elders, especially in their early years, not only out of necessity—often having

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Nickel is a secondary school Bible and English teacher and lay elder at Northview Community Church.



been excluded from established theological schools—but also by choice. It is a common perspective of many reform-minded churches that seminaries and theological colleges eventually begin to, at best, grow distant from the concerns of their front line parishes and, at worst, drift theologically and then perpetuate that drift amongst their students. A confident and theologically well-equipped board of lay people can act as a bulwark against such tendencies while still benefiting from those who have dedicated their professional lives to the study of the Scriptures.

## Historic Approaches to Church Governance

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, to which Northview Community Church subscribes, does not often speak on matters of church governance and polity; when it does, it notes that the New Testament Scriptures do “not prescribe a specific form of church organization.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, patterns of lay leadership and the role of elders have always figured prominently. The pietist “brethren” movement that emerged within the larger Mennonite community in southern Ukraine in the mid-nineteenth century was initially governed entirely by lay elders. Early Mennonite Brethren “established a multiple lay ministry polity model, which, though hierarchical, was tempered by shared authority.”<sup>3</sup> This remained the norm despite mass emigration from Europe in the ensuing decades and endured well into the mid twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> By the 1950s, that model gave way to church councils in which local lay people oversaw programs within the church, but spiritual leadership increasingly “shifted from a recognised group of ministers within a community to a single salaried

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<sup>2</sup> *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg, Man.: Kindred Productions, 2000), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Doug Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor, and Elder: Mennonite Brethren and McClendon’s Portrayal of Church Authorities,” *Direction* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 254.

<sup>4</sup> Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor,” 254.

pastor, often hired from outside the church membership.”<sup>5</sup> The transition from that council model back to a team of lay elders who had spiritual authority alongside the senior pastor did not take place until the 1990s in churches like Northview, which has retained an eldership structure ever since.

This late twentieth century return to church governance by lay elders represented a broader attempt by Evangelical churches to try to recapture the spirit of the governance of the early church. Alexander Strauch, whose 1995 book *Biblical Eldership* was a significant text in this movement, challenges what he calls “the hardened soil of long-standing, clerical traditions”<sup>6</sup> that had largely professionalized Protestant church leadership in the centuries since the Reformation. Strauch’s passionate call was for churches to be led by well-educated and spiritually qualified elders instead of being “reduced to temporary church board members.”<sup>7</sup> *Biblical Eldership* helped define a contemporary view of church leadership that neither perpetuates the antagonistic board versus pastor relationship of the past, nor relies passively on professional and formally credentialed ministers, but rather seeks balanced leadership that incorporates the best of both approaches.

## The Challenges in Developing Leaders

Biblical elders in this model, however, do not usually emerge fully-formed, so churches need to play a scaffolding role in the recruitment, development, and ongoing education of effective lay leaders. The first task is to emphasize that church leadership is not an inaccessible “holy of holies” of spirituality, nor is it an esoteric club reserved only for those with specialized training. These misconceptions can, unfortunately, be perpetuated by leaders with

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<sup>5</sup> Heidebrecht, “Preacher, Teacher, Pastor,” 254.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 10.

some theological education who flaunt academic jargon, implying that elders' tasks are so complex and impenetrable as to be totally out of reach by common church members. This strategy may garner a degree of superficial respect, but it can easily perpetuate the view that unschooled congregants could never attain the lofty heights of church leadership. Instead, church leaders should model the Apostle Paul's approach to discipling and mentoring Timothy.

In Acts 16:1-3, the evangelist Luke documents Paul's first encounter with Timothy, a young man with no more theological pedigree than that the "believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him."<sup>8</sup> Though a believer in Jesus, Timothy is descended from a mixed family in which his "mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek."<sup>9</sup> Paul—with all his Pharisaic credentials and a student trained "under Gamaliel"<sup>10</sup>—chooses Timothy, who has no such storied intellectual heritage, to train for church leadership. Over the course of the New Testament, Paul's affection for and confidence in his protégé becomes apparent from both those epistles he wrote directly to Timothy and others in which Timothy's help and support is acknowledged. Near the end of his ministry, Paul writes to the church in Philippi that "Timothy has proved himself" and that "I have no one else like him."<sup>11</sup> This profound relationship that shaped the early church came about because Paul, in the providence of God and under the oversight of the larger church, "recognized the value of developing Timothy into a more effective minister of the gospel."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 16:2. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 16:1.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 22:3.

<sup>11</sup> Phil. 2:20-22.

<sup>12</sup> Stacy E. Hoehl, "The Mentor Relationship: An Exploration of Paul as Loving Mentor to Timothy and the Application of This Relationship to Contemporary Leadership Challenges," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3, no. 2 (2011): 34.

Having encouraged congregants in their potential for spiritual leadership by building mentoring relationships, churches can further facilitate the development of theologically-equipped elders by providing access to high level biblical studies tools. The days when carefully curated and professionally staffed specialized seminary libraries were a necessary component of a theological education are mostly gone thanks to recent developments in electronic theological resources. In the early years of the web-based internet, the only commentaries available online were often centuries-old public domain texts. Despite the quality of those texts, they were not especially accessible to unschooled lay people; furthermore, those authors did not have the benefit of the past hundred years' incredible archeological finds like the Dead Sea Scrolls and other textual variants. Today, professional resources like Logos Bible Software have made extensive theological libraries available to even the smallest churches, and every year new smartphone apps put powerful and effective Bible study tools in the palms of anyone's hands.

## **The Role of the Local Church in Developing Leaders**

As important as resources are for the development of godly lay theologians, churches have a crucial training role to play as well. There are two typical risks in the pursuit of higher education: one is an "ivory tower" syndrome by which academics over time become out of sync with the needs of local congregations and even with the truths of Scripture. The other is the counterweight problem of becoming so critical of higher education that churches celebrate ignorance of higher learning as an essential criterion for genuine "grassroots" leadership.

The professionalization of theological study has some obvious advantages insofar as scholars can devote themselves full-time to study, including learning biblical languages. However, when academia becomes an industry unto itself and scholars seek personal fame and influence, the value of their scholarship can

quickly diminish. In the nineteenth century, theological liberalism emerged first in flagship denominational seminaries and eventually prompted heresy trials that “charged preachers and seminary professors with violating ordination vows or confessional standards.”<sup>13</sup> In the present day, it is easy for theologians with promotions and tenure on the line to gradually compromise their doctrine in order to be published more often or to maintain their comfortable professorial positions in the midst of shifting political climates. Academic success is also often achieved by novelty, since book publishers look to capitalize on theological trends in order to have their work stand out amidst mainstream orthodox doctrine. These pressures and myriad others can easily lead professional theologians astray over time. Left unchecked, they can influence local churches by planting seeds of error from the pulpits their students fill.

Radical distrust of academic theology, on the other hand, while not totally unwarranted, can be taken to extremes that can cause problems of a different sort. The church that wants to support lay theologians also needs to be committed to facilitating training that guards against the kinds of tendencies that can emerge among self-taught scholars. One of the benefits of a formal seminary education is that defined programs of study can compel students to consider a wide range of approaches. Left to their own devices, students often choose to deeply investigate personal and idiosyncratic “hobbyhorse” topics to the exclusion of all others. Since so many heresies are simply old errors dressed up in contemporary expressions, the lay theologian can be susceptible to misperceiving the problems inherent in their particular approach. Furthermore, if there is a generally dismissive attitude in the church against the academy, an enthusiastic, self-trained lay person might become

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Hoffercker, “Liberal Theology,” *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/liberal-theology/>. A relatively recent example of this process occurred at the Mennonite Brethren Seminary when a professor published statements that eventually led to a demanded retraction by the school’s supporting churches. Laura Kalmar, “MB Seminary Professor Apologizes for Remarks,” *MB Herald*, April 1, 2010, <https://mbherald.com/mb-seminary-professor-apologizes-for-remarks/>.

especially resistant to theological correction. Any church that seeks to facilitate the training of its own lay theologians must preserve some mechanism of internal critique in order that tendencies either to intellectual unorthodoxy and doctrinal drift or the naive confidence of intentional ignorance be kept in check.

## Conclusion

The biblical example of the relationship between Peter and Paul is instructive in outlining the tension churches will feel when they embrace a theologically-equipped laity. Peter was an uneducated fisherman who, perhaps incongruously, became the leader of the early church. Paul came to Christian faith later and was not a direct disciple, but was expertly trained in the Law as a Pharisee. The relationship between the two was not always smooth. As Paul points out in Galatians, they sometimes clashed vigorously, with Paul noting that when Peter “came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face.”<sup>14</sup> Peter, for his part, also comments briefly on his relationship with Paul in his own epistle claiming that Paul’s “letters contain some things that are hard to understand.”<sup>15</sup> After all, however, Peter enjoins his readers to adhere to the teaching of “our dear brother Paul [who] also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.”<sup>16</sup>

In a way, these two giants of the church epitomize the tension in the modern church between education and experience, lofty argument and pragmatic preaching. There are gifted Christian leaders today who are being overlooked because they have not gone through formal schooling or otherwise simply feel unqualified. Like Peter, who “astonished” the leaders of the Sanhedrin when they realized he and John were merely “unschooled, ordinary men,”<sup>17</sup> these leaders need guidance and support so that they can fulfill the potential God

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<sup>14</sup> Gal. 2:11.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Pet. 3:16.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Pet. 3:15.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 4:13.

has called them to. Similarly, highly educated and scholastically-minded church members must also be welcomed into leadership, disciplined away from pride in their own intellect, but encouraged, like Paul, to make the very best of their academic talents. As in the earliest days of the church, local congregations today have a crucial role to play in the training and ongoing development of lay theologians.

# Reading the Bible for All of Life:

## The Important Work of Biblical Literacy

Angi Tuffnell<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** God's grand story of redemption, revealed in the pages of Scripture, is an essential story to frame every individual believer's story. To access the story and discover the self-revelation of God's character, a believer will need to be biblically literate. Knowing *how* to read and study Scripture will aid believers in their growth. The Word of God examines the heart and mind of the reader, convicting, compelling, exhorting, and commanding. In this paper I will define Bible literacy, present the skills involved in accessing the truths of Scripture, and inspire you as to the great feast in store when we read the Bible well.

**Keywords:** Bible literacy, reading, proficiency, studying, transformation

## What is Bible Literacy?

The Bible tells one big story through a multitude of little stories. God's Word has been given to us in the form of one book which contains 66 smaller books written by about 40 authors over approximately 1400 years. Most of us have countless Bibles in different translations sitting on our shelves. But when we open up one of those Bibles, do we know where to start? Do we know how to read and study it?

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<sup>1</sup> Angi Tuffnell is a Doctor of Ministry student at Talbot Theological Seminary. One of her favourite things is studying the Bible with other women.



Literacy is defined as the ability to read or write, comprehending what one is reading at a basic level. Literacy can also refer to a breadth of knowledge in a particular area. It would be fair, then, to say that Bible literacy includes having access to the Scriptures in one's own language and the skills needed to read the Bible well. Reading God's Word thoroughly and thoughtfully are necessities in the journey of Bible literacy. We must read, engage with, and meditate on the whole of Scripture over time. The Bible was never intended to be read in fits and starts. Reading the book of Psalms countless times throughout our life is not Bible literacy; while we may gain a deep love of and comfort from the Psalms, we are missing the full picture of who God is. The Bible is God's self-revelation and, consequently, reading it is the primary means by which we, as believers, come to know Him.

## Back to Basics

Where does one begin on the journey of Bible literacy? A necessary starting point is to believe that Scripture *can* be understood and that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).<sup>2</sup> God will tell us, through His Word, what we need to know. By His Spirit, He will help us comprehend what is necessary to live for Him.

Attaining a level of Bible literacy is all about how to read well. We should approach the Bible as a book, as literature—one big story told in a combination of historical narratives, poems, prophecies, and biographies. Since it is inspired through various authors, we can see their voice and personality coming through the text. Each book of the Bible is written with an intended purpose, meaning, and literary style (called genre), which means that to read the Bible well, we need to honour the style a particular book is written

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

in. Historical narrative accounts, like Exodus and Acts, give facts and details. The Gospels share the life story and mission of Jesus; they are biographical records written by four distinct authors each introducing Him to a particular audience. The New Testament letters provide imperatives and instructions as well as the underlying indicative truths and power for living the Christian life. The genres come together to tell one grand story: the story of a God who created, who planned for the redemption of fallen humanity from before the foundation of the world.

## **From Mere Ability to Proficiency**

Studying God's Word is an integral part of the Christian faith. Yet, many believers are unsure how to begin the process of reading the Bible well. A helpful starting point is to ask *who, what, when, where, why, and how* of every section you read, and record what you learn about God. Remember that the skill of studying Scripture can be developed and strengthened in due course through experience and repetition. Basic literacy over time ought to develop into proficiency in handling the Word. As believers, we can resolve to read the Bible for all it is worth.

As we explore the full breadth of Scripture over our lifetimes, the little stories will start to thread together in a meaningful and, hopefully, transformative way. For example, six "boring and monotonous" chapters that describe the tabernacle's construction in the book of Exodus will soon become a stunning revelation about the God of beauty and detail and holiness. The charge that Paul gives to Timothy in his final letter is the same charge for us today: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

## **A Feast is Waiting**

The truth is, reading and studying take time. Yet something interesting happens as we engage in and devote ourselves to the study of His Word. As we grow in our comprehension of Scripture, we

begin to delight in it more and more. We will see that, as we grow from milk to meat, there is a feast waiting for us every time we sit down to meditate on and digest the passages before us. Moses ends the 40 years in the wilderness by teaching the children of Israel how precious the Word is: “For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life” (Deut. 32:47).

The Word is not to simply be endured, checked off, or studied out of obligation; it is intended to be delightful and life-giving. It does not mean that there will not be times when we will sit down and open it out of habit or discipline. Whether we “feel” like it or not, the habitual practice of reading and studying will still be of benefit even if there is not a mountaintop moment every time we engage. Because it is a supernatural book, God works in and through it even when we do not necessarily enjoy it.

Ultimately, our spiritual life and nourishment find their roots in His Word. Moses relays the essential nature of it to the children of Israel: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

## **A Transformation is Coming**

Scripture is God’s primary means of helping believers grow in Christlikeness. Literacy does not necessarily equal maturity, but Christian maturity does not happen without feeding on the Scriptures. A key repeated theme in the writings of John is the idea of abiding. Disciples abide in the vine, dwell in His presence, and spend time in His Word. As believers abide, they are confronted with the commands and instructions in Scripture. *Abiders obey*; they *do* the Word. James says this: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves, do what it says” (James 1:22). There is this miraculous outcome of *doing* His Word: those who abide and live and obey His Word grow more in Christlikeness by the mysterious work of His Spirit. Fruit grows off of our branches; we get saltier and brighter as

we conform more to His likeness. In reading Scripture, we are compelled to believe what God is saying and we are prompted to obey what He is commanding. This results in a life of being sanctified. Jesus prays for His disciples just before His death, seeking that they grow in holiness through the truth of His Word: “Sanctify them in your truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Isaiah 55 presents a stunning picture of the work that God’s Word is doing:

- <sup>10</sup> “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
<sup>13</sup> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall make a name for the LORD,  
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Isaiah compares the Word of God to rain and snow that comes from heaven to water the earth, causing fruit and plants to be born. The rain had a purpose and that purpose was accomplished. So it is with the Word of God. God describes His Word going forth with the aim of *doing* something. He promises that it will “accomplish and succeed” in what He’s sent it to do. In the context of Isaiah, the illustration is of thorns and weeds being transformed into strong and beautiful trees and shrubs. What comfort and hope.

The author of Hebrews describes it this way: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). As we read, the Bible itself uncovers our habitual sin and patterns of thinking or doing that put us at risk of drifting. But as this

supernatural book works in us, we can experience the sweet relief of confession and repentance available to us as we encounter Him and His tender mercy and everlasting kindness through His Word. We come face to face with the goodness of God as He reveals our wayward hearts and draws us back to Himself. Ultimately, we grow in holiness by submitting our thinking and ways to the plumbline of His precepts; we are conformed to His image as our Spirit-empowered efforts are confirmed.

## Let Us Resolve

We need to do the honest work of first assessing where God's Word is in our homes, lives, and churches. Is it gathering dust? Are the pages of the Psalms worn and threadbare while the book of Amos has never seen the light of day? We need the whole counsel of the Word to receive the complete revelation of God.

Yes, some books are challenging. A while back, a group of women and myself spent an entire year studying the Minor Prophets—a section of Scripture made up of books with strange names like Obadiah and Habakkuk. A primary theme in these books is the judgment and wrath of God. But something miraculous happened: we ended up loving Him more deeply by the end. We met a merciful God full of lovingkindness, who does and will judge righteously. In turn, these short, difficult books helped bring hindsight clarity to the book of Revelation which we had studied several years before. We better understood the necessity of a Saviour, as these books gave us a burden for those who have not received the healing forgiveness of Christ in their lives. We are missing out on the riches before us if we confine our Bible intake to a quick daily devotional that gives us morsels of the sustaining Word out of context and without the whole of Scripture bearing on itself.

So, what next? As professing believers, we ought to be reading and studying the Word of God regularly. Before you get started, acknowledge to the Lord that you desire to experience hunger, discipline, delight, and devotion as you encounter Scripture. Ask Him to search your heart and reveal the reasons you might lack desire and

intention. Ask for His power and illumination to help you regard the text as essential and necessary for life.

Can we resolve to clear the path to make way for a lifelong journey of Bible literacy? Join a Bible study, express your desire to a few people around you, take a course on the basics of studying Scripture. Start going to the Bible instead of reading books about the Bible. Feed on His Word. Study the Word *for* yourself but not *by* yourself.

As you begin or continue your journey of Bible Literacy, here are a few bits of help:

- Be prayerful. Ask God to help you understand what He needs you to know from His Word.
- Be intentional. Set a plan for the week ahead. If you're looking to crack open the Bible and start fresh, what about starting in the beginning? Pick a time and a place each day where you can commit to 10–20 minutes of reading (or more!).
- Be common-sensical. We don't need to drum up a new way of reading. Read the text before you for basic understanding. Ask questions about the text. What's happening? Who is this about? Where is this taking place? Why is this happening or being described or being commanded?
- Be contextual. Determine who the author is of the book you are reading. Who is the intended audience, and what is the author's intended meaning for that particular group of people?
- Be inquisitive. Start exploring the cross-references you find as you read or study a given passage. See what else God says on this particular matter or facet of His character.
- Be resolved. After you have determined what God meant for the people the author was writing to at that time, try to build the contextual bridge to today. Read the Scriptures through the lens of the finished work

of Christ. This will help us apply it to our time and our particular circumstances. Application can look like a change in thinking, a prompting to act, a command to obey, an offering of worship, a deep encouragement, a call to repent. We will not arrive at a different meaning from the original intended audience, but carrying that meaning through the cross and resurrection will help us to apply it faithfully to our own particular circumstances today.

Let's learn the Word through utilizing basic study skills both individually and with others. Let's love the Word as He gives us an understanding of the life available and the revelation of Himself. And let's live the Word, endeavouring to give a hearty "yes" to all that it asks of us, knowing that His commands have been given in light of the knowledge of our human frailty and failure. His power indwells us to help us want to obey and be able to obey.

Reading the Bible for life will nourish our minds and souls, and help us grow in Christian maturity and Christlikeness. We will gain satisfaction and delight as we meditate on truth in a world of ambiguity and lies. And we have clear instructions for the way; Scripture is sufficient to help us live all of the Christian life.

So in 2022, where is the Word of the Lord in your life? Let's dust off the cover and get started.

#### Resources for Getting the Big Picture of the Bible:

- *Woven: Understanding the Bible as One Seamless Story* Angie Smith
- *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* D.A. Carson

#### Resources for How to Study the Bible:

- *Read This First: A Simple Guide to Getting the Most from the Bible* Gary Millar
- *Women of the Word How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds* Jen Wilkin (Although the title would suggest otherwise, this book is not for

women only! It is a helpful resource for both men and women.)

- *How to Study Your Bible* Kay Arthur, David Arthur, and Pete De Lacy
- *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays



## Understanding Disputable Matters:

### Why Romans 14:1 Is Not Addressing Issues That “Don’t Really Matter”

Greg Harris<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In the early 2020s, politics, pandemics, and public health policies have produced countless arguments and divisions between professing Christians in Canada. Desiring to see arguments quelled, pastors may quote the Apostle Paul in Romans 14, telling our congregations to stop fighting over merely “disputable matters.” While this passage may initially seem to be applicable to our contemporary situations, it is actually addressing an urgent ecclesiological issue in the life of the Roman church; namely, how *Jewishly* do people need to behave now that they are Christians? This essay demonstrates that Romans 14 is not a text designed to help our people navigate issues that “don’t really matter,” nor does it assert that contentious dialogues are inappropriate, nor does it support a “your truth is your truth” epistemology for controversies. Consequently, this essay intends to lead readers to embrace the idea that “disputable matters” are worth dialoguing about, with patience and respect, for the health and strength of our local churches.

**Keywords:** disputable matters, adiaphora, Jew, Gentile, strong, weak, judge

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## Introduction

Recent years have provided no shortage of controversial issues for Canadian Christians to discuss. In our digitally driven and mediated world, the potential landmines for disunity in local churches are legion. Pastors have had to find ways to keep the main things the main things, while also recognizing that their congregations are either experiencing (or are at least under the threat of experiencing) division around any number of supposedly “disputable matters.” There are little fires everywhere for Canadian pastors, and in this tribalistic and divisive landscape we are desperate to get our hands on an effective extinguisher.

For many of us, we find our “argument extinguishers” in the words of Romans 14:1, which says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters.”<sup>2</sup> We read this passage and, in times like ours, it seems like the perfect fit. We see our people despising each other because of their differences when we desire for them to accept one another in spite of their differences. Furthermore, many of these divisive debates in the early 2020s are regarding issues not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. The temptation for pastors is to say that since the contemporary issues in question are not addressed directly in Scripture they are therefore tertiary to the gospel itself; so we quickly adopt the language from Romans 14:1 and call all such conversations “disputable matters.” Therefore, when Canadian Christians begin arguing and despising one another over issues such as government mandates, public health orders, and vaccinations, we think to ourselves, and sometimes say to others, “If that’s not a *quarrel over a disputable matter* I don’t know what is! Let’s just move on!”

We may want to use Romans 14 to justify glossing over the “disputable matters” (by which *we mean* issues that aren’t core to the gospel) brewing in our churches. However, to read and utilise Romans 14 in this way is to fundamentally misunderstand and

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the NIV translation.

misinterpret what Paul is doing in Romans 14:1–15:16.<sup>3</sup> To turn Paul’s treatment of “disputable matters” in Romans 14:1 into a grid for thinking through peripheral or insignificant issues would be both unwise and inappropriate.

## Purpose

The main idea supporting this essay is that we ought not use Romans 14 as a grid for dealing with *adiaphora* in the life of the local church.<sup>4</sup> The Apostle Paul, in this section, is working through the perennially difficult issue in the first century Christian church: what do Jewish Christians do with their culturally indoctrinated and scripturally ingrained notions of godly behaviour? This essay will articulate the contextual and exegetical rationales necessary to demonstrate that Romans 14:1–15:16 deals not with *adiaphora*, but with the crucial (and repeatedly addressed) issue of how Jews and Gentiles ought to relate to one another in the local church. Additionally, a few prompts for applying this text unit in our Canadian churches in 2022 and beyond will be provided.

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<sup>3</sup> I encourage you at this time to read this text unit in its entirety. The phrase “disputable matters,” frequently used in this paper, is how the NIV decided to interpret the Greek *διαλογισμός* (*dialogismos*).

<sup>4</sup> *Adiaphora* is a classical theological term used to describe issues in Christian theology that are indifferent, tertiary, and non-essential for Christian orthopraxy and orthodoxy. While those issues certainly do exist, to use Romans 14 as an example of *adiaphora*, and therefore as a guide for working through such issues, is an imposition of a framework onto the text itself, not one expositied from it.

# **The Contextual and Exegetical Rationales for Romans 14:1–15:16 Addressing the Crucial Issue of Jew/Gentile Relationships in the Local Church**

## **Contextual Rationale**

The two primary contextual rationales for the assertion that Romans 14:1–15:16 does not deal with mere disputable matters as we may conceive of that idea, but rather with the centrally important issue within the first century of relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the local church are: historical context and grammatical context.

## **Historical Context for Romans 14:1–15:16**

Paul is writing to the church in Rome, whom he has not visited. The dynamic between Jews and the broader culture in Rome was a complex socio-political issue. Acts 18:1-18 describes how the Jews were expelled from the city of Rome under the reign of the Emperor Claudius. There was sufficient frustration with apparent controversies and civic disruptions that, in the words of theologian Clinton Arnold, by the year 49 AD

Claudius was no longer tolerant and decided to rid the city of the Jews altogether. In his biography of Claudius, Suetonius corroborates Luke's account by verifying this expulsion: 'Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.' The identity of 'Chrestus' is most likely '(Jesus) Christ.' This suggests that there were heated debates among the Jews in the synagogues in Rome with the Jewish Christians who contended that Jesus is the Messiah

(Christos), which did not go unnoticed by the Roman authorities.<sup>5</sup>

The Emperor Claudius reigned until the year 54 AD, at which time Jewish people began to slowly migrate back to Rome. However, it is not hard to imagine that tensions would have still perpetuated between the two groups. As the ethnically-Jewish Christians entered back into Roman life, the same tensions and experiences between Jews and Gentiles in the general Roman population would have also been experienced within the life of local Christian congregations. Given this societal dynamic, it would be impossible for Christians in Rome to have heard Phoebe reading Paul's letter without these weighty cultural and religious issues coming to mind.

### **Grammatical Context for Romans 14:1–15:16**

It is clear societally that the Roman church would have been experiencing relational tensions between Jews and Gentiles. Throughout the letter Paul goes back and forth addressing the Jewish and Gentile contexts, and discusses how the gospel comes to bear in fullness therein. While the chapter divisions and subtitles in our modern Bibles may not help us intuitively understand this, it is evident from the content of his letter that Paul intends Romans 14:1–15:16 to be read as a unified section.

Time does not allow for an exhaustive summary of the letter to the Romans, but suffice it to say that Romans unpacks the glorious idea of salvation found in Jesus by grace through faith unto a life of obedience. Romans 1–11 deals with the issue of salvation by grace through faith for both Jews and Gentiles, while Romans 12–16 deals with the real life nitty-gritty implications of a life lived unto obedience to Jesus.

In Romans 12 and 13, Paul addresses a number of ways in which believers will present their lives as a living sacrifice in

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<sup>5</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts.*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 397–398.

response to the gift of grace in Jesus. Then in chapter 14, Paul commands the Christians to “accept” the other in general, and the one who is “weak in faith” in particular. Paul goes on to explain and nuance, until 15:17, what he means by this acceptance within the Roman church. At this point, Paul’s “therefore” moves his attention away from addressing the church specifically in Rome and toward a reminiscence of his past missionary efforts amongst the Gentiles, as well as his excitement for future missionary endeavours among other Gentile peoples.

## Summary

There is a perennial temptation for the modern interpreters of the Bible to apply passages directly to our situation without considering the historical context. Even the most seasoned of Bible readers can make the functional mistake of thinking that because the Bible was written and given *for us*, that means it was written *to us*. This error at times does not cause significant distortion in our understanding. However, reading Romans 14:1 without reminding ourselves of the historical and grammatical context can lead us to misunderstand and misapply what Paul was saying to the church in Rome as we begin to import our own definitions of who is the *weaker* or *stronger* brother in the particular issue in our mind. This kind of narcissism is inappropriate when the historical and grammatical context is considered.<sup>6</sup>

## Exegetical Rationale

The historical and grammatical context surrounding Romans 14:1 undergirds the idea that Paul’s focus on this section is more than mere *adiaphora*; rather, it is nuanced practical theology for a church experiencing significant relational tension. This idea is further

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<sup>6</sup> Narcissism is a term used to describe the interpretive method of inappropriately reading ourselves and our situation into the text. I do not know the origins of the term exactly. I only know I did not make it up.

buttressed by some careful exegetical considerations. There are six key groupings of Greek words that elucidate Paul's purpose in Romans 14:1–15:16.<sup>7</sup>

### **διαλογισμός [*dialogismos*]**

This is the Greek word found in 14:1 which the NIV translates as *disputable matters*. This English phrase is presumed to mean something that is tertiary or insignificant. *Dialogismos* does not have any inherently “indifferent” connotations, so we have no interpretive grounds to suggest that by the mere use of the word *dialogismos* Paul is referring to conversations that were illicit, unhelpful, or *adiaphoric* in nature.<sup>8</sup> The basic sense of the word in Greek is *reasoning* or *disputing something*. That said, in the New Testament the word is used almost exclusively in a negative context. For example, Paul also uses this word in Philippians 2:14 in another appeal to cease with unhelpful discussions. It seems that the issue for Paul in both Romans and Philippians, and his intent in using this word, is that the dialogical fires were generating more heat than light. The problem at hand is not *that* an inconsequential conversation was happening, but *how* the conversation was conducted.

### **ἀσθένεια [*asthenēma*], δυνατός [*dynatos*] and ἀδύνατος [*adynatos*]**

These three terms help us understand the nature of the *dialogismos* happening in Rome. The term *asthenēma* refers to the

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<sup>7</sup> Each word grouping will include the Greek spelling, the English transliteration/pronunciation, and definitions to provide the sense of each term and how they are translated in the text unit in focus. The scope of this essay does not permit exhaustive treatment of each term's semantic range and usage in other New Testament letters. All definitions of terms are paraphrased from James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Levi Friesen for his contribution on this point.

state of being sick or weak and is used twice in this text unit, in 14:1 (translated as *weak*) and 15:1 (translated as *failings*).

While *dynatos* and *adynatos* are each only used once in 15:1, they provide a helpful framing for Paul's pastoral instruction. *Dynatos* (translated as *strong*) carries the sense of something or someone being *possible, able, or competent*, while *adynatos* is simply its negation (i.e. *impossible, unable, incompetent*).

This group of words help us understand Paul's framing of the issue at hand in the Roman church. In this community made up of Jews and Gentiles, there is a particularly Jewish *dialogismos* occurring: the dispute over what foods can be eaten and how certain days should be treated. Paul sees two groups of people in this dispute, the *dynatos* (competent) and the *adynatos* (incompetent). In Paul's eyes, the *dynatos* are able to eat all kinds of foods or treat all days the same, while the *adynatos* are living with an *asthenēma* (weakness).

### **πιστεύω [*pisteuō*], and πίστις [*pistis*]**

The Greek *pisteuō* is the verbal form, and *pistis* is the noun form, of the words typically translated into English as *belief, faith, or trust*. When Paul uses these words, he is typically referring to someone's *faith in Christ* (as the verb), or their *Christian faith* (as the noun). However, in 14:1, 22, and 23 (twice), Paul does not use these words with Jesus or Christianity as the referent. He is using the words *pisteuō* and *pistis* to talk about someone's belief system or act of believing itself. This is almost certainly because Paul is specifically addressing Jewish people who have come to faith in Jesus from an already existing, and incredibly thorough, set of convictions about what is good, true, and beautiful. Some of these Jewish people are *dynatos* and others are *adynatos* on the basis of how they understand their former cultural and religious practices to inform their new life in Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Apostle Paul engages the Corinthian church surrounding a related but inverted issue. In the Corinthian church it is not Jewish people who are primarily having a hard time understanding how their former religious practices influence their new ethic as Christians, but pagans. Interestingly, in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul, the careful and



**κρίνω [krinō], διάκρισις [diakrisis], κατακρίνω[katakrinō],  
διακρίνω [diakrinō], and ἐξουθενέω [exoutheneō]**

This fourth grouping of Greek words is the most extensive and most nuanced, and yet they are more closely linked than we might initially presume. The foundational word in this grouping is *krinō*, which, depending on the context, can be translated as *discern*, *decide*, *evaluate*, *prefer*, or *condemn*. In Romans 14:1–15:16, *krinō* is used eight times: four times in reference to someone’s decision *for* themselves, and four times in reference to deciding something *about* another.

The next three words in this word grouping are linked closely with the root word *krinō*, and each appears only once in the text unit. *Diakrinō* has the sense of wavering in judgment and is translated in 14:23 as *doubt*. *Katakrinō* has the sense of *deciding against* something, and is translated in 14:23 as *condemned*. *Diakrisis* has the sense of making a distinction between good and evil, and is translated in 14:1 as *quarrelling*. Paul is exhorting the Roman church to accept the *adynatos* among them and to not dialogue divisively.

The final word in this group, *exoutheneō*, is not connected directly to the core word *krinō*, but is strongly connected thematically to the previous three words. This word has the sense of *despising* and *disdaining*, is used twice in the text unit (14:2, 10), and, in both cases, is translated as *treating with contempt*.

This word grouping is essential for understanding what Paul is accomplishing in this text unit. Paul is saying that both the *dynatos* Jews and *adynatos* Jews are making decisions (*krinō*) based on their convictions of what is best. Their actions are discerned based on their deeply ingrained theological and cultural convictions. What is being chastised is not the act of dialoguing itself, but dialoguing in a condemnatory manner. Neither is the decision-making being chastised, but rather the condemnation and contempt that is projected

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contextual pastor-theologian that he is, does not use *πιστεύω [pisteuō]* or *πίστις [pistis]* as much, but more frequently appeals to the Roman concept of *συνείδησις [syneidēsin]*, which is translated in English as *conscience*.

onto *other* people’s decisions.<sup>10</sup> Both groups are making decisions that align with their doctrinal beliefs, and while the *dynatos* Jews are correct in their theology, they are still among the guilty for treating their fellow *adynatos* believers with contempt.<sup>11</sup>

### **νοῦθετέω [noutheteō]**

The word groups above make it increasingly clear that the issue at hand for the Apostle Paul is not mere *adiaphora*, but is actually crucial for the life of the church. Paul’s exhortation for the Roman Christians to engage in *noutheteō* (meaning *instruction* or *admonishing*), in concert with his framework of *dynatos* and *adynatos*, makes it clear that there actually is a “right” and “wrong” in the issue at hand regarding dietary laws and special days.<sup>12</sup> Paul expects there to be a level of *noutheteō* happening in the Roman church from the *dynatos* towards the *adynatos*. The *dialogismos* is expected to continue, but just in a drastically different tone than has previously defined the situation. He expects the Roman church to patiently instruct each other in the ways of Jesus and the ensuing implications.

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<sup>10</sup> The only occurrence in the text unit where *krinō* is referring to someone’s own decision making *and* carries a negative connotation is 14:22. Furthermore, English translations like the ESV and NIV divide the one Greek sentence into two. These decisions seem to me to misrepresent the sense of what Paul is exploring. I think this verse is better understood as saying something to the effect of, “So whatever you believe about these matters keep before God since a person flourishes when he does not decide for himself by what he approves.” It is my position that the English translations are missing the sense of what is happening in this verse and unnecessarily import a negative and contextually counterintuitive connotation. However, I recognize that I am the minority opinion, and those teams of translators probably made the right decision for reasons I don’t understand yet.

<sup>11</sup> Though 14:16 makes it clear that contemptuous thoughts went both ways.

<sup>12</sup> This point is made explicitly clear in Romans 14:14 and 14:16.

## οἰκοδομή [oikodomē]

The final word in our exegetical exploration, *oikodomē*, appears twice in our text unit. The word carries a range of meaning, like *building* and *edification*, but also carries a sense of *home* with it. Paul's goal for his instruction is not that everyone feels good about their decision, but that the Roman church family is built with Gentiles and Jews (both *dynatos* and *adynatos*).

### Summary

When Paul's language in Romans 14:1–15:16 is carefully considered, it is clear that he isn't casually engaging in *adiaphora*, but that he intends to pastor the Roman church to deal wisely and Christianly with the significant relational issue in their midst. Paul is engaging in an issue that he deals with repeatedly throughout all of his letters, which is no surprise given the nature of his apostolic ministry—the self-described Pharisee of Pharisees who is the missionary to the Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> Paul is dealing here with people who have perhaps bought into the false teaching of the Judaizers, or, maybe more likely, Jews who simply have not matured enough yet in their Christian faith to know what Peter had to learn in Acts 10, what

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<sup>13</sup> The issue of *how culturally Jewish must a Jewish-Christian be* is addressed in many books in the New Testament to one degree or another. The book of Acts is dealing with the central thesis of the gospel moving out from the focal point of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Apostle Peter is taught in Acts 10 in a vision that all food is now clean, and that he should take up and eat. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is where the issue is discerned theologically that people do not need to become or act culturally Jewish to be a Jesus follower. Paul himself, in multiple letters, with different levels of intensity, engages with this issue. The letter to the Galatians deals with this issue with the most force because the Judaizers were teaching contrary to the decision in Acts 15, saying that one *must* behave in accordance with Jewish practice in order to truly follow Jesus. The Apostle Peter himself was even rebuked for his own errors regarding how Jews and Gentiles are equal in Christ. Paul also instructs both Timothy and Titus about how to deal with “certain persons” who are propagating doctrine that is at the very least immature, if not an error on par with the Judaizers (see 1 Tim. 1:6-11; 1 Tim. 4:1-10; 2 Tim. 2:23-26; and Titus 3:9-11).

the *dynatos* Jews in Rome knew, and what Paul repeats in Romans 14:14: *nothing is unclean in itself*. The leaders of the church in Rome need to patiently teach this implication of the gospel to see maturity grow in the *adyatos*. In the meantime, however, the not-yet-mature in their beliefs ought to be welcomed into the family of faith.

## Concluding Prompts for Applying Romans

### 14:1–15:16

Every Canadian church is facing different issues and needs to consider how this text unit applies in their unique setting. The Apostle Paul presents the large text unit Romans 14:1–15:16 to the church in Rome for his own pastoral and discipleship reasons. This topic, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of his entire letter, is not dealing with mere *adiaphora*, but is rather a significant relational tension that is deeply intertwined with Jewish traditions and laws. If we were to use the schema articulated by Gavin Ortlund in his book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Paul is dealing with a “second-rank doctrine” that is urgent for the health and practice of the church.<sup>14</sup> If we are going to appeal to the language of *disputable matters* from Romans 14:1, we should do so in a way that aligns with Paul’s intent. We should not appeal to this passage to silence conversations we believe are inconsequential, or claim this passage presents a relativistic “you do you” or “your truth is your truth” paradigm for the Christian’s belief and behaviour within a Christian community. Rather, the following prompts present a better applicational road forward when using Romans 14:1–15:16 in our churches. These observations are in no particular order, and may or may not be helpful fodder for you to consider for your particular church context:

1. We tend to read and apply the Bible too individualistically, and we need to proactively counteract that tendency. To use this text to engage tertiary theological issues that may be

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<sup>14</sup> Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 19.

relevant in our lives (e.g. whether or not Christians can drink alcohol, whether or not Christians can go to movies, etc.) is to misunderstand the intent of the text. Even in reading our text unit, the temptation to read the *oikodomē* (build up/edify) goal in personal and privatistic ways is very strong. We need to consider ways to evaluate the condition of our church family as a whole more than merely the anecdotes of individuals.

2. There is a perennial temptation for Christians to view those with whom they disagree with contemptuous thoughts. We need to remember that we are fellow heirs with our brothers and sisters in Christ; we are not endowed with the responsibility to ultimately discern the heart of other professing believers. We all share the same Lord. When we feel contempt for others, that is a prompt for us to repent and trust Jesus to be a just Lord and Judge, and for the Holy Spirit to be powerful enough to work in the lives of the elect.
3. Pastorally, there are many contemporary issues that we are tempted to say do not matter for living a life of holiness. However, even if such a category of theological, ethical, and practical issues did exist, using the language and schema of “disputable matters” from Romans 14 is inappropriate since this passage is dealing with an issue of urgency for the Roman church. Therefore, we need to actively resist the temptation to go directly from the language of our English translations of the Bible and narcigetically import them into our everyday situations, even if they *seem* to apply seamlessly.
4. This passage does not chastise the discernment about whether someone believes the right things or acts properly, but rather rebukes the one who views others with contempt. It is not good for *adynatos* to be weak. To leave a believer in a state of immaturity and error is not loving; it is also not loving to condemn the *intent* that is motivating a believer to act in wrong ways or believe immature things.

5. In Romans 15:14, Paul expected the community of faith to be able to instruct each other in the way of the truth, and he exhorted his protégé Timothy to “patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with careful instruction.”<sup>15</sup> There is objective truth, and we should seek to embrace it and align our lives with it. We should also desire for others to embrace it and align their lives to it, within a welcoming relational context of full belonging. It is because of the reality of objective truth that Paul’s paradigm of “strong/weak” is actually helpful for the Roman Christians. Not everyone can be right at the same time while holding diametrically opposing views, and we need to be willing to not only kindly correct but also humbly receive correction, since maturity as a Christian will require us to both give and receive admonitions.
6. The temptation for us to use Romans 14 as a “let’s just agree to disagree” text may be strong, but it is not exegetically responsible. It is also an unfortunate abdication of a potential discipleship and maturation process. Engaging with fellow believers in robust dialogue that seeks to understand the truth and its necessary implications, in a manner that smells like the Fruit of the Spirit, will mature disciples of Jesus, not damage them.

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Tim. 4:2 (ESV).

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