

DAVID F. WELLS



GOD
IN THE
WHIRLWIND

*How the Holy-love of God
Reorients Our World*

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“A timely and necessary antidote to the spirit of the age which is manifested in the prevailing man-centeredness of contemporary evangelicalism. Wells calls for the recalibration of our lives by a clear understanding of and a devout musing on the holy love of God. This book provides a fitting finale to the story line that began with *No Place for Truth*. Stott taught us how to *preach* between two worlds, and Wells teaches us to *live* there, at the intersection of faith (Christ) and culture.”

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

“Drinking from the fire hydrant that is David Wells’s writing is worth the rush. The water is not only bracing but sweet. *God in the Whirlwind*, his latest, is such a torrent, first showing how we postmoderns have put ourselves at the center of the universe—and the center doesn’t hold. We have more of everything and less satisfaction with it. But Wells takes us to a place where God is at the center of the universe, where God’s ‘holy-love,’ the unique union of God’s holiness and his love, defines better what we need and provides more abundantly for it. Comprehending the ‘holy-love’ of God and its culmination in the life of Jesus Christ reinvigorates our walk with God, our worship, our service, and our work in a fallen world. Wells shows the way, and it’s a whirlwind indeed.”

Mindy Belz, Editor, *World* magazine

“In his *No Place for Truth* and its companion volumes Professor David Wells blew a chilling, chaff-separating wind through contemporary Western Christianity. While he may have sounded like a latter-day Jeremiah, all along his vision was in fact Isaiah-like in its grandeur. Now, in *God in the Whirlwind*, this is made wonderfully, and at times thrillingly, clear. Here Dr. Wells is again the splendid biblical theologian he has long since proved himself to be—whose work is driven by devotion to the God who is Holy-love, and whose Luther-like desire to ‘Let God be God’ is clear on every page. Drink safely, deeply, and be satisfied.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary,
Dallas, Texas

“This is a beautiful book. The gospel is presented in all its power and significance for this and any generation. David Wells has the unique ability to make deep and rich truths accessible to any reader. Utterly biblical, thoroughly orthodox, yet fresh and alive, *God in the Whirlwind* takes us to the very heart of God’s character and makes us want, not to study him, but to worship him. I know of no better introduction to the deep, deep love of Jesus, ‘and it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to Thee.’”

William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary,
Philadelphia

“David Wells has long been one of our most penetrating analysts of the cultural confusions that Christians today must contend with and that sometimes distort the Christian message. This book, as he says, emphasizes the ‘Christianity’ part of ‘Christianity and Culture.’ Here Dr. Wells models how to communicate the holiness and love of God—as manifested in the gospel, worship, and the Christian life—to a culture that has forgotten what they mean.”

Gene Edward Veith, Jr., Provost and Professor of Literature,
Patrick Henry College; Director, Cranach Institute,
Concordia Theological Seminary

“David Wells is like a most-valued guest who after several earlier, eye-opening visits has now stopped back by to sit down and share with us the heart of the matter. Having in previous books shown a world that makes no place for truth, in this one he lights up truth. Theological discourse here becomes a powerful call to the church to see God who stands before us—full of overwhelming holy-love shown finally at the cross.”

Kathleen B. Nielson, Director of Women’s Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition

God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World

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Preface

Two decades ago, thanks to a remarkably generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, I began what would turn out to be five interconnected volumes. These were all in answer to the question originally posed by Pew: What is it that accounts for the loss of the church's theological character? The answer to this question was to come from the three recipients of this grant. My role was to take the cultural component in this issue. I fulfilled my responsibilities to Pew when, in 1993, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* was published. But once I had started down this road, I found it impossible to turn aside into other interests since I knew that I would be leaving the job unfinished. So it was that three more volumes, essentially in the same project, followed: *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (1994); *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (1998); and *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2004). I concluded this project with a summary volume designed to make the substance of these books more accessible: *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (2008).

These volumes were a sustained cultural analysis, and some critics have complained that they contain no answers to the church's current parlous state. The criticism has some merit. In my mind, I assumed an answer to the dilemmas unearthed and was not always as explicit in setting this out as I should have been.

Anyone looking back on these volumes, I think, will be able to see, albeit only in sketchy description, what had been on my mind. This book seeks to fill out that description.

The more I have been engaged with what has happened in Western culture, the clearer has become my understanding of what has been principally lost in the evangelical church. It is our understanding of God's character but an understanding in which that character has "weight." We now need to return, as God's people have done so often in the past, to find again what has been lost.

Faith lives along this line between Christ and culture. It is a line filled with dangers and hidden land mines. It is one where seductive and alluring voices are heard. It is also here, though, if sight is clear, that our faith gains its sinews and strength by engaging with this world. At least it has been so for me.

And now, in this volume, I have shifted my focus. No longer am I so preoccupied with the culture part of the equation. Now I am looking out on life from the other side of things, what is symbolized by "Christ" in the Christ-and-culture juxtaposition of things. This volume reflects on what we have so often lost in our work of framing Christ-and-culture. It is the holy-love of God.

This theme cuts right through all our Christian doctrines. It is woven through the whole fabric of Christian thinking which grows out of these doctrines. In consequence, it has generated an enormous literature across the centuries that now separate us from the time of the apostles. In the bibliography, I have selected just a few of these volumes, especially those that are more recent. I have done so with the aim of providing a few pointers for those who wish to read further, and in more detail, on the main subjects in this book. Some of the books listed address cultural issues, most focus on the biblical ideas, and a few reflect current controversies.

I am most grateful for kind friends who read portions of this book when it was still in manuscript form. They are Greg Beale, Tom Petter, James Singleton, and Ken Swetland. Stephen Witmer not only read a chapter but then circulated another to a circle of pastors who met with me for a fine, vigorous discussion. They are: Paul Buckley, Andy Rice, Brandon Levering, Mike Rattin, Tim Andrews, and, of course, Stephen Witmer. Naturally, whatever mistakes and infelicities of thought remain are my sole responsibility.

CHAPTER 1

God Our Vision, Culture Our Context

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

ELEANOR H. HULL

In this book, we are on a journey. Our destination is a well-known place. It is the character of God. We are taking a journey into “the Father’s heart,” as A. W. Tozer put it. It is here that we find our home, our resting place, our joy, our hope, and our strength.

The goal of Christ’s redemption was, after all, that we might know God, love him, serve him, enjoy him, and glorify him forever. This is, indeed, our chief end. It was for this end that Christ came, was incarnate, died in our place, and was raised for our justification. It was that we might know God. Once, we were part of that world which “did not know God” (1 Cor. 1:21). But now we “have come to know God” (Gal. 4:9). We “know him who is from the beginning” (1 John 2:13) because we know “the love of Christ,” and the aim of redemption is that we “may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). And this knowledge of God, this experience of his goodness, is what our experience in life has sometimes diminished. That is why it must constantly be renewed.

This is our goal in life, that we might be God-centered in our

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thoughts and God-fearing in our hearts, as J. I. Packer put it. We are to be God-honoring in all that we do. And how is that going to happen if we never consider, or consider only fleetingly, or irregularly, the end toward which we travel, and the one who also walks with us through life on the way to this end?

The greatest in God's kingdom, down the ages, have always found a dwelling place here. Here they have found their sustenance, their delight, and their solace. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!" (Ps. 84:1), cried the psalmist. "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food . . . when I remember you upon my bed" (Ps. 63:5–6). Knowing God is itself what deepened David's thirst to know him even more. And it has ever been so.

Knowing God fills us with a hunger for more of what we already know. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). David knew God at this time, but his desire for God drew him back to the great and glorious center of all reality for even more. That is, and always has been, the cry of those who know God well. And connected with this thirst for God is a deep delight in him. It is a delight we see in many of the psalms, a delight robust and virile, as C. S. Lewis said, and one which we today sometimes have to regard with "innocent envy." So, how might we know what the psalmists knew? How might we, too, learn to delight in God?

In this book, I will not be able to consider all of God's attributes. In an earlier generation, Stephen Charnock did this in his classic, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, but it fills more than 1,100 pages! Here, I must limit myself and so will be thinking only of God's character. This, as I will explain, I am summing up as his "holy-love." That is our main destination. As we think of this place, we will also think about the consequences of all of this for living in the twenty-first century.

At the very beginning, though, I want to highlight two challenges we will encounter. I am going to return to the first of these in several of the chapters that follow. The second I will mention here, and then, from here on, we will simply have to be aware of it. We have to think about these challenges in this book because we have already encountered both in our lives more times than we can even number. We are

so familiar with them that we might not fully realize how important they are.

The first of these challenges may strike you as strange. I am going to identify what is the most important cultural challenge we will encounter as we try to enter into a deeper knowledge of God. It may strike you as strange that I want to raise this with you at the outset. Are we not starting at the wrong place? Do we not agree that if we want to know the character of God then all we need to do is to open our Bibles? After all, biblical truth is the foundation of our knowledge of God. It is Scripture alone that is God-breathed and, therefore, it is the source of our knowledge of God. Is this not entirely sufficient, then, for all we need to know about God and his character?

The answer, of course, is that Scripture is indeed sufficient. However, there is a *proviso* here. Scripture will prove sufficient if we are able to receive from it all that God has put into it. That, though, is not as simple as it sounds. The reason lies in what Paul says elsewhere. We are to “be transformed by the renewal” of our minds—which is surely what happens when we take hold of the truth God has given us in his Word—but also, he says, we are not to be “conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2). The shaping of our life is to come from Scripture and *not* from culture. We are to be those in whom truth is the internal driver and worldly horizons and habits are not. It is always *sola Scriptura* and it should never be *sola cultura*, as Os Guinness puts it. This is a two-sided practice: “Yes” to biblical truth and “No” to cultural norms if they damage our walk with God and rob us of what he has for us in his Word. Being transformed also means being unconformed.

Why is this? The answer is that our experience of our culture may have affected how we see things. Given the intense exposure we have to our modernized world, we need to be alert to the way it can shape our perspective and understanding. Along the way, we will pick up on this, but shortly I want to explain what I believe is its central challenge.

The second challenge I am going to mention you may have experienced even in the short time since opening this book! It is the extraordinary bombardment on our mind that goes on every day from a thousand different sources that leave us distracted, with our minds going simultaneously in multiple directions. How, then, can we re-

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ceive from Scripture the truth God has for us if we cannot focus long enough, linger long enough, to receive that truth? Every age has its own challenges. This is one of ours. It is the affliction of distraction.

The Center of Reality

The first challenge, then, has to do with our culture. How is it that our culture may get in our way of knowing God as he has revealed himself to be?

Let me begin with a baseline truth of Scripture. It is that God stands before us. He summons us to come out of ourselves and to know him. This is the most profound truth that we ever encounter—or should I say, the most profound truth by which we are encountered?—and it is key to many other truths. And yet our culture is pushing us into exactly the opposite pattern. Our culture says that we must go *into* ourselves to know God. This is the cultural question that we must begin to understand, because otherwise it will shape how we read Scripture, how we see God, how we approach him, and what we want from him. So, here goes!

I should say right away that real faith, faith of a biblical kind, has always had a subjective side to it. That is not in question. When we hear the gospel, it is *we* who must respond. It is *we* who must repent and believe. And it is the Holy Spirit who works within us supernaturally to regenerate us, to give new life where there was only death, new appetites for God and his truth where before there were none, joining us to the death of Christ so that we might have the status of sons. And not only the status but also the *experience* of being God's children. We have received, Paul declares, "the Spirit of adoption as sons" whereby "we cry 'Abba! Father!'" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . ." (Rom. 8:15–16). All of this, of course, is internal. It takes place in the depths of our soul and it encompasses all that we are. And in no way are these truths being doubted when I say that God stands before us and summons us to come out of ourselves and know him. But what does it mean to say that God stands before us, that he is, in this sense, objective to us?

Let me begin at some distance from Christian faith and slowly work toward the center, where we want to be. Along the way, we will

be thinking about how our experience in this pressure-filled, affluent, globalized culture shapes our understanding of who God is and what we expect from him.

God Is Out There, Somewhere

That God is before us will seem like an unexceptional statement. When some people hear those words they may only think that God exists and that he is in our world. In the West, the number of those who believe in God's existence has usually been in the 90–97 percent range. In 2013, though, only 80 percent of Americans put themselves in this category in a Pew study. Nevertheless, when those who subscribe to the “New Atheism” mock this belief in God's existence—a “delusion,” as Richard Dawkins calls it; an “anachronism,” Steven Pinker declares; and just a set of “fantasies,” says Sam Harris—they find themselves outside the mainstream in all our Western cultures. Furthermore, about 80 percent of people in the West also consider themselves to be “spiritual.” Remarkably, this is true even in Europe, where the processes of secularization have run very deeply for a very long time.

But the real question to ask about belief in God's existence is this: what “weight” does that belief have? The U.S. Congress had the words “In God We Trust” placed on our paper currency in 1956, but it is also clear that this belief, for many, is a bit skinny and peripheral to how they actually live. They believe in God's existence but it is a belief without much cash value. To say that God is “before” them, therefore, would be somewhat meaningless. It does not necessarily have the weight to define how they think about life and how they live. Indeed, one of the defining marks of our time, at least here in the West, is the practical atheism that is true of so many people. They say that God is there but then they live as if he were not.

How a person thinks about God, Paul Froese and Christopher Bader show in their *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God—and What That Says about Us*, is shaped by their answers to two other questions. First, does God ever intervene in life? Second, does God ever make moral judgments about what we do and say?

If the answer to both of these questions is “yes,” then saying that God is before us will mean something entirely different from what it

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would mean if the answer to these questions is “no.” If we think that God has a hands-off approach to life, how we think of being in his presence will be one thing; if we think he has a hands-on approach, it will be something quite different. Should we think of him, then, as a landlord who keeps the building in repair but does not interfere in the lives of those who live there? Should we think of him more as a cheerleader who shouts encouragement from the sidelines but is not himself in the game? Or a therapist who always maintains an arms-length relationship with the patient so that the analysis is not skewed but who knows that, in the end, it is the patient who must right his or her own ship? Should we think of God as being nonjudgmental, one who keeps his moral thoughts to himself? This is the direction in which our culture is pushing us: God does not interfere. He is a God of love and he is not judgmental.

The other angle here is how much God cares about our weaknesses and failures. Indeed, how much does he know? And what weight does he give to different failures?

Ours is a day in which information about the world—about its wars, tragedies, suffering, and hatreds—is instantaneous and simultaneous. We are becoming knowledgeable, through TV and the Internet, of everything of significance that happens. And a whole lot of what is entirely insignificant, too! This raises in our minds some interesting questions. Given the awful cruelties that go on in the world, does God really care about our own private, comparatively small peccadilloes? Does he get bent out of shape by a little moment of deceit here or there when we are simply trying to avoid embarrassment? Is it so terrible to tell a lie if there is no malice? How about a sexual weakness that we cannot resist? Or a little self-promotion that drifts loose of the facts? Does he obsess over these private failures? Does he really care? Or is he large and generous and does he overlook what we are powerless to change? Is he not more preoccupied with cheering us on than with condemning us? This, too, is where our culture wants to take us.

We hear this cultural way of thinking even being echoed in the church. Joel Osteen, pastor of America’s largest church audience—not to mention his worldwide following of 200 million—takes us down this road every week. In his (saccharin-like) view, God is our greatest booster

who, sadly, is frustrated that he cannot shower on us more health, wealth, happiness, and self-fulfillment. The reason is simply that we have not stretched out our hands to take these things. God really, really wants us to have them. If we do not have them, well, the fault is ours.

Actually, Osteen's message is not much different from the way that a majority of American teenagers think about God today. In his *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith has given us the fruit of a large study he conducted on our teenagers. It was released in 2005.

What is really striking in this study is Smith's findings of the view of God that is dominant among a majority of these teenagers. He calls it "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." The dominant view, even among evangelical teenagers, is that God made everything and established a moral order, but he does not intervene. Actually, for most he is not even Trinitarian, and the incarnation and resurrection of Christ play little part in church teenage thinking—even in evangelical teenage thinking. They see God as not demanding much from them because he is chiefly engaged in solving their problems and making them feel good. Religion is about experiencing happiness, contentedness, having God solve one's problems and provide stuff like homes, the Internet, iPods, iPads, and iPhones.

This is a widespread view of God within modern culture, not only among adolescents but among many adults as well. It is the view of God most common in Western contexts. These are the contexts of brilliantly spectacular technology, the abundance churned out by capitalism, the enormous range of opportunities that we have, the unending choices in everything from toothpaste to travel, and the fact that we are now knowledgeable of the entire world into which we are wired. All of these factors interconnect in our experience and do strange things to the way we think. Most importantly, they have obviously done strange things to how we think about God.

Indeed, Ross Douthat, in his *Bad Religion*, speaks of this as a pervasive "heresy" that has now swept America. He is quite correct, though most people would not think of heresy in this way. However, what so many Americans think about God is a distortion of what is true. And as a distortion it is a substitute for the real thing. And that is why it is heretical. So, why are people thinking like this? Let me take a stab at answering what is, no doubt, a highly complex question.

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A Paradox

This context, this highly modernized world, has produced what David Myers calls the “American Paradox.” Actually, this paradox is not uniquely American. It is found throughout the West, and increasingly it is being seen outside the West. In prosperous parts of Asia, for example, the same thing is becoming evident. And this paradox leads naturally into the predominant view of God. So, what is the paradox?

It is that we have never had so much and yet we have never had so little. Never have we had more choices, more easily accessible education, more freedoms, more affluence, more sophisticated appliances, better cars, better houses, more comfort, or better health care. This is the one side of the paradox.

The other side, though, is that by every measure, depression has never been more prevalent, anxiety higher, or confusion more widespread. We are not holding our marriages together very well, our children are more demoralized than ever, our teens are committing suicide at the highest rate ever, we are incarcerating more and more people, and cohabitation has never been more widespread. In fact, in 2012 in America, 53 percent of children were born out of wedlock. This new norm is a sure predictor of coming poverty for so many of those children.

This paradox is not entirely new. When Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman, visited America in the 1830s, he noticed that although quite a few people had become well-to-do, there was also among them a “strange melancholy.” They had attained an equality with each other at a political level. However, on the social front, almost everyone knew someone who had more than they had! Political equality did not produce equal outcomes in terms of wealth and possessions.

That, at least, is how Tocqueville explained the “melancholy” that he saw. Whether this was the real explanation is not really important. What is important is that abundance is not necessarily an unblemished, unqualified blessing. We should, of course, have known that, because that is what Jesus had said a long time ago! However, today, this cultural paradox is exceedingly aggravated, and we are in quite a different place culturally than the America that Tocqueville saw almost two centuries ago.

Many therapists are now finding that this paradox has worked

itself into the lives of those who come to see them. Among those are many who are younger. They often report that though they grew up in good homes, had all they wanted, went on to college, (perhaps) entered the workplace, they are nevertheless baffled by the emptiness they feel. Their self-esteem is high but their self is empty. They grew up being told they could be anything that they wanted to be, but they do not know what they want to be. They are unhappy, but there seems to be no cause for their unhappiness. They are more connected to more people through the Internet, and yet they have never felt more lonely. They want to be accepted, and yet they often feel alienated. Never have we had so much; never have we had so little. That is our paradox.

This two-sided experience is probably the best explanation for how so many people, teenagers and adults alike, are now thinking about God and what they want from him. On the one hand, the experience of abundance, of seemingly unlimited options, of opportunity, of ever-rising levels of affluence, almost inevitably produces an attitude of *entitlement*. Each successive generation, until recently, has assumed that it will do better than the previous generation. Each has started where the previous one left off. And this expectation has not been unrealistic. That is how things have worked out. It is not difficult to see how this sense of entitlement naturally carries over into our attitude toward God and his dealings with us. It is what leads us to think of him as a cheerleader who only wants our success. He is a booster, an inspiring coach, a source of endless prosperity for us. He would never interfere with us in our pursuit of the good life (by which we mean the pursuit of the good things in life). We see him as a never-ending fountain of these blessings. He is our Concierge.

Purveyors of the health-and-wealth gospel, a “gospel” that is being exported from the West to the underdeveloped parts of the world, seem quite oblivious to the fact that their take on Christian faith is rooted in this kind of experience. Had they not enjoyed Western medical expertise and Western affluence, it is rather doubtful that they would have thought that Christianity is all about being healthy and wealthy. At least, in the church’s long, winding journey through history, we have never heard anything exactly like this before. What appears to be happening is that these purveyors of this “gospel” have assumed

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certain goals in life—to have the desired wealth and sufficient health to enjoy it. Faith then entitles them to get these things from God. And where this kind of Christianity has been exported—for example, to many countries in Africa—this is the faith that is being advertised. This is so quite literally. When leaving the airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, a few years ago, I noticed a billboard with a simple question. It asked, “Do you want to get rich?” Below that question was a telephone number. That, I was told, belonged to a health-and-wealth ministry.

In many African cities, in fact, there are “miracle centers” where the afflicted pay a price and go in to get their miracle. At least they are assured that a miracle can be had. The temple money-changers so angered Jesus that he physically tossed them out of the building, but we take their modernized progeny in the health-and-wealth movement in our stride. They just blend into our consuming societies and our expectations that God is there at our beck and call. They are simply part of the vast, sprawling evangelical empire.

While it is the case that we moderns have had this experience of plenty, it is also the case—and this is the other side of the paradox—that our experience of plenty is accompanied by the experience of emptiness and loss. We carry within us many deficits—a sense of life’s harshness, frustrations at work, bruised and broken relationships, shattered families, an inability to sustain enduring friendships, lack of a sense of belonging in this world, and a sense that it is vacant and hostile. So we look to God for some internal balm, some relief from these wounds.

We become inclined to think of God as our Therapist. It is comfort, healing, and inspiration that we want most deeply, so that is what we seek from him. That, too, is what we want most from our church experience. We want it to be comforting, uplifting, inspiring, and easy on the mind. We do not want Sunday (or, perhaps, Saturday evening) to be another workday, another burden, something that requires effort and concentration. We already have enough burdens and struggles, enough things to concentrate on, in our workweek. On the weekend, we want relief.

It is not difficult to see, then, how this two-sided experience, this paradox, has shaped our understanding of God. It leaves us with a

yearning for a God who will come close, who will walk softly, who will touch gently, who will come to uplift, assure, comfort, and guide. We want our God to be accepting and nonjudgmental.

It also leaves us with the expectation that somehow this God of plenty will dispense his largesse in generous dollops to us. Maybe even through a lottery win. Perhaps we could win Powerball, or maybe some sweepstakes prize. That is the kind of God we want. This is what we expect him to be like.

God Disappears Within

This attitude, as I have been arguing, probably grows out of our experience. But our experience rests on nothing less than a shifting of the tectonic plates beneath our Western societies. It is the end product of at least two closely related mega-changes that have been underway in our culture since at least the 1960s. They are, first, that in our minds we have exited the older moral world in which God was transcendent and holy, and we have entered a new psychological world in which he is only immanent and only loving. This is the framework in which we now understand everything. And this means that the changes in our way of seeing things that are rooted in our experience will now be confirmed in our cultural context.

Second, we are now thinking of ourselves in terms, not of human nature, but of the self. And the self is simply an internal core of intuitions. It is the place where our own unique biography, gender, ethnicity, and life-experience all come together in a single center of self-consciousness. And every self is unique because no one has exactly the same set of personal factors. It is no surprise that we are now inclined to see life, to understand what is true, to think of right and wrong, in uniquely individual ways. We each have our own perspective on life and its meaning, and each perspective is as valid as any other. And none of it is framed by absolute moral norms. This is where the overwhelming majority of Americans live.

These changes I tried to describe in my *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*. Although the lost moral world and the emergence of the new self can be described separately, they actu-

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ally happened together and each fueled the other. Let me pursue this briefly.

In the 1960s, when these cultural changes were afoot, they seemed quite radical. This was at the heart of the insurgent New Left. The influential books from this time, such as Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*, were an attack on Enlightenment rationality—as if, as the Enlightenment supposed, our reason is entirely unbiased! But the other side of that message was an unrelenting preoccupation with the self, with its intuitions and states, and this, of course, went hand-in-hand with the way culture was working on people. What had begun in the radical New Left in time morphed into the commonplace assumptions of the postmodern world. This radicalism became mainstream. And out of this has come what Philip Rieff has called “psychological man.” This is the person who is stripped of all reference points outside of him or herself. There is no moral world, no ultimate rights and wrongs, and no one to whom he or she is accountable. This person's own interior reality is all that counts, and it is untouched by any obligation to community, or understanding from the past, or even by the intrusions of God from the outside. The basis on which lives are being built is that there is nothing outside the self on which they can be built. And this self wants only to be pleased. It sees no reason to be saved. This is therapeutic deism, whose morals are self-focused and self-generated.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, the words that came into vogue to describe all of this were individualism, narcissism, the “Me Generation,” and the Age of Aquarius. It was the time of Transcendental Meditation and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It would provide the grist for books such as Tom Wolfe's brilliantly acidic novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. This novel depicts New York in the 1980s through the lives of four tawdry characters who have no higher good than their own self-interest and really no self other than what they project in their appearance. They are vain and empty. They are nothing but a collection of poses and self-projections. It would be paralleled later by Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street*. This movie followed the lives of some Wall Street traders who were driven solely by greed and who inhabited a totally amoral world.

In time, the new therapeutic preoccupations of the Me Generation would, of course, seep into the church, although in less glaring and more sanitized versions. Looking back on this time, Wade Clark Roof said that one of the defining marks of the Boomer generation was its distinction between the inward and outward aspects of religion, that is, between what he called spirit and institution. The institutional aspect of Christian faith, the church, came to be viewed with skepticism. Credence was given instead to what is internal. Not to church doctrine, which others had formulated. Not to church authority. Indeed, not to any external authority at all. Rather, it is in private intuitions that God is found. Boomers were “believers” in their own private worlds and “disbelievers” in what the church does and says.

Here, in fact, were the seeds that by the end of the 1990s had produced throughout the West millions of people who were spiritual but not religious. In both America and Europe, around 80 percent said they were spiritual. And while this included a number who were also religious, there were many of the spiritual who were decidedly hostile to all religions. They were opposed to doctrines they were expected to believe, rules they had to follow, and churches they were expected to attend. They resisted each of these. They would not be encumbered by religious or social expectations that others imposed on them. The impulses that began in the 1960s had by the '90s become dominant. And, of course, TV and the Internet fed this disposition. There are a surprising number who get their spiritual uplift week by week only from the comfort of their own living rooms or from their computers. They never go to church. Well, they “go” to church but do so in their own way.

When Roof did his analysis, he described this as a generational habit. This, he said, is how Boomers are. The truth is, though, that this outlook is not lodged in a single generation. Those that followed the Boomers—the Gen Xers and then the Millennials—had exactly the same habits. This is what Smith’s study on teenagers also picked up. No, this is not a generational matter. It was, and is, a *cultural* matter. This is what is happening to people who are living amid a highly modernized society. They are in the midst of the “American Paradox,” and they are part and parcel of both its postmodern mood and its solutions.

This was the soil on which Oprah built her TV empire. The fol-

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lowers who watched her show week by week were as conventional as apple pie in their own minds. The Pied Piper whom they followed, though, really is not. She heralded an age when God is found in the self, when salvation is only about therapy, happiness is just around the corner, and consumption is everyone's right. And the nice thing about Oprah is that she herself is not perfection on toast. She is so very human. Her follies and shortcomings are all on display in moments of painful honesty. It was as if she was in her own private confessional—though confessing to herself—but the whole world was privileged to listen in.

The cultural attitudes that Oprah mined, of course, affected much more than just personal satisfaction or even religion. In his *Twilight of Authority*, Robert Nisbet wrote of how those attitudes were undermining the entire political process as well. Across the board, he said, given our self-preoccupation, our total self-focus, there is a retreat from what is important to the community to what is important only to the individual, from the weighty to the ephemeral, from others to ourselves. And our national conversation about these things is as far removed as it could be from the days when people had the nation's good in their minds. Perhaps the epitome of this were the seven multi-hour Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, reported nationally by newsprint, when serious issues were seriously debated at great length.

Now, our national issues are debated on TV. When a nation becomes absorbed in trivia, Neil Postman said (in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*), when life is reduced to nothing but entertainment, and the public discussion of our nation's well-being is carried out in the baby talk of small TV sound bites, then we are getting the first whiffs of cultural death. No longer is there a way to talk about what is good for society, and no longer is there an appetite to talk about any good other than that of private self-interest.

There come those times in a nation's life, Os Guinness has written, when its people rise up against the founding principles of their own nation. This is one of those times in America. It is far more dangerous than any terrorist attack. It is, in fact, "a free people's suicide," as he puts it in the title of his book. Why? Because what holds the republic together has never been simply the Constitution and our laws. The

law is an exceedingly blunt instrument when it comes to controlling human behavior. There are many things that are unethical that are not illegal. Most lying, for example, is not illegal but it is always unethical. Our criminal and civil laws can control only so much of our behavior. It is virtue that does the rest. And that is precisely what is being eroded in this self-oriented, self-consumed culture.

Here is the acid that is eating away at the nation's foundations, degrading objective values, uprooting older customs, and leaving people with no clear sense of purpose and, indeed, no purpose at all other than their own self-interest. Under the postmodern sun, everyone has a right to their own version of reality. When this comes about, any culture loses its ability to renew its own life. The culture of the past is then converted into superficial formulae that float around the air waves and are passed, person to person, on the Internet. It is served up again as *kitsch*, and everyone pretends this is the same, deep old thing it once was. It is not. When this happens, we are in the "twilight of American culture," as Morris Berman argues.

Things Get Blurry

This disposition was articulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition*. With all of its French prolixity, its strangeness, it seemed like a misfit in America as books go. But we had already advanced down this road ourselves, maybe not with the same French *hauteur* but nevertheless toward the same conclusions. Writer after writer, and movie after movie in the 1990s, assumed that there is no independent reality, no reality "out there." What we have, each one of us, is a private framework of understanding, and there are no "facts" to lean on. Facts exist only when we come to understand them within our own private worlds. Thomas Kuhn, who had written about scientific theory-making, was now widely invoked to explain much of what was happening in culture. Everyone began to speak of "paradigm shifts" as easily as they did of "burgers and fries."

So it was that the boundaries between things began to get a bit sketchy, then to disappear. America was ready for this. As James Livingstone remarks, Americans needed no prodding from "tenured radicals"

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to go down this road. There are a number of these fallen boundaries of which we should be aware.

The distinction between soul and body was a boundary that disappeared increasingly after the 1960s as our culture began its self-transformation. All that we are, it came to be assumed and then asserted, is animal. All that we are is just our body.

The problem is, though, in this new world we struggle to find personal reality. We do not always know how to express our individuality. We yearn for something that will set us apart from everyone else. A little external decoration, like being pierced and tattooed, helps! Actually, it was not just tattoos. It was everything that went along with being *cool*. Everything that made one stand out as a one-of-a-kind body, as different, and in that difference, as mysterious, and in that mystery as something that was, well, oh-so-desirable. Now *that* is what life is about!

But if the distinction between ourselves and animals has gone by the wayside, then this opens up a new discussion about rights. That is what happened next. With earnest countenances, there were those who assured us that animals are no different from humans and should be accorded the same rights. It has even been proposed that animals deserve to have lawyers to help them secure their rights—though, if I may say so, no animal deserves some of our lawyers!

This disappearance of boundaries happened not only in relation to the body. It is gender, too. The manipulation of gender, its bending, remains on the edges of society, among the other exotica. But homosexuality is an entirely different matter. Homosexuality has gained significant cultural acceptance, and that acceptance is now right in the mainstream. Indeed, it was right in the center of President Obama's inaugural address in 2013.

That there is this widespread support for homosexuality is itself significant. But of far greater significance is the fact that it is only one part of a profound, multipronged effort to redefine the family. We are in the midst of a massive social experiment. We are redefining the most basic building block of any society. The Marxists tried to redesign the class system of their day. That attempt now lies in ruins. Today, many Western societies are attempting, in an experiment equally bold,

to rewrite their societies' ground rules about families. One suspects, though, that the outcome will not be very different. When these social experiments collapse, they bring behind them immense confusion, disorder, and suffering.

But this is not the only change we are seeing. Once we began to think of ourselves as not other than animal, it no longer seemed clear to us that we were actually that different from being mere computers. We are just our DNA working itself out through various internal mechanisms. That was a vein mined in some of our movies, like *Blade Runner*, from an earlier time, and *The Matrix* more recently.

There is a chicken-and-egg dilemma here. Which came first? Did we first break down these boundaries and then find that the older boundary between ourselves and God had also gone? Or did that boundary go first and, once it had disappeared, all of life had to be reimagined? However it happened, the external God has now disappeared and has been replaced by the internal God. Transcendence has been swallowed up by immanence. God is to be found only within the self. And once that happened, the boundary between right and wrong—at least as we had thought about these things—went down like a row of falling skittles. Evil and redemption came to be seen as the two sides of the same coin, not the two alternatives in life.

The truth is that all of life is being reconceived and reimagined. However, this attempted rebuilding of ourselves and our society on different foundations is leading us, if I may be so bold, into a dead end. The truth is that we are not doing very well. When God—the external God—dies, then the self immediately moves in to fill the vacuum. But then something strange happens. The self also dies. And with it goes meaning and reality. When these things go, anything is possible. Huxley's dystopian novel, *Brave New World*, does not seem so far off into the future after all.

We know ourselves now to be on a fast-moving train hurtling down the tracks, and it is absurd to think that by leaning over the side and digging our heels into the ground we could have the slightest effect on the train's velocity. People sense this. Many do. There is panic in the culture because we know our era is ending. Our horror movies are not just stories. They are a kind of mirror of ourselves. They surface

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the inchoate sense that we have, the sense of dread, the sense that all is not right in our world, that out there is a lurking menace whom we cannot see. We intuitively feel that a terrifying calamity looms over us, but we just do not quite understand what this is or even where it is.

Here We Are

The American church is on the forefront of encountering this modernized world. How it should manage this engagement, though, has become its most perplexing dilemma. And it is also its most urgent challenge. Clearly, it has often been tempted to adapt Christian faith to this context, rather than to confront the context where that is required. Instead of becoming an alternative view of life, Christian faith has often become an echo, in many ways, of what is happening in this kind of modernized culture.

Jesus would be surprised to see how easy the kingdom of God has become as we have made ourselves relevant to the culture.

There are, in fact, gut-wrenching changes taking place in our Western societies. Our world is being shaken to its very foundations. Instead of offering great thoughts about God, the meaning of reality, and the gospel, there are evangelical churches that are offering only little therapeutic nostrums that are sweet but mostly worthless. One even wonders whether some current churchgoers might even be resistant were they to encounter a Christianity that is deep, costly, and demanding.

That is why we must come back to our first principles. And the most basic of these is the fact that God is there and that he is objective to us. He is not there to conform to us; we must conform to him. He summons us from outside of ourselves to know him. We do not go inside of ourselves to find him. We are summoned to know him only on his terms. He is not known on our terms. This summons is heard in and through his Word. It is not heard through our intuitions.

These are our most basic principles because they deal with our most basic issues and our most basic calling. That calling is to know God as he has made himself known and in the ways that he has prescribed. We are to hear this call within the framework he has established. He is not there at our convenience, or simply for our healing, or simply as the Divine Teller handing out stuff from his big bank. No, we are here for

his service. We are here to know him as he is and not as we want him to be. The local church is the place where we should be learning about this, and God's Word is the means by which we can do so.

But I must go further. It is not enough to know that God has given us truth that corresponds to what is there, that corresponds to him who is there. Additionally, this is the Word that God himself uses to address us personally. In doing so, he makes us knowers of himself. He comes from outside our circumstances. He is not limited by our subjectivity. He is free to break in upon us, making us his own, and incorporate us into his great redemptive plans which have been unfolding across the centuries. The Holy Spirit re-speaks Scripture's truth to us today and opens our minds and hearts to receive it. Thus we are given, not just *a* view of God and of ourselves, but *the* view. And not just the right and true view. We are given God himself, who comes to us through his Word by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is *God* who makes us knowers of himself.

God as Holy-love

God, then, is objective to us in the sense that we stand before him. We are accountable before him and accountable within the world of his holiness. We know him savingly only because he has drawn us into a knowledge of himself. "In this is love," John writes, "not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We "love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The way love is defined, and what gives it its body of meaning, is the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ. That is what supremely defines God's love, and this will be taken up in the chapters that follow.

John's sentence defining love would have been completed quite differently in the West today. In this is love, many would say, that God is there for us when we need him. He is there for what we need from him. He is love in that he gives inward comfort and makes us feel better about ourselves. He is love in that he makes us happy, that he gives us a sense of fulfillment, that he gives us stuff, that he heals us, that he does everything to encourage us each and every day. That is the prevailing view of God today, and when Osteen reiterates all of this he shows how perfect is his cultural touch. The Bible's view, by

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contrast, is quite different because its world is moral. Ours today is deeply, relentlessly, and only therapeutic. The Bible's world is defined by God's character of holiness. Ours today is not. It is psychological.

This is the difference between the God who is objective to us and the God who is subjective in the sense that he has disappeared into the self. It is a difference essential for us to grasp as we begin our study.

When postmoderns think about life in a psychological framework, they do so from a center in the self. It is the self that determines what salvation means and what life means. When we think about life within the moral framework that Scripture gives us, then we are thinking of it with God at its center. It is he in his holiness who defines the salvation we need and he in his love who provides what we need, in Christ. In a postmodern view, we are at life's center; in a biblical view, we are not. It is God who is life's center. If we do not understand these differences, we will be at sea when we start to think about how God has actually revealed himself.

This interplay between love and holiness is, as we shall see and as we already know, very hard to hold together simultaneously. In fact, there are many who think it quite improper to do so. In the West, we greatly approve of the thought that God is love but we reject the thought of his holiness. This, some say, is part of the primitive past from which we have evolved. We have come of age and can no longer believe in harsh myths like divine judgment. By contrast, there are other cultures, especially where radicalized Islam is present, that despise the thought that God is love and think of him as only holy. Love is seen as part of soft, Western sentimentality. This means that their societies have only harsh laws coupled with all of the mechanisms of revenge and retaliation for wrongs done. There is no forgiveness.

Christianity, though, uniquely combines love and holiness because in God's character they are, and always have been, combined. However, I am thinking of God's love and his holiness here as comprising the many aspects of his character of which Scripture speaks. I therefore am going to be speaking of God's *holy-love*. This term is not entirely satisfactory. It may even suggest precisely what I am arguing against, that love is basic and holiness is secondary and is what qualifies that love. But that is not what I mean. The problem is that if I cannot use

the shorthand of *holy-love*, I am stuck with something that is unworkably cumbersome. It would be something like “God’s holiness-and-God’s-love-in their-union-with-each-other.” If I were to use this long description as many times as I use *holy-love* in the pages that follow, readers would quickly find it annoying! So, I am staying with *holy-love*.

Today, our constant temptation, aided and abetted as it is by our culture, is to shatter the hyphen. We want God’s love without his holiness. We want this because we live in our own private, therapeutic worlds that have no absolute moral norms. God’s holiness, therefore, becomes a jarring and unwanted intrusion. His love without his holiness, however, is one of those things in life that we simply cannot have. And, indeed, it will become one of our greatest joys to be able to understand how God is *both* holy and loving.

The Center of Our Attention

Pings and Jingles

But before we start our journey into the character of God, let me briefly take up the second challenge which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. It is distraction.

When Maggie Jackson writes a book called *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, and Susan Cain writes one called *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, and John Freeman writes *The Tyranny of E-mail*, it is clear that Houston has a problem! And this is just the tip of the iceberg. There is now a considerable literature pondering all of this—how tense, unfocused, confused, endangered, and distracted we have become amid our brave new world. Indeed, as 2013 began, George Barna published quite an extensive study on what temptations people admitted to experiencing. It may be, of course, that people were reluctant to admit to finding some of the more unsavory sins tempting. However, what they did own up to were procrastinating (60 percent), worrying (60 percent), and eating too much (55 percent). These topped the list, and they are all typically Western issues. But next came a newer temptation. Spending too much time on the various forms of media came in at 44 percent.

Technology expands human powers. It has mightily expanded our knowledge of life, of our world, of what is happening. It greatly in-

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creases the access we have to others . . . and that they have to us. Jackson speaks of the “snowstorms of information” we encounter each day from the 50 million websites we can visit, the 75 million blogs, the millions of books to which we have access, and the TV that we watch. Our life is now punctuated by incessant computer pings, cell phone jingles, and beeps of one kind or another. We are acutely aware that we are living life on multiple fronts simultaneously. We have to do this or we will be left behind, so to speak. In the workplace, one-third say that they are unable to think about their work as they skip from task to task. Attention shifts, on average, every three minutes. Actually, the problem is also compounded by the fact that people keep interrupting themselves! It is a world of virtual meetings and romances, of texts, of bullet-points, of instant decision making, and lost rules. Jackson thinks of this as a kind of cultural ADD. She is right. But it is also the acute onset of high modernity.

But there is something important here for us to understand. It is that we must come to our triune God *through* this world and, therefore, in our minds, we must deal with this world. There is no direct flight to God! A direct flight is what monks and mystics across the ages have always thought they could find. Monks in their aching solitude or mystics in their emancipation from their own rationality have always thought that they could take leave of this world. They imagined that they could find a place where, or a way in which, they would be undistracted. Then they would come to know God directly, face-to-face, and intimately, in an unmediated way for the mystics, and without interruption for the monks. They would be in this place free from the conflicts and confusions of life.

Jerome, one of the fathers in the early church, was one of these for a while. He set off to live in the desert as a monk in order to carry out his solitary pursuit of God. Alone, he thought, he would be free from all of the complications, temptations, and distractions of life. Picture me, he says to his reader, alone in the desert, the “companion of scorpions,” his body stiff and cold in the night air. But even though his body was chilly, his mind was “hot with desire” and filled with visions of the dancing girls of Rome.

Jerome had stumbled onto a truth. It is that we are never free of

ourselves. And in ourselves we carry the sights, sounds, and struggles of the world we have known and, perhaps, tried to leave behind. For us today, that means this highly pressurized world of constant overstimulation, constant demands, and unceasing distraction. Brief retreats are helpful, but our lives cannot be on an unending retreat. It is in *this* world, not somewhere else, that we must learn to be God-centered in our thoughts and God-honoring in our lives. We must learn to walk with God *through* our world with all of its anxieties and temptations. In his time, John Bunyan said this in his classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a book about the many different situations in life, with their own challenges and temptations, through which Christian made his way en route to the Celestial City. That was a biblical insight. It is in our world, with all of its complexities, that we must live before the face of God.

I am confident that we can do this. After all, were we unable to live out a biblically faithful life, then God's redemption would be limited and it would fail to accomplish its end. Does that sound plausible? Indeed not!

Focus

What, then, is the alternative to distraction? It is the self-discipline to focus. This means finding the determination to leave aside all of the other interests, the urgent demands, all of the clutter that competes for our attention while we do this. Attention and focus are the fuels that actually enable us to get things done, as Jackson observes. Withdrawal and ordering are the two keys to attention—being able to withdraw from the alternatives, at least for periods of time, and focus the mind on something that we have isolated. And here, our focus is the truth God has given us of himself, his greatness as seen particularly in his character and redemptive work.

How are we going to be able to do this? If we are convinced that we need, above all, to know God, to know who he is in his character, that will trump every competing interest. But we have to be utterly convinced. Being halfhearted and divided in our focus will not get us where we want to be. As Jonathan Edwards observed a long time ago, we act on our strongest motive. If our strongest motive, our deepest desire, is to know God, it will generate the discipline that we need to

GOD IN THE WHIRLWIND

pursue this, because we will want to know God more than anything else. If this is not our strongest motive, we will find ourselves with multiple, alternative, and competing foci. These will inevitably distract us. If we are not self-directed, we will be tumbled along by our culture. And that is when we will lose our ability to reflect on the deeper issues of life. Without this ability to stop, to focus, to linger, to reflect, to analyze, and to evaluate, we begin to lose touch with the God who has called us to know him.

This lack of attention, from one angle, is the result of having to answer too many e-mails, too many phone calls, wanting to visit too many blog sites, having to choose between too many products, needing to keep up too many relationships (perhaps many of them virtual) and to do too many other things. However, from another angle, all of this speaks to what we *really* want. Would we prefer the illusion of a relationship via the virtual world, or do we want the real thing, which is face-to-face and flesh-and-blood? Would we prefer merely to have the pose of being Christian, living only with our appearances, or do we want the real thing, God himself?

God, however, cannot be downloaded as can the reams of information we have at our fingertips from the Internet. Acquiring information is one thing. Understanding it is another. Learning to become wise by incorporating that information into a framework of understanding, and doing so before God, is yet something else. This, like many other things of value in life, takes time. There are no shortcuts here. Instantaneous knowledge from the Internet is one thing. Learning to know God is something quite different. The knowledge of God is, in fact, a lifetime pursuit, not an instantaneous download. God has made himself known in Scripture, but we need to learn how to walk with him through life in the light of what we know of him. This journey never ends until, like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, we finally cross the great river and are welcomed to the shores of eternity and the presence of God. Can we, then, set aside the impatience that the Internet tends to breed, and the habits of being distracted which our highly compacted modern lives create, in order to focus on what really matters?

I am confident that we can. We can all find a way to tame what distracts us from our pursuit of God. We can all teach ourselves to focus.

We can all untangle ourselves from our appetite for instant results and immediate gratification. The most worthwhile things in life often come to flower only over long periods of time. We can teach ourselves to see this and change our frame of reference. Redirecting our minds in this way and learning to focus is a wondrously liberating thing. It allows us to untether ourselves from everything that wants to consume our attention, our energy, and even our soul. It frees us from the tyranny of the urgent. When we are thus untethered, we are free to be where we want to be. Where we want to be is before God. “I have set the LORD always before me,” said David, and his conclusion was that “because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken” (Ps. 16:8). Even the modernized world will not shake us if we really want to walk with God!

My theme, then, is the holy-love of God. Because that is so, our redemption is the place where we must start, because it is here that we begin to see God disclosing his character to us. We need to see how God’s saving designs unfold as we move from the Old Testament toward and into the New Testament. Two chapters will be spent on this. We need to understand clearly the similarities and differences between Abraham’s knowledge of God from the Old Testament and ours today as reflected in the New Testament. In both, there is God’s promise of justification. That is the similarity. So, what are the differences?

This will be followed by two chapters that look at God’s character, the one on his love and the other on his holiness. We will then be in a position, in chapter 6, to consider the atonement. That promise of acceptance with God first made to Abraham could not be realized without Christ’s work on the cross. Here, as in a crucible, we will be able to see how the love of God, his grace, provided what his holiness demanded. In each of the chapters that follow the chapter on Christ’s work on the cross—chapters on sanctification, worship, and service—I will be showing how at their very center is God’s holy-love. My focus throughout will be to offer a biblical theology of God’s character, but I will be doing so, all the time, with an awareness of the culture in which we live, at least those of us who live in the modernized West. This is a wonderful journey that Scripture sets before us.

Come, then, let us take our first steps down this road!

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