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JOHN PIPER: THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Justin Gerald Taylor  
March 2015

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I dedicate this dissertation to my family: my parents, Gerald and Diane Taylor; my siblings, Jeremy Taylor and Janelle Staff; and especially my wife, Lea, and our children, Clairra, Malachi, and Cecily. Each of you is a gift from God in my life, and I do not take for granted his grace and kindness through you. Thank you for your patience, your love, and your support.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Bill Piper Papers	The Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Memorial Library, Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina
<i>CSR</i>	<i>Christian Scholars' Review</i>
Daniel Fuller Papers	Papers of Daniel Payton Fuller, Collection 19, Archives and Special Collections, David Allan Hubbard Library, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California
<i>JASA</i>	<i>Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
John Piper Papers	John Piper Papers, SC-217, Wheaton College Archives and Special Collections, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>WJE</i>	<i>The Works of Jonathan Edwards</i> , Yale University Press
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



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## PREFACE

I am deeply grateful for those who made this dissertation possible. First and foremost, I am thankful to the triune Lord for his gift of persevering grace throughout this process. I pray that I have written this in the strength that he has supplied and not in my own strength (1 Pet 4:11).

Under God, I am thankful to my family: to my parents, my siblings, and especially my dear wife and our children, as acknowledged in the dedication. Each is a gift I do not deserve.

I am grateful for Lane T. Dennis, president and CEO of Crossway Books, where I am employed. Lane, along with his wife, Ebeth, has been a steadfast encourager and supporter throughout this process. Without Lane's prodding I doubt I would have pursued PhD work. I am grateful for competent and cheerful co-workers with whom it is a joy to work in common mission. Special recognition goes to Jill Carter, who helps me in a myriad of ways every workday.

Southern Seminary is a truly wonderful place to study under the direction of President R. Albert Mohler Jr. and Jonathan Pennington, director of research doctoral studies. Former dean Russell Moore and Phillip Bethancourt were especially encouraging in the decision to pursue doctoral studies.

Each member of my dissertation committee—chairman Michael Haykin, Donald Whitney, Nathan Finn, and external reader Sam Storms—has shaped the way I think about the study of history and how I approach the Christian life.

Archivists are the unsung heroes of historical research in primary sources. Nancy Gower at Fuller Seminary, along with Fuller PhD student Gavin Ortlund, were helpful in tracking down numerous files from the career of Daniel Fuller. David Malone

and Keith Call at Wheaton College, which is collecting Piper's papers, were available to answer questions given their knowledge of Wheaton. Finally, Brent Cook (with permission from former president Stephen Jones) was gracious to provide access to previously unavailable papers from Bill Piper at the Fundamentalism File of Bob Jones University.

Several friends, colleagues, and teachers read chapter drafts and provided timely encouragement and shrewd feedback, including Doug Sweeney, John Woodbridge, Rob Plummer, Ian Clary, Andy Naselli, Jim Hamilton, Tony Reinke, David Mathis, Kevin DeYoung, and Collin Hansen.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not express gratitude to John Piper. He is a model to me of Christian graciousness and humility. It is not an easy thing to have someone poking and prodding around in the past to study and retell aspects of one's life, but he has been unfailingly generous and gracious in responding to a steady stream of requests for comment or further information.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

Justin Taylor

Wheaton, Illinois

March 2015

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On Easter weekend, 2013, John Piper preached his final sermon as the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, completing thirty-three years of pastoral ministry (1980–2013).<sup>1</sup> It would be difficult to dispute the level of influence he has been granted within evangelicalism, both in North America and around the world, especially among a younger generation. Some of his actions have self-consciously discouraged cultural indicators of popular-level influence,<sup>2</sup> but quantifiable measurables still evidence a wide and substantial level of resonance for his preaching, writing, and teaching ministry.<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson has labeled Piper the Martyn Lloyd-Jones of our generation.<sup>4</sup> Collin Hansen’s journalistic exploration of younger evangelicals attributed much of the Reformed resurgence—or “New Calvinism”—to Piper’s impact.<sup>5</sup> Mark Dever, in an analysis of “Where’d All These Calvinists Come From,” answers that

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, “God Raised Your Great Shepherd from the Dead: A Farewell Sermon,” March 31, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/god-raised-your-great-shepherd-from-the-dead> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>For example, he turned down an interview for a cover-story profile in *Christianity Today* (2000) as well as an interview to be included in *Time* magazine’s list of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America” (2005).

<sup>3</sup>For example, at the time of this writing, his Twitter followers number 716,000, and his bestselling book, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* (first published in 2004 as *The Passion of Jesus Christ: Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*), has sold over 2.5 million copies.

<sup>4</sup>D. A. Carson, introduction to John Piper’s lecture-sermon on “The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and New Earth,” The Gospel Coalition Conference (May 24, 2007). Piper’s talk is available online, but the introduction was not recorded.

<sup>5</sup>Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Piper has been the primary influence under God.

[Piper's] books, *Desiring God Ministries*, the many conferences he speaks at, all have made him probably the single most potent factor in this most recent rise of Reformed theology. I hesitate to write that. All the factors that I have mentioned before John and his work I do think are part of the explanation. But they are part of the explanation for how the wave, if you will, became so deep, so large, so overwhelming, but they were happening unnoticed, in the 1960's and 1970's and 1980's—all preparing the ground, shifting the discourse, preparing the men—like John—who would be leaders in this latest resurgence. But it has been John who is the swelling wave hitting the coast. It is John who is the visible expression of many of these earlier men. His *Desiring God Ministries* is the conduit through whom so many of these others who have preceded him now find their work mediated to the rising generation.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand and evaluate Piper's influence, it will be helpful to have in mind a biographical narrative of Piper's life and the influences upon it. In what follows I will sketch a brief overview of Piper's most formative years, up through his taking the pastorate at Bethlehem. Many of these events will be recounted in greater detail in the chapters that follow.

### **Biographical Overview**

John Piper (1946–) was raised in a self-identified fundamentalist home.<sup>7</sup> His parents, William S. H. Piper (1919–2007) and Ruth Mohn Piper (1918–1974), had been

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<sup>6</sup>Mark Dever, "Where'd All These New Calvinists Come From?" <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/10/24/where-did-all-these-calvinists-come-from> (accessed October 24, 2013).

<sup>7</sup>George Marsden defines fundamentalists as "evangelical Christians, close to the traditions of the dominant American revivalist establishment of the nineteenth century, who in the twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed" (George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 4). Nathan Finn expands on this, defining fundamentalism as "Protestant conservative dissent against progressive trends in theology and/or culture." More positively, "fundamentalism is the militant defense of conservative evangelical convictions against progressive revisions or rejections of historic orthodox positions. . . . [W]hen a conservative Protestant dissents from theological or cultural progressivism, whether through conservative activism or formal removal from his church or denomination, he becomes a fundamentalist" (Nathan A. Finn, "The Development of Baptist Fundamentalism in the South, 1940–1980" [PhD diss., Southeastern Theological Seminary, 2007], 13–14).

students at Bob Jones College in Cleveland, Tennessee, arriving just a year after Billy Graham left the school.<sup>8</sup> Bill Piper was an itinerant evangelist who counted the greatest influences in his life to be his own father and Bob Jones Sr.<sup>9</sup> In 1945 Piper was elected to be the youngest trustee in the school's history, and when the college relocated to Greenville, South Carolina, the following year, he moved his family along with the school. In June of 1957, however, Piper resigned from the board over how he was treated when he raised questions about the school's public condemnation of Billy Graham's crusade in New York, which involved cooperation with modernist-liberals. Bill and Ruth, however, remained lifelong self-identified fundamentalists, though with qualification so as to distinguish the attitude from the doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

This rupture with the flagship school of fundamentalism opened the door for John Piper to pursue further education from schools associated with so-called neo-evangelicalism.<sup>11</sup> Wheaton College was the first stop (1964–1968). Wheaton did not

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<sup>8</sup>Graham dropped out after one semester—a combination of homesickness, bad grades, displeasure, and accumulating demerits—and transferred to Florida Bible Institute in January 1937. The Pipers enrolled at Bob Jones College in 1938 and graduated in 1942. Among their classmates were future members of Billy Graham's inner circle: brothers T. W. Wilson (1918–2001) and Grady Wilson (1919–1987), along with Cliff Barrows (1923– ), who became a lifelong friend of the Pipers, speaking at both of their funerals. In the summer of 1943, Barrows and Bill Piper ministered together in Alabama, where they conducted tent meetings together. Piper would preach, and Barrows would lead the children's meetings and the singing. In 1949 Barrows moved to Greenville, and his wife, Billie, joined Ruth and other wives of Bob Jones alumni to form the WOES (Wives of Evangelists) club, where they met together regularly to pray for their husbands.

<sup>9</sup>In a letter from Bill Piper to Bob Jones Sr. in the midst of their falling out (November 16, 1957; Bill Piper Papers), Piper writes, "Apart from my own father, you have done more for me and mean more to me than any living man. I cannot deny that you have made a great impact upon my life. For four years I sat at your feet imbibing your philosophy of life. Unquestionably, God used you to help shape my thinking and mold my ministry. I would be the worst of ingrates if I were not eternally grateful to you. I am and shall always be grateful to God for the blessing you have been in my life."

<sup>10</sup>See, in particular, John Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper: Fundamentalist Full of Grace and Joy," February 5, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/evangelist-bill-piper-fundamentalist-full-of-grace-and-joy> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>John Harold Ockenga explained the origin of neo-evangelicalism: "Neo-evangelicalism was born in 1948 in connection with a convocation address [for Fuller Theological Seminary] which I gave in the Civic Auditorium in Pasadena. While reaffirming the theological view of fundamentalism, this address repudiated its ecclesiology and its social theory. The ringing call for a repudiation of separatism and the

produce a theological revolution in Piper’s worldview, but it set the stage for the discoveries to come.<sup>12</sup> There were, however, at least four significant developments for Piper during his time at Wheaton. First, he was introduced to the writings of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) his freshman year, beginning with *Mere Christianity*. He writes of Lewis, “It is hard to overstate the impact he had on my life.”<sup>13</sup> “I think that without his influence I would not have lived my life with as much joy or usefulness as I have.”<sup>14</sup> Second, in June of 1966 he met Noël Henry (1947– ), whom he would marry in 1968. Third, that same month, God broke a debilitating psychological and physiological speaking phobia that had prevented Piper from giving even simple presentations in front of small groups.<sup>15</sup> Wheaton’s chaplain asked Piper to pray a brief prayer before hundreds of students at summer chapel, and Piper was able to do it after begging God for grace. Finally, in the beginning of his junior year, while bound to the campus infirmary because of mononucleosis, Piper listened on the campus radio to the spiritual emphasis week talks by Ockenga. As Piper listened to Ockenga expound the Word, he sensed a decisive call to the ministry of the Word.<sup>16</sup>

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summons to social involvement received a hearty response from many Evangelicals. . . . It differed from fundamentalism in its repudiation of separatism and its determination to engage itself in the theological dialogue of the day. It had a new emphasis upon the application of the gospel to the sociological, political, and economic areas of life” (Harold John Ockenga, foreword to Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 11).

<sup>12</sup>John Piper, “15 Reasons I’m Thankful for Wheaton College,” *Wheaton Alumni Magazine* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 22.

<sup>13</sup>John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 18.

<sup>14</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 19.

<sup>15</sup>This debilitation is explored in greater length in chapter 3, below. For places where Piper has recounted the story, see John Piper, “He Saw the Grace of God and Was Glad,” November 24, 1991, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/he-saw-the-grace-of-god-and-was-glad> (accessed July 7, 2014); John Piper, “What Were Some Practical Things You Did to Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking?” March 9, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-were-some-practical-things-you-did-to-overcome-your-fear-of-public-speaking> (accessed November 15, 2014); John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012), 49–51.

<sup>16</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 22.

Seminary studies at Fuller Theological Seminary (1968–1971) were seminal for Piper for several reasons. Virtually all of the discoveries related in one way or another to Daniel P. Fuller (1925– ), professor of hermeneutics and son of the school’s founder. Fuller introduced Piper to a rigorous exegetical methodology that prized close attention to the syntactical features of a text and rewarded the process of asking hard questions. Fuller told his hermeneutics class one day that Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) uniquely combined warm-hearted piety with profound rational theology. Upon this recommendation, Piper went to the library as soon as the class was finished and checked out Edwards’s posthumously published *Essay on the Trinity*. After that he read *The End for Which God Created the World*, which he bought at the campus bookstore. Piper would eventually describe Edwards as “the most important dead teacher outside the Bible. No one outside Scripture has shaped my vision of God and the Christian life more than Jonathan Edwards.”<sup>17</sup> Also deeply significant for Piper’s spirituality and theology were his becoming a soteriological Calvinist<sup>18</sup> (which he learned more in his exegetical classes than his theological courses) and his discovery of C. S. Lewis’s sermon “The Weight of Glory,”<sup>19</sup> which introduced him (with Fuller’s help) to “Christian hedonism,” later defined as God being most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.<sup>20</sup>

After seminary Piper did his doctoral work in New Testament at the University of Munich (1971–1974), which did not prove to have a substantial impact upon his life,

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<sup>17</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 29.

<sup>18</sup>I use this admittedly awkward nomenclature to distinguish a baptistic version of Reformed theology from the understanding of the covenants and the ecclesiology of John Calvin and his successors. Timothy Paul Jones suggests that the most accurate name for what Piper and others embrace, in common with other Calvinists, is Dortianism. See Timothy Paul Jones, “Naming the New Calvinism,” June 23, 2014, <http://proofofgrace.com/naming-the-new-calvinism> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>19</sup>Lewis’s sermon was originally delivered at Oxford University Church of St. Mary the Virgin on June 8, 1941. It first appeared in the journal *Theology* in 1941, then as a booklet in 1942, and finally as a book in 1949, combined with other addresses.

<sup>20</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 10.



spirituality, or theology. The influences upon his life to that point prevented him from being enamored with the academy and its methodology:

So the mercy and faithfulness of God . . . [was manifested] in every sweet influence of God’s Word in my life from the time I could hear my father speak; through Sunday school at White Oak Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina; through Bible classes at Wheaton College; through daily disciplines of meditation and memorization; through class after class with Dr. Fuller; being trained in the severe discipline of observation. The fruit of these labors was so powerfully self-attesting and soul-satisfying that the critical methodology I found at the University of Munich held no allurements. And the more I cut my way through that thicket, the less fruitful it seemed.<sup>21</sup>

In 1974 Piper was hired as assistant professor of biblical studies at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota (1974–1980). In May of 1979, John Piper had completed his fifth year of teaching and was due for a sabbatical in the fall. In every class Piper had encountered students who sought to discount his Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9, so he had one aim for his eight-month leave: “to study Romans 9 and write a book on it that would settle, in my own mind, the meaning of these verses.” Or put differently, “to analyze God’s words so closely and construe them so carefully that I could write a book that would be compelling and stand the test of time.”<sup>22</sup>

Piper enjoyed classroom teaching. His exegetical method proved revolutionary for some of the students, and he even saw some students converted in his New Testament history classes. But over the course of his sabbatical a new desire emerged: “to see the word of God applied across a broader range of problems in people’s lives and a broader range of ages.” He increasingly longed “to address a flock week after week and try to

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<sup>21</sup>John Piper, “Preface to the 2012 Republication,” *Love Your Enemies: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), vi.

<sup>22</sup>John Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What Is Romans Nine About?” November 3, 2002, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-absolute-sovereignty-of-god-what-is-romans-nine-about> (accessed July 7, 2014). The book—which Richard Muller would call “the most compelling and forceful exposition of Romans 9:1–23 I have ever seen”—was published four years later as *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

draw them in . . . to an experience of God that gives them more joy in him than they have in anything else and thus magnifies Christ.” And over the course of his sabbatical, he found that in studying the majestic, free, and sovereign God of Romans 9 day after day his “analysis merged into worship.”<sup>23</sup>

The calling to preach and pastor became irresistible. In July of 1980, Piper was installed as the thirteenth pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota, which has since becoming a multi-campus congregation with thousands of congregants. During his 33-year-pastorate Piper authored over fifty books and has become a popular speaker for parachurch ministries devoted to a resurgence of God-centered worship, sound doctrine, and risk-taking mission (e.g., the Passion conferences, Together for the Gospel, The Gospel Coalition, Cross Conference).<sup>24</sup> During this time Piper was also instrumental in founding, or helping to found, organizations such as The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (1987), Desiring God Ministries (1994), and The Bethlehem Institute (1998), which has now developed into Bethlehem College and Seminary (2009).

Piper served in his pastoral capacity until Easter 2013, when he delivered his final sermon as Bethlehem’s pastor for preaching and vision and passed the baton to his successor and former student, Jason Meyer. He currently serves as an author, speaker, and teacher for Desiring God, as well as Chancellor for Bethlehem College and Seminary.

### **Thesis**

The academic work done thus far on Piper’s ministry has focused upon textual

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<sup>23</sup>John Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony,” January 28, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource/john-pipers-candidating-testimony> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>24</sup>For a comprehensive, chronological list of Piper’s published writings, see the appendix.

and methodological analysis of his preaching<sup>25</sup> or upon systematization and summation of aspects of his theology.<sup>26</sup> In this present study I intend to offer something simultaneously broader and deeper, an initial exercise in intellectual biography through means of exploring four personal influences upon the trajectory of Piper’s life, spirituality, and theology. Based on Piper’s own testimony, I identify four subjects who have indelibly shaped his perspective: his parents (who were joyful fundamentalists), C. S. Lewis (who embodied romantic rationalism), Daniel Fuller (who exemplified the rigors of exegetical biblicism), and Jonathan Edwards (who taught and modeled a doctrinally rich and experientially affective form of Calvinism). I will argue that all four of these influences irreducibly combine to inform the Christian hedonism that John Piper has sought to teach and live. Since this is a dissertation in biblical spirituality and church history, I will also include an extended analysis of Piper’s use of Scripture and history as means of instruction and edification. I argue that both Piper’s profound virtues and his occasional academic limitations as an interpreter of both Scripture and history are best understood within the context of his vocation as a working pastor who is first seeking spiritual edification for himself and others.

Piper, who has produced numerous biographical sketches from church history with lessons for today, has offered the following observation: “It seems to me that any

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<sup>25</sup>Tony Merida, “The Christocentric Emphasis in John Piper’s Expository Preaching” (PhD PhD diss., The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006); Shin Woong Park, “A Study of John Piper as Pastor-Preacher” (DMin thesis, Liberty University, 2009); Sunghyun Pae, “A Study of John Piper’s Sermon Preparation: A Model for Pastors Who Emphasize the Supremacy of God in Expository Preaching” (DMin thesis, Liberty University, 2011); Michael Taylor, “Doctrinal Exposition: An Analysis of John Piper’s Preaching Ministry” (PhD PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

<sup>26</sup>Shawn Stanton Merithew, “Theological Tenets of the Evangelistic Ministry of John Piper during the Years 1980–2002” (PhD PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003); cf. Shawn Stanton Merithew, *God’s Desire for the Nations: The Missionary Theology of John Piper* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2010); Philip O. Hopkins, “Missions for the Glory of God: An Analysis of the Missionary Theology of John Piper” (PhD diss., The Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005); Justin Taylor, “The Theology of Prayer in the Preaching and Teaching Ministry of John Piper” (MAR thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2012).

serious analysis or exploration of a human being's life will always deal in paradoxes. It will see tensions. Again and again, the serious effort to understand another person will meet with ironic realities."<sup>27</sup> This dissertation presents an opportunity to begin exploring such tensions in Piper's own story. Questions to be explored include why he characterizes his parents as being manifestly marked by joyfulness, when the popular understanding of fundamentalism is one of strictness and legality. Further, why does Piper overwhelmingly characterize his upbringing as one of gratitude when he was introverted and a self-described loner who did not have many meaningful conversations with his parents? Related, why does Piper exhibit no resentment for his father's absence during his formative years, since he was as an evangelist on the road two-thirds of the year? Why was he so attracted to the work of C. S. Lewis, when Lewis rejected or downplayed many truths that Piper would regard as central and indispensable, and for which he would be highly critical if others held to a similar theology? What drew Piper to Daniel Fuller as a life-changing influence while many in the Reformed community have made Fuller's work an object of criticism?<sup>28</sup> And what is one to make of Fuller's redefining of inerrancy and imputation, along with his rejection of complementarianism, when these seem to be hallmarks of Piper's teaching ministry? With respect to Edwards, is Piper justified in claiming that Edwards was a Christian hedonist (conceptually, even if he would have balked at the terminology)? These and other avenues of intrigue and mystery can be explored through an in-depth textual analysis of Piper's writing and a careful examination of the historical record. In the chapters that follow, some of these questions

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<sup>27</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Douglas Moo, "Review of *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*," *TrinJ* 3, no. 1 (1982): 99–103; O. Palmer Robertson, "Daniel P. Fuller's *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum*: A Review Article," *Presbyterion* 8, no. 1 (1982): 84–91; W. Robert Godfrey, "Back to Basics: A Response to the Robertson-Fuller Dialogue," *Presbyterion* 9, nos. 1–2 (1983): 80–92; Meredith G. Kline, "Covenant Theology under Attack," *New Horizons* 15 (February 1994): 3–5.

will be explored explicitly while others will implicitly remain in the background.

### **Background**

In 1998, the week after becoming married, my wife and I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, so that I could join the inaugural class of The Bethlehem Institute, a seminary-level apprenticeship program at Bethlehem Baptist Church. After graduating in 2000, I planned to enroll at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary but had the opportunity to fill a one-year vacancy as Piper's theological and editorial assistant. After that year, and after being accepted at Southern, I was given the opportunity (and agreed) to stay in this role longer term. This position gave me a unique opportunity to become well acquainted with Piper's theology, spirituality, personality, and history.

Near the end of 2005 I left this position to join Crossway Books in Wheaton, Illinois. Four years later, in 2009, Sam Storms and I began co-editing a festschrift for Piper.<sup>29</sup> The editing of David Livingston's biographical sketch of Piper<sup>30</sup> was a life-changing experience and one directly related to this dissertation.<sup>31</sup> As I worked through Livingston's chapter, I began to see more clearly the fascinating narrative trajectory of Piper's life story and desired to explore it in greater depth. I noted in particular that Piper was influenced by fundamentalist, conservative evangelical, progressive evangelical, and Reformed sources. A thesis eventually emerged in my own thinking: by understanding the unique combination of these divergent influences, one can begin to understand what makes Piper's theology and spirituality so uniquely powerful.

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<sup>29</sup>Sam Storms and Justin Taylor, eds., *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>30</sup>David Livingston, "Three Doors Down from a Power Plant," in *For the Fame of God's Name*, 24–35.

<sup>31</sup>Livingston, "Three Doors Down from a Power Plant," 24–35.

## Overview

Chapter 2 provides information about John Piper's parents, Bill and Ruth Piper. I begin by describing their family lineage and then provide biographical information about the Pipers, including their relationship to Bob Jones College and to Bob Jones Sr. in particular. Bill Piper's resignation from the board in 1957 over issues related to Billy Graham had a significant effect on John Piper's later alignment with neo-evangelical institutions. I provide detailed information about Bill Piper's evangelistic schedule and travels, which took him away from his family on average two-thirds of the year, usually for fifteen days at a time (but sometimes over thirty). I trace some of John Piper's difficulties in his formative years and the role of his parents at this time, and I close the narrative portion by recounting the death of Ruth Piper in a tragic accident in 1974. I then turn to evaluating the various ways in which Piper's upbringing and parents influenced various theological and spiritual themes in his later life.

Chapter 3 introduces the role of C. S. Lewis into the life of John Piper. He began reading *Mere Christianity* his freshman year at Wheaton College and was scarcely without a Lewis book thereafter. English professor Clyde Kilby played a significant role in Piper's development; not only did he model a Lewisian love for the imagination, but he was one of the first Lewis scholars in America, having met Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien in England and partnered with them to produce some works. Following from Piper's time at Wheaton, I trace the various ideas of Lewis that have particularly marked Piper's approach to spirituality, including the role that Lewis played in the development of Christian hedonism and Lewis's unique combination of romanticism and rationalism. Included in this chapter is a discussion of why Piper values Lewis so highly when Lewis did not hold to several doctrines that Piper especially prizes as important to Christian theology and spirituality.

Chapter 4 examines the influence of Jonathan Edwards upon the life and theology of Piper. I provide a chronological narrative of Piper's encounter with various

works from Edwards, showing the ways Edwards's writings have shaped Piper's thinking and spirituality. I then examine how Piper ranks the influence of each work in his own understanding. I close by arguing that a key to understanding Piper as an Edwardsian interpreter is to remember that he does not primarily approach the task as a historian or as a scholar but as an appropriator—a working pastor eager to be personally fed and to feed the flock. Piper's calling accounts for some of his limitations as an Edwards popularizer but also for some of his power, as a new generation sees the Edwardsian spirit embodied afresh.

Chapter 5 looks at the influence of Dan Fuller on John Piper. I begin by relating Fuller's own biography with a special emphasis upon his revision of inerrancy, which culminated in a theological change of direction for the seminary. I then narrate Piper's time at the school and summarize the key theological insights that emerged during this revolutionary period in his life. Fuller became Piper's most formative living teacher, and in turn, Piper became Fuller's most influential student. I also touch upon some controversial areas, including the relationship between gospel and law, along with the role of faith and imputation in the doctrine of justification.

Chapter 6 moves away from specific individuals as influencers and turns to Piper's understanding of exegesis. As with earlier chapters, there is a narrative flow to the arrangement as I trace Piper's development through college, into seminary, and then to graduate work, the classroom, and the pulpit. I look at his exegetical methodology, along with his understanding of the role of the intellect, the affections, and the Holy Spirit in the interpretive task. I close by suggesting ways that Piper's approach is commendable, though not without its limitations (primarily focused on the neglect of historical and cultural backgrounds, along with a downplaying of biblical theology).

Chapter 7 is the final chapter of the narrative and constitutes the second topical analysis, explaining and evaluating Piper's historiography. I explain why Piper is drawn

to biography and identify the role biographies have played in his own life, along with how he selects his biographical subjects and what he is seeking to accomplish in delivering biographical messages. I then examine the wider debate within evangelicalism regarding the role of providence in historiography, along with the purposes of history for scholarship and edification. Finally, I recount how Piper sees his own work fitting into this debate.

In the conclusion I seek to pull the entire thesis together, arguing that without any of these four influences—Piper’s parents, C. S. Lewis, Daniel Fuller, or Jonathan Edwards—there would be a different John Piper than what there is today. I argue that each has irreducibly contributed not only to the form of Christian hedonism, but more generally to the theology and spirituality that Piper seeks to exemplify in his quest for godliness for the glory of God.



## CHAPTER 2

### BILL AND RUTH PIPER: JOYFUL FUNDAMENTALISM

#### Background

##### Piper Lineage

In 1871, 50-year-old John Piper (1821–1886) of Devonshire, England—along with his wife, Mary Ann Hobbs (“Margaret”), and their seven children, ranging in age from 21 to 3<sup>1</sup>—boarded the famed British passenger liner “The City of Brussels,” which provided an express line from Liverpool to New York.<sup>2</sup> They arrived at the New York port on July 3, 1871, and then traveled about 85 miles west to live in Washington Township, Pennsylvania. They would settle in Bangor, a borough in Pennsylvania about 15 miles northwest of the Chapman Quarries, where Piper and his older sons had been recruited to mine slate.<sup>3</sup>

The Pipers’ third oldest child, Samuel John, married Bessie Parsons, an English immigrant eight years his junior. Elmer Albert, Samuel and Bessie’s third born

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<sup>1</sup>Their children were Walter (age 21), William (17), Samuel John (14), Louise (8), Mary (8), Thomas (4), and Albert (3). “England and Wales Census, 1871,” index and images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/V5TK-RKW> (accessed June 4, 2014), John Piper, Diptford, Devonshire, England; citing “1871 England, Scotland and Wales census,” index and images, *findmypast.co.uk* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) : Brightsolid, n.d.); PRO RG 10, folio 116, p. 14; Totnes registration district, Ugborough subdistrict, ED 9, household 64, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey; FHL microfilm 831787.

<sup>2</sup>The 390-foot steamship, which had been running the express line for two years at this point, was designed to carry 200 cabin-class passengers and 600 steerage. In 1861, its first year of service, the ship set a record for completing the fastest Eastbound trip—from New York to Queenstown, New Zealand—in 7 days, 20 hours, 33 minutes (14.74 knots).

<sup>3</sup>For ancestral information, I am indebted to the research and compilation of Glenn Piper, who has assembled his findings online at <http://www.bitler.org/piper/> (accessed June 11, 2014).

child (on March 3, 1889), became a machinist, and six months after he married Emma Lerch, their first son was born in Bangor, Pennsylvania: Harold John (January 17, 1913). The next two boys were born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Elmer David (February 24, 1917) and William Solomon Hottel (January 8, 1919).<sup>4</sup>

### **William S. H. Piper**

This youngest of Elmer and Emma's sons was named after William Solomon Hottel (1878–1965), who served from 1914 to 1920 as one of the pastors at Ebenezer Bible Fellowship Church in Bethlehem, part of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Pennsylvania Conference.<sup>5</sup> Hottel, a gifted Bible expositor who trained Sunday School teachers during the week for their Sunday lessons. Word of this instruction spread, and those from nearby congregations began to attend his training sessions. It is likely that this is where Elmer Albert Piper received his informal theological training.<sup>6</sup> Elmer would go on to be a fiery preacher at West Wyomissing Non Sectarian Church, expositing the fundamentals of the faith from a dispensational hermeneutic. Bill's earliest memories of his father were his long hours spent in the study over the Bible. Bill later claimed—possibly with some exaggeration—that his father could have recited most of the New

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<sup>4</sup>As noted below, Bill Piper's name comes from William Solomon Hottel. John Piper consistently spells his father's second middle name as Hottle. I have been unable to find a definitive source on this (Bill usually abbreviated his two middle names as "S. H.") but would note two things: (1) It seems unlikely that Elmer would misspell his son's middle name, given his relationship with Hottel (who later signed Bill's ordination certificate); (2) The Library of Congress's *Catalog of Copyright Entries: Third Series* (1951) lists Bill's name as William Solomon Hottel Piper (p. 577). Therefore, I think it is a reasonable judgment that this is how the name was originally spelled and that it was later misspelled by his family.

<sup>5</sup>On Hottel, see Harold P. Shelly, *The Bible Fellowship Church, formerly Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Pennsylvania Conference, originally die Evangelische Mennoniten Gemeinschaft von Ost-Pennsylvanien* (Bethlehem, PA: The Historical Committee, Bible Fellowship Church, 1992), 114, 153, 233–36, 258, 260, 262, 355.

<sup>6</sup>A newspaper clipping from July 1940 notes that Rev. E. A. Piper has "more than 20 years experience as pastor, evangelist and Bible expositor," which would put the start of his ministry around 1919, the year Bill was born and the year before Hottel resigned. This clipping is found in Bill Piper, "Scrapbook," John Piper Papers.

Testament from memory.<sup>7</sup>

Bill was baptized as a young boy in Sylvan Lake in Pontiac, Michigan. He recounts:

I received Christ as my Savior when I was a boy of six. Certainly there were many things I did not know, nor need to know. I knew enough to be saved. I knew I was sinful and needed a Savior. I knew that Christ was that Savior I needed. I knew that if I would believe on Him and confess Him as my Savior He would save me. That is all I needed to know and that all any child needs to know to be saved. I trusted Christ and he saved me.<sup>8</sup>

Nine years later, as a 15-year-old junior at Reading High School, Bill attended a citywide revival meeting at his father's church. As he sat under the preaching of a well-known visiting evangelist, he began to experience deep conviction. He saw afresh the weakness of his flesh and the cowardice of his witness. He walked forward, and for the first time in his life he says he knew the fullness of the Holy Spirit and felt powerfully courageous. The next day he stood up at school and preached the gospel for twenty minutes.<sup>9</sup>

On Saturday night, the evangelist turned the service over to the youth, and Bill was asked to preach for the first time. His heart was full of zeal and he wanted to do his best for the Lord. He gathered half a dozen Gospel tracts, spread them out over the pulpit, and preached from one tract to the next. "I don't recall a thing I said. It probably was a poor sermon. But the thing that mattered was that when I gave the invitation to receive Christ ten precious souls left their seats, came weeping to an improvised altar and

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<sup>7</sup>John Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper: Fundamentalist Full of Grace and Joy," February 5, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/evangelist-bill-piper-fundamentalist-full-of-grace-and-joy> (accessed July 11, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>Bill Piper, *A Good Time and How to Have It* (Greenville, SC: Piper Publications, 1964), 65, cited in Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

<sup>9</sup>In addition to "Evangelist Bill Piper," John Piper also recounts this story in "Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called Lordship Salvation," February 1, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/letter-to-a-friend-concerning-the-so-called-lordship-salvation> (accessed June 23, 2014).

surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup> He describes what was happening in his own heart as he saw the response to the gospel:

The thrill that came to me then is still with me many years later. I knew that Jesus had walked on the water but I felt as I left the building that night that I was walking on air! Believe me, I was on cloud nine! And, better still, I’ve never come down. What thrilled me most was the sudden realization that I had immeasurable power at my disposal. That the God of heaven, the God of the Bible, was willing to speak through me in such a way as to touch other lives and transform them and change their destinies. I never dreamed such a thrill was possible for me. I had not known such power was at my disposal. I said then, “God, let me know this power the rest of my life. Let me be so yielded to Thee that I’ll never cease to know the thrill and joy of winning others to Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

For his remaining 73 years on earth Bill never lost the thrill of seeing the soul-winning power of God lead a precious soul to Christ, and he was unable to recount this first evangelistic sermon without tears.<sup>12</sup>

### **Bill and Ruth Piper**

Bill’s high school sweetheart was Ruth Eulalia Mohn, three months older than he (b. October 7, 1918), who lived four miles to the west of the Piper home in neighboring Wyomissing Hills (where Bill’s father pastored). Bill first references her in his five-year journal in December of 1934, their junior year of high school.<sup>13</sup> Ruth’s ancestors emigrated to Pennsylvania from Hanover, Germany, in the eighteenth century,

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<sup>10</sup>Bill Piper, *The Greatest Menace to Modern Youth* (Greenville, SC: Piper’s Evangelistic Publications, 1980), 22–23. Bill’s “Five Year Diary,” located in John Piper Papers—which goes from 1934 through half of 1937—records events over the following three-day period: “Great sermon by Mr. Young on ‘Death Traps’” (Saturday, November 10, 1934). “A great day. Conversions morning, afternoon and evening. I spoke at Front & Windsor Methodist Church [i.e., Wesley United Methodist Church in Reading, PA]. First time I ever went out alone” (Sunday, November 11, 1934). “God gave me courage to speak to Bob Weidenhammer and Jimmy Burnish [two of his high-school classmates] about Christ” (Monday, November 12, 1934). We cannot be certain, but these seem to be the same events recounted by Bill many years later and recorded above, though the chronology varies somewhat.

<sup>11</sup>Piper, *The Greatest Menace to Modern Youth*, 22–23.

<sup>12</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>13</sup>Piper, “Five Year Diary.”

and one can still find places in the state associated with the family, like the town of Mohns Hill or Mohn's Memorial Evangelical Congregational Church.<sup>14</sup>

Ruth's high school yearbook records that she devoted her time to Bible study, young people's prayer meetings, and sewing. For recreation she swam, hiked, and played tennis. Like Bill, she sang in chorus and with an a cappella group, along with other forms of vocal music. Her stated plans were to enter evangelistic work, likely on account of her courtship with Bill. A couple of pages later Bill's yearbook entry says he is "a most devoted church-goer" and that he "wants to be an Evangelistic Preacher." While fellow classmates at the end of their senior year were signing each other's yearbooks with jokes, memories, and flirtation, Bill's signature records what mattered most in his life: "Saved by Grace / Wm. Piper / Eph. 2:8-9."<sup>15</sup>

When Bill was a junior and his brother Elmer a freshman, they started a local radio program called "Bill and El, the Gospel Songsters"—Elmer as tenor, Bill as baritone—featuring their own singing and preaching, with "Precious Hiding Place"

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<sup>14</sup>*Historical and Biographical Annals of Berks County, Pennsylvania, Embracing a Concise History of the County and a Genealogical and Biographical Record of Representative Families* (1909), available online at [https://archive.org/stream/cu31924097286300/cu31924097286300\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/cu31924097286300/cu31924097286300_djvu.txt) (accessed June 17, 2014). In 1733 Johannes Mohn (1700–1764) and his wife, Margaret, set sail on the ship *Elizabeth*, leaving from the port in Rotterdam and arriving in Philadelphia. Their youngest son, Ludwig (1730–96), married Anna, and together they had five sons and three daughters. Daniel (d. 1846), the fourth son of Ludwig and Anna, followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather as a farmer. William Mohn (1804–89), the third son and seventh child of Daniel and Barbara Mohn, went into farming after purchasing his father's homestead. When he moved to Adamstown, he owned a successful gristmill for ten years and was active as an officer in the Evangelical Church, establishing a school and a church at Mohn's Hill. William's first wife, Polly Gerner Mohn, gave birth to nine children, including their fifth son, Jeremiah Gerner Mohn (1839–1919). After William's death, Jeremiah purchased the church property in 1985 and presented it to the congregation as a memorial to his parents; it was subsequently known as Mohn's Memorial Church. Jeremiah's first marriage, to Annie Shirk, produced one son, Charles Ellsworth Mohn (1867–1928), who grew up to work in the hat business like his father. He and his wife, Eulalia Blankenbiller, had one son, Winfield H. Mohn (1892–1935), who also served in the wool hat manufacturing business. For many years he led music in the West Lawn Evangelical Church and often organized groups of singers for church gatherings. He and his wife, Erma W. (Stoner) Mohn (1894–1991), had two children, Ruth Eulalia and Charles S. Mohn (1920–1949). Near the end of Ruth's junior year at Reading High School, her father, Winfield, died at the age of 42 after a long illness caused by a heart condition.

<sup>15</sup>Reading High School Yearbook, 1936, John Piper Papers.

(1918) as their theme song. The old gospel song told the old, old story that the boys had found to be precious and true.

Bill Piper and Ruth Mohn graduated together in 1936. From there, Bill studied at John A. Davis Memorial Bible School, a Practical Bible Training School in Binghamton, New York, and then traveled the country with their Student's League of Nations. In September of 1936, Ruth enrolled in Moody Bible Institute of Chicago in order to study music education. Later that year, on the day before Christmas Eve of 1936, Bill was licensed as a gospel minister at a meeting of the Calvary Baptist Church in Reading. His licensure allowed him "to preach the Gospel as he may have opportunity, and to exercise his gifts in the work of the Ministry, except in administering the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper."<sup>16</sup>

On May 26, 1938, nineteen-year-olds Bill and Ruth were married in a joint ceremony with his brother Elmer and Ruth ("Naomi") Werner at First Evangelical Congregational Church in Reading. (The brothers, playing off of their middle names, loved to recount that Solomon and David married Ruth and Naomi.<sup>17</sup>)

### **Bob Jones College (1938–1942)**

After getting married, the Pipers moved to Cleveland, Tennessee, where they enrolled in Bob Jones College, founded by Bob Jones Sr. (1883–1968) near Panama City, Florida, in 1927 and then relocated to Cleveland in 1933.<sup>18</sup> Bill was an average student

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<sup>16</sup>Bill Piper, "Ordination Certificate," John Piper Papers.

<sup>17</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper" (audio version).

<sup>18</sup>For histories of the school told from two different perspectives, see Mark Taylor Dalhouse, *An Island in the Lake of Fire: Bob Jones University, Fundamentalism, and the Separatist Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) and David L. Turner, *Standing without Apology: The History of Bob Jones University* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1997). The former is an outside, critical study and the latter an inside, filiopietistic account. Both are valuable studies. The only full-length biography of Jones Sr. is not a critical study but rather a flattering account written by a longtime friend and associate of Jones: R. K. Johnson, *Builder of Bridges: A Biography of Dr. Bob Jones Sr.* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 1982).

but a gifted actor, speaker, and preacher, starring in several Shakespeare plays at the school. Bill developed a special fondness and lifelong admiration for the school's founder, Bob Jones Sr., the evangelist and fundamentalist patriarch who at that time was in his mid-50s.<sup>19</sup> To the students, he was known simply as "Dr. Bob."

The school's creed affirmed the fundamentals in nine affirmations:

I believe in [1] the inspiration of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments; [2] the creation of man by the direct act of God; [3] the incarnation and virgin birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; [4] His identification as the Son of God; [5] His vicarious atonement for the sins of mankind by the shedding of His blood on the cross; [6] the resurrection of His body from the tomb; [7] His power to save men from sin; [8] the new birth through the regeneration by the Holy Spirit; and [9] the gift of eternal life by the grace of God.<sup>20</sup>

These were the core Bible beliefs Piper had learned in church from his father and other evangelists, and they also serve as an apt summary of his lifelong doctrinal convictions.

Upon graduating in June of 1942 with a bachelor's degree, Piper entered full-time evangelistic work, with Cleveland, Tennessee, as his home base. His ministry letterhead expressed his vocation: "Campaigning for Christ . . . Across the Nation." On the home front, Ruth was pregnant with their first child. On January 29, 1943, in the Reading [Pennsylvania] Hospital, Ruth gave birth to her firstborn child and only daughter, Beverly Ruth. Later that year Bill and Ruth bought their first home, just half a block to the west of Bob Jones College.

In 1945, Piper was asked to become a trustee at his alma mater, making him the youngest board member in the school's eighteen-year history. Responding in May of 1945 to an encouraging letter from Dr. Bob, Piper mentioned that he did not deserve the gracious remarks or the honor of being named a trustee. The twin themes of honor and

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<sup>19</sup>Even amid painful relational circumstances, Bill wrote to "Dr. Bob": "Apart from my own father, you have done more for me and mean more to me than any living man." Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., November 16, 1957, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>20</sup>Bob Jones College Yearbook, 1946, John Piper Papers.

loyalty are evident throughout the relatively brief letter:

. . . this honor, to say the least, has greatly increased my determination, which was already fixed, to remain loyal to the institution that has revolutionized my life. Rest assured that I have received the honor with a deep sense of new responsibility. I have not found it difficult to be faithful and loyal. On the contrary, during these three years since graduation, my devotion to and love for the school has steadily increased. As my experience increases so does my appreciation for the value of those lessons learned at your feet and in those blessed college halls. I want to renew my pledge of loyalty. I want to say that by the grace of God, as long as Bob Jones College stays true to the Lord, I shall continue to give of my financial support, turn all the students possible to it, and render any active service I may be called upon as a board member to render.<sup>21</sup>

This must have been an enormously encouraging season in Bill Piper's life. He had realized his longstanding dream of being a full-time evangelist. Just a few years after graduating from college, of all the alumni available, his mentor had asked him to serve as a trustee. And Bill and Ruth had just found out that they were expecting their second child in January.

### **John, not Peter, Piper**

The Pipers' only son was born at 8:29 A.M. on January 11, 1946, in Erlanger Hospital of Chattanooga, Tennessee, a half hour drive southwest of their home in Cleveland. He was 7 lbs., 6 oz., and 19 inches long. Bill later wrote to his son, "When you were born, I wanted to call you Peter for I wanted you to be dynamic, filled with fire."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Bill envisioned his son, Peter Piper, the great evangelist, leading other sons to glory as the Apostle Peter had done on Pentecost. Bill must have prematurely let others know his proposed name, for later that afternoon Ruth received a Western Union telegram from their friends the Hylers in Cleveland, offering "Congratulations to you both upon the arrival of Peter."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., May 30, 1945, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>22</sup>Bill Piper, letter to John and Noël Piper, October 3, 1972, John Piper Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Telegram from the Hylers to Bill and Ruth Piper, January 11, 1946, John Piper Papers. Bill



John was a biblical name (the beloved disciple of Jesus), but also a common family name (the Christian name of Bill's great-grandfather, as well as the middle name of both Bill's grandfather and oldest brother). Stephen was the church's courageous first martyr (Acts 6–8). As Bill observed when John was an adult: "John Stephen . . . fits you far better."<sup>24</sup> In his family he would always be known simply as "Johnny."

### **Greenville, South Carolina**

In April of 1946, the administration of Bob Jones College announced they would be selling the Cleveland property and relocating the school 180 miles east, to Greenville, South Carolina, and that the college would become a university. The move would take place over the summer, and the Greenville doors would open for the first time in the fall of 1947.

After the announcement, the Pipers gathered about 25 people in the living room of their Cleveland home to share a dream: they could all move to Greenville together, secure a large tract of land near the school, and build their own homes upon it. They could share in Christian fellowship with one another and partake of the school's culture, which they all knew and loved. It would be a community of friends of Bob Jones University, and this lovely subdivision of homes would be a credit to the school and its fine culture of excellence.<sup>25</sup>

Although there was initial interest, no one stepped forward to take the lead in

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wrote a poem in the third person for his son's sixth birthday, and it includes these lines: "How well I recollect the time / He first saw light of day. / I tried to call him Pete but Mom / As usual had her way. / We called him John; a goodly name, / I think it fits him fine, / Like John of old, he's sweet and good / And keeps his Sis in line" (Bill Piper, "My Boy," January 11, 1952, John Piper Papers). Ruth seems to have had the presence of mind to spare her son from a lifetime of questions about Piper's rate of picking pecks of pickled pepper.

<sup>24</sup>Bill Piper, letter to John and Noël Piper, October 3, 1972, John Piper Papers.

<sup>25</sup>Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., November 16, 1957, Bill Piper Papers.

spearheading such a venture. So after much prayer, Bill and Ruth decided to sell their Cleveland home, make a down payment on a house in Greenville, and acquire two lots of land (\$1,400 each) from Annie Bradley and the College Park Realty Corporation. In the summer of 1946 Bill, Ruth, four-year-old Beverly, and six-month-old Johnny made the move to Greenville. In August they bought a two-story brick home on James Street, three miles west of the school, where they would live for the next five years.

That November Bill and Ruth purchased 63.48 acres of land in Butler township, on the northwest side of Super Highway No. 29 (about a mile inside the corporate limits of Greenville at that time). On the southeast side of the highway was Bob Jones University. On the northwest side this residential area came to be called “University Park,” as Bill and Ruth became the President and Secretary of College Park Realty Corporation. Ruth was granted power of attorney to handle the influx of paperwork required to sell dozens of properties as Bill traveled the country on various revivals and evangelistic crusades.

“The pipedream,” as Bill called it, would soon fade. Without sewerage, bus service, paved streets, or power, the land was an unattractive option for most buyers. The first two years they struggled to sell a single lot, all the while making enormous payments on staggering mortgages. Drowning in debt, they came close to declaring bankruptcy.<sup>26</sup> Bill—whose default disposition seemed to be indomitably happy—became depressed and had trouble sleeping. He began to read a book by Keswickian author James McConkey on *The Surrendered Life*.<sup>27</sup> In one of his addresses (“The Committal”), McConkey

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<sup>26</sup>Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>27</sup>James McConkey, *The Surrendered Life* (Silver Publishing Company, 1903), <http://www.path2prayer.com/article.php?id=165> (accessed July 9, 2014). For a history and analysis of Keswick theology, see Andrew David Naselli, “Keswick Theology: A Historical and Theological Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement, 1875–1920” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2006).

expounds Psalm 37:5: “Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring [it] to pass.” Bill began to see the difference between “submitting” to God (in conversion) and “committing” his way to God (day by day). He had done the former. He had come committed to evangelistic work as a teenager, and ever since that time God had used him to save many souls. But he did not feel that he was totally committed to God. So under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, he bowed and gave everything to the Lord. He felt a peace beyond understanding.<sup>28</sup> In 1950, the homes began to sell. In May alone nine lots were sold.<sup>29</sup> During this time Bill and Ruth were building their own dream home on the property, at 122 Bradley Boulevard—just a half-mile across Wade Hampton Boulevard, using the same blonde brick construction for their ranch home that was used for the Jones house on campus. Construction was complete in 1951.

On May 28, 1952, the University awarded Bill and Elmer the Doctor of Divinity degrees in recognition for the impact of their ministry in the churches of the United States. Later that summer, before John’s kindergarten year at Summit Drive Elementary School, the Pipers took their annual family vacation, driving south from Greenville through Georgia to Florida, which would include stops in Daytona Beach, Saint Petersburg, and Fort Lauderdale. Each day at the beach would involve fishing off the pier and special times of deep-sea fishing off of a boat. It was on one of those vacation days, kneeling at a hotel bed with his mother, that young Johnny prayed to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior. It was not an event that he personally remembered—he has no memories before the age of six—but the family would recognize it as his genuine conversion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>John Piper tells the story in his public essay, “A Letter to a Friend.” Bill recounted the story orally over the phone to John when John was writing this piece.

<sup>29</sup>Historical property information for this land during this time period was accessed at the Greenville County public registry of deeds and mortgages.

<sup>30</sup>John Piper, “The Pastor as Scholar: A Personal Journey and the Joyful Place of Scholarship,”

## Evangelistic Campaigns

A survey of Bill Piper's personal records from 1948 to 1954 allows us to see the pace and productivity of his campaigns.<sup>31</sup> Over that period he averaged 16 campaigns per year and 55 radio broadcasts (ranging from a low of 38 in 1948 to a high of 97 in 1950). Each year he preached, on average, 293 sermons, and the total number of speaking events could be as high as 455 times in a year. He could see crowds as large as 1,100 (in 1953), but the biggest gatherings for most years averaged 350 people.

On average Piper recorded 703 professions of faith ("souls saved") per year, ranging from 374 (in 1948) to 1,002 (in 1950). This was, on average, about 47 people saved per campaign. The "rededications" (recommitments to the Lord subsequent to conversion—sometimes rendered simply as "dedications") were considerably higher, averaging 2,605 per year and 164 per campaign. Another result he tracked was the number of "family altars," commitments from parents (usually the father) to lead regular family devotions or family "altars," as families read the Bible, prayed, and sometimes sang together. Each year Piper saw an average of 246 such commitments, about 16 per campaign. Financially, each campaign averaged \$416.76 in love offerings during this time period. Total donations per year averaged \$6,244.93.<sup>32</sup>

On average, Bill was on the road 225 days out of the year, nearly two-thirds of the time. The campaigns almost always began on a Sunday and ended on a Sunday, which meant that he would fly there (or take the train, in some cases) on Saturday and return home on a Monday. Most campaigns were 15 days in length, which meant that Bill

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in D. A. Carson and John Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, ed. David Mathis and Owen Strachan (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 26.

<sup>31</sup>For the following information I am relying upon Bill Piper's ledger from this time period, recording his deductible expenses and the results of his campaigns. See Bill Piper, "Revival Records: 1948-'54," John Piper Papers.

<sup>32</sup>With inflation, \$416.76 in 1952 would be equivalent to \$3,741.40 in purchasing power in 2014. The total average annual offering of \$6,244.93 would be about \$56,062.98 today.

would be there to minister for three consecutive Sundays. On several occasions each year, campaigns would be combined in one trip for the sake of efficiency (e.g., two in California, two in Pennsylvania and Maryland, two in Minnesota and Michigan). His ministry would eventually take him to all 50 states, but during the 1950s, the Northeast and the Midwest seemed to be the most frequently visited destinations (with Pennsylvania and Ohio heading the list, followed by Maryland and Michigan). Very few campaigns took place in the Deep South.

Soliciting sponsoring churches was a family affair. When he was home, Bill and Ruth, along with Beverly and Johnny, would sit at a folding table in the master bedroom. On the table would be stacks of stationary, envelopes, and stamps. Printed on the ministry stationary was a form letter sent out to pastors in fundamentalist pastors across America asking them to host an evangelistic series of meetings at their church. The family's livelihood largely depended upon the response. After they were done folding the letters, stuffing them in the envelopes, and putting the stamps upon them, Bill would close with a prayer of complete confidence in the promises of God. He believed with all of his heart that they could trust God to answer and meet every one of their needs. Again and again he came back to Philippians 4:19 ("My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus") and Romans 8:28 ("We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose").

On a Saturday, his day of departure, Bill would drive the family to the airport in Greenville. There were no jetways; passengers simply walked straight up the airstair into the plane. Sometimes he would tell them his seat number ahead of time and then take a white envelope to wave by his little window portal so they could see where he was sitting before the plane took off down the runway. John would almost come to tears at times fearing that his father's propeller plane might crash.

On Monday mornings, a week and a half later, Ruth's face would glow.<sup>33</sup> After Beverly and John came home from school, she drove with them to the airport. "Some of the sweetest memories of my childhood," John recalls, "are the smile of my father's face as he came out of the plane and down the steps and almost ran across the runway to hug me."<sup>34</sup> He would drive the family home, unpack his bags, and then join them for supper. Ruth would be in the kitchen, finishing the preparation of roast beef, carrots, potatoes, and succotash, with chocolate cake topped with peanut butter icing for dessert. Bill and Ruth would sit on opposite ends of the glass dining room table, with Beverly across from John and his maternal grandmother, "Ma Mohn," who lived with them. It did not take long for Bill to begin an intermingling of jokes and stories of gospel victories.

The two most important events within the Piper family both involved painful separations. The first was Bill Piper's resignation from the board of trustees for Bob Jones University in June of 1957. Although Bill would remain a fundamentalist evangelist, this took him out of the Bob Jones network that had been so meaningful to him, and it opened the door for John to pursue educational opportunities at non-fundamentalist colleges in the future. The second was the death of Ruth in December of 1974. The loss of his mother was devastating to John, and his father's remarriage a year later put more relational separation between the two men, though their relationship remained full of mutual admiration and appreciation. Both life-shaping events are narrated in detail below.

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<sup>33</sup>John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011), 13.

<sup>34</sup>John Piper, "Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up," April 16, 2007, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/submission-and-headship-in-the-home-where-i-grew-up> (accessed July 3, 2014).

### **Parting Ways with the Joneses**

In December of 1955, Bob Jones University sent a statement to their alumni evangelists as a way of gauging or confirming their stance for the purity of the gospel and reiterating the importance of not compromising the faith by having modernist sponsors or partners. If they were in agreement with the school, their names would be placed on a list of trusted evangelists blessed by the university. The pledge contained three prohibitions followed by one affirmation. First, they must refuse partnership with any pastor who rejected or refused to defend any of the five fundamentals: “I will not accept a church meeting on the invitation of any pastor that I know does not stand for the inspiration of the Bible, the Virgin Birth, the incarnation, the vicarious and substitutional blood atonement, and the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Second, “I will not accept an invitation from any group of pastors if I know there is one in the group that does not believe in the fundamentals outlined in the preceding paragraph. I will, however, be glad to conduct an evangelistic campaign under the sponsorship of the other pastors who do accept the doctrinal position stated.” Third, “I further pledge myself not to personally support financially or encourage anyone else to support any program of any church which I know is contrary to the Gospel which I believe and preach.” Finally, there was a positive commitment: “I am ready, if my schedule can be satisfactorily arranged, to enter any door that the Lord opens where there is an opportunity to co-operate with faithful, orthodox pastors in helping to build up the saints and win the lost to the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

Bill Piper gladly signed the document and returned it to Bob Jones Sr. with a personal letter:

When I was but a child, sitting under the wonderful teaching of my father, I determined what kind of preacher and Evangelist I would be if ever the Lord would call me. That purpose never changed and when the Lord did call me I sold my life

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<sup>35</sup>Appended to Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., December 27, 1955, Bill Piper Papers.

out to the work of preaching the Word, reviving the saints and winning lost souls to Jesus. I have no sympathy with the liberal, the modernist or the compromiser. I name them for what they are. To my knowledge, I have never trimmed my message to suit anyone sponsoring or attending my meetings. I have preached the truth as the Lord gave it to me. To my knowledge, there has never been a modernist cooperating with any of my campaigns. I share your conviction completely on this matter of separation from apostacy [*sic*].<sup>36</sup>

The first sign of disruption in this seemingly warm and cordial relation between Jones and Piper occurred a few months later. Jones wasted no time with pleasantries or formalities, but opened his letter to Piper by expressing his frustration and exercising his authority: “From something that Dr. Stenholm [1915–1989; an administrator at BJU] has told me and some things I have heard you said to some of our Bob Jones University crowd, I think it would be a pretty good idea for you, when you return, to drop over here and see me for a little talk.” He continued:

You are a member of the Board of Trustees; and if these men clearly understand you, I think that there are two or three things that ought to be cleared up in your thinking about how Bob Jones University is carried on and who is responsible to see that it is carried on a certain way. You, of course, are not only an alumnus but an honorary alumnus and a member of the Board of Trustees of the University; so we especially want a person like you to understand clearly the by-laws and charter and responsibilities of the President, etc.<sup>37</sup>

He also enclosed a copy of the university by-laws.

Piper sought to see Jones that next week, but Jones was traveling, so Piper wrote him a letter of response. “I regret it immeasurably if I have done anything out of line or said anything contrary to policy. I am not aware of having done so, but I shall be happy for you to call anything to my attention that should be corrected. If I have said anything amiss, I’ll be glad to make it right.” He assured Jones of his wholehearted love for him and for the school, going back eighteen years to his student days and eleven years to when he began as a board member. “I think I know perfectly how the school is

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<sup>36</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., December 27, 1955.

<sup>37</sup>Bob Jones Sr., letter to Bill Piper, March 16, 1956, Bill Piper Papers.



operated and who is responsible for seeing that it operates that way and I am in hearty agreement with this system. I am well acquainted with the Constitution and By-laws and endorse them whole heartedly.” He reiterated his innocence and support: “I am sure that I have never said anything intentionally of a malicious nature about any member of the administration nor spoken disparagingly about the way things are done. I’m thrilled with every step of progress and take a keen interest in all the work of the school. I’m sure that in my enthusiasm for progress I must have said some things that have been misinterpreted. For this I am very sorry.”<sup>38</sup>

Jones responded with a cordial letter downplaying the incident and the urgency of a response. “A young fellow told me some things you said, and it left some questions in his mind. Sometime when you get here, I will be glad to talk to you.” Jones offered his own reassurances in return, grateful for Piper’s expression of support and letting him know that they have always thought highly of Piper and counted on him. He then issued a backhanded compliment: “To be perfectly frank with you, I have heard about Ruth’s critical attitude toward the school and her mother’s critical attitude; and I have never had any question about your attitude; and when the young man talked to me, I felt he must have misunderstood you.”<sup>39</sup> The statements were written in the indicative mood, but the implicit imperative of warning was unmistakable.

Piper used to say that apart from his own father, no living man had done more for him and meant more to him than Bob Jones Sr.<sup>40</sup> He sat under Dr. Bob’s teaching and preaching for four years at the University, imbibing his philosophy of life and being shaped and molded by his ministry. As Piper once wrote to his patriarchal mentor, “I would be the worst of ingrates if I were not eternally grateful to you. I am and shall

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<sup>38</sup>Bill Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., March 23, 1956, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>39</sup>Bob Jones Sr., letter to Bill Piper, March 29, 1956, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>40</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

always be grateful to God for the blessing you have been in my life.”<sup>41</sup> He loved the school with all of his heart.

Piper also had a deep appreciation and affection for fellow evangelist Billy Graham (1918– ). Jones, on the other hand, was highly critical of Graham’s move away from separatism, and he was going public with his criticism. The relationship between Graham and Jones went back nearly twenty years. In December of 1936—a year and a half before Bill Piper would apply for admission to Bob Jones College—a depressed and dejected 18-year-old Billy Graham transferred from Bob Jones College to Florida Bible Institute (just outside of Tampa). Jones gave Graham a warning and a prediction before he left: “Billy, if you leave and throw your life away at a little country Bible school, the chances are you’ll never be heard of. At best, all you can amount to would be a poor country Baptist preacher somewhere out in the sticks.”<sup>42</sup> Given the established network of fundamentalism at the time, it was not an unreasonable prediction for a minister in training about to leave the flagship school.

The relationship between the two men was later repaired before it ruptured again. Twelve years after this meeting, Bob Jones University would confer on Billy Graham—then the president of Northwestern Baptist Bible College in Minneapolis and an increasingly popular evangelist—an honorary doctorate in 1948. In March of 1950 Graham held an evangelistic rally in Columbia, South Carolina, and the Joneses invited Graham to Greenville, where 6,000 turned out to hear him at Rodeheaver Auditorium on campus. The mayor ordered the stores in town to close and the public schools were dismissed at noon for the event.<sup>43</sup> Graham told Bob Jones Jr. (1911–97), “warn me if you

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<sup>41</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>42</sup>William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: W. Morrow & Co., 1991), 70.

<sup>43</sup>Dalhouse, *Lake of Fire*, 81.

see me doing anything that will hurt the cause of Christ.” The younger Jones agreed and they prayed together.<sup>44</sup>

But by the summer of 1956, as Graham’s popularity increased and his rejection of separatism solidified, Jones told Piper he believed Graham was “preaching a watered down Gospel that was more palatable to the modernists.”<sup>45</sup> This did not sit well with Piper, who had heard Graham “preach some very straight messages on the radio and had a hard time believing this.”<sup>46</sup> In November of 1956 the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association contacted Bob Jones Jr.—who had assumed the presidency of the university in 1947—about the possibility of Graham holding an evangelistic rally as part of a nationwide strategy to raise awareness for the planned New York Crusade, scheduled to begin in the spring of 1957. The Joneses emphatically rejected the invitation, with Jones Jr. publicly repudiating the BGEA for “seeking the sponsorship of modernists and liberals. . . . Our sincere and heartfelt conviction is that Billy is going to wreck evangelism and leave even orthodox churches, if they cooperate, spineless and emasculated.”<sup>47</sup>

A few days before the Board meeting at the end of May 1957, word reached Bob Jones Sr. that Bill Piper was not happy about his relationship to the university. Jones asked R. K. (“Lefty”) Johnson (1911–1971), the Board secretary, to talk with Piper to find out if this was true. He did so, and Piper denied the rumor. Jones saw Piper leave Johnson’s office and thought he looked more enthusiastic and happier than he had seen him in a long time. On the basis of what Piper had told Johnson, and the way in which Piper had interacted with Jones, they gave assurance to the Nominating Committee to

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<sup>44</sup>Dalhouse, *Lake of Fire*, 81.

<sup>45</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957. Piper is recounting Jones’s words back to him.

<sup>46</sup>Piper, letter to Bob Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>47</sup>Turner, *Standing Without Apology*, 182.

proceed with re-nominating Piper as a board member.<sup>48</sup>

But in reality, all was not well. Piper was wrestling with the tension between his loyalty to the school and his discomfort with how the school was relating to and speaking about Graham. The last thing in the world Bill Piper wanted to do was to fight Dr. Bob. But the Joneses' increasingly bitter and public opposition to Billy Graham put Bill Piper in a "strained and difficult position."<sup>49</sup> He felt "right over a barrel."<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, Piper was in sympathy with the charter and the by-laws of Bob Jones University. He was a proud alumnus and a trustee in good standing. He was, and always had been, against modernists and modernism. "For 24 years I have faithfully warned congregations of false teachers and of the apostasy of these last days. I certainly had no intention of wishing a modernist God's blessing nor would I knowingly take a compromising position with him."<sup>51</sup> "But on the other hand," he writes, "if I had a chance to preach to a modernist, I'd take it. If a modernist invited me to preach in his church knowing what I stood for and no holds barred, I'd preach in his church. If liberals or modernists voluntarily supported my meetings and asked me to participate knowing in advance what I was going to preach, I would not object so long as there were no strings of any kind placed upon me."<sup>52</sup>

This, it seemed to Piper, was exactly the attitude of Billy Graham. Several years prior, Piper came to a decision about Graham: "as long as he would walk straight and not compromise in his preaching, I would be for him."<sup>53</sup> Piper was able to distinguish

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<sup>48</sup>Bob Jones Sr., letter to Bill Piper, November 27, 1957, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>49</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>50</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>51</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>52</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>53</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

between the content of Graham’s preaching and the cooperative methods of his crusades, and in Piper’s mind the former was the decisive factor in supporting him. Jones, on the other hand, not only thought that Graham’s methods were a compromise of the gospel, but that his preaching was as well.<sup>54</sup>

Over the previous few years several grievances against Jones and the school had been accumulating in Piper’s heart. He had grown increasingly uncomfortable not only with Jones’s critique of Billy Graham’s method of evangelism, but also with his relentless battle against the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program.<sup>55</sup> He thought Jones was sowing bitter seeds that would prove unfruitful. He felt “torn and sick in heart over the conflict.”<sup>56</sup> He didn’t want to fight anyone—not Bob Jones, not Billy Graham—except the devil.

But he kept hoping that he was wrong, praying the Lord would give him a correct understanding of their problems. He tried earnestly to see and accept the Joneses’ position, but he could not shake the sense that their positions were increasingly extreme. The issues were not focused clearly enough in his own mind in order to approach Jones, now in his mid-70s. In this season of fog, Piper feared over several months that he would do more harm than good by voicing them.<sup>57</sup>

Immediately after the board meeting following commencement in late May of 1957, Piper traveled to Wisconsin to speak at a union revival meeting. On Wednesday,

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<sup>54</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>55</sup>The Cooperative Program, started by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925, was “a centralized means of funding all of the denomination’s agencies and boards, most of which were tied in some way to the promotion of evangelism and foreign missions.” Separatists criticized the funding mechanism, however, because it “funded all of [the] convention agencies without making any theological discriminations” (Nathan A. Finn, “The Development of Baptist Fundamentalism in the South, 1940–1980” [PhD diss., Southeastern Theological Seminary, 2007], 106, 127).

<sup>56</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>57</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

June 5, he later recounted, “my thoughts congealed and I arrived home at some definite conclusions.”<sup>58</sup> That evening he received a phone call from Ruth. She had important news from Lew Miller, who was sitting there at the house, having just returned from a tense conversation with Dr. Bob.

Lewis and Joanna Miller had returned to campus on Sunday afternoon, June 2.<sup>59</sup> Lew Miller was a 28-year-old student who had graduated from Penn State, had been converted in the Air Force, and was now enrolled at BJU with aspirations of being an evangelist. The Millers had joined White Oak Baptist Church and were befriended by the Pipers, who took the young couple and their infant son under their wings. The Millers returned to Greenville, having taken a year off from school to recoup financially, and would stay at the Piper residence for a few days before they could settle on an apartment.

The reception Miller received after being a year away was unexpected and disconcerting. People at White Oak began asking him why in the world he came back, given the problems with the school and its increasing separatism. Instead of enrolling the next day, Miller determined that he needed to find out what was going on and whether the rumors were true. He knew who the enemies of the school were and he knew what they would say, so he didn’t seek their perspective. Instead he wanted a more objective perspective, so he sought out concerned friends of the school. He talked to a significant number of people and collected an equally significant number of concerns. Ruth Piper was a voice of caution. She knew that the Millers had spent all their money to drive hundreds of miles back to Greenville, they had a son just over a year old, and Joanna was

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<sup>58</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>59</sup>The following narrative, apart from areas where other references are indicated, is based upon two interviews I conducted with Lewis Miller (June 11 and June 12, 2014; notes in my possession). It should be kept in mind that this is only one side of the story, since the other participants in these events are no longer living. I have sought to represent fairly the Bob Jones University side from extant historical sources (including Bob Jones’s brief accounts of the events and their background in his correspondence with Bill Piper).

pregnant. Were they really going to leave so quickly on account of hearsay? Shouldn't Lew check with the university to see if the things he was hearing were in fact so?

Miller determined that he was going to go straight to the top: to the founder himself, Dr. Bob Jones Sr. No one, including Ruth, seemed to think that was a good idea. Vince Cervera and John Tierney—evangelists, members of White Oak, and Bob Jones alum—warned Lew that Dr. Bob would “break” him, as he had with so many who questioned his authority and opposed him. Lew decided to go anyway. On Wednesday, June 5, he walked the half-mile down Bradley Boulevard, across Wade Hampton Boulevard, and onto campus. Dr. Gilbert Stenholm, the dean of the school of religion, staff evangelist, and head of the preachers, met with Miller, who explained that he had a list of 28 things he wanted to ask Dr. Jones. Stenholm explained that Jones was traveling in the Midwest, so Lew would have to talk to him instead.

The meeting lasted for several hours as Lew Miller worked through his list. A lot of the questions had to do with Billy Graham and the school's attitude toward Billy and his ministry, but Miller also raised questions about professors and students who had been dismissed. Stenholm kept asking Miller for the source of his information. Miller “made the statement that the alumni who are here in Greenville are for the school but that some of them did not like the policies.”<sup>60</sup> He was not at liberty to identify these alumni, knowing that any friends of the school he had talked to would suffer repercussions if he divulged the source of his questions. Finally, a possible source dawned on Stenholm: “I know. You've been over to the Pipers. Those *hypocrites*.”<sup>61</sup> Stenholm could not understand how someone could claim to “love the school” and yet “not go along with its policies.”<sup>62</sup> Miller was indignant at the suggestion that the Pipers were hypocritical. He

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<sup>60</sup>Gilbert Stenholm, letter to Bob Jones Sr., November 27, 1957, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>61</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957; emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup>Stenholm, letter to Jones Sr., November 27, 1957.

had not heard them talk negatively about the school, though he suspected that they were not as enthusiastic about it as they had once been and that perhaps they thought its glory days had passed. But none of that had been communicated to him directly. And none of his 28 questions had come from the Pipers. Miller insisted that Stenholm take back his remark—which he eventually did.<sup>63</sup>

Stenholm excused himself from the meeting, leaving Miller to sit in his office alone. After some time, he returned and announced that Dr. Jones had just arrived back into town and would meet with him that evening. The subsequent conversation with Dr. Jones turned out to be even more intense, though much shorter. Jones pressed him for the source of his information, and Miller questioned the founder's integrity in return. The meeting ended with Miller announcing that he was leaving, given that he would not be reenrolling as a student. He walked out the office door, the booming voice of Dr. Bob warning him down the hallway about his grave mistake, and walked straight to the Piper home.

Out in front of 122 Bradley Boulevard, 11-year-old John Piper saw Lew Miller and knew from the look on his face that something was wrong. Vince Cervera and John Tierney were in the street, playing catch with a baseball. They knew where Miller had been and had advised him not to go. When they asked how it had gone, Miller could hold it in no further and burst out crying. Many had warned that Bob Jones would break him, and they were right—though he had not broken down in front of Jones himself.

Vince and John walked with Lew into the Piper home to talk with Ruth. Lew told her what had happened, and she eventually asked the question Lew had been dreading: had Jones said anything about the Pipers? Lew didn't know whether he should say anything or not, but he admitted that they had said some ugly things—for example,

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<sup>63</sup>Piper, letter to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.



that he was probably staying with “that Southern Baptist Bill Piper” and calling the Pipers “hypocrites.” Ruth decided to call Bill in Wisconsin. She knew there was an hour difference between Wisconsin and Greenville, so she waited till her husband was finished with his revival meeting for the evening. She stepped out in the hall, while Lew was in the other room, and told Bill what had happened. Bill asked to speak to Lew, and he asked Lew to repeat everything he had said about the meetings and about the hypocrisy charge in particular.

Bill was glad to learn Stenholm had withdrawn his comment about their hypocrisy. He was certainly willing to forgive him. “But the fact remains that he did say it and that the feeling was in his heart when he did.”<sup>64</sup> If Stenholm had accused Bill Piper alone of being a hypocrite, he says, “I probably would have brushed the matter aside, but not without difficulty.”<sup>65</sup> But he had used the plural—*those hypocrites*—and thus included his beloved wife. Bill writes that “of all the people I know in this world she is the farthest from being a hypocrite. I know of no one who deals more honestly in and with the truth than Ruth. I could not sit back indifferently and let Gilbert or anyone else call my wife a hypocrite.”<sup>66</sup> For Bill, “The hypocrite charge was like an exclamation point to my thoughts and decision.”<sup>67</sup>

The next day, Bill put his stationary in a typewriter and typed the following letter to his former mentor:

Dear Dr. Bob,

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<sup>64</sup>Piper to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>65</sup>Piper to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

<sup>66</sup>Piper to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957. In December of 1974, shortly after Ruth’s death, Bill wrote, “She loathed everything farcical and hypocritical. Her genuineness was transparent. She radiated reality. Life to her was neither a mummery nor a charade but a daily expression of untainted sincerity” (“A Memorial to Ruth, My Wife,” John Piper Papers).

<sup>67</sup>Piper to Jones Sr., November 16, 1957.

It is with great difficulty and pain of heart and only after much prayer that I am writing this letter. I had hoped that through all of this current strife I could steer a course that would eliminate the necessity of making any drastic decision. I find that against my will, however, I have become increasingly involved in the present controversy. Recently, word has reached me on several occasions that I have been accused of being disloyal and have been called an enemy of the school by persons on the campus. These accusations, as I am sure you realize, are not true. Last night word came to me by phone that a member of the administration has called Mrs. Piper and me “hypocrites.” I feel that with this attitude prevailing on the campus and within the administration, any service that I could render the school as a member of The Board of Trustees would be negligible.

I am in wholehearted sympathy and agreement with the principles upon which the school is founded and governed. I am not in sympathy with the bitter, contentious and censorious spirit manifested by these accusations which apparently are the fruit of the present controversy. With deepest regret, therefore, I hereby submit my resignation to The Board of Trustees. Please accept this as final.

Most Sincerely yours,

Bill Piper<sup>68</sup>

As Bill pulled the letter off of his typewriter, signed it, folded it, placed it in the envelope, addressing and stamping it, he knew that a relationship spanning two decades—a personal and institutional relationship more significant to him than anything outside his family—was ending and that things would likely never be the same again. “Breaking with the school,” he later told Billy Graham, “has almost been like breaking with one’s family.”<sup>69</sup>

### **The Death of Ruth**

In the summer of 1974, 28-year-old John Piper returned to the United States from Germany, where he had earned his doctorate in theology from the University of

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<sup>68</sup>Bill Piper to Bob Jones Sr., June 6, 1957, Bill Piper Papers.

<sup>69</sup>Bill Piper to Billy Graham, April 17, 1958, Bill Piper Papers. In the letter to Graham, Piper is quite candid about his true feelings at this point in time: “I stayed loyal to the school as long as conscience would permit but when, in the name of applying the charter and the by laws, both Dr. Bob Jr. and Sr. began to resort to half truths, lies, slander, coercion, name calling and subjection of the student body to perpetual, relentless brain washing tactics in his vicious attacks against you and the Southern Baptist program, it became impossible in good conscience to remain on the Board.”

Munich. Along with his wife Noël and their toddler son Karsten (not yet two years old), John returned to Greenville before they drove as a family to St. Paul, Minnesota, where John had been hired as an assistant professor of biblical studies at Bethel College. It was the last time John would see his mother alive.

Bill and Ruth decided to join a sightseeing tour of Israel scheduled for December of 1974—Ruth’s first trip and Bill’s second.<sup>70</sup> Along with 191 other tourists, they enjoyed seeing the sites where their Savior had walked and taught. Monday, December 16, was the second to last day of their ten-day sightseeing tour before returning to the States. It was a beautiful day with crisp air in the lower 50s and without a cloud in the sky.<sup>71</sup> The first stop of the tour bus was at the lower foothills of the western side of the Mount of Olives and the eastern bank of the Kidron Valley. To the west was the Temple Mount, and the beautiful Franciscan “Church of All Nations” housed a flat rock that tradition claimed was Jesus’s “Rock of Agony” where the Son cried out for his Father to remove the cup of God’s wrath while his companions slept, ultimately submitting to his Father’s will instead of insisting on his own (Luke 22:43–44). As the tourists walked into the room, a holy quietness descended as they meditated upon the compassion and yieldedness of Christ. Bill Piper reflected on the significance of Christ’s cry of agony: “It was not a plea to escape the cross. For Him to die for our sins was God’s well known eternal plan. He would not now void or placate that plan. No! It was a cry for deliverance from the cup of sorrow and agony he was testing that very moment. It was a time of physical and spiritual wrestling such as the world will never witness

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<sup>70</sup>The narrative below is largely dependent upon Bill Piper’s recollections entitled “My Gethsemane,” located in John Piper Papers, written in December 1974 on his return flight to the United States and published in the newsletter of the touring ministry, Christ for the World, Inc.

<sup>71</sup>For weather in Jerusalem on this date, see <http://www.tutiempo.net/en/Climate/JERUSALEM/12-1974/401840.htm> (accessed June 11, 2014). The description also comes from Piper, “My Gethsemane.”

again.”<sup>72</sup>

Men knelt first and touched the rock, according to custom. The women followed, and Ruth was one of the last to touch the Rock of Agony. There were no dry eyes in the group, as each person prayed to yield anew to the perfect will of God. Bill describes an “unusual thrill of joy” sweeping over him as he watched his precious wife pray that God’s will be done in her life, no matter the cost. It was one of the happiest days of their lives together as a couple. From the Garden of Gethsemane the group went half a mile east to Mount Olivet, where they heard a thrilling message about Christ’s ascent to heaven and the hope of his return at the same location (Zech 14:4).

The group then boarded the bus for a journey nearly an hour south to Hebron, one of the holiest sites in Israel. It was home to the Cave of Machpelah (or the Cave of the Patriarchs), where Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah were all buried. The massive building around the tomb had been designed by Herod the Great.

From Hebron they headed back north toward Jerusalem with a planned stop at Bethlehem, the birthplace of David and Jesus, about 45 minutes away. Bill and Ruth sat at the front of the bus. Around 3 in the afternoon, as the bus went down a hill and began to round a corner near Solomon’s Pools (a few miles southwest of Bethlehem), Bill stood up and turned to address the other tour members. Bill seems to have functioned as an assistant tour guide (under the leadership of his friend and fellow fundamentalist evangelist, E. J. Daniels [1908–1987]). Bill knew the biblical significance of these biblical sites and may have wanted to instruct them about what they would be seeing next.

Bill spoke just a few words when he heard the sound of glass shattering and almost simultaneously felt a sharp blow in his back. He looked down at Ruth, who had

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<sup>72</sup>Piper, “My Gethsemane.”

crumbled on the seat, “bloodied and broken by the lumber.” With his last remaining strength he leaned over her body and cried, “O my darling, No! No!” before falling faint from unbearable physical pain. Ruth’s neck had been snapped and Bill believed that his back was broken. They had crashed head-on into a van or truck, driven by Israeli soldiers, with lumber lashed to the top. The bulk of the boards had struck and crossed the seat where Bill had been sitting less than ten seconds earlier.

Because Bill had stood up and turned just moments before the accident, he avoided a head injury. But he was seriously injured with a severe laceration to his back, broken ribs, and a punctured lung. He watched as they carried Ruth’s body to another bus, and he waited in pain-wracked agony and helplessness, not knowing if she was alive or dead. The reality was that she had been killed instantly, as was the driver of the truck. The coroner identified her cause of death as “lacerated medulla oblongata,” severance of the brain stem. She was 56 years old. In one shattering moment, Bill had lost his wife of 36 years.

When help arrived for Bill, it was a modest first-aid truck. Lacking a stretcher, they carried him to the truck and put him in the simple vehicle that just had benches along the sides. As Bill recalled: “Two Israeli soldiers injured in the wreck were literally slid into the truck on the floor, while bleeding profusely. I was sickened by the sight.” They sped off to Shaare Zedek on Jaffa Road, just two miles outside the Old City of Jerusalem.

On Monday evening the phone rang at John Piper’s house in New Brighton. Noël answered. It was Bob Bowers, the husband of John’s older sister. She handed the phone to John. “Johnny, this is Bob, good buddy. I have bad news.” “Okay.” “It’s real bad.” “Go ahead. I’m ready.” Bob explained that his Mother and Daddy were approaching Bethlehem on a tour bus coming around a curve and that a logging truck hit them. “Daddy is in the hospital. But your mother didn’t make it.” John asked, “Do you

know any more?” and Bob told him all that he’d learned. After he hung up, John told Noël: “Mommy died, and Daddy’s in the hospital.” As John cried, young Karsten pulled on his pant leg, saying, “Daddy’s tired.” John hugged him and whispered so that he couldn’t hear: “You’ll never see Oma again.” John blurted through his sobs to Noël: “Poor Daddy! Mother’s gone—he never had ’er!” John needed to be alone, so he walked to their bedroom, knelt by the bed, and sobbed—heaved—for two hours. He cried to Jesus for his Daddy, his maternal grandmother MaMohn, his sister Beverly, and his brother-in-law Bob. He didn’t feel any urge to deny her death, and he didn’t think “it should not be so.” Rather, his dominant thought was for his dad: “O Lord, help him . . . help him.”<sup>73</sup>

Bill remained in Israel for several days, undergoing surgery and receiving medical care in preparation for his return to the States. As John prepared to travel to Greenville in order to meet the flight returning from Jerusalem, he had to get several things in order. He wrote a letter to Al Glenn, his department chairman at Bethel College, who had encouraged John to teach extra classes in the spring semester of 1975. Piper wrote, “I know you want me to teach an overload in the spring but unless my job depends on it I’d rather not.” The reason he gave was this: “When I stand beside my mother’s coffin and then look at my wife and son, the \$1,000 extra which I would make teaching the overload simply loses all its attraction because it would rob me of some of the quality time with my family.”<sup>74</sup> His mother’s death had awakened in Piper a longing that his family life not be trivial.

Six days after the death of his beloved wife, Bill accompanied Ruth’s body in a 12-hour flight from Tel Aviv to Washington, D.C., then on to Atlanta Hartsfield

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<sup>73</sup>The account of Piper’s reception of this news is based on John Piper, Journal 20, Entry for December 19, 1974, John Piper Papers. Piper also provides an abbreviated version in *Desiring God*, 90.

<sup>74</sup>Piper, Journal 20, Entry for January 8, 1975.

International Airport, where John saw his widowed father for the first time. It was the day before Christmas Eve, 1974. The lacerations on Bill's back were so deep that stitches could not hold the skin together, so Bill was transported from the plane into an ambulance, while Ruth's body was transferred into a waiting hearse. With the ambulance in the lead they began the 160-mile trip northeast along Interstate 85 to the Mackey Mortuary in Greenville.

As Bill lay there for three and half hours with his only son next to him, he alternated between talking and weeping, talking and weeping. "Why was I spared? God must have something for me. God must have a reason for me to live. God must have a purpose for me!"<sup>75</sup> Bill knew that if he had not stood up just a moment before the collision—if he had remained in his seat like Ruth—he too would undoubtedly have died. And knowing the God of Romans 8:28, he knew God had spared him for a purpose.

### **The Influence of Piper's Parents**

For good or for ill, and often for a combination of both, our parents are our primary influences, at least until a certain age. This is certainly true for John Piper. Several areas of influences and themes can be identified from their relationship with him.

### **The Unwasted Life**

Hanging above the Pipers' kitchen sink on 122 Bradley Boulevard was "a simple piece of glass painted black on the back with a gray link chain snug around it for a border and for hanging." On the front, written in old English script and rendered in white paint, were the words, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ

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<sup>75</sup>John Piper, "Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain," October 27, 1996, <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/doing-missions-when-dying-is-gain> (accessed July 18, 2014); John Piper and Justin Taylor, "An Interview with John Piper," in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 223.

will last.”<sup>76</sup> The meaning of this sign was embodied in the ministry of his Bill Piper. When he would return home from his campaigns, he would not only tell jokes but would relay accounts of gospel triumph. He told stories of young people walking the aisle and being saved. He would explain that at one meeting, the people had been praying for thirty years for their old friend Joe. They would be on their faces praying, “Save Joe. He may not have much time left.” And then on the last day of the crusade, old Joe would rise from his seat and walk forward with tears to respond to the altar call. And the whole church would rejoice that a thirty-year prayer project had been answered as this hardened sinner responded to the gospel call. Bill was deeply moved as he recounted these gospel victories. For John, it was more exciting to be the son of an evangelist around their glass rectangular dining room table than to sit at a wooden round table with knights and warriors.<sup>77</sup> Those Monday meals were holy and happy days for John Piper and the whole family.<sup>78</sup>

John recounts how his father would plead with sinners to come to Christ: “Oh, how he would plead! Children, teenagers, young singles, young married people, the middle-aged, old people—he would press the warnings and the wooings of Christ into the heart of each person. He had stories, so many stories, for each age group—stories of glorious conversions, and stories of horrific refusals to believe followed by tragic deaths. Seldom could those stories come without tears.”<sup>79</sup> While all the stories of young people dying in car wrecks before they were converted certainly made an impression on John’s young mind, the one that gripped him the most was his father’s story of a man converted

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<sup>76</sup>John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 12. The lines are a quote from a poem, “Only One Life ’Twill Soon Be Past” by C. T. Studd (1860–1931).

<sup>77</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 15.

<sup>78</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>79</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 11.



in his old age:

The church had prayed for this man for decades. He was hard and resistant. But this time, for some reason, he showed up when my father was preaching. At the end of the service, during a hymn, to everyone's amazement he came and took my father's hand. They sat down together on the front pew of the church as the people were dismissed. God opened his heart to the Gospel of Christ, and he was saved from his sins and given eternal life. But that did not stop him from sobbing and saying, as the tears ran down his wrinkled face—and what an impact it made on me to hear my father say this through his own tears—“I've wasted it! I've wasted it!”<sup>80</sup>

As John listened to these thrilling tales from the sawdust trail, he learned that God is great, God is sovereign, God saves sinners, God is good, God opens the eyes of the blind. The word *glory* (which Bill pronounced GLOH-ree) was in virtually every one of his prayers—at the supper table, in the pulpit, during devotions on the couch. His son was learning that the glory of God was an awesome reality, to be winsomely communicated and passionately celebrated. First Corinthians 10:31 was always on his father's lips: “Johnny, whether ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”<sup>81</sup> All of this created in young John a burning passion for his life to count for eternity and can be seen in the message of books like *Don't Waste Your Life*.

### **Hard Work in the Shadow of the Cross**

In his eulogy for his mother, John Piper focused upon two symbols.<sup>82</sup> The first was a folder he had found on Christmas Eve of 1974, going through her files shortly after her death. His mother had labeled it “Unfinished Business.” John initially thought it would be important for his father to review. But when he picked it out and opened it, it was empty. Many would interpret this as a metaphor for the completion of Ruth's

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<sup>80</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 12.

<sup>81</sup>John Piper, “Let Your Passion Be Single,” November 12, 1999, <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/let-your-passion-be-single> (accessed July 14, 2014).

<sup>82</sup>John Piper, “Reflections upon Two Symbols at My Mother's Funeral,” December 26, 1974, John Piper Papers.

usefulness on earth, but John did not see it this way. After all, there were a hundred things left to do that she could have done better than anyone. Instead, he observed: “Mother, while she lived here, was a finisher of tasks. She left no business behind that was left unfinished because of sloth or mismanagement. What she left undone, God chose to leave undone, not Mother.” In other words, it was a symbol not of her current state but a picture of the way in which she lived. She was a great do-er.

The second symbol was the golden cross that John had requested for the casket:

Our family, for as long as I can remember, has been built upon the fact that the most important event in all of history for every single individual who has ever lived is the death of Jesus, God’s son, on the cross for the sin of men. Therefore, the keynote that has been sounded by my father and mother is this: God forbid that we should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ [Gal 6:14]. Why? I have been shown, thanks to Mother and Daddy, and have come to see for myself that apart from God’s mercy there is in us Pipers no good thing with which we might commend ourselves to God. We would be without hope both in life and in death, but for one thing: the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. A stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles, but to a family who has been called, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God [1 Cor 1:23–24]. Through it, God has covered all our sin and welcomes us into his eternal presence freely.<sup>83</sup>

He then drew the connection to the pall with the golden cross gracing her casket:

We have covered Mother with a cross because God did. Our confidence for Mother, our only confidence, is that He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for her on the cross will now give her all things with him [Rom 8:32]. It’s an amazing thing to believe in a crucified God. It means the stripping away of all self-reliance and all boasting in mere human achievement. This radical transformation that comes with faith leaves no area of life untouched. The woman who relies wholly on the cross is a new creation of God and will lead a radically new kind of life.<sup>84</sup>

Piper then tied the two symbols together, the empty folder of “Unfinished Business” and the cross covering the casket: “Mother’s life was a long sequence of

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<sup>83</sup>Piper, “Reflections upon Two Symbols at My Mother’s Funeral.”

<sup>84</sup>Piper, “Reflections upon Two Symbols at My Mother’s Funeral.”

completed good deeds for others. But I want to make it plain that for mother these good deeds were the fruit brought forth by the Spirit of God through her faith in the cross of our Lord Jesus.” So honoring her deeds was fully compatible with boasting only in the cross of Christ: “It was God who equipped her with everything good that she might do his will, working in her that which was pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ; to Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen [Heb 13:21].”<sup>85</sup> One can see the son in his mother, for John Piper has a strong work ethic with significant productivity, intentionally done under the shadow of the cross.

### **Blood-Earnest, Bible-Saturated, Doctrinal Preaching**

Bill Piper, his son argues, “was not your typical evangelist. He was a doctrinally driven, Bible-saturated evangelist. When he preached to save sinners, he explained doctrine.”<sup>86</sup> John points to one of his father’s evangelistic sermon outlines, which worked through Christ as our redemption, propitiation, righteousness, sanctification, example, expectation, completeness:

He believed that the best way to call for repentance and faith was to unpack the glories of Christ in the gospel, which meant unpacking doctrine. . . . What marked out his evangelistic preaching as unusual was not the stories, but basic doctrines of man’s helpless condition in sin, God’s holiness and wrath and the imminent danger of damnation, the glorious fullness of Christ’s saving work on the cross, and the free offer of forgiveness and righteousness to any who believed. He was the most Bible-saturated preacher I have ever heard.<sup>87</sup>

It was the rare occasion when John was able to hear his father preach one of these evangelistic sermons in person, but when he did, the intensity made an indelible impression: “I trembled to hear my father preach. In spite of the predictable opening

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<sup>85</sup>Piper, “Reflections upon Two Symbols at My Mother’s Funeral.”

<sup>86</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>87</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

humor, the whole thing struck me as absolutely blood-earnest. There was a certain squint to his eye and a tightening of his lips when the avalanche of biblical texts came to a climax in application.”<sup>88</sup> John Piper is a doctrinally oriented preacher, known for Bible saturation and intensity, and it is natural to see the influence of his father upon this aspect of his ministry.

### **Fundamentalist Balance, Critique, and Appreciation**

After the split with Bob Jones, the Pipers continued to self-identify as fundamentalists, though with qualification. While many children of fundamentalists rebel against their upbringing, John Piper has embraced it, despite some differences.

I grew up in a home where it was assumed we would not smoke, or drink, or gamble, or play cards, or dance, or go to movies. We were fundamentalists. So why didn't I kick against this growing up? I have never thought ill of my parents for these standards. I have never resented it or belittled it. When I was in my early twenties, I was indignant in some of my classes at Fuller Seminary when certain young faculty members were cynical and sarcastic about fundamentalism. They sounded to me like adolescents who were angry at their parents and their backgrounds and couldn't seem to grow up. I never felt that way about my parents or about the fundamentalism of my past.<sup>89</sup>

Bill and Ruth held to the doctrinal fundamentals, along with its cultural manifestations, but sought to provide a context of godly freedom with an emphasis on wisdom rather than just upon rule keeping. When John learned that his seventh-grade homeroom class had won the annual attendance award, which meant a trip to the Carolina Theater on Main Street during school hours, John asked his mother if he could go (knowing that fundamentalists didn't go to the theater). Her only response was, "Do what you think is right." He weighed all the factors and decided to go. (It was a Western, and he felt dirty for watching it.) But his mother's proverbial wisdom had made an impact.

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<sup>88</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 11.

<sup>89</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

Second, when an attractive girl from school invited him to the eighth-grade Sadie Hawkins dance, John replied that he didn't dance, and the girl said they could just sit and watch. He again asked his mother what to do. Again she said, "Do what you think is right." (As it turns out, John was spared the ordeal due to a prior family commitment!) Piper later reflected on his mother's wisdom: "She was saying: We have standards, son, but they need to come from the inside. If they don't come from the inside, they are worthless. On these issues, you're old enough now to discover who you are deep inside. When my parents said, 'Do what you think is right,' they were not foolish relativists. They were wise fundamentalists."<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere he says: "We were fundamentalists without the attitude. We had our lists of things. But that wasn't the main thing. God was the main thing. And he was worth everything."<sup>91</sup>

From his father, John learned the importance of wisdom and love within a fundamentalist context. Bill would sometimes come back from his travels to raise doctrinal issues he had come across. He cared deeply about truth and biblical interpretation. He wanted to get these matters right *and* to get them right in a loving way. When quoting Ephesians 4:15 he would render ἀληθεύοντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ as "truthing in love."<sup>92</sup> He loved his fundamentalist heritage but felt that it was here that they let him down. In the 1950s Bill Piper recounted to Billy Graham, "Years ago I learned by experience that if I wanted to have a lasting, constructive, widely accepted ministry I would have to steer clear of these split off, narrow minded, pharisaic, prejudiced, hyper-critical, off brand types of 'fundamentalists.'"<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

<sup>91</sup>John Piper, "Ten Lessons I Learned from My Father," March 12, 1996, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/ten-lessons-i-learned-from-my-father> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>92</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

<sup>93</sup>Bill Piper to Billy Graham, April 17, 1958.

Despite John Piper's disagreements with certain aspects of fundamentalism (e.g., secondary separation, dispensationalism, cessationism, and the militant attitude), he still affirms his gratitude for the movement:

What I want to say about Fundamentalism is that its great gift to the church is precisely the backbone to resist compromise and to make standing for truth and principle a means of love rather than an alternative to it. I am helped by the call for biblical separation, because almost no evangelicals even think about the doctrine. So I thank God for fundamentalism, and I think that some of the whining about its ill effects would have to also be directed against the black-and-white bluntness of Jesus.<sup>94</sup>

By most definitions, John Piper is not a fundamentalist. He has seen the best and the worst that the movement has to offer, but being raised by joyful fundamentalists who focused on wisdom and motivation rather than only upon external rules, he was able to see and appreciate the beauty of fundamentalism done well for the glory of God.

### **The Son of an Evangelist**

Bill Piper never pressured his son to become a pastor or an evangelist. Given John's gifting and personality, Bill thought the academic classroom was a wonderful fit for his son. When John sensed the Lord leading him to the pastorate, Bill—who had been in thousands of churches—wrote a letter to his son reminding him of the challenges that lay ahead. He wanted him to remember that it was more than just teaching and preaching:

You'll be the comforter of the fatherless and the widow. You'll counsel constantly with those whose homes and hearts are broken. You'll have to handle divorce problems and a thousand marital situations. You'll have to exhort and advise young people involved in sordid and illicit sex, with drugs and violence. You'll have to visit the hospitals, the shut-ins, the elderly. A mountain of problems will be laid on your shoulders and at your doorstep. And then there's the heartache of ministering to a weak and carnal and worldly, apathetic group of professing Christians, very few of whom will be found trustworthy and dependable. Then there are a hundred

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<sup>94</sup>John Piper, "Praise God for Fundamentalists," October 31, 2007, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/praise-god-for-fundamentalists> (accessed July 8, 2014). This was written in the context of serious criticism Piper received from fundamentalists after inviting Rick Warren to speak at a conference.

administrative responsibilities as pastor. You're the generator and sometimes the janitor. The church will look to you for guidance in building programs, church growth, youth activities, outreach, extra services, etc. You'll be called upon to arbitrate all kinds of problems. At times you will feel the weight of the world on your shoulders. Many pastors have broken under the strain.<sup>95</sup>

Bill's point was not to discourage his son but to prepare him, providing a realistic picture of what he would face in the future. At the end of the day, however, he wanted the Lord's will to be done for his son, and he rejoiced at the prospect of what the Lord might be pleased to do:

If the Lord has called you, these things will not deter nor dismay you. But I wanted you to know the whole picture. As in all of our Lord's work there will be a thousand compensations. You'll see that people trust Christ as Savior and Lord. You'll see these grow in the knowledge of Christ and his Word. You'll witness saints enabled by your preaching to face all manner of tests. You'll see God at work in human lives, and there is no joy comparable to this. Just ask yourself, Son, if you are prepared not only to preach and teach, but also to weep over men's souls, to care for the sick and dying, and to bear the burdens carried today by the saints of God. No matter what, I'll back you all the way with my encouragement and prayers.<sup>96</sup>

Bill Piper himself was an indefatigable evangelist. He preached in all fifty states and half a dozen countries, conducted over 1,250 evangelistic crusades, and recorded over 30,000 professions of faith.<sup>97</sup> John, despite a popular ministry as a pastor, speaker, and author, admits that he is a weak evangelist. The result, he says, is that "I have always lived in the shadow of my father's evangelistic effectiveness."<sup>98</sup> But John views this difference as something for his good, to be embraced and not rejected:

I think it's been good for me, because my father's life is like a living parable of the priority that God puts on the salvation of one sinner who repents. "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). My father's life is a

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<sup>95</sup>John Piper, "John Piper's Candidating Testimony," January 28, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource/john-pipers-candidating-testimony> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>96</sup>Piper, "John Piper's Candidating Testimony."

<sup>97</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

<sup>98</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

constant reminder of that truth. I am thankful for it.<sup>99</sup>

### **Christian Hedonism**

In subsequent chapters we will explore the influence of C. S. Lewis, Daniel Fuller, and Jonathan Edwards in the development of John Piper’s conception of “Christian hedonism” (the idea, expressed most succinctly, that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him). Even though Piper uses the assumptions of his upbringing as a foil against Christian hedonism—explaining that he thought that the virtue of an act was lessened to the degree that it was motivated by joy—it can be argued that he witnessed Christian hedonism in action from his parents. In particular, their manifest joy left an indelible impression upon him:

My mother and my father were the happiest people I have ever known. This strikes many as an incongruity, a paradox. But this is the key to my father’s influence on me and, I believe, one of the keys to the power of his ministry. The fundamentalist forcefulness in the pulpit, the fundamentalist vision of “the razorsharp edge of truth,” the fundamentalist standards that move from the Ten Commandments down to dancing and card-playing—all of this was enveloped in a world of joy and freedom.<sup>100</sup>

John writes that his father, “unsystematically, unapologetically, and almost unwittingly,” would say things like: “*God’s only requirement is that you be satisfied with Christ.*”<sup>101</sup> Years before John read C. S. Lewis’s *The Weight of Glory*, Bill was contrasting the folly of trusting in temporal, unsatisfying pleasure versus the eternal pleasure only God can give:

I have often seen a cow stick her head through a barbed wire fence to chew the stubby grass bordering a highway, when behind her lay a whole pasture of grass. I have always been reminded of Christians who have not learned to completely trust Christ, reaching out to the world for sensual pleasure when rivers of pleasure were

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<sup>99</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>100</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>101</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”



at their disposal in Christ.<sup>102</sup>

In another sermon, Bill Piper said,

No, no one is denying that there are pleasures to be had in this world. . . . That is not the point. The point is that there are other pleasures to be had in this life. Pleasures so great in depth, significance, satisfaction and duration, that they far exceed the pleasures of sin. They are the pleasures to be found in the knowledge and service of Christ.<sup>103</sup>

Bill Piper (like Pascal and Lewis before him, though without reading them) taught that all men long to be happy: “Everyone wants to be happy. Sinners seek it in pleasure, fame, wealth and unbelief, but they seek in vain. Christians have found the answer to happiness in Christ.”<sup>104</sup> And he gave a personal testimony on how to “sanctify the Lord” (Isa 8:13): “I knew . . . that God was sufficient, abundantly able to supply my every need and the need of all who would trust Him. But to sanctify Him as such, I realized that day that I must live a contented life, a life fully satisfied with Him alone.”<sup>105</sup> John Piper identifies lines like this as echo of his own mature expression of Christian hedonism that “God is most sanctified in us, when we are most satisfied in him.”<sup>106</sup> He would learn and develop a more sophisticated version of Christian hedonism when he was outside of his parents’ home, but inside their home he saw an early picture of its beauty and transforming power.

### **The Influence of His Mother**

John Piper’s recollections of his father are filled with honor and admiration, but he attributes greater influence to his mother: “she stamped me more than anybody in

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<sup>102</sup>Piper, *A Good Time and How to Have It*, 48, cited in Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>103</sup>Piper, *The Greatest Menace to Modern Youth*, 22, cited in Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>104</sup>Bill Piper, *Dead Men Made Alive* (Greenville, SC: Piper’s Publications, 1949), 30, cited in Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>105</sup>Piper, *A Good Time and How to Have It*, 17, cited in Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

<sup>106</sup>Piper, “Evangelist Bill Piper.”

the world—there’s just no doubt about it. She didn’t give me the content of my theology, because she wasn’t very much of a theologian, but she shaped the way I approach life.”<sup>107</sup>

He never saw his mother read a book except for her Bible—to be specific, a Scofield Reference Bible in the King James Version. The most marked-up pages of her Bible were the Proverbs, the only biblical book she quoted. It may have been because the book of Proverbs speaks more about mothers and sons than any other book in the Bible. Undoubtedly she meditated upon verses such as “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (1:8); “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother” (10:1); “Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old” (23:22). In a sermon on a passage from Proverbs years later John would recount, “My father was away from home most of the time, so my mother bore the unbelievable burden of rearing my sister and me alone, as mother and father as it were. So she schooled herself in this most practical of all biblical books and worked incessantly for my good.”<sup>108</sup>

One can see the tenderness of Ruth and her affection for her son through his difficulties growing up. His greatest challenge was that when called upon to speak in front of a group—no matter how small—he was unable to do it. Psychological and physiological factors mysteriously combined to produce a debilitating phobia. This intense nervousness manifested itself whenever he was called upon to speak in front of a group, whether at church or at school.<sup>109</sup> He has speculated that his speaking phobia “probably was rooted in some deep embarrassments that I had as a little kid. But I don’t

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<sup>107</sup>Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony.”

<sup>108</sup>John Piper, “The Lips of Knowledge Are a Precious Jewel,” October 5, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-lips-of-knowledge-are-a-precious-jewel> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>109</sup>This began around the time he was in sixth grade, according to John Piper, “Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain.”

know.”<sup>110</sup>

At Training Union, a Southern Baptist discipleship program held at the local church on Sunday evenings, the young people had to give “parts”—memorized or summarized summations of an assignment from the quarterly or manual—lasting just one minute each. When it was his turn, John would hold the 3 x 5 card but his hand would start to shake badly. “I would tremble so badly I could hold nothing in my hands. My heart would race so fast and hard I could see it move under my shirt. My throat and shoulders would tighten up so badly I literally could not get the words out in any normal way. It was terribly humiliating and kept me from many activities.”<sup>111</sup> The rest of the group would look at their laps to avoid the awkwardness of looking at John. He would go home and cry, and his mother would pray with him, comfort him, and be in agony with him.<sup>112</sup>

For John it was a time filled with embarrassment, humiliation, and loneliness.<sup>113</sup> During the day he would often sit out in the family’s front yard under the shade of their Dogwood tree when he was feeling blue. He would write notes or poems, seeking to feel the reality and significance of things and to give shape and meaning to his feelings. One time he tried to compose a poem to his mother to help her feel that she was the only person in the world who seemed to understand.<sup>114</sup> Across Dellwood Valley to the north, John could see Piney Mountain. On a quiet afternoon he could hear the distant

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<sup>110</sup>John Piper, “What Were Some Practical Things You Did to Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking?” March 9, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-were-some-practical-things-you-did-to-overcome-your-fear-of-public-speaking> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>111</sup>John Piper, “He Saw the Grace of God and Was Glad,” November 24, 1991, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/he-saw-the-grace-of-god-and-was-glad> (accessed July 7, 2014).

<sup>112</sup>Piper, “What Were Some Practical Things You Did to Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking?”

<sup>113</sup>Piper, “He Saw the Grace of God and Was Glad.”

<sup>114</sup>Piper, “He Saw the Grace of God and Was Glad.”

trains and wonder what it would be like to get on one and disappear to a place where no one wondered why the evangelist's son could not even deliver a simple book report.<sup>115</sup>

His parents once asked their family doctor what might be wrong with John. He recommended that they take him to a psychologist. But after just one visit, John was angry and vowed never to return. She had given the impression that perhaps his mother was to blame in some way, and John was fiercely protective of her.<sup>116</sup> She was his lifeline, not the cause of the problem, empathizing with him and encouraging him during this incredibly painful season of life.

It would be difficult to overstate how difficult it was for John to lose his mother when he was 28 years old. She was a model of faithful affection toward him and his family, and it was a profound sadness for him that his children did not get to know their paternal grandmother. Decades later John would reflect upon the gospel and the actions of a group of young Israeli soldiers whose recklessness caused such devastation:

Unless you understand the circumstances of my growing up, you can't know what a loss that was to me at age 28. But as a tribute to the mighty mercy of God I bear witness from my heart: I don't hate those soldiers. I do not wish them evil. In fact, it has occurred to me that they are probably today about my age or a little younger, and if any of them were reached with the gospel and believed in Christ, I would count it a great joy to be with them in heaven for ever. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord [Rom 12:19]. I am happy to leave it with him. This, I commend to you, is a wonderful way to live. This is freedom. And in this freedom there are great open spaces for love.<sup>117</sup>

John loved his mother, but he loved the gospel even more and was able to interpret her death through the lens of Romans 8:28 and to rejoice in the cross, which

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<sup>115</sup>Piper, "He Saw the Grace of God and Was Glad."

<sup>116</sup>John Piper, Journal E-9, Entry for October 27, 1990, John Piper Papers.

<sup>117</sup>John Piper, "Do Not Avenge Yourselves, But Give Place to Wrath," February 20, 2005, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/do-not-avenge-yourselves-but-give-place-to-wrath> (accessed July 7, 2014). Although it cannot be independently verified, Piper's impression is that the Israeli soldiers on this logging truck had been drinking, which is why he refers to refraining from bitterness for their culpability in this accident.

covered all of her sins.

### **Complementarianism**

In a very real sense Ruth Piper had to fulfill the role of both father and mother when Bill was absent, which (as we have seen) was two out of every three days of the year. Put another way, by the day John turned eighteen, his father had been on the road an equivalent of twelve of those years. John remembers, “I have never known anyone quite like Ruth Piper. She seemed to me omni-competent and overflowing with love and energy.”<sup>118</sup>

Ruth handled all of the family finances, paying the bills and interacting with the bank and creditors. At one point she ran a little coin-operated laundry business across town, about 10 minutes from home. In addition, she actively served on the park board in Greenville and was the superintendent of the Intermediate Department—Sunday School for ages 13 to 16—at White Oak Baptist Church. John writes,

She taught me how to cut the grass and splice electric cord and pull Bermuda grass by the roots and paint the eaves and shine the dining-room table with a shammy and drive a car and keep French fries from getting soggy in the cooking oil. She helped me with the maps in geography and showed me how to do a bibliography and work up a science project on static electricity and believe that Algebra II was possible. She dealt with the contractors when we added a basement and, more than once, put her hand to the shovel. It never occurred to me that there was anything she couldn't do.<sup>119</sup>

But when Bill came home, there was a change. He prayed at the meals, led in devotions, drove their car to worship, watched over the family in the pew, answered their questions, and initiated the discipline. Ruth “had the extraordinary ability and biblical wisdom and humility to honor him as the head of the home. She was, in the best sense of

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<sup>118</sup>Piper, “Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up.”

<sup>119</sup>John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 31.

the word, submissive to him. It was an amazing thing to watch week after week as my father came and went. He went, and my mother ruled the whole house with a firm and competent and loving hand. And he came, and my mother deferred to his leadership.”<sup>120</sup> This leadership and submission was marked by a deep joy and respect: “I never heard my father attack my mother or put her down in any way. They sang together and laughed together and put their heads together to bring each other up-to-date on the state of the family. It was a gift of God that I could never begin to pay for or earn.”<sup>121</sup> The effect on John was that he learned “a biblical truth before I knew it was in the Bible. There is no correlation between submission and incompetence. There is such a thing as masculine leadership that does not demean a wife. There is such thing as submission that is not weak or mindless or manipulative.”<sup>122</sup>

In fact, until Piper began hearing feminist rhetoric in the late 1960s, it never even entered his mind that the “beautiful design in my home was somehow owing to anyone’s inferiority. It wasn’t. It was owing to this: My mother and my father put their hope in God and believed that obedience to his word would create the best of all possible families—and it did.”<sup>123</sup> One can even trace the codification and defense of complementarian theology—contextualizing, nuancing, defending, and explaining headship and submission for a new generation in the 1990s—to the joyful freedom of the Piper household that John witnessed and operated within.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>Piper, “Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up.”

<sup>121</sup>Piper, “Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up.”

<sup>122</sup>Piper, “Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up.”

<sup>123</sup>Piper, “Submission and Headship in the Home Where I Grew Up.”

<sup>124</sup>See, in particular, Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood was founded by Piper, Grudem, and others in 1987.

## Race and Repentance

Piper, by his own shame-filled confession, was “manifestly racist” when growing up.<sup>125</sup> His mother, who once washed John’s mouth out with soap for telling his sister to “shut up!” “would have washed my mouth out with gasoline if she knew how foul my mouth was racially when she wasn’t around.”<sup>126</sup> In his child and teenage years, he recounted, “my attitudes and actions assumed the superiority of my race in almost every way.”<sup>127</sup>

At this time, Greenville had legally mandated separation of the races: “Separate schools, separate motels, separate restrooms, separate swimming pools, separate drinking fountains.”<sup>128</sup> By the mid-to late 1950s the African-American community began to push back against the degradation of “separate but equal.” During the winter of 1955–56, Rosa Parks (1913–2005) served as the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she refused to follow a bus driver’s orders to move to the back of the bus to provide a seat for a standing white customer.<sup>129</sup> On October 25, 1959, famed baseball player Jackie Robinson (1919–1972) had an incident in Greenville’s Municipal Airport as the authorities suggested he move to a Negro lounge rather than the general waiting area before boarding a flight.<sup>130</sup> In December of that year, Jesse Jackson (1941– )—who grew up just five miles from the Pipers and was four years older than John—returned to Greenville over Christmas break from his freshman year at the

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<sup>125</sup>John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 35.

<sup>126</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 207.

<sup>127</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 35.

<sup>128</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 25–26.

<sup>129</sup>See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), chapter 4.

<sup>130</sup>“Gloster Current to Robert Carter,” in *First Class Citizenship: The Civil Rights Letters of Jackie Robinson*, ed. Michael G. Lon (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 74–76.

University of Illinois. When he went to the public library to study, he was turned away by the police for not utilizing the limited Negro library instead.<sup>131</sup> On January 1, 1960, the NAACP responded to the treatment of Jackie Robinson by marching from Springfield Baptist Church to Municipal Airport, where they staged a sit-down protest in the white waiting room over “the stigma, the inconvenience, and the stupidity of racial segregation.”<sup>132</sup> On March 1, black students were arrested at the Greenville library. In July, there was another library incident, along with 75 students staging sit-ins at local establishments like W. T. Grant’s and H. L. Green’s. On August 9, 14 black teenagers—most of them students at Sterling High School—entered S. H. Kress store and sat at the counter, only to be arrested.<sup>133</sup>

During these tense and racially charged years, White Oak Baptist Church (where the Pipers were members) voted in 1962 to disallow blacks from attending services at the church. After all, the reasoning went, why would someone who is black want to attend an all-white service on the other side of town unless they were seeking to make a political scene, which would be a disruption of worship and contrary to the purpose of the church?<sup>134</sup> Ruth Piper (to John’s recollection) was the only church member to vote against this.<sup>135</sup>

Ruth may not have thought twice about inviting her African-American housekeeper, Lucy Mills Agnew (1915–1984), to the wedding at White Oak Baptist

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<sup>131</sup>Marshall Frady, *Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 131–32.

<sup>132</sup>Derek Charles Catsam, *Freedom’s Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides, Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 121.

<sup>133</sup>*Peterson v. City of Greenville* 373 U.S. 2044 (1963)  
<http://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/373/244/> (accessed July 21, 2014).

<sup>134</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 36.

<sup>135</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 36. Bill Piper was almost certainly traveling at this time.



Church for her daughter, Beverly, who was to be married to Bob Bowers on December 23, 1962. For years Lucy helped Ruth clean the Piper house on Saturdays. John recalls,

I liked Lucy, but the whole structure of the relationship was demeaning. Those who defend the noble spirit of Southern slaveholders by pointing to how nice they were to their slaves, and how deep the affections were, and how they even attended each other's personal celebrations, seem to be naïve about what makes a relationship degrading.

Piper writes,

No, she was not a slave. But the point still stands. Of course, we were nice. Of course, we loved Lucy. Of course, she was invited to my sister's wedding. As long as she and her family "knew their place." Being nice to, and having strong affections for, and including in our lives is what we do for our dogs too. It doesn't say much about honor and respect and equality before God. My affections for Lucy did not provide the slightest restraint on my racist mouth when I was with my friends.<sup>136</sup>

When Lucy and her family arrived at the church, the ushers did not know what to do. One usher tried to escort them to the balcony (which had hardly been used since the church was built), but Ruth put a stop to this. "My mother—all five feet, two inches of her—intervened and by herself took them by the arm and seated them on the main floor of the sanctuary."<sup>137</sup>

At the same time, this is not to suggest that his parents were innocent with regard to race. The original deed to the property the Pipers purchased in Greenville contained a racially restrictive covenant, made common after the U. S. Supreme Court decision of *Corrigan v. Buckley* validated their use in 1926. The College Park Realty Corporation agreed that "the property herein conveyed shall not be used for other than residential purposes for white people" and that "Said property, or any part thereof, shall not be sold to persons of African descent."<sup>138</sup> When the conditions and restrictions were

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<sup>136</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 36.

<sup>137</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 36.

<sup>138</sup>Greenville County Deeds, Book 296, p. 308 (July 30, 1946). The public register of deeds is

changed on the lots in subsequent years after the Pipers owned the plat, the racial stipulations appear to have remained unchanged.<sup>139</sup>

As noted above, John did not have long and meaningful conversations with his father about many subjects, and there is no evidence that they discussed racial issues in depth. What John would have heard, if Bill had shared his views, was that “all white Christians should love the blacks.” He would have explained his love for the blacks: “I think I know and understand blacks fairly well. For years we have had blacks working in our home and in our yard. No one can say I don’t love the blacks. I have preached to and fellowshiped with them in Asia, Africa, and in some of their churches in America. I have knelt and prayed with them, cried and praised the Lord with them. Our ministry today is reaching out to blacks and most of the thousands coming to Christ are black.” “As individuals,” Bill would say, “they are precious souls for whom Christ died and whom we are to love and seek to win. As a race, however, they are unique and different and have their own culture.” He himself would never “marry a black” on account of God’s original design: “God made the races, separated them and set the bounds of their habitation, Deut. 32:8; Acts 17:26. He made them uniquely different and intended that these distinctions remain. God never intended the human race to become a mixed or mongrel race. So, while I am strongly opposed to segregation I favor separation that the uniqueness with which God made them is maintained.”<sup>140</sup>

John took a different path, which he attributes to the grace of God. It was in college and graduate school that John became persuaded that interracial marriage was not

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searchable online at <http://www.greenvillecounty.org/rod/searchrecords.asp> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>139</sup> See Greenville County Deeds, Book 343, pp. 7–10.

<sup>140</sup> Bill Piper, letter to John Piper, November 14, 1995, John Piper Papers. This is from a letter, written when Bill was 76 years old, outlining reasons why John should reconsider transracial adoption, though he concludes by writing, “In the final analysis, what really matters is whether or not anything is done ‘in the name of the Lord,’ ‘as unto the Lord,’ and for ‘the glory of the Lord.’ Col. 3:17, 23 and 1 Cor. 10:31.”

only permissible but fully biblical.<sup>141</sup> When he took the pastorate at Bethlehem, he moved to South Minneapolis, residing in the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the United States.<sup>142</sup> And as a pastor, he resolved to preach each year on racial harmony during Martin Luther King Jr. weekend.<sup>143</sup> The culmination of his public efforts was the publication of the book *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* (2011), where he argues that “Only Jesus can bring the bloodlines of race into the single bloodline of the cross and give us peace.”<sup>144</sup> While John Piper has deep regret over his racist past and disagreed with his father on interracial marriage, he believes that the seed of his repentance can be traced to the courageous actions of his mother: “She was, under God, the seed of my salvation in more ways than one. As I watched that drama [of Lucy’s family being seated at the wedding], I knew deep down that my attitudes were an offense to my mother and to her God. Oh, how thankful I am for the conviction and courage of my gutsy, Yankee, fundamentalist mother.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>In December of 1967, at the InterVarsity Urbana Missions Conference in Urbana, Illinois, John and Noël listened to Warren Webster [1928–2007]—a former missionary to Pakistan who then served as general director of the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society—in answer to a student’s question about what he would do if his daughter wanted to marry a Pakistani Christian on the mission field. According to Piper’s recollection, he answered something like, “Better a Christian Pakistani than a godless white American!” Piper recounts his response: “Whatever the wording, the impact on Noël and me was profound. From that moment, I knew I had a lot of homework to do. The perceived wrongness of interracial marriage had been for me one of the unshakeable reasons why segregation was right.” Then in the spring of 1971, Piper wrote a paper for Lewis Smedes’s ethics class at Fuller Seminary on “The Ethics of Interracial Marriage” (he received an A-). This biblical study of the issue settled it once and for all for him. Both stories are recounted in Piper, *Bloodlines*, 37–39.

<sup>142</sup>City Vision, <http://www.cityvisiontc.org/shtml/glocal.shtml> (accessed July 11, 2014).

<sup>143</sup>Piper’s first sermon on this was “Racial Reconciliation: Unfolding Bethlehem’s Fresh Initiative #3: Racial Harmony Sunday,” January 14, 1996, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/racial-reconciliation> (accessed July 11, 2014). The initiative under discussion in this sermon reads as follows: “Against the rising spirit of indifference, alienation, and hostility in our land, we will embrace the supremacy of God’s love to take new steps personally and corporately toward racial reconciliation, expressed visibly in our community and in our church.”

<sup>144</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 16.

<sup>145</sup>Piper, *Bloodlines*, 36.

## **Conclusion**

One can never fully trace the degree or extent of a parent's influence upon the life of a child. The shaping is simply too significant to capture in full. In this chapter I have sought to trace the key points of Bill and Ruth Piper's background to set the stage for understanding and interpreting John Piper's life. I have examined two key separations—the rupture with Bob Jones Sr. and his university, along with the tragic death of Ruth—and sought to show that these made a significant impact on the trajectory of John Piper's life, the first indirectly and the latter directly. I have also looked at several areas in which Bill and Ruth Piper expressed or exemplified theological and spiritual themes that would become meaningful for Piper as he developed into a pastor, author, teacher, and influencer. One could plausibly argue that Piper still would have developed his version of Christian eudemonism apart from the influence of his particular parents, but it would be difficult to dispute that it would not have the same flavor of intensity and joy if he had not been for what he observed and absorbed in his formative years. Under God, there was no one more significant than Bill and Ruth Piper in developing the spirituality of John Piper's Christian hedonism.

## CHAPTER 3

### C. S. LEWIS: ROMANTIC RATIONALISM

Early afternoon on Friday, November 22, 1963, an announcement came over the loudspeaker of Wade Hampton High School in Greenville, South Carolina, delivering the shocking news that President John F. Kennedy, 46 years old, had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Seventeen-year-old John Piper was in Mrs. Clanton’s English class at the time, and school was subsequently dismissed early for the day. Only years later would Piper realize that another man died that same day—just a half hour earlier—who would have far greater influence on his life than that of the president. C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) had quietly passed away in his bedroom at the residence he shared with his brother in the Kilns of Oxford, England, exactly one week shy of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup>

Piper discovered the writings of Lewis while a student at Wheaton College (1964–1968). Lewis, he says, “walked up over the horizon of my little brown path in 1964 with such blazing brightness that it is hard to overstate the impact he had on my life.”<sup>2</sup> Without Lewis’s influence, Piper reflects, “I think . . . I would not have lived my life with as much joy and usefulness as I have. . . . I will never cease to thank God for this

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<sup>1</sup>Of the making of biographies of Lewis there seems to be no end. They can be categorized in accordance with their approach: some are overly cynical or suspicious (e.g., A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002]); some are hagiographical, with virtually no criticisms (e.g., the authorized biography by his friends Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [New York: HarperCollins, 2003]); and some take a more mediating and judicious approach (e.g., George Sayers, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, repr. ed. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005], Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, repr. ed. [New York: HarperOne, 2008], and now Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013]).

<sup>2</sup>John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 18.

remarkable man who came onto my path at the perfect moment.”<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I will explore the various ways in which the writings of Lewis have influenced Piper’s approach to logic, literature, joy, wonder, and the Christian life. In order to situate this discovery in the context of Piper’s life, I will first need to recount Piper’s choice of Wheaton College, which would not have been expected in his early years, given his family’s ties to the flagship educational institution of fundamentalism (as recounted in chap. 2). It will also be important to trace some aspects of Piper’s biography in his college years, for these were years in which he not only discovered one of the formative influences in his life, but they were direction-setting years in which he met his future wife, experienced a call to ministry, and overcame an inability to do public speaking of any kind. Lewis’s effect upon Piper will become clearer when set in this wider biographical light.

### **Preparing for College**

In September of 1963, toward the beginning of John Piper’s senior year at Wade Hampton High School, his father wrote him a letter about choosing which college to attend.<sup>4</sup> Bill Piper recognized this as one of the greatest decisions his son would make, and he wanted to share his “thoughts, desires and convictions,” expressing his “whole heart on the matter.” Bill found that it was sometimes easier for him to express his thoughts on paper than to express them verbally—a candid and ironic admission for a man whose vocation required verbal proclamation but who recognized his limitations in more intimate, inter-personal communication.

Bill began by acknowledging that he did not know whether his son shares all

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<sup>3</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 19–20.

<sup>4</sup>Bill Piper, letter to John Piper, September 11, 1963, John Piper Papers. All of the quotes in this section are from this document.

of his convictions. He hoped that he would, but he also knew that convictions develop over time. But he wanted to impress upon John that the significance of this decision cannot be overestimated for a young man: “It does more to color his thinking, stamp his personality, affect his outlook on life and mold his destiny than probably any other association he will have during the course of a life time.”

Having established the importance of the issue, Bill Piper began to rehearse a declension narrative of Christian higher education in America. There was once a time when institutions respected the Bible, had high ethical standards, and exercised firm discipline. But now, due in large part to the rise of organic evolution and the philosophies of Darwin and Freud, “higher education sold out to the materialists, the secularists, the atheists and the communists.” The result is that “God is repudiated, the Bible slandered and belittled and Christ is trampled in the streets.” Piper regarded it as “a tragedy beyond description that a clean, healthy, decent American boy or girl feels compelled to wade through filth to get a diploma.” Even the majority of the denominational schools had deteriorated into merely secular or worldly institutions.

For Bill this raised a profound question of Christian ethics: is it morally right for Christians to use God-given money in order to support institutions that advance evolution and atheism while undermining the veracity of the Bible and the truth of Christ crucified? Bill had complete confidence in John’s ability to stand firm amidst the pressure, but the issue is rather one of principle for him. He personalized the issue for John: “Bear in mind that practically every cent we spend to put you through college will be coming from God’s people across America who give in response to the blessing received through the preaching of God’s Word. Should this money be taken and sent to a school where this same Word is rejected and trampled upon?”

Bill supposed that some parents regard this option as a necessary evil in order for their children to receive a good education. But in Bill’s mind, the only possible

justification would be if a student knew exactly what specialized major he needed and the required courses were only offered by modernistic schools. For most young fundamentalists, there is the option of Christian colleges, which were established in response to the apostasy of denominational schools and the paganism of state or independent schools. These schools honor Christ, accept the Bible as the Word of God, adhere to Christian standards of behavior, and study disciplines like science and philosophy within the Christ viewpoint. "Such schools," he wrote, "are deserving of our respect, our endorsement, our prayers, our gifts, and, if the necessary courses are offered similar to those in secular schools, should certainly be preferred and supported."

Bill acknowledged that there were weaknesses with some of these schools, including lack of full accreditation (making the transfer of credits difficult), inadequate staffing, and limited curricula. But he did not think this is true of a list of top four schools he had written down for John: Biola College (La Mirada, California), Houghton College (Caneadea, New York), Wheaton College (Wheaton, Illinois), and Taylor University (Upland, Indiana). Of Wheaton, he wrote,

Wheaton, of course, speaks for itself. It has for years been considered the leading Christian school of America. Their standards are high. It is difficult to get into Wheaton and difficult to stay. A degree from Wheaton is as good as a degree from any college. I have had some qualms in the past few years about Wheaton's emphasis on the intellectual aspects of education feeling that they had lost some of their spiritual warmth. I have had several . . . tell me this was true. Nevertheless, the school holds to the Faith and to Christian standards.

In addition to these four schools, Piper also offered his comments on Bethel College (St. Paul, Minnesota), Gordon College (Wenham, Massachusetts), Louisiana College (Pineville, Louisiana), and Bryan College (Dayton, Tennessee). Bill concludes: "There may be other fine schools in the country but to my knowledge these are the best in existence for those interested seriously in acquiring a Christian education."

Bill did not want the school's distance from home to be a factor in John's decision. Any place, no matter the distance, will have that "away from home" feeling.



The telephone and airplane make distance less of a factor. He also warned against choosing a school for reasons of pride or status. Such would surely be displeasing to the Lord. There is ultimately only one question a Christian needs to ask: “Where would God have me to attend college?” Bill quotes Psalm 37:23; Proverbs 3:5–6; and Ephesians 5:17. God has a will for John’s life, which includes a will for where he should attend college, even if he did not yet know it. Bill could testify from his own experience, “There is no joy comparable to knowing that what you are doing is what God almighty wants you to be doing.” Bill gave specific instructions on how this is to be done: “Get all the information you can about all the schools. Lay all this out before the Lord. Make every move a matter of prayer, not just rationalizing. Ask the Lord for some specific indications of His will.” Bill then movingly summarizes his deepest desires for his son’s life:

. . . that you will constantly seek to know Christ and to make Him known. That you will always remember that our primary duty is to glorify God and to witness to His saving and keeping power. That no matter what your vocation may prove to be that you will look upon yourself as God’s representative in that vocation.

He continued,

I would a thousand times you rather be a truck driver in the will of God than a medical doctor out of it. If God would lay His hand upon you and call you to some specific Christian field of service, this would thrill my soul, naturally. Where but from the Christian homes of our world are the Christian leaders of tomorrow going to come? But I do not consider one job more sacred than another. We are all His witnesses. Paul could write, “I am an apostle, by the will of God.” I am an Evangelist, by the will of God. Whatever you become, I want you to be able to write over the door of your home, “I am what I am by the will of God.”

Bill closed his letter with several things he wanted his son to know. First, he would stand with John in whatever decision he makes—whether choosing a Christian or a secular school—if he can say with assurance after earnest prayer that he believes God would have him do this. Second, if John decides to transfer from a Christian school to a specialized university after a couple of years and after knowing the mind of the Lord, Bill promised to pay it, no matter the cost. Third, he assured his son of his daily earnest

prayers on his behalf. Finally, he wanted him to feel the freedom to discuss these issues with him, and invited him to write at any time. He encouraged John once more to gather the facts, think it through, commit it to the Lord in earnest prayer, and to put out a fleece.<sup>5</sup>

### **Wheaton College**

John Piper graduated from high school in June of 1964. Although he undoubtedly weighed his father's counsel both carefully and prayerfully, he proceeded to apply to two private research universities, Emory University (Atlanta, Georgia) and Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, Maryland), and one evangelical college, Wheaton. He visited all three schools with his parents and was accepted at all three. He elected to go to Wheaton, whose motto was "For Christ and His Kingdom." Established in 1860 by abolitionist pastor John Blanchard (1811–1892), the 40-acre elm-shaded campus, nestled in a suburb of 25,000 residents, was located 25 miles west of Chicago and 730 miles northwest of Greenville.<sup>6</sup>

There were cultural, theological, and ecclesiastical continuities and discontinuities between Piper's upbringing and his new environs. The 1960s were a time of angst and unrest among college students, even at conservative institutions of higher learning. But the administration of Wheaton sought to hold the line both theologically and culturally. At this time premillennialism was still a part of the doctrinal statement for

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<sup>5</sup>The terminology of "putting out a fleece," in fundamentalist and evangelical parlance, was derived from Judg 6, where Gideon wanted to confirm God's will of instructing the Israelite troops to defeat Midianite invaders. Gideon put out a fleece and asked the Lord to make it wet while the surroundings were dry, then he put out a fleece and asked the Lord to make it dry while the surroundings were wet. It thus became a paradigm for discerning the will of God through a confirmatory sign.

<sup>6</sup>On the history of Wheaton, see Paul M. Bechtel, *Wheaton College: A Heritage Remembered, 1860–1984* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1984). In 1964 a student's total yearly expenses for tuition, room, and board were approximately \$2,250 per year. Adjusted for inflation, this is equivalent to purchasing power of \$17,263.45 in 2014. <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=2250&year1=1964&year2=2014> (accessed October 10, 2014).

the school, and the standards of behavior required of students included “refraining from the use of alcoholic liquors and tobacco, from gambling and the possession and use of playing cards, from dancing, from meetings of secret societies, and from attendance at theatres, including the movies.”<sup>7</sup> But Wheaton opened for Piper a new world of Christendom he hardly knew existed. His whole life he had been surrounded by fundamentalists and conservative Southern Baptists. Now he was at a non-denominational school in the Midwest, and in chapel he learned new hymns like “May the Mind of Christ,” “And Can It Be,” “Like a River Glorious,” “When Peace Likes a River,” and “For All the Saints”—none of which he could recall having heard before. “In fact,” Piper later recalled, “I didn’t know you could be a Christian and be a Presbyterian. I was very provincial.”<sup>8</sup>

In November of 1965, the fall semester of Piper’s sophomore year at Wheaton, he paid 35¢ for a brown, spiral-bound, “Progress note book,” which he labeled on the cover, “Notes (Thoughts) vol. I / Johnny S. Piper.” Piper contributed to his journal in spurts, taking all three undergraduate years to complete his first 77-page volume. Piper’s friends and acquaintances from college remember him as serious and analytical but also polite and kind, with a ready smile and laugh.<sup>9</sup> But by Piper’s own admission, reflecting years later on this period of his life, he was also “one snooty, critical sophomore. I would sit there in the dining hall and make negative comments about every girl that came through. And I began to just loathe what I was.”<sup>10</sup> It was the unsanctified part of having an insecure spirit and an analytical mind. At one point in his journal he had enough self-

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<sup>7</sup>See *Wheaton College Catalog*, 1965–1966, <http://espace.wheaton.edu/lr/a-sc/archives/publications/catalogs/1965-1966catalog.pdf>, 12 (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>John Piper, “15 Reasons I’m Thankful for Wheaton College,” *Wheaton Alumni Magazine* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 22.

<sup>9</sup>Justin Taylor, interview with David Bareford, November 8, 2014, notes in my possession.

<sup>10</sup>Piper, “15 Reasons I’m Thankful for Wheaton College,” 22.

awareness to observe, “My life has been built around seeing the wrong or the ugly in things and then pointing it out.”<sup>11</sup> This attitude is reflected in some of his journalistic entries, even as they evidence a maturation process as the entries and the years and go by. The early entries in particular contain typical teenage struggles and awkwardness, exacerbated by a desire to start a meaningful relationship with a girl, even though he had never dated and hardly knew how to initiate a conversation with the opposite sex that didn’t feel forced or phony. Piper’s reflections manifest a desire to please God and to make his life count for eternity, while displaying an introverted disposition and an analytic mind. In one entry he records, “Perhaps there is no such thing as ‘too serious,’ only too much seriousness.”<sup>12</sup> In another he writes, “Some people have told me I’d be a lot happier if I didn’t analyze things so much. To me that’s like almost saying if I were somebody else I’d be happier.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Falling in Love, Fear of Speaking, and Calling to Ministry**

In May of 1966, near the end of his sophomore year, Piper had come to the settled conviction that he would become a pre-med major. He wrote in his journal, “I feel so sure, so happy, so directed; I am finally headed for the M.D.”<sup>14</sup> His freshman year he had received an A in vertebrate zoology, but this was the only science course he had

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<sup>11</sup>John Piper, Journal 1, Entry for April 24, 1967, John Piper Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Piper, Journal 1, Entry for May 19, 1966.

<sup>13</sup>Piper, Journal 1, Entry for September 30, 1967. Piper writes of his resolution to take “every question, problem, area of concern and after much reading, discussion & study to sit quietly & formulate in writing my own view, faulty or not. May the Lord ever censor falsity from truth in my endeavors!” Though Piper had not yet read anything from Jonathan Edwards, this resolution is an interesting echo of Edwards’s eleventh resolution: “Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances don’t hinder” (Jonathan Edwards, “Resolutions,” *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn in *WJE*, vol. 16 [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998], 754).

<sup>14</sup>Piper, Journal 1, Entry for March 14, 1966.

taken. He needed to have eight hours of general chemistry before enrolling in organic chemistry. So instead of returning to Greenville over summer break, he remained in Wheaton to complete his chemistry prerequisite, from June 18 to August 12. It was during this summer that Piper would meet a young woman who would change his life.

Noël Frances Henry was almost two full years younger than John—born in Norfolk, Virginia, two days after Christmas in 1947. Her father, George, was aboard the USS *Chipola* (AO-63), a fleet oiler the U.S. Navy used to service combat ships in the Pacific Theatre of Operations during World War II. The quickest way to convey news in those days was via telegram, which charged by the word. To save money, Noël's mother, Pamela, sent him a minimalist message: "Noel Frances born 12/27." George Henry was undoubtedly overjoyed, but he had to send back a clarifying question: "Boy or girl?" Noël was the first of ten Henry children.

She had graduated from a rural high school near Barnesville, Georgia, in 1965. Among the 36 graduating seniors that year, Noël was one of the few with aspirations for college, wanting to follow in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother who had both received and benefited from a liberal arts education. The few classmates who were college-bound planned to stay in Georgia, but Noël wanted to go as far away from home as possible, to a place where she didn't have parents telling her what to do. So she wrote for information to colleges that had advertised in Christian magazines received at the Henry home. She applied and was accepted at Wheaton, where she enrolled as a freshman in the fall of 1965.

Her freshman year she declared to her friends that she wanted to wait a few years after college in order to get married because she wanted to see the world first. She also made clear that she would never marry a preacher. Noël later looked back on herself at this stage and characterized herself as "a silly, fairly shallow girl who wanted fun more

than much of anything else.” She would not have dated a non-Christian, but she was not much more discerning than that.<sup>15</sup>

On Monday afternoon, June 6, Piper was in the lounge of Fischer Hall—his residence hall on the north end of campus, freshly constructed in 1965—reading Paul Tournier’s book *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study* (1962). Piper heard the voice of a fellow student with a Georgian accent, explaining to the front-desk attendant she was locked out of her dormitory across campus. Earlier in the day she had been moving her things from the all-female Williston Hall to an off-campus apartment when she realized that she had neglected to grab the clothes out of her closet. But when she returned to Williston the dorm was locked, so now she was seeking some help. He discovered that her name was Noël Henry, an 18-year-old brunette who had just completed her freshman year. John and Noël were introduced in the lounge that day and soon found themselves with common friends in the “fine arts room,” located in the basement of Fischer Hall, where students often congregated to hang out and to play games together. That weekend they happened to sit near each other at Wheaton Bible Church and picked up their conversation after the service. They were soon a couple. By July 15—less than six weeks after meeting for the first time—Piper professed his love to her and had no doubts that they would be married.<sup>16</sup> They waited until May 18, 1968, during Piper’s final semester of school, to become officially engaged.

The same summer Piper met his future wife he had another encounter that would change the direction of his life. Evan D. Welsh (1904–1981), the college chaplain,

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<sup>15</sup>Carolyn Mahaney, “Noel Piper: The Interview, Part 1,” March 20, 2007, [http://www.girltalkhome.com/blog/Noel\\_Piper\\_The\\_Interview\\_Pt\\_1](http://www.girltalkhome.com/blog/Noel_Piper_The_Interview_Pt_1) (accessed December 8, 2015). She writes, “[W]hen I met a cute, curly-haired guy who liked me, that was enough for me. In fact, it was extra cute how he thought so seriously about things, on the one hand, and on the other, how he played a wild game of charades and sang and moved his arms and shoulders (we didn’t dance) to the Beach Boys.”

<sup>16</sup>Piper records, “From July 15 [1966] I have come to love her and I will marry her without a doubt” (Piper, Journal 1, Entry for November 19, 1966).

approached Piper about praying in a session of summer chapel, which met daily from 10:00 to 10:25 AM and was required for all students. Welsh, in his early sixties with a gray-haired flattop, lived with his wife across the street from “front campus,” where they opened their home once a week for students to enjoy fellowship in the home of an older Christian couple. Welsh asked Piper if he would mind opening one of the mandatory summer chapel sessions in prayer. Welsh almost certainly didn’t know that Piper was unable to do any sort of public presentation in front of five people, let alone 500 of his fellow classmates. But Piper surprised himself by asking in response, “How long would it have to be?” Chaplain Welsh said that it didn’t really matter—30 seconds, a minute—as long as it was from the heart. Piper further surprised himself by saying “Yes.” And then the wrestling began. Piper was terrified. He paced the front campus, crying out to the Lord for deliverance from this debilitating speech paralysis. In high school he couldn’t even do a math problem on the board in front of his classmates or read a simple notecard in front of his Training Union classmates at church. The sweaty palms, clutched throat, pounding heart, eyes filled with tears—they all came back to him. But as he pled with the Lord for help, he decided to make a Psalm-like vow, which he had never done before: “God, if you will get me through this without my choking and becoming paralyzed, I will never say no to a speaking opportunity out of fear.”<sup>17</sup> He proceeded in faith. When it came time to pray, Piper gripped the podium in Edman Chapel with both hands and prayed aloud to his Deliverer and Savior, and he was ever afterward convinced that the Lord fulfilled his word: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps 50:15). Something broke, and Piper’s tongue was loosed and finally set free.

In September of 1966, having successfully completed eight credit hours of

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<sup>17</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, 35. Piper also tells the story in John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012), 49–51.

chemistry, Piper was ready to begin his junior year on a pre-med track, but he fell seriously ill with flu-like symptoms. He paid a visit to the campus infirmary, where he was diagnosed with infectious mononucleosis.<sup>18</sup> To allow time to recover and to keep him from infecting others with the virus, he was confined to a bed in the health center for three weeks. Spiritual Emphasis Week at the beginning of the fall semester was one of Piper's favorite times of the year. Just the year before Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984) had exploded onto the American evangelical scene through his Wheaton lectures.<sup>19</sup> This year the special speaker was Harold John Ockenga (1905–1985), who had been the pastor of historic Park Street Church in Boston for 30 years. Ockenga served as the founding president of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942–1944), the first president (though in absentia) of Fuller Theological Seminary (1947–1954, 1960–1963), and one of the principal backers of the founding of *Christianity Today* in 1956. In 1969 Ockenga would become the first president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Before Ockenga had turned 50 years old he was already the subject of a biography.<sup>20</sup> Ockenga was one of the most influential leaders of neo-evangelicalism, which distinguished itself as movement that opposed liberalism but sought to reform fundamentalism.<sup>21</sup>

Flat on his back with yellow glands so swollen it was difficult to breath, Piper

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<sup>18</sup>The health center had five full-time and three part-time nurses under the direction of Joan Johnson, RN. Clarence Wyngarden, MD, who had a large medical practice in the community, supervised the center, held clinic hours on campus twice a day, and was on-call 24/7. The infirmary had 25 beds, half of them occupied at any given time, with the average student staying there for three days. See *Wheaton College Catalog*, 1965–66.

<sup>19</sup>On Schaeffer's time at Wheaton, see Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 76–77.

<sup>20</sup>Harold Lindsell, *Park Street Prophet: A Life of Harold John Ockenga* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1951).

<sup>21</sup>On Ockenga, see Lindsell, *Park Street Prophet*; Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); and Owen Daniel Strachan, "Reenchanted the Evangelical Mind: Park Street Church's Harold Ockenga, the Boston Scholars, and the Mid-century Intellectual Surge" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2011).



turned on his bedside radio to WETN, the campus station, which was broadcasting Ockenga's messages live from Edman Chapel, just a couple of hundred yards to the west of the infirmary. The effect of the preaching was profound upon Piper: "Never had I heard exposition of the Scriptures like this. Suddenly all the glorious objectivity of Reality centered for me on the Word of God. I lay there feeling as if I had awakened from a dream, and knew, now that I was awake, what I was to do."<sup>22</sup> Everything in John wanted to know the Bible like this and to have the ability to handle it in this way. By the end of the week he told Noël that he had decided to go to seminary after Wheaton. After being released from the health-care center he dropped organic chemistry and reversed course on his pre-med plans. Nothing would ever be the same. "From that moment on," he would later say, "I have never doubted that my calling in life is to be a minister of the Word of God."<sup>23</sup>

### **Studying Under America's Leading Lewis Scholar**

Piper had taken six hours of literature during his sophomore year as a Literature major. This opened the door for him to study under the renowned professor Clyde S. Kilby (1902–1986) his senior year. Piper took Kilby for Romantic Literature (studying Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Gothic Novel) and also for an Integration Course (which covered the entire range of English and American literature).<sup>24</sup> Piper took every poetry class he could and avoided every novel class he could, in part because of the slowness of his reading pace.<sup>25</sup> He could not complete the

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<sup>22</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 21–22.

<sup>23</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 22.

<sup>24</sup>Piper's paper was on "Wordsworth's Poetics," which Kilby awarded an A: "An excellent paper. Of course much more could be said, but you have done a fine job. You *think* and *write* clearly. A for the course. No exam necessary. Congratulations!" (John Piper Papers).

<sup>25</sup>Piper writes, "I read painfully slowly. To this day I cannot read faster than I can talk. Something short-circuits in my ability to perceive accurately what's on the page, when I try to push beyond to go faster" (John Piper, "The Pastor as Scholar: A Personal Journey and the Joyful Place of Scholarship,"

novels, but he could carefully analyze poetry. However, this was not the only reason that Piper was drawn to poetry, and thereby Kilby:

Mainly poetry was chosen because the emotions of a young man can run deep in the river of poetry. Clyde Kilby was a giant in the lit department in those days, and his book *Poetry and Life* [an introduction to poetry published in 1953] was lived in front of us in class. Kilby took the passion for observation and breathed a kind of life into it that biology never could. He taught me that there is always more to see in what I see. There is always wonder. There is always something to be astonished about. There is mental health in learning to look at a tree or a cloud or a nose, and to marvel that it is what it is. This then became poetry. When you finally see the wonder of what you have been looking at for ten years, what you do with that seeing is try to say it—and that is what poetry is.<sup>26</sup>

The works that had deeply influenced Kilby were in turn commended to his students. Kilby strongly encouraged his students to read G. K. Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy* (1908). "Yes, Chesterton is a Roman Catholic," Piper recounts Kilby saying to his evangelical students. "Read it. You'll be a healthier person." Piper read the book and agreed. It changed his life.<sup>27</sup>

Kilby had begun reading works by C. S. Lewis in the early 1940s and had discovered "something bottomless."<sup>28</sup> The two men began corresponding in 1952. On

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in D. A. Carson and John Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, ed. David Mathis and Owen Strachan [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011], 29).

<sup>26</sup>Piper, *Pastor as Scholar*, 32. See Clyde S. Kilby, *Poetry and Life: An Introduction* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1953). Mark Noll recalls, "Kilby loved literature, he believed in the imagination, and he could quote Wordsworth with abandon. Most of all he was driven by a passion to disabuse Wheaton fundamentalists of the notion that poetry was a frill, an extra for nailing down the final point of a sermon. Poetry, proclaimed Kilby, was life. And not only life but Christian life. Through my personal fog it started to make sense. I knew I liked poems. But I had never before associated the two" (Mark A. Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 27).

<sup>27</sup>John Piper, "Do You See the Joy of God in the Sun? Part 2," August 26, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/do-you-see-the-joy-of-god-in-the-sun-part-2> (accessed November 6, 2014).

<sup>28</sup>Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections Staff, "Biographical Note," Clyde Kilby Papers, 1953–1978, Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections, <http://archon.wheaton.edu/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=54&q=&rootcontentid=12055> (accessed November 6, 2014).

July 1, 1953, Clyde and Martha Kilby were passing through Oxford, and Lewis had invited him for a visit at Magdalen College, Oxford. So as not to offend the bachelor don, Kilby asked his wife to go shopping while the two men discussed literature, art, and the Renaissance for over an hour. They would never meet in person again but corresponded over the next decade until Lewis's death in 1963. "That meeting," Lewis's literary executor Walter Hooper recounts, "cemented Kilby's admiration and he became Lewis's chief champion and defender in America. So sound were his judgments about Lewis that it was inevitable that Kilby should be referred to as 'Dean of Lewis studies' and 'the godfather of Lewis interest in America'. Certainly he did more to introduce Lewis to evangelical Christians than anyone."<sup>29</sup> Mark Noll comments, "Kilby's efforts to promote the work of these British authors made him, perhaps unwittingly, a force transforming the character of American evangelicalism." His efforts, Noll notes, "played a major role in popularizing Lewis among fundamentalists and evangelicals, and to some extent the American population at large."<sup>30</sup>

In 1966 Kilby journeyed to Oxford to meet with J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), with whom he had shared a brief correspondence. During this trip he also visited Major Warren Hamilton Lewis (1895–1973), Lewis's only sibling. Kilby requested that upon his death he might receive Lewis's letters, manuscripts, and personal affects. Kilby had recently founded the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton, which he envisioned as a depository and research center related to the writings of the Inklings (especially Owen Barfield, Charles Williams, and Dorothy L. Sayers). Major Lewis gladly consented, and these materials formed the foundation for this collection.

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<sup>29</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963*, vol. 3., ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 1683.

<sup>30</sup>Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation*, 27.

Kilby was one of the first Americans to engage Lewis's work as an object of serious literary study. In 1964, the year after Lewis's death, Kilby published one of the first critical studies of Lewis's thought, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis*. In 1967 Kilby collected and edited *Letters to an American Lady*, Lewis's letters to Mary Shelburne spanning from 1950 to 1963. In 1969 Kilby edited a thematically arranged anthology of Lewis's writings, *A Mind Awake*, which Piper reviewed as a seminary student the following year.<sup>31</sup> In 1973 Kilby co-authored *C. S. Lewis: Images of His World*, primarily a pictorial book with supplementary captions and narrative. Later that decade Kilby wrote *Images of Salvation in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*. His last project, published in 1983, was a co-edited edition of Warnie Lewis's diaries.<sup>32</sup>

Piper was encountering in the classroom not only an early Lewis scholar but a man who had absorbed and embodied the Lewisian spirit. Piper compares the influence of Kilby and Stuart Hackett (1925–2012) upon his life and thought.<sup>33</sup> “Kilby was a romantic—like C. S. Lewis. Hackett was a rationalist—like C. S. Lewis. One taught literature, the other taught philosophy. One taught me to see with the eyes of a poet. The other taught me the ubiquitous relevance of the law of non-contradiction.” Piper thanks God for both men, believing that both saw what was true and wise. But Piper judges that

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<sup>31</sup>Piper reviewed this work in the Fuller Seminary newspaper: John Piper, review of *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis*, *Opinion* 9 (May 26, 1970): 7–9.

<sup>32</sup>Clyde S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); C. S. Lewis, *A Mind Awake: An Anthology*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969); Douglas R. Gilbert and Clyde S. Kilby, *C. S. Lewis: Images of His World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); Clyde S. Kilby, *Images of Salvation in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1978); Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Meade (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).

<sup>33</sup>Piper writes, “[Kilby] may have been my most influential teacher when I was in college. But then again it may have been Stuart Hackett” (John Piper, “The Strange Glory of Ordinary Things,” <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/the-strange-glory-of-ordinary-things>, September 26, 2013 [accessed November 6, 2014]). Piper wrote during college, “Kilby is perhaps the greatest teacher I’ve ever had—he’s helping me to know how to live . . .” (Piper, *Journal* 1, Entry for April 25, 1968).

Kilby went deeper. “That’s not,” Piper clarifies, “a criticism of the philosopher. It’s a statement about who we are as human beings. We are meant to reason because God is rational. And we are meant to rejoice because of the glory we see. But the reason serves the rejoicing. The thinker and analyzer in us is meant to protect the poet and lover.”<sup>34</sup>

Piper writes that it was the combination of Lewis and Kilby who “conspired to kindle in me a tremendous love for nature and for poetry and for the power and beauty of the emotions in human life.”<sup>35</sup> Piper recalls Kilby leading devotionals in class from the last four chapters of the biblical book of Job. He brought to the classroom a Lewis-like wonder and childlike marvel: “He talked about the ostrich, which God created to be foolish, so that it would leave its eggs on the desert floor. And he would marvel over the creation through an inspired writer’s marveling. In such a way, the affections were awakened to see and to feel things.”<sup>36</sup> Kilby reveled in the mystery of the real universe, what Lewis called “the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live.”<sup>37</sup> Piper writes of Kilby’s influence:

When you are being shown what you’ve always looked at all your life and never seen, it is absolutely revolutionary. Kilby was one of the greatest influences of my life, and I scarcely know what he thought about anything—politically, psychologically, theologically. It was the *way* he saw the world and spoke of the world. He was so alive to the wonder of things. This was incalculably valuable preparation of soul for the vision of God that would come just a few years later at seminary.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Piper, “The Strange Glory of Ordinary Things.”

<sup>35</sup>John Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most,” November 1, 1993, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/books-that-have-influenced-me-most> (accessed November 4, 2012).

<sup>36</sup>Piper, “15 Reasons I’m Thankful for Wheaton College,” 22.

<sup>37</sup>C. S. Lewis, preface to *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, ed. C. S. Lewis (New York, Macmillan, 1946), 35.

<sup>38</sup>Piper, *Pastor as Scholar*, 33.

## Piper's Encounters with Lewis Himself

When Piper entered Wheaton College, he had no awareness of Lewis or his work. His freshman year a friend recommended that he read *Mere Christianity*.<sup>39</sup> It would be Piper's wardrobe-door entrance into the world of Lewis's literature, and he would go on to read virtually his entire published corpus.<sup>40</sup> The documentary evidence is relatively thin regarding the exact number of books Piper read during this period and how they specifically influenced him. Apart from reading *Mere Christianity* his freshman year, we know that he read Lewis's spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, which occasioned Piper's first mention of Lewis in his journal: "To read of how he enjoys and appreciates literary art arouses in me a feeling that I could do the same. . . . I feel like I want to make my life's work something along these lines."<sup>41</sup> In the fall semester of his senior year Piper read *The Problem of Pain*, which he reviewed for Millard Erickson's apologetics class.<sup>42</sup> The next semester, Piper notes that Kilby had discussed in class a principle Lewis had learned: real-time self-analysis of an experience can ruin it. As Lewis

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<sup>39</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity; A Revised and Enlarged Edition, with a New Introduction of the Three Books, The Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

<sup>40</sup>Writing in 1993, Piper lists 22 books he had read at that point by Lewis: C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1943); C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 7 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1950–1956); C. S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Warren H. Lewis (London: Bles, 1966); C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*, ed. Clyde S. Kilby (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952); C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Macmillan, 1943); C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: John Lane, 1943); C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (London: G. Bles, 1933); C. S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: G. Bles, 1964); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1943); C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943); C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1946); C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). See Piper, "Books that Have Influenced Me Most."

<sup>41</sup>Piper, Journal 1, Entry for September 4, 1967.

<sup>42</sup>Erickson commented; "You have done a good job of stating Lewis' view. I am not sure you have gone very far beyond this, however. B to B—" (John Piper Papers).

wrote, “You cannot *study* Pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyse the nature of humour while roaring with laughter.”<sup>43</sup> Piper was eager to learn more about Lewis’s perspective on this, though it sat in tension with his belief in the Socratic principle that the unexamined life is not worth living. Piper wondered if it is simply a “delicate balance of emphasis. There is a sense I believe in which to stop and take stock of our pleasure adds a great deal of enjoyment to it. Nevertheless both principles are needful & I’m glad I am beginning to understand both.”<sup>44</sup> Piper would soon return to Lewis for further instruction on experiencing and analyzing joy.

### **Lewis on Christian Hedonism**

Lewis was a key influence in Piper’s discovery of “Christian hedonism,” but this would take place at Fuller Seminary, not Wheaton College. His first quarter at Fuller, in the fall of 1968, he walked into Vroman’s Bookstore on Colorado Avenue in Pasadena, just a few blocks southeast of the seminary. There he saw and bought a small blue paperback copy of *The Weight of Glory*. “The first page of that sermon,” he now says, “is one of the most influential pages of literature I have ever read.”<sup>45</sup> It confirmed what Piper had been learning from Daniel Fuller’s hermeneutics course on the pursuit of joy, as Piper records in his journal on November 16, 1968:

It is a whole new way of looking at things. C. S. Lewis and Dr. Fuller have combined to bomb me with the idea that Christians are at fault not because they try to please themselves too much but because they are far too easily pleased. The idea consists in the fact that nowhere in the New Testament is self-denial lauded for its own sake, and the fact of the preponderance of promises and rewards. We always

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<sup>43</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Myth Becomes Fact,” *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000), 140.

<sup>44</sup>Piper, Journal 1, Entry for April 25, 1968.

<sup>45</sup>John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011), 19.

deny ourselves to follow Christ or to esteem our neighbor, never because self-denial is a good thing of itself. Christians are admonished to seek their highest good and seek it with all their heart. Our problem is not our self seeking but our seeking in the wrong places and our easy satisfaction short of the glory of God.<sup>46</sup>

It would be nearly a decade before Piper formulated his understanding of “Christian hedonism” in print for the first time, and he did so in a magazine essay entitled “How I Became a Christian Hedonist.”<sup>47</sup> Writing in the form of theological autobiography, Piper recounts how he came to hold this position, citing the insights of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and Lewis. This article was picked up, largely verbatim, in *Desiring God*, but by then Piper had added quotations from Jonathan Edwards for support.<sup>48</sup>

Piper begins by noting that his early conceptions on the ethics of moral duty were governed by the presupposition that “the goodness of my moral action was lessened to the degree that I was motivated by a desire for my own pleasure.” This did not bother Piper when he was doing something morally inconsequential (e.g., buying ice cream for pleasure) but it felt selfish and utilitarian (and therefore morally deficient) when the prospect of Christian service was motivated by a desire for pleasure or happiness. The result was an existential struggle, as his ethical framework kept colliding into his “overwhelming longing to be happy,” which was “a tremendously powerful impulse to seek pleasure.” So he felt ethically compelled to suppress that which he most desired.

Acknowledging the strangeness of the terminology of “Christian hedonism,” Piper recounts the series of insights that led to this position. First, he learned from Pascal that to seek his own happiness is not necessarily sinful but simply a factual given of human nature. Pascal observed that some men going to war and other men avoiding it,

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<sup>46</sup>John Piper, Journal 2, Entry for November 16, 1968, John Piper Papers.

<sup>47</sup>John Piper, “How I Became a Christian Hedonist,” *His 37* (March 1977): 1, 4–5.

<sup>48</sup>In what follows I will quote from the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. of *Desiring God*.



some choosing to live and some to commit suicide, were all motivated by the desire to be happier, or at least to avoid more misery.<sup>49</sup>

Second, Piper read in Lewis that our great problem is not the desire for happiness but the fact that we are far too easily pleased.<sup>50</sup> Lewis begins his sermon on “The Weight of Glory” by observing that nineteen out of twenty good men today would list unselfishness as the highest of the virtues, whereas almost all of the great Christians of old would have listed love. A negative has replaced a positive: going without something is not the same as seeking to secure the happiness of another. “The New Testament,” Lewis writes, “has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.” The notion that we should suppress our own desire for good and our hope for enjoyment is not a part of Christianity but owes more to Immanuel Kant and the Stoics. Lewis continues, in words that would form an indelible impression on Piper’s mind, heart, and ministry:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>51</sup>

“There it was in black and white,” Piper recounts, “and to my mind it was totally compelling: It is not a bad thing to desire our own good. In fact, the great problem of human beings is that they are far too easily pleased. They don’t seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and passion that they should. And so they settle for mud pies of

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<sup>49</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 18.

<sup>50</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 19–20.

<sup>51</sup>C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 96.

appetite instead of infinite delight.” He had never in his whole life heard a Christian, let alone one of Lewis’s stature, say these kinds of things, and Piper became convinced that our fault lay not in our desire for happiness but in the weakness of it.

Implicit in what Lewis says in “The Weight of Glory” is the idea that God has designed us for happiness and that we experience an empty void that can only be met and filled by God himself. It was Pascal, however, who most clearly and memorably demonstrated this for Piper, arguing that God designed our infinite desire for happiness to be filled by an infinite and immutable object, namely God himself.<sup>52</sup>

Piper’s next insight from Lewis may be the most important one of all. The quote from “The Weight of Glory” was confirmatory to what he had already been seeing, but Lewis’s chapter entitled “A Word about Praise” in his *Reflections on the Psalms* changed everything for Piper’s understanding of worship, joy, praise, and adoration. It is worth summarizing Lewis’s argument in some detail.

Lewis admits with some embarrassment that when he first began to draw near to God in belief, and even for some time afterward, he found the command to praise God a stumbling block. After all, he noted, we routinely reject those who seek and expect praise and congratulations: “We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand.” He took this horizontal observation and applied it vertically: “Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and of His worshippers threatened to appear in my mind.”<sup>53</sup>

The Psalms in particular were problematic for Lewis. The commands and

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<sup>52</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 20–21.

<sup>53</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958; repr., New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 80.

motivations for praise were not merely intellectual difficulties but profoundly troubling to him spiritually. Lewis found it hideous that God was honored by thanks and praise (Ps 50:23), akin to saying, “What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.”<sup>54</sup> He was bothered by “the suggestion of the very silliest Pagan bargaining,” whereby the Psalmist seems to offer praise to God if he will do something for him (cf. Ps 54:1, 6). He was appalled by the argument that God should save his supplicant from death since those in Sheol cannot give him praise (Ps 30:10; 88:10; 119:175). He found it extremely distressing that mere quantity of praise seemed like an important consideration to God (Ps 119:164). “Gratitude to God, reverence to Him, obedience to Him, I thought I could understand; not this perpetual eulogy.”<sup>55</sup> Lewis was likewise confused and disturbed by the teaching that God has the “right” to be praised.

In response, Lewis asks us to begin with something like an inanimate object, which has no rights. What do we mean, he asks, when we say that it is “admirable”? We mean more than that it is admired by others; bad works are often admired and good works ignored, so something can be admired without being truly admirable. We also mean something more than that it deserves to be admired in the sense that an injustice would obtain if admiration were not bestowed. Rather, Lewis argues, an admirable object deserves or demands admiration in the sense that “admiration is the correct, adequate, appropriate, response to it,” and conversely that failing to admire it means we are “stupid, insensible, and great losers” because “we shall have missed something.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, Lewis is saying that something is admirable when admiration is both a fitting and obviously necessary response to it. Lewis then applies this concept to God: “He is that Object to admire which (or, if you like, to appreciate which) is simply to be awake, to

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<sup>54</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 91.

<sup>55</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 91.

<sup>56</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 92.

have entered the real world; not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all.”<sup>57</sup>

Lewis came to see that in his previous difficulties with the concept of praise, he had failed to see that “it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men.”<sup>58</sup> This is a key point for Lewis: the command to praise is not just so that God can *receive* something, but it is bound up with the very *giving* of God himself. So Lewis now had an answer to his previous conception that commanding and craving worship would be “like a vain woman wanting compliments.”<sup>59</sup> Lewis had thought about praise of God (and other things) in terms of compliment, approval, or honor. What had escaped his notice is the notion that “all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.”

The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars.<sup>60</sup>

We not only spontaneously praise what we value but instinctively urge others to join in our praise, rhetorically asking, “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?”<sup>61</sup> This unlocked the Psalter for Lewis: the psalmist, in enthusiastically imploring others to praise God, was simply doing what *all* of us do when we enjoy and worship something. “My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God,” Lewis writes, “depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely

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<sup>57</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 92.

<sup>58</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 93.

<sup>59</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 93.

<sup>60</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 94.

<sup>61</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 95.

Valuable, what we delight to do, what we indeed can't help doing, about everything else we value."<sup>62</sup>

Lewis then explores the psychology behind this dynamic of necessarily praising what we enjoy. Praise does more than express enjoyment, it actually "completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."

It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with . . .<sup>63</sup>

Piper calls this the "capstone" of his emerging Christian hedonism: "Praising God, the highest calling of humanity and our eternal vocation, did not involve the renunciation, but rather the consummation of the joy I so desired."<sup>64</sup>

Lewis agrees with the first answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." In heaven, Lewis says, when we can fully worship God in spirit and in truth, we shall know that these are really the same thing: "Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."<sup>65</sup> This gave Piper the pieces of the puzzle to develop his own word picture years later, arguing that we glorify God by enjoying him forever, and that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. As Piper now puts it, "The implications of this for ministry are all-pervasive. I have tried to spell them out in most of my books. That is the main reason I write—to spread this conviction

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<sup>62</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 95.

<sup>63</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 97.

<sup>64</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 22.

<sup>65</sup>Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 97.

and this experience.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Other Areas of Lewis’s Influences upon Piper**

In the remainder of this chapter some of the key ways in which Lewis influenced Piper’s understanding of life and reality will be traced.

#### **Romantic Rationalism**

The label of Lewis as a “romantic rationalist” did not originate with Piper, but it may be the best description Piper has offered for the paradoxical essence of Lewis that influenced Piper so profoundly.<sup>67</sup> The heart of Lewis’s “romanticism,” Piper writes, is “Lewis’s experience of the world that repeatedly awakened in him a sense that there is always more than this created world—something other, something beyond the natural world.”<sup>68</sup> By “rationalism” Piper refers to Lewis’s “profound devotion to being rational—to the principle that there is true rationality and that it is rooted in absolute Reason.”<sup>69</sup> For Piper, it is the combining of the two—“experiencing the stab of God-shaped joy and defending objective, absolute Truth, because of the absolute Reality of God”—that sets Lewis apart as so rare and wonderful.<sup>70</sup> Over and over again Piper comes back to this paradoxical bringing together of that which so many assume are exclusive: “rationalism and poetry, cool logic and warm feeling, disciplined prose and free

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<sup>66</sup>Piper, *Pastor as Scholar*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> The likely source of this terminology is Peter Kreeft’s chapter, “The Romantic Rationalist: Lewis the Man,” in *C. S. Lewis: A Critical Essay* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969). Piper employed this terminology in his co-edited book of essays on Lewis; see John Piper and David Mathis, eds., *The Romantic Rationalist: God, Life, and Imagination in the Work of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2014).

<sup>68</sup>John Piper, “C. S. Lewis, Romantic Rationalist: How His Paths to Christ Shaped His Life and Ministry,” in *The Romantic Rationalist*, 26–27.

<sup>69</sup>Piper, “C. S. Lewis, Romantic Rationalist,” 28.

<sup>70</sup>Piper, “Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul.”

imagination.”<sup>71</sup> Lewis convincingly demonstrated to Piper that “rigorous, precise, penetrating logic is not inimical to deep, soul-stirring feeling and vivid, lively, even playful imagination.”<sup>72</sup> “In shattering these old stereotypes for me,” Piper writes, “he freed me to think hard and to write poetry, to argue for the resurrection and compose hymns to Christ, to smash an argument and hug a friend, to demand a definition and use a metaphor.”<sup>73</sup>

Though it was the combination of the two that was so meaningful to Piper, we can also examine what he has said individually about the impact of both poles of Lewis’s thought and work. Clyde Kilby entitled his anthology of Lewis’s writings *A Mind Awake*, and the title captures one area in which Lewis impacted Piper. Lewis, even more than Chesterton or anyone else, gave Piper “the sense that we are all sleep-walking through life, largely induced by our preoccupation with what people think of us, so that we do not see the wonders all around us in nature, in people, and in the things people do and make. The world is full of wonders if we are not too self-absorbed to see it. I want to live this way and Lewis is God’s main cause.”<sup>74</sup> Lewis was alive to an intense sense of reality. Piper admits that this is difficult to communicate but he tries to capture this influence: “To wake up in the morning and to be aware of the firmness of the mattress, the warmth of the sun rays, the sound of the clock ticking, the sheer *being* of things (quiddity as he calls it).”<sup>75</sup> Lewis, Piper recounts, “helped me become alive to life. He helped me to see what is there in the world—things which if we didn’t have them, we would pay a million

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<sup>71</sup>Piper, “Books That Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>72</sup>Piper, “Books That Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>73</sup>Piper, “Books That Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>74</sup>John Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014; in my possession.

<sup>75</sup>John Piper, “Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul: Learning from the Mind and Heart of C. S. Lewis,” February 2, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/lessons-from-an-inconsolable-soul> (accessed November 6, 2014).

dollars to have, but having them, ignore. He convicts me of my insensitivity to beauty. He convicts me of my callous inability to enjoy God's daily gifts. He helps me to awaken my dazing soul so that the realities of life and of God and heaven and hell are seen and felt."<sup>76</sup>

Piper suspects that most people today would not have enjoyed being with Lewis because of his ruthlessly logical mind: "He would have picked us apart for our inarticulate and illogical flow of thought."<sup>77</sup> We saw earlier that Piper identifies Clyde Kilby (the romantic) and Stuart Hackett (the rationalist) as his two most influential undergraduate professors. Neither man, however, brought the two together in the powerful way that Lewis did: "It has had an indelible impact on me that the person who has most been effective in wakening me to the beauties of the world would also be the person in whom the law of non-contradiction reigns supreme. The way Lewis spots and dismantles logical inconsistencies in his opponents is stunning."<sup>78</sup> From the time Piper first met Lewis in his writings, the romantic-rationalist combination was an aspiration that Piper sought to emulate in his own thinking and living.<sup>79</sup>

### **Abstraction and Generalization in Language**

For Piper, the romantic-rationalist combination was tied into Lewis's overall use of provocative language to make a point.<sup>80</sup> Lewis created an awareness in Piper and drove home the message that concrete language should be preferred to that which is abstracted. Piper gives examples of the result: "Peach, rather than fruit. Dog, rather than

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<sup>76</sup>Piper, "Books That Have Influenced Me Most."

<sup>77</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>78</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>79</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>80</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.



animal. Or better yet, Dusty rather than dog. Rain, rather than weather. Neptune, rather than planet. Basketball, rather than sport. Buttered toast and bacon, rather than breakfast. Brown woolen pullover, rather than clothing. Rusty socket wrench, rather than tool.”<sup>81</sup> Lewis filled Piper with a strong aversion to boring language, and Piper believes this had a salutary effect on his own preaching.<sup>82</sup>

### **Chronological Snobbery**

Lewis tells us that he learned from his friend Owen Barfield (1898–1997) the need to avoid “chronological snobbery,” which Lewis defined as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.” Lewis’s response is that we must ask whether it has ever been refuted, and if so, by whom, where, and how conclusively. Perhaps the assumption simply died away, as most fashionable ideas do.<sup>83</sup>

Lewis’s most eloquent expansion of this point is in his introduction to Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation*.

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. . . . None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not

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<sup>81</sup>John Piper, “Expressing Truth,” May 16, 2014, <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/expressing-truth> (accessed November 7, 2014).

<sup>82</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>83</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955; repr., New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966), 207–8.

endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.<sup>84</sup>

This increased Piper's self-consciousness about the issue. First, there was the simple argument that "Truth is no less truth for being old."<sup>85</sup> Piper learned from Lewis, or at least received clarity on the idea, that there is no virtue in being new and no fault in being old: "Truth and beauty and goodness are not determined by when they exist. Nothing is inferior for being old and nothing is valuable for being modern."<sup>86</sup> Second, Piper latched on to a specific application from Lewis: we should make it a steady part of our reading diet (every third book was Lewis's counsel) to read books outside our own provincial century. Piper paraphrases Lewis: "They are less parochial. Or at least non parochial in the ways we are, and therefore freeing for our limited perspective."<sup>87</sup> Piper writes, "To this day I get most of my soul-food from centuries ago."<sup>88</sup> Third, there was Lewis's own personal example. Lewis did not just offer this as theoretical advice but himself embodied this worldview. Piper writes that Lewis "loved the wisdom of the ages, not the whimsy of the passing present. He called himself a Neanderthaler and a dinosaur. He didn't read newspapers. He never wore a watch. He never learned to type. He did not own or drive a car. He cared nothing about cutting a good appearance and wore the same old clothes until they were threadbare. He was incredibly free from the addicting powers of the present moment."<sup>89</sup> Finally, Piper's most common self-description for this result of

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<sup>84</sup>C. S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 439.

<sup>85</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>86</sup>Piper, "Books That Have Influenced Me Most."

<sup>87</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>88</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste your Life*, 19.

<sup>89</sup>Piper, "Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul."

this upon his own life is a sense of liberation or freedom: “This has freed me from the tyranny of novelty and opened for me the wisdom of the ages.”<sup>90</sup> It freed him “to expect less from the present and more from the centuries.”<sup>91</sup> Piper writes that Lewis’s “unwavering commitment to what is True and Real and Valuable, as opposed to what is trendy or fashionable or current, has been . . . [a] kind of liberation for me.”<sup>92</sup> Piper concludes: “I thank God for Lewis’s compelling demonstration of the obvious.”<sup>93</sup>

### **Academia**

Lewis was an academic and an intellectual, and he embodied for Piper a very attractive way of life: “It showed that a person who gives himself to the life of the mind can be very useful for the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>94</sup> There are similarities between the two men: both studying English and poetry, both pursuing advanced academic degrees, both teaching at the collegiate level, both becoming more well known for their popularizations than their scholarly contributions. But they parted ways in their strategies: “I am much more of a frontline person than Lewis and have not gone the way of scholarship. But I’ve always admired it, desired it in some measure, and I think Lewis is partly responsible for this by being an example of a believing and impactful academic.”<sup>95</sup>

### **Humble Self-Forgetfulness**

Lewis once wrote about what it is like to meet a truly humble person:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people

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<sup>90</sup>Piper, “Books That Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>91</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>92</sup>Piper, “Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul.”

<sup>93</sup>Piper, *Don’t Waste your Life*, 19.

<sup>94</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>95</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seems a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps Lewis’s own success along these lines can be illustrated by a comment Walter Hooper once made about the man:

Although Lewis owned a huge library, he possessed few of his own works. His phenomenal memory recorded almost everything he had read *except* his own writings—an appealing fault. Often, when I quoted lines from his own poems he would ask who the author was. He was a very great scholar, but no expert in the field of C. S. Lewis.<sup>97</sup>

Piper took Lewis’s combination of self-knowing and extroversion and saw in it a powerful principle that informs our pursuit of joy. Lewis taught, to use Piper’s words, that “the effort to know the experience of Joy by looking at Joy is self-defeating.” Here is Lewis describing his own experience: “I saw that all my waitings and watchings for Joy, all my vain hopes to find some mental content on which I could, so to speak, lay my finger and say, ‘This is it,’ had been a futile attempt to contemplate the enjoyed.”<sup>98</sup> Lewis argued that we are cut off from what we think about: “The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think.” Lewis writes, “You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment; for in hope we look to hope’s object and we interrupt this by (so to speak) turning around to look at the hope itself.” For Lewis, there is a sense in which introspection is misleading:

In introspection we try to look inside ourselves and see what is going on. But nearly everything that was going on a moment before is stopped by the very act of our turning to look at it. Unfortunately this does not mean that introspection finds

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<sup>96</sup>Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 114.

<sup>97</sup>Walter Hooper, preface to C. S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), vii.

<sup>98</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 219.

nothing. On the contrary, it finds precisely what is left behind by the suspension of all our normal activities; and what is left behind is mainly mental images and physical sensations. The great error is to mistake this mere sediment or track or byproduct for the activities themselves.<sup>99</sup>

Piper sees enormous implications in this for trying to believe God by looking at our believing: “It can’t be done, because the moment we step outside ourselves to contemplate our enjoying, we are no longer enjoying, but contemplating.” This had a huge effect on how Piper conceived of the relationship between introspection and self-examination:

What this has meant for me is, first, that I see now that the pursuit of Joy must always be indirect—focusing not on the experience but the object to be enjoyed. And, second, I see that faith in Jesus, in its most authentic experience is suspended when it is being analyzed to see if it is real. Which means this analysis always ends in discouragement. When we are trusting Christ most authentically, we are not thinking about trusting, but about Christ. When we step out of the moment to examine it, we cease what we were doing, and therefore cannot see it. My counsel for strugglers therefore is relentlessly: Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus in his word. And pray for eyes to see.<sup>100</sup>

## Friendship

In Lewis’s *The Four Loves*, he delineates four kinds of love: (1) *agape*, the God-like, servant-hearted love of all people, even enemies; (2) *philia*, the love of camaraderie and friendship; (3) *eros*, the love of romance, desire, and sexuality; and (4) *storge*, the love of affection from natural attachment. Lewis’s teaching on the distinction between *eros* and *philia* in particular made an impact on Piper. Lewis wrote: “Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.”<sup>101</sup> Piper paraphrases: “In other words, in romance, two sit

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<sup>99</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 218–19.

<sup>100</sup>Piper, “Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul.”

<sup>101</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1960), 58.

across from each other and tell each other how much they like about each other. In friendship, they don't face each other, but stand shoulder to shoulder, facing a common challenge or a shared beauty or a great God."<sup>102</sup> Piper sees this as being close to the biblical notion of friendship: "the greater the shared vision, and the shared joy in that vision, the deeper the friendship."<sup>103</sup> This view of friendship as a "uniting dream not a psychological entanglement" was very powerful for Piper in accounting for how he could see someone just once a year and pick up the conversation as if nothing had happened, exhibiting the same passions.<sup>104</sup> Another implication for Piper is that when two people don't see, feel, or like statements about God in a similar way, "courtesy and tolerance are possible, but not any deep friendship."<sup>105</sup> Piper contrasts this with what he calls an "'emergent' ethos," which "uproots friendship from the solid ground of biblical doctrine, and therefore preserves it in the short run as a cut flower, but in the long run without the roots in shared biblical truth, it will not be able to weather the storms that are coming. And worse, while it lasts, it does not display the worth of God because it's not rooted in a true vision of his character and work."<sup>106</sup>

### **Transposition from Natural to Supernatural**

Lewis's essay on "Transposition" (originally read by Piper as one of the essays in *The Weight of Glory* volume) discusses the way in which we can transpose things from

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<sup>102</sup>John Piper, "Joy and the Supremacy of Christ," in *The Supremacy of God in a Postmodern World*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 82.

<sup>103</sup>Piper, "Joy and the Supremacy of Christ," 82.

<sup>104</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>105</sup>Piper, "Joy and the Supremacy of Christ," 82.

<sup>106</sup>Piper, "Joy and the Supremacy of Christ," 82.

a lower, natural medium to a higher, supernatural medium.<sup>107</sup> This piece by Lewis significantly influenced the way Piper conceived of the relationship between the body and the mind or soul. The overlap helped him understand how the soul can continue existing even while the body is in the grave. In addition, the principles of Lewis's essay were seminal in shaping some of Piper's approach to pastoral counseling of non-emotional people who claim to be incapable of exercising spiritual affections for God. He suggests that they seek to take their natural emotions (like their heart trembling at the night sky in the Boundary Waters in the wild of Minnesota) and "transpose" them into spiritual affections (like the music of the soul toward their Maker), all the way taking care not to equate the two since the latter is supernatural and the former is not. Lewis's essays also helped Piper conceive of how God might govern the soul's affections in a way different from the reductionistic explanation of them as mere chemicals and electrons.<sup>108</sup>

### **Culture-Affirming and Soul-Winning**

Lewis's essays on "Learning in War-time" and "Christianity and Culture" gave Piper "a more creation-affirming view of culture than a fundamentalist boy should have."<sup>109</sup> What enabled Piper to receive Lewis's perspective, despite his background and inclinations, was that in the midst of Lewis's arguments for the importance of learning the liberal arts and studying culture even in the midst of war, he could also push back from the other direction, writing, "The Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the culture Pagan." Lewis continues, in words that were music to the ears of this son of an evangelist: "The Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul

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<sup>107</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Transposition," in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 267–78.

<sup>108</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014; John Piper, email to author, October 10, 2014.

<sup>109</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014; C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-time," in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 579–86; C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 71–92.

is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world.”<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere Lewis wrote, “[T]he glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying Him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life.”<sup>111</sup>

Lewis’s passion for evangelism, even as he pursued serious study and affirmed non-utilitarian cultural creations like literature, is exemplified in an exchange he had with William Norman Pittenger (1905–1997), a liberal Anglican theologian known for his defense of process theology and an early defense of the legitimacy of homosexual relationships among professing Christians. In October of 1958 he published a piece critiquing Lewis as an apologist.<sup>112</sup> The following month Lewis penned a response, acknowledging error, chiding misinterpretation, and closing with a lament about the lack of theological translation in their day. Lewis notes that he is writing *ad populum*, not *ad clerum*. Lewis had pointed out that in plane and solid geometry something self-contradictory on one level may be consistent from the other, and he used that to suggest the same is true with the Trinity. Pittenger views this as vulgar, and though Lewis disagrees, he asks the reader to suppose this is so. He then argues, “If it gets across to the unbeliever what the unbeliever desperately needs to know, the vulgarity must be endured.” Lewis goes on to reveal his heart for helping laypeople and unbelievers come to a knowledge of the truth:

When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving fellow-countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was therefore simply that of a translator—one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand. For this purpose a style

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<sup>110</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Christianity and Literature,” in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 411–20.

<sup>111</sup>Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” 73.

<sup>112</sup>W. Norman Pittenger, “Apologist Versus Apologist: A Critique of C. S. Lewis as ‘Defender of the Faith,’” *The Christian Century* 75 (October 1, 1958): 1104–07.



more guarded, more *nuancé*, fineliner shaded, more rich in fruitful ambiguities — in fact, a style more like Dr Pittenger’s own—would have been worse than useless. It would not only have failed to enlighten the common reader’s understanding; it would have aroused his suspicion. He would have thought, poor soul, that I was facing both ways, sitting on the fence, offering at one moment what I withdrew the next, and generally trying to trick him. I may have made theological errors. My manner may have been defective. Others may do better hereafter. I am ready, if I am young enough, to learn. Dr Pittenger would be a more helpful critic if he advised a cure as well as asserting many diseases. How does he himself do such work? What methods, and with what success, does he employ when he is trying to convert the great mass of storekeepers, lawyers, realtors, morticians, policemen and artisans who surround him in his own city?

One thing at least is sure. If the real theologians had tackled this laborious work of translation about a hundred years ago, when they began to lose touch with the people (for whom Christ died), there would have been no place for me.<sup>113</sup>

It is this kind of perspective that made Lewis not only a scholarly role model for Piper but a kindred spirit who sought to glorify the Lord in the salvation of souls through the explanation of truth in a winsomely understandable way.

### **Other Ideas in Lewis Essays**

Piper identifies several other ideas that have shaped his perspective on life and ministry, and these may be mentioned more briefly, mapped into three different time periods in Piper’s life. First, in seminary Piper was helped by Lewis’s essay on capital punishment.<sup>114</sup> Lewis argued that refusing to punish criminals and only operating with a view toward remediation and deterrence is a violation of justice and the seedbed of tyranny. Piper would later explain Lewis’s argument as critiquing this “dehumanization with a gentle face.”<sup>115</sup> For Lewis, this supposedly humanitarian theory of punishment

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<sup>113</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger,” *The Christian Century* 75 (November 26, 1958), 1359–61.

<sup>114</sup>C. S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 698–705.

<sup>115</sup>John Piper, “Life Is Cheap in Norway: C. S. Lewis on the Sentence of Anders Breivik,” August 27, 2012, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/life-is-cheap-in-norway-c-s-lewis-on-the-sentence-of-anders-breivik> (accessed November 8, 2014).

strips many of his dignity while putting man in the category of a dog that needs more training and investing the state with tyrannical powers of reeducation.<sup>116</sup>

Second, while Piper was at the University of Munich, completing his doctoral degree while surrounded by the perspective of higher biblical criticism, he was both heartened and stabilized by Lewis's testimony regarding the differences between the myths of ancient literature and the historical reliability of the gospels.<sup>117</sup> Lewis commented, "I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this."<sup>118</sup>

Third, while in pastoral ministry, Piper was both humbled and encouraged at various points of temptation by reading Lewis's essay on "The Inner Ring."<sup>119</sup> Lewis wrote about our longing to be an insider with power, to have the supposed pleasure of being accepted and in the know while others only watch from the outside. He warned, "As long as you are governed by that desire you will never get what you want. You are trying to peel an onion; if you succeed there will be nothing left. Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain." Lewis knew that our labor to become the best carries with it deep risks: "If in your working hours you make the work your end, you will presently find yourself all unawares inside the only circle in your profession that really matters. You will be one of the sound craftsmen, and the other sound craftsmen will know it." One can easily imagine this advice becoming more poignant the more well known Piper became.

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<sup>116</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014.

<sup>117</sup>Piper, email to author, October 24, 2014

<sup>118</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Fern-seed and Elephants," in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, 244.

<sup>119</sup>C. S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring," in *Essay Collection and Other Short Stories*, 721–28.

## Piper's Criticisms of Lewis

Piper, as we have seen, has been deeply and profoundly influenced by Lewis. But this fact, Piper says, requires answering the following question: “Why has he been so significant for me, even though he is not Reformed in his doctrine, and could barely be called an *evangelical* by typical American uses of that word?” Piper lists six problematic areas. First, Lewis did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and was more inclined to deploy logic than to use biblical exegesis. Second, Lewis does not seem to respect the Reformation, believes it could have been avoided, and believes that aspects of it are farcical. Third, Piper claims that Lewis was steadfast in his refusal to explain why he would not become a Roman Catholic.<sup>120</sup> Fourth, Lewis is open to the idea that other religions contain imperfect representations of Christ through which people can be saved. Fifth, Lewis seems to appeal to libertarian freedom as an explanation for suffering in the world. Finally, though Lewis writes with reverence about the atonement he places little significance in the explanations of how the atonement actually saves sinners.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>While Piper’s point may be technically true, it leaves the impression that Lewis did not express his disagreements with Roman Catholic doctrine. Regarding devotion to Mary in particular, Lewis expressed his views in a letter to a Mrs. Van Deusen: “My own view would be that a *salute* to any saint (or angel) cannot in itself be wrong any more than taking off one’s hat to a friend: but that there is always some danger lest such practices start one on the road to a state (sometimes found in R.C.’s [Roman Catholics]) where the B.V.M. [Blessed Virgin Mary] is treated really as a deity and even becomes the centre of the religion. I therefore think that such salutes are better avoided. And if the Blessed Virgin is as good as the best mothers I have known, she does not *want* any of the attention which might have gone to her Son diverted to herself” (*Collected Letters*, 3:209). Lewis also addressed the question in a letter to H. Lyman Stebbins: “The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition and specially from apostolic Xtianity I reject. Thus their theology about the B.V.M. [Blessed Virgin Mary] I reject because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament: where indeed the words ‘Blessed is the womb that bore thee’ [Luke 11:27–28] receives a rejoinder pointing in exactly the opposite direction. Their papalism seems equally foreign to the attitude of St Paul towards St Peter in the Epistles. The doctrine of Transubstantiation insists in defining in a way wh. the N.T. seems to me not to countenance. In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local *variation* from the central, ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is. I must therefore reject their *claim*; tho’ this does not mean rejecting particular things they say.” C. S. Lewis to H. Lyman Stebbins (May 8, 1945), in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949*, vol. 2, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 646–47.

<sup>121</sup>John Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 116–19.

The result of this is that Piper does not believe Lewis is a writer to which “we should turn for growth in a careful biblical understanding of Christian doctrine.” Piper believes that the mistakes enumerated above hurt the church and dishonor Christ. “There is almost no passage of Scripture on which I would turn to Lewis for exegetical illumination.” “If a pastor,” Piper writes, “treats Lewis as a resource for doctrinal substance, he will find his messages growing thin, interesting perhaps, but not with much rich biblical content.” Piper sees drawbacks in Lewis’s overall agenda, which was to defend and articulate “mere Christianity,” that which is confessed by Christians *ubique et ab omnibus*.<sup>122</sup> Piper believes that a limited focus like this, seeking to avoid that which is disputed, runs the risk of omitting that which is essential.

Nevertheless, Piper writes, “There was something at the core of his work—of his mind—that had the ironic effect on me of awakening lively affections and firm convictions that he himself would not have held.” He elaborates:

There was something about the way he read Scripture that made my own embrace of inerrancy tighter, not looser. There was something about the way he spoke of grace and God’s power that made me value the particularities of the Reformation more, not less. There was something about the way he portrayed the wonders of the incarnation that made me more suspicious of his own inclusivism, not less. There was something about the way he spoke of doctrine as the necessary roadmap that leads to Reality, and the way he esteemed truth and reason and precision of thought, that made me cherish more, not less, the historic articulations of the biblical explanations of how the work of Christ saves sinners—the so-called theories of the atonement.<sup>123</sup>

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to set Piper’s discovery of Lewis within the stream of Piper’s wider biography. Coming from a fundamentalist background, growing

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<sup>122</sup>The origin of the “mere Christianity” terminology dates back to the seventeenth-century English Puritan pastor and writer Richard Baxter. See N. H. Keeble, “C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, and ‘Mere Christianity,’” *Christianity and Literature* 30 (Spring 1981): 27–44.

<sup>123</sup>Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 120.

up literally across the street from the flagship institution of southern fundamentalism, Piper was now out of the South and in a more ecumenical environment. We saw that the trajectory of Piper's future ministry was influenced and shaped by events that took place from 1964 to 1968, including meeting his future wife, his breakthrough in public speaking, his call to ministry, and his majoring in English Literature. By studying under one of the foremost C. S. Lewis scholars of his day, Piper was afforded the privilege of seeing the Lewisian spirit of being "alive to wonder" embodied in the classroom. And on his own Piper had already been reading Lewis's writings, such that "For the next five or six years," Piper writes, "I was almost never without a Lewis book near at hand."<sup>124</sup>

Wheaton College was not the decisive place of influence for John Piper. "In many ways," he recounts, "Wheaton put everything in place like kindling, so that when something happened later at Fuller Seminary, everything could come theologically together for me."<sup>125</sup> Wheaton was, however, irreducibly important as a part of his development. Piper testifies, "ever since I stumbled upon him [i.e., Lewis] and his Reformed counterpart, Jonathan Edwards, in my early twenties, I have never been the same."<sup>126</sup> In the next two chapters we will explore how Daniel Fuller at Fuller Seminary and Jonathan Edwards shaped John Piper's life and thought, continuing and deepening the discoveries he had begun to make at Wheaton and through the influence of C. S. Lewis.

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<sup>124</sup>Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 19–20.

<sup>125</sup>Piper, "15 Reasons I'm Thankful for Wheaton College," 22.

<sup>126</sup>Piper, "Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul."

## CHAPTER 4

### DANIEL FULLER: EXEGETICAL BIBLICALISM

One week after graduating from Wheaton College, and three months before his first class at Fuller Theological Seminary, John Piper remained in Wheaton, studying Greek and preparing for seminary. He was reading Roland Bainton's biography of Martin Luther, *Here I Stand*, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's 2-volume collection of sermons on *The Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>1</sup> Piper recorded in his journal the impact of reading Lloyd-Jones's exposition: "They probably have touched my life as much as any sermons ever."<sup>2</sup> Piper had a tremendous longing to have a grasp of Scripture that would enable him to speak out with confidence. And reading Bainton's work confirmed for him the importance of having heroes: "Nothing spurs me on like looking at what someone else has done. . . . I am coming to realize that a hero is one of the most important things in a person's experience as far as motivating him is concerned."<sup>3</sup> But to that point, Piper did not have anyone in his life that could fulfill this mentoring and modeling role for him, helping him to grow in his understanding of the Bible. "Then the greatest of all—that I

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<sup>1</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Signet, 1950); D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (London: Inter-Varsity Press/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–60). Piper read Lloyd-Jones's study on the Sermon on the Mount because at Urbana 1967 it was recommended by George Verwer (1938–), founder and international director of Operation Mobilisation, as the most important book of the twentieth century. Records do not exist concerning the number of books to which Verwer has awarded this designation.

<sup>2</sup>John Piper, Journal 2, Entry for June 17, 1968, John Piper Papers. Piper would later recount the effect this book had upon him: "The impact was unforgettable. Not since I was a little boy sitting under the preaching of my father, had I been so moved by what J. I. Packer called 'the greatness and weight of spiritual issues'" (John Piper, "Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Preacher," in D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed., ed. Kevin DeYoung [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 153–55).

<sup>3</sup>Piper, Journal 2, Entry for June 17, 1968.

still look forward to—is to meet one of those heroes and have him personally encourage and advise me.”<sup>4</sup> The Lord would soon answer this prayer in the person of Daniel Fuller. We will look first at Fuller’s life before examining the influence he had upon John Piper.

### **A Biographical Sketch of Daniel P. Fuller**

Daniel Payton Fuller was born on August 28, 1928, in Los Angeles, the only child of Charles E. Fuller (1887–1969) and Grace Payton Fuller (1886–1966).<sup>5</sup> In 1940 Dan met fellow South Pasadena High School freshman Ralph Winter (1924–2005), who quickly became his best friend.<sup>6</sup> The Winters had moved to South Pasadena from Highland Park, where they had recently left a fairly liberal Presbyterian church. They then joined Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, where the Fullers had been members since 1933. While in high school Fuller and Winter joined a Dunamis Club, the brainchild of Dawson Trotman (1906–1956), who had founded the Navigators in 1933.<sup>7</sup> Around 1937 Trotman started these clubs in high school to encourage young men to study the Bible, to memorize Scripture, and to grow in effective witnessing.<sup>8</sup> Fuller memorized hundreds of Bible passages during this time.

After graduating from South Pasadena High School in 1943, Fuller registered for the draft and enlisted in the Navy. He joined the new V-12 Navy College Training

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<sup>4</sup>Piper, Journal 2, Entry for June 17, 1968.

<sup>5</sup>The biographical information in the following is largely based on personal conversations with Dan Fuller. See also the biographical sketch in the collection listing for “Collection 19: Papers of Daniel Payton Fuller,” available online at <http://libraryarchives.fuller.edu/findingaidsdoc/CFT00019.pdf> (accessed April 30, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>On Winter, see especially Greg H. Parsons, *Ralph D. Winter: Early Life and Core Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2012). Winter would go on to become a professor at Fuller Seminary and later founded the U.S. Center for World Mission.

<sup>7</sup>On Trotman and his impact upon discipleship in American evangelicalism, see James Douglas Hankins Jr., “Following Up: Dawson Trotman, the Navigators, and the Origins of Disciple Making in American Evangelicalism, 1926–1956” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>There was a separate club for women.

Program, where commissioned officers could receive expedited educational training. The Navy, anticipating an invasion of Japan and untold casualties, needed to replenish its commissioned officers. Fuller began his officer training at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and then eight months later was transferred to the University of California at Berkeley to train in the Naval ROTC.

### **Princeton Seminary**

In September of 1946, following honorable discharge from the Navy as an ensign, Fuller was ordained as a Baptist minister and planned to enroll at Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>9</sup> But when Ralph Winter mentioned that he planned to go to Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey in order to learn the inductive method of studying the Bible, Fuller decided he would go to Princeton with his friend. Bill Bright (1921–2003)—a recent convert and an acquaintance—joined them as well.<sup>10</sup>

One of their teachers at Princeton was Howard T. Kuist (1895–1964), Charles T. Haley Professor of Biblical Theology for Teaching of English Bible, a pioneering

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<sup>9</sup>In the spring of 1946 Charles Fuller wrote a letter to Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871–1952), the founding president of the seminary, expressing his hope that Dan would enroll that fall; cited in George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 20–21.

<sup>10</sup>On Bright, see John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008). On October 25, 1944, a 22-year-old Oklahoma native named William (“Bill”) Bright arrived in town. Bright, a self-described “happy pagan,” had dreams of quick wealth, success in acting, and the start of a political career. While driving around town that day, Bright picked up a hitchhiker, who happened to be a member of the Navigators. The hitchhiker took Bright to the home of Dawson Trotman, who invited him to spend the night. That evening they went over to the Fuller house, where a party was being held in honor of Dan Fuller’s 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Bright eventually began to attend the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood—the largest Presbyterian church in the U.S. at the time—where he became a Christian during weekly Bible studies led by Henrietta Mears (1890–1963), the church’s influential director of Christian education. Winter and Bright would become roommates at Princeton, and Fuller and Bright would become close friends. Bright was an entrepreneur who had started a successful candy shop near the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street. Upon going to seminary, he had put a friend in charge of the business. But when the business began to fail, Bright needed to return to California to revive the work. He later dropped out of Fuller Seminary in order to reach the local campuses for Christ.



advocate of the inductive Bible study method.<sup>11</sup> Kuist emphasized the necessity of observation, defined as “the art of seeing things as they really are.” Preachers, he argued, have only a limited amount of time for sermon preparation, and therefore a majority of the preacher’s time should be spent in the text itself, not in secondary literature. Commentaries should be consulted only for facts, not conclusions. Kuist sought to convince his students to put aside all hermeneutical systems and presuppositions—including any sermon, creeds, or lesson they had heard before—and let the Bible speak for itself, as if they were approaching it for the first time. “Such talk,” Fuller recounts, “was a life-changing moment for me. I tend to construe my whole life since then as this idea’s playing a crucial role in what I did and how I thought thereafter.”<sup>12</sup>

Kuist devoted the bulk of his classroom time “to coaching students in how to grasp an author’s intended meaning from the verbal symbols in a text.”<sup>13</sup> The English Bible was their main text. Kuist also had his students read two short readings. The first was Mortimer Adler’s chapter on “Coming to Terms” from *How to Read a Book*.<sup>14</sup> The second reading was a testimony from entomologist and paleontologist Samuel Scudder (1837–1911) about his student days in the classroom of Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), founder of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. Agassiz required his students to stare at a fish for hours on end, day after day, forbidding them to look at anything else or to use any artificial aids. “‘Look, look, look!’ was his repeated injunction.”<sup>15</sup> When

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<sup>11</sup>Kuist is pronounced like the word *kissed*. The index to his manuscript collection at Princeton can be viewed online at <http://manuscripts.ptsem.edu/collection/195> (accessed July 16, 2014).

<sup>12</sup>Daniel Fuller, email to author, January 1, 2011; in my possession.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, “How I Became a Berean,” [http://documents.fuller.edu/ministry/berean/i\\_became.htm](http://documents.fuller.edu/ministry/berean/i_became.htm) (accessed October 30, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 185–208.

<sup>15</sup>Samuel H. Scudder, “‘In the Laboratory with Agassiz,’ by a Former Student,” *Every Saturday* 16 (April 4, 1874): 369–70.

asked about his greatest accomplishment over his long career, Agassiz replied, “I have taught men to observe.”<sup>16</sup> Fuller recounts, “This story produced a most profound change in my strategy for studying the Bible. It made me realize how diligently I must scrutinize a Bible passage to see just what is there and try to forget what I had previously heard or read about that passage.”<sup>17</sup> Kuist led his class through an inductive study of the Gospel of Luke, but the observation work was so intensive that they were only able to work through the first three chapters of the book. As they worked through the material, Fuller began to doubt some of what he had learned from the Scofield Bible, which was so influential in fundamentalist dispensationalism. Fuller was seeing the fallibility of his own theological tradition as he sought to study the Bible afresh.

Fuller thought that Kuist himself was a better advocate of this methodology than a model. But Kuist had imparted to Fuller an intensive observational methodology that was the seedbed of his own distinct method of inductively seeking the author’s intent by tracing the logical relationships in an argument while seeking to set all presuppositions and systems aside.

### **Fuller Seminary**

Not long after he arrived at Princeton, Fuller received a letter from his parents expressing their optimism about the long-term strategy of this educational investment, even though both of them feared its modernist influence upon their only son. Grace wrote, “Dad has felt that if you could come through Princeton . . . it would widen your field of influence and open many doors for you. . . . Dad feels that you would have his vision and carry on in his way to mold the school, possibly to teach there, and to keep it

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<sup>16</sup>Lane Cooper, *Louis Agassiz as a Teacher* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing, 1945), 1, cited in Howard Tillman Kuist, *These Words Upon Thy Heart: Scripture and the Christian Response* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1947), 67.

<sup>17</sup>Fuller, “How I Became a Berean.”

in the middle of the road.”<sup>18</sup>

The “school” that she mentions was a longstanding dream of Charles Fuller’s. He had been awakened from sleep one night in November of 1939 with an “impression” to start a Christian college. Charles Fuller was a fundamentalist pastor and evangelist who hosted a weekly “Old Fashioned Revival Hour” radio program. He was not a theologian or an educator, but a mobilizer and influencer with longstanding connections to Christian higher education.<sup>19</sup> Now he sensed the Lord calling him to begin a new work.

As Dan Fuller was completing his second semester at Princeton, Grace and Charles Fuller were having exploratory meetings about the college with Audrey and Harold John Ockenga. When Ockenga suggested that a seminary would be more strategic than an undergraduate institution, Mrs. Fuller wondered if there were enough qualified evangelicals to teach at such a school. Ockenga—who had a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh and knew the academic world well—rattled off a half dozen potential candidates. The Fullers were impressed, and the initial faculty was assembled by late spring of 1947. In September of 1947, Dan Fuller, Ralph Winter, and Bill Bright were among the 39 students of the inaugural class of Fuller Theological Seminary.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Grace Fuller, letter to Daniel Fuller, September 17, 1946; cited in Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 23. From context, it seems the “middle of the road” metaphor refers to the avoidance of both controversialism and compromise.

<sup>19</sup>He graduated from Biola (Bible Institute of Los Angeles) in 1921 and became a member of their board of directors that same year. He then became chairman of the board in 1929. On Fuller, see Daniel P. Fuller, *Give the Winds a Mighty Voice: The Story of Charles E. Fuller* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), <http://ccl.us/fuller.toc.html> (accessed July 16, 2014).

<sup>20</sup>For the first few years the school met in classrooms at the three-story educational building of Lake Avenue Congregational Church. Everett Harrison (1902–1999) taught Greek exegesis and introduction to the New Testament; Wilbur Smith (1915–1972) taught apologetics; Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003) taught revelation and inspiration and served as dean; and Harold Lindsell (1913–1998) taught church history and served as registrar.

## **Park Street Church**

After completing his second year at Fuller, with graduation now in sight, Dan began to get nervous about what he would do after graduation. He thought he should learn how to be a pastor, and Ockenga—serving as the seminary president *in absentia* from Boston—invited Fuller to serve with him as assistant pastor at Park Street Church.<sup>21</sup> Fuller moved there in 1949, and it proved to be a disaster. When Fuller preached, Ockenga sat in the balcony recording critical feedback intended to help Fuller improve as a preacher, though it seems to have had the effect of making him more self-conscious and discouraged. Fuller was living by himself at the time, lonely and depressed, struggling not only spiritually but also theologically, as he was increasingly troubled with how to reconcile the gospel and law themes of the Bible. He ended up suffering a complete nervous breakdown in March of 1950, which he marks as an exceedingly dark period in his life.

In the spring of 1950 Dan Fuller left Boston to return home to Pasadena. It was during this six-week recovery there that he first read C. S. Lewis’s sermon, “The Weight of Glory.” That sermon, along with Fuller’s observation of verses like Hebrews 12:2 (Jesus went to the cross “for the *joy* set before him”), planted the seeds for his understanding of “biblical eudaemonism,” or what Piper later would call “Christian hedonism.” Fuller began to see that his own needs could be met only by following Jesus, and that the problem was that he was not greedy *enough* for the joy that God had to give.

## **Teaching at Fuller Seminary**

That fall Fuller married Ruth Rusche,<sup>22</sup> with Bright serving as his best man.

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<sup>21</sup>Lindsell gets the chronology wrong: “Following his graduation from Fuller with the B.D. degree, he joined Harold John Ockenga as an assistant at the Park Street Church in Boston.” Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 108.

<sup>22</sup>Pronounced rew-SHAY.

Dan received his BD degree from Fuller Seminary in June of 1951, then stayed on another year to earn his ThM, writing his thesis on the Gospel of Mark. In October of 1952, Fuller professor Clarence Roddy (1898–1970) had a heart attack, and the school needed someone to teach his inductive class on the Gospel of Mark. Dan seemed a logical choice as a temporary replacement. The students were initially less than enthused to have this recent graduate as their teacher, and Fuller found it difficult to teach the inductive method. But he continued in this capacity until February of 1953 and began to receive encouraging feedback about his teaching.

From March through May of that spring semester, Fuller taught the New Testament Survey class for Wilbur Smith, who was on sabbatical (the seventh year of the school's existence). This course required teaching the whole of the New Testament (27 books) in 37 sessions, 50 minutes per class. A book like Romans, for example, would have to be summarized in just three sessions. As Fuller studied the book inductively to prepare for class, the beginning of the process of “arc-ing” was born. He would see certain units being embraced by larger units, and he began to employ a system of representing units of thoughts by drawing an arc over a set of propositions. Eventually all of Romans 1–8 was encompassed under one arc, from which an outline could be constructed. The class would receive an outline, with space to make notes, instead of a lecture. Students responded quite positively to Fuller's teaching, which eventually led to his being hired fulltime. Fuller would go on to develop the arcing method as a means of keeping track of an author's train of thought by discerning the relationship between the various propositions in a passage.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>For explanations of arcing, see Thomas R. Schreiner's chapter on “Tracing the Argument” in his book, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 97–124; John Piper, *Biblical Exegesis: Discovering the Meaning of Scriptural Texts* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2002), and the website <http://biblearc.com>.

## Northern Seminary

After a year of teaching at Fuller, Dan decided that he needed to pursue doctoral work. So in the fall of 1953 Dan and Ruth moved to Chicago to attend Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, from which he eventually earned an unaccredited doctoral degree. George Eldon Ladd (1911–1982), who began teaching New Testament at Fuller during Dan’s final year of seminary, had become both a mentor and a friend to the young scholar.<sup>24</sup> In early 1954 Ladd offered Fuller counsel on his studies, and it had a direct impact on the direction of his future. Ladd explained that “the crucial point at which dispensationalists and nondispensationalists differ is at the point of the interpretation of the two Testaments.” Fuller responded that he was “a little more aware now that there is a real problem to be faced in dispensationalism.”<sup>25</sup> For his dissertation, he ended up writing a lengthy critique of “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism.”<sup>26</sup>

This move away from dispensationalism greatly disappointed and alarmed his father. After all, in Charles Fuller’s office, where he wrote his sermons and radio addresses, hung a portrait of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), the father of modern dispensationalism. In the mind of the senior Fuller—a man of immense action but little theological analysis—dispensationalism was the only true motivator for evangelism and missions. “Are you going to give that up, too?” he queried his son.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>John A. D’Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 64.

<sup>25</sup>George Ladd, letter to Daniel Fuller, February 8, 1954; Daniel Fuller, letter to George Ladd, March 17, 1954; both cited in D’Elia, *A Place at the Table*, 64.

<sup>26</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (ThD dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957). D’Elia, *A Place at the Table*, 204 n. 16, claims that Fuller’s dissertation was “published in expanded form” as *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990). Despite the shared phrase “the hermeneutics of dispensationalism,” this is not true. The dissertation was 400 pages, whereas the book (first published in 1980 by Eerdmans) was around 200 pages. Fuller explains in the preface to the book that whereas his dissertation defended covenant theology over dispensationalism, the present work is a critique of both. So the critique of dispensationalism is similar, but the solution is different.

<sup>27</sup>The characterization and recollection is from Daniel Fuller, interview with Justin Taylor,

But Dan Fuller was beginning to doubt more than just his father's dispensationalism. He also was wrestling with the fundamentalist-evangelical understanding of scriptural inerrancy. During this time (1953–1954), he read Edwin R. Thiele's new monograph, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, a landmark treatment of the chronology of the northern and southern kingdoms in biblical history.<sup>28</sup> After studying the data, Fuller said to himself: "Good heavens: things in the Bible don't add up!"<sup>29</sup> The idea of errors in the Bible was disturbing to him, but he was eventually heartened by the fact that no doctrinal teaching in the Bible seemed to depend on these discrepancies.

After a year in residence at Northern, Fuller returned to Pasadena in 1954 and was hired as Instructor in English Bible at the seminary. From 1954–59 he taught a number of electives on the inductive method, using books like Romans and Galatians. The text that Professor Kuist had assigned to him, Adler's *How to Read a Book*, had stressed the importance of grasping the syntactical function of every word in a proposition, and Adler mentioned as an aside that sentence diagramming was the way to ensure such understanding. Kuist himself had not discussed this in class, and no one at the time was doing sentence diagramming in Greek. So Fuller hired students to diagram the Greek sentences of Romans and Galatians. But Fuller first had to become more proficient in the technical aspects of English grammar and syntax in order to guide this work. Fuller set himself to studying Kittredge and Farley's 1913 textbook, *Advanced English Grammar*.<sup>30</sup> Because he was in uncharted waters with regard to Greek sentence

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January 31, 2013; notes in my possession.

<sup>28</sup>Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

<sup>29</sup>Fuller, interview with Taylor, January 31, 2013.

<sup>30</sup>George Lyman Kittredge and Frank Edgar Farley, *An Advanced English Grammar: With Exercises* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1913).

diagramming, he had to pioneer some of the ways in which the unique syntax of Greek was diagrammed. Fuller later heard that his Greek sentence diagrams were being used at Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>31</sup>

### **University of Basel**

In May of 1957, after completing his dissertation remotely, Fuller was elected assistant professor of English Bible at Fuller Seminary. In June of 1959 Dan and Ruth moved with their four young children to Basel, Switzerland, so that Dan could pursue his second doctorate of theology.<sup>32</sup> There he studied hermeneutics with Bo Reicke (1914–1987), Oscar Cullmann (1902–1999), and the theology faculty of the University of Basel, including Karl Barth (1886–1968). Writing in 1965, Fuller explained his rationale for studying in Europe:

As one whose field is hermeneutics, I felt increasingly and, finally, irresistibly drawn to Europe as the place to pursue this study. Until recently the term hermeneutics had all but dropped from the vocabulary of American theologians; however, since World War II, European theologians, realizing its cruciality for the whole theological discipline, have been discussing it avidly.<sup>33</sup>

Fuller was deeply influenced by the connection Cullmann saw between historicity and hermeneutics and was strongly opposed to the hermeneutical presuppositions of Barth.<sup>34</sup> Fuller found in Cullman a sophisticated defense of biblicism

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<sup>31</sup>Fuller, interview with Taylor, January 31, 2013.

<sup>32</sup>Marsden relates, “Dan had argued persuasively that he must have the highest European credentials if he and the seminary were to make an impact in the scholarly world, and the elder Fullers [now in their seventies] were confident that he would stand strong in the den of neo-orthodoxy” (*Reforming Fundamentalism*, 197).

<sup>33</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 9.

<sup>34</sup>Many writers, both conservative and liberal, insinuate that Barth was the primary influencer on Fuller at this time. Harold Lindsell wrote that Fuller “went to Basel, Switzerland, to work for another doctorate under men like Karl Barth” (Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], 108). Lindsell’s insinuation was then uncritically picked up by other critics, both conservative and liberal. For example, Norman Geisler and William Roach wrote, “The founder’s son, Daniel Fuller (after studying under Karl Barth in Basel), soon followed suit [in abandoning inerrancy]” (Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* [Grand



and induction, along with a suspicion of system which he had first learned from Kuist.<sup>35</sup> Cullmann's understanding of the historical nature of Scripture also served as a catalyst for Fuller's desire to construct an alternative understanding of inerrancy. Cullmann insisted that "the word became flesh" (John 1:14) is not only a reference to the incarnation, but "applies equally to the compiling of the Bible. Starting from this point we realize that, if we despise the purely historical study of this process because of the accidental and human character of its expression, we are in danger of falling into a heresy as old as Christianity: docetism."<sup>36</sup> Within Scripture, he said, there are "distorting influences involved in the interpretation of the historical character and kerygmatic event of the event," such that to deny such distortions "would amount to disputing that the revelation in salvation history belongs to the incarnation within the human situation."<sup>37</sup>

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Rapids: Baker, 2012], 20). Rudolph Nelson wrote that in 1962 "special attention focused on the views of Dan Fuller, who had just been studying at Basel under Karl Barth" (Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 190). Similarly, Gary Dorrien wrote that Fuller returned from Basel "after completing his doctorate with Karl Barth" (Garry J. Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 97). The unified implication from these disparate sources is that Barth was Fuller's primary influence and a catalyst toward his new view. Despite some superficial similarities, it is difficult to see how this mistake could be made if one knows the hermeneutical methodologies and views of history Fuller and Barth held. Fuller's understanding of scriptural veracity is deeply tied to historicity. As Marsden points out, Fuller's views in this regard were "directly opposed to the method of Karl Barth" (Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 212). Ted Dorman, a former student of Fuller's who wrote his dissertation on Cullmann's hermeneutics, notes: "Dr. Fuller has consistently made it clear to all of his students that those who seek to understand and communicate the biblical message would do well to follow Cullmann's approach to biblical interpretation, as opposed to the hermeneutical stance of Cullmann's former Basel colleague Karl Barth" (Theodore Martin Dorman, *The Hermeneutics of Oscar Cullman* [San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1991], vii).

<sup>35</sup>Fuller writes that Cullmann was explicit about the need to put "biblical theology, the Heilsgeschichte of the 66 canonical books, above one's own creed, even his own Lutheran creed. . . . He helped me in understanding that the biblical canon was closed and that any exposition of it was never more than exposition, whose validity was always to be tested, as the noble Bereans did with Paul's exposition of the OT canon (Acts 17:11) in searching the scriptures to see if Paul was right. We have to do that even with our own earlier ways of construing the biblical canon. I was surprised when Cullmann told me that he became born again only when he decided to do that with the canonical books and not allow Schweitzer, Kierkegaard, or Barth to control his exegesis" (Daniel Fuller, email to author, January 17, 2011).

<sup>36</sup>Oscar Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," in *The Early Church*, trans. A. J. B. Higgins (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 9, cited in Daniel P. Fuller, "Evangelicals and Biblical Inerrancy," unpublished manuscript c. 1960s, 9, Daniel Fuller Papers.

<sup>37</sup>Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967), 66. This statement is

During the first year of study in Basel (1959 or early 1960), the Fullers had a visit from Charles (“Chuck”) Carlston. After completing his undergraduate degree at Harvard University in 1947, Carlston had been part of the inaugural class at Fuller Seminary. Following graduation from the seminary as the top student in the class, he returned to Harvard, earning an AM in 1952 and a PhD in New Testament in 1958. In the course of his visit with the Fullers, Carlston mentioned that Fuller Seminary would never achieve acceptance in the wider academy—something virtually everyone at the evangelical school desired—if it continued to hold to the fundamentalist doctrine of inerrancy. Here was an alumnus of the school, the top student in the inaugural class, who had gone on to complete doctoral work at an Ivy League institution, warning the son of the founder that the school would not realize its dream of changing the world if it continued to cling to such an untenable, outdated doctrine. This was a turning point in Fuller’s own approach to the issue as he began to wrestle more deeply with how the question of truth should be understood with respect to the divine Scriptures.<sup>38</sup>

A freshly emboldened Dan Fuller wrote his parents to explain that evangelicals need to pursue truth no matter the cost and no matter where it took them. Evangelicals had made a “major mistake” in their interpretation of the Bible, he argued. They believe that the “Bible is without error ‘in whole and in part.’”<sup>39</sup> By turning a blind eye to the latest archeological discoveries, these fundamentalists undermined the intellectual honesty they extolled. “Unbelief laughs,” Fuller wrote, “and I see no reason why I should

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evaluated and critiqued by Dorman, not for being objectively wrong per se but rather for being internally inconsistent with Cullman’s inductive methodology of eschewing all *a priori* commitments in the hermeneutical task. Dorman argues that cultural conditioning has to do with form, while distortion relates to content, and that the form is a more appropriate category for the phenomena of Scripture. See Dorman, *The Hermeneutics of Oscar Cullman*, 166–69.

<sup>38</sup>Fuller, interview with Taylor, January 31, 2013.

<sup>39</sup>Note that Fuller Seminary’s Statement of Faith, adopted in January 1950, said that the original autographs of scripture “are plenary inspired and free from error in the whole and in the part.” The faculty and trustees annually signed their affirmation of it.

not laugh with them.” In Fuller’s view, there was no virtue in papering over the innocent bookkeeping mistakes found in the Bible’s errant chronological records. The Bible’s infallibility had to do with faith and practice, not historical detail and science—and therefore Fuller’s creed should not be so restrictive. When he returned to Fuller from Europe, Dan was eager to try his new view out on his colleagues to “see whether the Faculty can blow holes in it.”<sup>40</sup>

In October of 1960, Fuller wrote a substantive letter to his parents, trying to summarize the discussion they had together over the summer: “I tried to show you why people like me need to be over here in Europe studying and what implications our being here might have for the future of Fuller Seminary.”<sup>41</sup> He noted that around 1800, coinciding with the Industrial Revolution, man began to approach thinking in a more scientific way. Prior to this, “tradition rather than scientific inquiry was the great means for securing knowledge.”<sup>42</sup> With respect to biblical interpretation, Fuller claimed, the unresolved clash is now between those who base all their knowledge on science and those who still afford biblical tradition some role in epistemic warrant. Fuller argued for a third way:

On the one side are the hyper Fundamentalists who fight to the death against any compromise from a literal interpretation of the Bible for the interests of science. On the other hand, there are these who are so convinced of science that they believe it can be the basis for an entire world view, so that whatever it says in the form of scientific fact or what can be logically deduced from its facts is the truth despite what the Bible says. Here is the core of the basic struggle in theology today. It is here where Fuller Seminary can and must make a great contribution to the world

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<sup>40</sup>The archivist at the Fuller Archives is unable to locate this letter from Daniel Fuller to Charles and Grace Fuller (February 25, 1960). I am therefore dependent upon Marsden’s recounting of its contents and for his quotations of it (*Reforming Fundamentalism*, 201). The next day Dan wrote another letter to his parents, floating the idea of him becoming the school’s new president, as the prospects of David Hubbard’s candidacy were put on hold. Dan’s idea, however, proved to be short-lived.

<sup>41</sup>Daniel Fuller to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960, Daniel Fuller Papers.

<sup>42</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup>

We must remember, Fuller wrote, that “the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and therefore He delights fully in the scientific, historical, critical procedure.”<sup>44</sup>

Fuller then turned to the implications for the school. He argued that the seminary must welcome academic freedom. “Any Faculty member can raise any possible matter for discussion and reflection, even if what he would raise would be contrary to the creed.”<sup>45</sup> William LaSor, an Old Testament professor at Fuller, had once questioned whether the book of Esther should be in the canon, and Fuller argued that this kind of question should be permissible,

for the creed, like any scientific fact, must always be subject to reevaluation, and revision, for the moment we simply hold to the creed because we want to, or because we will lose friends by changing it and cease to let it rest or fall on the evidences that we presently have at our disposal, we have become existentialists, people whose faith is a leap into the void, obscurantists, and bigots. Of course anyone who denies the creed and does so at the expense of denying the authority of those passages of Scripture on which it is based must be adjudged a heretic, but if what he says can be shown to derive from Scripture and reason, the creed must be revised to make room for him.<sup>46</sup>

The school, Fuller argued, must show the opposition that it is truly scientific and that their historical conclusions are not drawn simply from their doctrine of plenary inspiration but rest on “sober appraisal” of all the facts. Problem passages must be dealt with head on, “and if we feel the facts warrant it, we must be willing to depart from the conservative line laid down by the old Princeton school in which we are only too prone to blissfully and uncritically relax. If we really believe in the historical and critical method of Biblical interpretation, as we constantly praise ourselves that we do, we must let a sane

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<sup>43</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>44</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>45</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>46</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

historical investigation have greater weight than a deduction from [our] view of verbal inspiration.”<sup>47</sup>

Fuller next sought to steel his parents against the inevitable criticism this vision would engender. “We must look to God for grace to love truth more than the favor of our constituency, more than our own reputations, more than our own success. Christ has called us to take up our crosses, follow him, and die, and being honest in following the truth is a good way to incur the wrath of natural men, and in particular religious, supposedly orthodox men, who have always been the greatest enemy of the truth and who crucified our Lord.” He added as a parenthetical comment, “It is no accident or strange thing that Fuller Seminary’s harshest enemies have been evangelicals, so that we have found it [to be so].”<sup>48</sup>

Fuller ended with a strong call for academic freedom at the institution. His appeal here was not for scholarly approval but for Christian mission and vibrant orthodoxy. “If the students of Fuller Seminary can be taught above all things to think for themselves and then stand through thick and thin by what they believe, these will be the men who . . . strike out for God and do exploits. The men who really know why they believe the Bible to be the Word of God will tremble before its precepts and will therefore be in a position to make others do the same.” Fuller connects his call with the seminary’s original *raison d’être*.

This liberty to love and follow the truth, wherever it may lead, must be the foundation of all of Fuller Seminary’s policies. If it loses this, it has lost its reason for existence, for there are plenty of other schools who are following the existential line and in their way are doing a much better job than we. Fuller Seminary is the hope of the oncoming generation which is deeply suspicious of the saccharine platitudes that some in the older generation have tried to pawn off on it.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>48</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>49</sup>He contrasts this with “all the obscurantism of Wheaton, Dallas, etc.” Daniel Fuller, letter to

Did Daniel Fuller believe that the Bible is “without error”? Yes and no. On the one hand, he wrote in an unpublished reflection paper, “it is obvious that I grant the possibility that there are errors in the Bible.” For example, “normal exegesis” does not allow for any gaps in the chronology of Genesis 5, and yet the “inescapable conclusions” of Carbon 14 dating require the antiquity of man. “Nevertheless,” he wrote, “I believe that Genesis 5 is inspired revelation and is, in a very real sense, without error.” Fuller located his solution in the doctrine of divine accommodation: “When God inspired the writing of the original document of Genesis 5, it was shaped and accommodated to the capacities of its original readers. Were God to have recorded at that time the exact information as to how old the human race really is, it would have been so contrary to the opinion of the culture of that time that the book would have been cast aside as utterly worthless.” What is important is that the “redemptive message” remains intact. “There can be errors here and there [in the original autographs], and when this is the case, it is due to a permission on the part of God so that the original readers would not miss the forest because of a certain tree.” In putting together his doctrine of inspiration in this way, Fuller could still affirm “the Bible is without error in whole and in part” (as Fuller Seminary’s creed put it) in the sense that “every part was arranged so that the maximal amount of truth might be transmitted to the original readers.” “These errors,” Fuller went on to say, “do not mean a lack of inspiration at this point, but are themselves the *result* of inspiration. Such errors could not happen, however, in regard to *essential* things which have to do with the events themselves and their meaning” (my emphasis). Fuller then made an interesting admission: “Here, in fact, I do assert the truth in advance of examining it . . . for on the basis of the sure knowledge of God revealed in Acts, I believe that Genesis reveals God and therefore will not contradict God.”<sup>50</sup>

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Charles and Grace Fuller, October 25, 1960.

<sup>50</sup>Daniel Fuller, “Thoughts Regarding Infallibility,” August 9, 1961, Daniel Fuller Papers. It is

## Black Saturday

In the spring of 1961, Dan Fuller—who saw himself as more of a scholar than an administrator—reluctantly accepted the board’s request that upon his return to Fuller Seminary in the fall of 1962 he become the dean of the theology school. By this time, Marsden notes, the faculty at Fuller Seminary was roughly aligned into two camps: “The conservative neo-evangelicals were emphasizing the doctrine of inerrancy as firmly as ever. . . . The progressive neo-evangelicals, on the other hand, were ready for a clean break with fundamentalism and were willing to let the chips fall where they might.”<sup>51</sup> Donald Weber, the seminary’s fundraiser and the brother-in-law of former president Edward Carnell, was “the chief political coordinator of the progressive takeover.”<sup>52</sup>

On October 4, 1962, Ockenga wrote to Fuller in Basel, giving a brief update on the student enrollment and saying that they looked forward to his installation as dean on December 3. Ockenga then raised the issue of reports, from various sources (hostile and sympathetic), that there was “a sense of uncertainty concerning the loyalty of Fuller Seminary to the Word of God as it is stated in our creed, and as it was set forth in the early purposes of the Seminary.”<sup>53</sup> At this point in time Ockenga seems unaware of Dan Fuller’s new convictions on inerrancy, though perhaps he had heard rumors.

Scriptural inerrancy and authority were not simply academic issues for

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hard to avoid the conclusion that when it comes to “essential truths,” Fuller’s view is just as a priori and fideistic—perhaps he would say “existentialistic”—as those who apply this approach to all the claims of Scripture. Soon after making this admission, Fuller continues to insist on presupposition-less exegesis: we must “approach the Bible with no presuppositions and simply let it say what it will as the historical and grammatical data are taken into consideration.” In other words, “where the Biblical message can be checked by the data of science and history, the question of who is right must be carried on in a purely dispassionate way.”

<sup>51</sup>Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 202, 207.

<sup>52</sup>Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 211. Carl Henry made the biting comment that Weber’s “opposition to inerrancy among Fuller trustee contacts was more potent than his production of income” (Carl F. H. Henry, “How to Lose a Seminary,” unpublished lecture delivered at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, September 16, 1988; in my possession).

<sup>53</sup>Harold Ockenga, letter to Daniel Fuller, October 4, 1962, Daniel Fuller Papers.

Ockenga. As he wrote later to a correspondent, “Many years ago I made a full commitment to Christ on the ground of an infallibly inspired Scripture, inerrant in the original autographs. I have never changed my position on that and I hold it to this day.”<sup>54</sup> In 1929 Ockenga had followed his professor J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) when he withdrew from Princeton Seminary on account of its progressive reorganization in order to found Westminster Theological Seminary. Later, as pastor of Park Street, Ockenga realized that he could not in good conscience send students to Princeton for ministerial training with confidence that they would retain their orthodoxy.<sup>55</sup> In Ockenga’s mind, “The material cause for organizing [Fuller Seminary] . . . was definitely to build a seminary on the Bible as infallibly inspired and inerrant in the original autographs.”<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere Ockenga wrote, “We established the seminary in 1947 in order to maintain an institution committed to the absolute authority of Scripture. This view had been maintained at Princeton until its reorganization and then had been eroded until 1947. I felt that it was necessary to have a new institution fully committed to the authority of Scripture and fully positive in its testimony.”<sup>57</sup>

In October of 1962, Ockenga wrote to Fuller in Basil about his recent on-campus visit to the seminary, where he had reemphasized “our position of adopting the inerrant view of Scripture.” He knew this would raise questions among the faculty, given the variation of views that had emerged. “It has been one of my great burdens since founding the Seminary that our faculty might act as a unit in the study of this problem and in the exploring and stating of a very definite position.” Ockenga pointed out, “The

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<sup>54</sup>Harold Ockenga, letter to James Henry Hutchens, July 2, 1964, Daniel Fuller Papers.

<sup>55</sup>Ockenga, letter to Hutchens, July 2, 1964.

<sup>56</sup>Ockenga, letter to Hutchens, July 2, 1964.

<sup>57</sup>Harold Ockenga, letter to David Hubbard, January 19, 1963, cited in Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 220.



view as we have stated it has been held by some within the entire history of the church,” and that it did not originate with American fundamentalism. But ever the gentleman scholar, and undoubtedly aware that he was corresponding with his co-founders’ son and the next dean of the theology school, Ockenga reassured Fuller that the seminary faculty should be able “to ask questions without the feeling of suspicion or condemnation by others.” In fact, he suggested to Fuller, “one of your great contributions would be the ability to lead this faculty in such a united study.”<sup>58</sup>

Ockenga proceeded to state his own views strongly but to express some openness. He writes, “It is obvious that without full authority of the Word, we would undercut everything we are trying to do as evangelicals, and as an institution. However, it may be that this will have to be stated in a different way from the old Princeton position, which is the one I have espoused and propagated in my own ministry. If after such a study we reiterate our view of the inerrancy of Scripture, then we should expect every man to be enthusiastic and aggressive in his commitment and in his propagation of this view.”<sup>59</sup> This openness on Ockenga’s part, along with his stated confidence that Dan Fuller could lead this studied reconsideration, may have been all the encouragement that Fuller needed.

Fuller and family moved back to Pasadena that fall, and he joined the faculty and trustees who gathered at the Huntington Sheraton Hotel in Pasadena for a three-day planning conference to map out the next ten years of the seminary. Leading up to this meeting the tensions had been high, as the power struggle between the conservatives and progressives continued; the strategic meeting would be crucial for the seminary’s future. Their time together began on Thursday, November 29, and would end on Saturday,

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<sup>58</sup>Harold Ockenga, letter to Daniel Fuller, October 4, 1962, Daniel Fuller Papers.

<sup>59</sup>Ockenga to Daniel Fuller, October 4, 1962.

December 1, 1962. The revision of the school's creed was the last item on the agenda for the last day of their meeting.<sup>60</sup>

By the early 1960s, some of the faculty had been pressing for a revised, more nuanced version of the creed than the one drafted by Edward John Carnell and approved in January of 1950. Ockenga had appointed a revision committee to study the issue, with Everett Harrison as chair and Paul Jewett, George Ladd, and Geoffrey Bromiley as members.<sup>61</sup> They had made some suggestions, but recommended delaying any revisions until Jewett, a key member of the committee, could return from his time in Europe. Accordingly, few expected much discussion of the matter. In fact, Wilbur Smith left early that day before the agenda item was considered.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, the issue of the creed's revision was now on the table, perhaps just to provide a brief update on where things stood. Fuller—who was energized more by assiduous scholarship than administrative strategizing—had been largely silent throughout the day's various discussions. At one point that day, Fuller had been pulled aside by Weber and upbraided for his passivity. Weber complained that Fuller was failing before he even began. Fuller was resolved to look for an opportunity to engage the discussion and make a contribution.

When it came time to introduce the agenda item on the creed, Ockenga could have simply asked for a brief report or update, or tabled discussion for a future meeting. But instead, he questioned the very need for it in the first place. Why, he asked, would Fuller Seminary need to revise its creed? There sat Dan Fuller. He was the dean-elect. He

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<sup>60</sup>For the following recollection of this discussion I am dependent upon Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 208–15.

<sup>61</sup>David Allan Hubbard, "The Process of Creedal Revision," *Theology, News and Notes*, Special Issue, Fuller Theological Seminary (1976): 10. See also William Sanford LaSor, "Life Under Tension—Fuller Theological Seminary and 'The Battle for the Bible,'" *Theology, News and Notes*, Special Issue, Fuller Theological Seminary (1976): 5–10, 23.

<sup>62</sup>Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 211.

had just been challenged not to remain silent. He had spent years thinking about the future of the school, as his parents depended upon his higher learning and trusted his theological insights. He had spent untold hours formulating an understanding of the Bible's ostensible errors owing to divine accommodation. He had been warned by the school's first all-star student that the future of the school was hopeless if it retained this outdated doctrine. And he had received a letter just eight weeks earlier from Ockenga saying that the faculty should be free "to ask questions without the feeling of suspicion or condemnation by others," acknowledging "it may be that this will have to be stated in a different way from the old Princeton position" and suggesting "one of your great contributions would be the ability to lead this faculty in such a united study." Fuller had told his parents two years earlier that he was eager to try out his view on his colleagues to see if they could "blow holes in it." And now Ockenga was putting the question before his faculty and administration. Dan Fuller responded, "Dr. Ockenga, there are errors which cannot be explained by the original autographs. It is simply not historically feasible to say that these errors would disappear if we had the autographs." The subject was history, theology, and hermeneutics—Fuller's comfort zone. He began to unpack his new view for the faculty and trustees.

And there sat Ockenga, taken aback by the response. In the room were Charles and Grace Fuller, with whom he had helped to found the seminary fifteen years earlier. And now he was to respond to their only son, Daniel Fuller, handpicked to be the new theology dean, who had just explained that the Bible had "errors" and that the standard appeal to "original autographs" (advocated by the likes of Ockenga and supported by the school's constituency) could not solve the problem. After listening to this explanation of how the Bible could be inerrant even with errors, Ockenga exclaimed, "Well, what are we going to do then? Dan Fuller thinks the Bible is just full of errors!" Fuller, whose views were complex and nuanced, bristled at the pejorative summary and retorted, "That

is a gross distortion.” The tension could scarcely have been higher. Carnell decided to interject. Earlier that year he had found himself the object of conservative ire for seeming to let Karl Barth off the hook on this issue during a public consultation in Chicago (April 1962). He did not want to make that mistake twice. He turned to Fuller and explained, “My laundry list of difficulties that biblical Christianity has with empirical facts is longer than any other list in this room of 120 people, including yours, Dan Fuller, but this should not cause us to be disturbed, since my list is still the shortest of any world view.”<sup>63</sup> Carnell shared Fuller’s doubts but seems to have shifted the subject away from theological hermeneutics to philosophical apologetics.

Fuller Seminary was divided, and Fuller and Ockenga—the new dean and the president—were on opposite sides. On the conservative side, Harold Lindsell, Gleason Archer, and Geoffrey Bromiley agreed with Ockenga and Carnell. On the progressive side, William LaSor spoke in Fuller’s defense, along with less vocal supporters like Ladd and Harrison. Smith and Jewett were both absent, but the former was on the old school side while the latter was on the new school side. Most importantly, however, Dan Fuller had the full support of his parents. Nothing that happened on Black Saturday had an effect on Monday (January 1, 1963), when Dan Fuller was named the new dean of the theology department and an associate professor. His father would order that the transcripts of the proceedings be kept private, and they have not been seen since.

The fallout over inerrancy was significant. Charles Woodbridge was the first to resign, long before Black Saturday (early November 1956). Smith resigned in June 1963. He had tried to resign after Black Saturday, but Charles Fuller and Ockenga convinced him to rescind his resignation. Lindsell resigned in February of 1964 and left after the

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<sup>63</sup>The quote was retold by Dan Fuller and cited in Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind*, 110–11. Nelson cites the source of the recollection as Lindsell, but the quote does not seem to appear in *The Battle for Truth*.

semester was complete. Archer resigned in spring of 1964, effective after the school year ended in 1965. In 1971, the board of Fuller Seminary voted unanimously for a new Statement of Faith, which remains in place to this day. Article II now reads: “Scripture is an essential part and trustworthy record of this divine self-disclosure. All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, are the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. . . .”<sup>64</sup>

Dan Fuller continued to develop his understanding of inerrancy and published a few pieces on his understanding of history and inspiration.<sup>65</sup> He continued to insist that every word of the Bible is inspired by God and that he held to “inerrancy,” though he applied the category of “error” only to non-revelational matters that were ultimately incidental to “faith and practice.” And even these are not regarded as “errors” per se but rather as accommodations that would not ultimately lead people away from the Bible’s revelational truths. As he explained to a student who wrote to him with questions: “I affirm that the Bible is wholly inerrant. . . . But this is a complex theological question and has many philosophical overtones. When people say that Dan Fuller doesn’t believe inerrancy, what do they mean by inerrant? . . . This subject is all tied up with the theological/philosophical problem of the relation of faith and history.”<sup>66</sup>

## Teaching and Writing

From 1964 to 1965, serving as dean of the theology department and associate

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<sup>64</sup>Fuller Theological Seminary Statement of Faith, <http://www.fuller.edu/about/mission-and-values/statement-of-faith/> (accessed July 15, 2014).

<sup>65</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, “Benjamin B. Warfield’s View of Faith and History: A Critique in the Light of the New Testament,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theology Society* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 75–83; Daniel P. Fuller, “The Nature of Biblical Inerrancy,” *JASA* 24 (June 1972): 47–51; Daniel P. Fuller, “Evangelicalism and Biblical Inerrancy,” unpublished paper [c. 1960s], Daniel Fuller Papers; Daniel Fuller and Clark Pinnock, “On Revelation and Biblical Authority,” *JETS* 16, no. 2 (1973): 67–72; also published in *CSR* 2:4 (1973): 330–35; Daniel P. Fuller, “Response to Harold Lindsell’s *The Battle for the Bible*,” *Today’s Christian* (September 1977), no pagination, Daniel Fuller Papers.

<sup>66</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to Georgine Sylvester, February 5, 1973, Daniel Fuller Papers.

professor of hermeneutics, Fuller was responsible for shaping the new MDiv curriculum at the seminary, which took effect in the fall of 1965 and required his capstone course on “The Unity of the Bible” (to the consternation of some of his colleagues). Fuller remained dean and associate professor of hermeneutics for just under a decade; in May of 1972 he relinquished the deanship and resumed fulltime teaching that fall as professor of hermeneutics. On September 1, 1993, Fuller retired and was appointed senior professor of hermeneutics. That same year he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

Over his four decades of teaching Fuller published four books. The first, *Easter Faith and History* (1965), was a revision of his doctoral dissertation at Basel where he sought to use objectivist historiography to provide an evidentialist account of the resurrection of Jesus. The second, *Give the Winds a Mighty Voice: The Story of Charles E. Fuller* (1972), was a biography published four years after his father’s death. George Marsden comments that it is “a model of the genre of sympathetic biography.”<sup>67</sup> Fuller’s third book was on the relationship between the old and new covenants, entitled *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (1980).<sup>68</sup> Fuller argued against both covenant theology and dispensationalism: “instead of two sets of promises in the Bible—conditional and unconditional—there is only one kind of promise throughout Scripture, and the realization of its promises is dependent upon compliance with conditions which are well characterized as ‘the obedience of faith.’”<sup>69</sup> Finally, his *magnum opus* (and final book)

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<sup>67</sup>Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, xx.

<sup>68</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). Fuller explains in the preface that in the winter quarter of 1971, teaching an inductive exegesis course on Galatians, John Piper “asked the fateful question, ‘Was the command to trust God, which is such an essential part of the new covenant, also commanded in the Mosaic law?’” (ix). This began Fuller’s process of rethinking his covenant theology.

<sup>69</sup>Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum?* 105.

was published three years after his retirement, with a laudatory foreword by John Piper, entitled, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (1996).<sup>70</sup>

### **Piper at Fuller**

Nearly six years after “Black Saturday,” in September of 1968, John Piper loaded up his 1965 1/2 gold Mustang 2+2 in Wheaton and drove over 2,000 miles to Pasadena, California. The first quarter of his first year at Fuller Seminary he took Dan Fuller’s course on introductory hermeneutics. Piper would go on to take several courses with Fuller, including a small class that met in Fuller’s home on “new hermeneutics,” a course on faith and history, and several NT exegesis classes, culminating in “The Unity of the Bible.” Fuller’s pedagogy, theology, methodology, and personal investment had an enormous influence on Piper. Fuller had just turned 40 years old when he met Piper, then 22 years old. Piper was, according to Fuller, the “most responsive student I ever had.”<sup>71</sup> I will trace several themes, areas of influence, and significant events regarding the intersection of Piper and Fuller.

### **Affirmation of Ability**

At the end of November 1968, in an afternoon session of his first course with Fuller, John Piper waited along with the 80 other students in the class for his first paper to

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<sup>70</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). In this work Fuller was seeking, in a sense, to complete the unfinished goal of Jonathan Edwards, who wrote: “I have had on my mind and heart . . . a great work, which I call a *History of the Work of Redemption*, a body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of a history . . . introducing all parts of divinity in that order which is most scriptural and most natural; a method which appears to me the most beautiful and entertaining, wherein every divine doctrine will appear to the greatest advantage, in the brightest light, in the most striking manner, showing the admirable contexture and harmony of the whole” (Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., ed. Edward Hickman [repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], 1:clxxiv, cited in John Piper, “A Vision of God for the Final Era of Frontier Missions: A Word of Gratitude to Daniel Payton Fuller on His 60th Birthday,” August 28, 1985, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-vision-of-god-for-the-final-era-of-frontier-missions> (accessed July 17, 2014).

<sup>71</sup>Fuller, interview with Taylor, January 31, 2013.

be returned.<sup>72</sup> When Fuller called his name and Piper identified himself, Fuller looked at him and made a comment, the simplicity of which would outweigh its significance: “You’ve got ability.” Piper describes that affirmation as a “watershed moment” in his life: “I felt like I turned from a run-of-the-mill B student at Wheaton to someone who might do something significant ‘for Christ and his kingdom.’”<sup>73</sup> “I went home trembling. I may have cried. Thinking about it now brings tears to my eyes—like a little boy hearing from his dad that he could do it.”<sup>74</sup> Piper goes on to describe the significance of this for him:

This was a gift to me. I was frightened in seminary. I was unsure of why I was there. I didn’t know what I might be able to do. All I brought was longings. And not nearly enough faith in the mercy of God to go with them. Those words of Dan Fuller were not so much about ego as about calling in the area of thought and word. It was as though God said: Don’t get a big head, but this is what I want you to do. You have known this, but now I tell it to you again. Do this. I will help you. I have been preparing you for this. Just go forward and nurture what I am doing in you.<sup>75</sup>

Fuller’s most vivid memory of teaching Piper was in reading the finals for a Romans 1–8 class (spring of 1970). Fuller asked a series of questions on the mimeographed exam, but only allowed space for short answers. As he read the answers on some of the other students’ exams, he began to grow weary on account of the “fuzzy thinking” being exhibited, so he went outside for a short walk to clear his head. When he went back to his desk, he turned to Piper’s exam. Upon reading his answer he “felt a real life” in seeing Piper’s ability to use sound exegetical principles to argue clearly for the

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<sup>72</sup>Piper’s paper was “An Analysis of James D. Smart’s ‘The Interpretation of Scripture’ or Keep the Faith, Brother!” John Piper Papers. Fuller initially gave Piper a 90 percent, but then crossed out “90” and wrote, “95—really the highest score I can give.”

<sup>73</sup>John Piper, email to author, June 20, 2011; in my possession.

<sup>74</sup>John Piper, Journal E-43, Entry for September 9, 2003, John Piper Papers.

<sup>75</sup>Piper, Journal E-43, Entry for September 9, 2003.



conclusions from the text.<sup>76</sup>

### **Learning to Read and See**

Fuller's classes were not lecture-based but involved painstaking observation of biblical texts with Socratic dialogue, as Fuller reserved his didactic material for large unpublished syllabi his students could read. For his exegesis courses, he would put his Greek sentence diagrams on the overhead projector and give Xeroxed copies of the diagrams to the students, and then they would dialogue together about the text. Fuller viewed his classes as an opportunity for the students to teach him to understand the flow of the thought within the passage. They practiced arcing and diagramming, with help and motivation from "Agassiz and the Fish" and Adler's *How to Read a Book*, both resources (as we have seen) that influenced Fuller when he was in school. Piper was deeply influenced by *How to Read a Book*, writing that it "is a beautifully written book and is eminently reasonable and full of common sense wisdom."<sup>77</sup>

For advanced hermeneutics, Fuller assigned *Validity in Interpretation*, a new book by Virginia University English professor E. D. Hirsch.<sup>78</sup> Piper calls it "one of the most important books I have ever read."<sup>79</sup> Hirsch argued, "Understanding is difficult, but not impossible, and the hermeneutic circle is less mysterious and paradoxical than many in the German hermeneutical tradition have made it out to be."<sup>80</sup> "From this book," Piper writes,

I came to believe very strongly in the real possibility of rethinking another person's

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<sup>76</sup>Fuller, interview with Taylor, January 31, 2013.

<sup>77</sup>John Piper, "Books that Have Influenced Me Most," November 1, 1993, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/books-that-have-influenced-me-most> (accessed October 20, 2013).

<sup>78</sup>E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>79</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 31 n. 7.

<sup>80</sup>Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 77.

thoughts after him. This meant that “meaning,” defined as what an author willed to communicate, was a discoverable reality outside my own consciousness. This confidence provided for me a thrilling incentive to read what great thinkers have written, because it meant that I might be able to actually understand and appropriate what they thought. The possibilities for growth still seem unlimited on the basis of what I learned from Hirsch.<sup>81</sup>

With respect to how Hirsch’s work intersected with Adler’s, Piper writes, “While Hirsch gave me the philosophical foundation for the task and hope of reading for understanding, Adler provided for me the methodological superstructure for carrying out the task.”<sup>82</sup>

### **Fuller’s Modeling and Methodology**

Piper has described the kind of people he needs in his life: “I need something irregular, unusual. Something unusually wise and deep and strong and pure and great. Something this world does not offer. I long for a person who has seen God and been forever put out of sync with this world. I long for a person who can tell me what God has shown him—something that is really there in the word of God, something that few see, something solid and glorious.”<sup>83</sup> This is what Piper found in Fuller.

Fuller’s writing, teaching, and example provided a methodology that opened the door to profound spiritual reality encountered through the Word of God: “I found my way into a method of biblical theology which has been immeasurably fruitful both in the scholarly and spiritual dimensions of my life.”<sup>84</sup> Piper is not engaging in sensationalistic hyperbole when he writes, “I would let you cut off my hands and feet before I would let you take from me what I learned under the teaching of Daniel Fuller at Fuller Seminary. Not because I value the words of men, but because his words opened the Word for me

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<sup>81</sup>Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>82</sup>Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>83</sup>John Piper, “I Do Not Aspire to Be a Regular Guy,” July 15, 2014, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/i-do-not-aspire-to-be-a-regular-guy> (accessed July 16, 2014).

<sup>84</sup>Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most.”

like no one ever had.”<sup>85</sup> Under Fuller’s guidance, Piper “had tasted the sweetest spiritual fruit from the painstaking exegetical effort to understand the intention of the inspired biblical authors. . . . the backbreaking effort to see what is really there.”<sup>86</sup>

Piper highlights several virtues exemplified by Fuller. First, Piper found in Fuller someone who did not settle for systems or easy answers but diligently queried the text and sought discussion for greater understanding. There was a relentless intellectual restlessness that Piper admired and sought to emulate. “Nobody,” Piper writes, “thought more rigorously than Dan Fuller.” Second, Piper admires the way in which Fuller wrestled with the text of Scripture. He did not believe in proof-texting or deducing his doctrine from confessions. His commitment to induction kept him tied to the text. “Nobody was more riveted on the biblical text in his exegetical method than Dan Fuller.” Third, Fuller believes that the quest for meaning—that is, the understanding of an author’s intention—was a moral application of the Golden Rule. Piper knows no one “more jealous to think the author’s thoughts after him . . .” Fourth, Piper judges that Fuller’s commitment to Scripture as the infallible Word of God was incontrovertible, even if misunderstood.<sup>87</sup> In Piper’s view, “Nobody was more practically committed to the truth and authority of Scripture than Dan Fuller.” Fifth, Piper observes, “Nobody communicated a greater sense of gravity of the ultimate things at stake in biblical truth.” Sixth, Piper writes that “Nobody was more vulnerable to students’ questions or took them more seriously than Dan Fuller. He would linger for hours after class with us. And he

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<sup>85</sup>John Piper, “The Lips of Knowledge Are a Precious Jewel,” October 5, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-lips-of-knowledge-are-a-precious-jewel> (accessed October 20, 2013).

<sup>86</sup>John Piper, “Preface to the 2012 Republication,” *Love Your Enemies: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis* (1979; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), vi.

<sup>87</sup>Piper’s endorsement for *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum?* commends “Dr. Fuller’s sometimes misunderstood, yet incontrovertible commitment to the Bible as the infallible Word of God.” This is not to say, however, that Piper agreed with all of Fuller’s presuppositions and applications regarding inerrancy. For more on this, see chapter 6 below on “John Piper’s Use of Scripture.”

would stay up late writing answers to our questions and then bring the paper the next day to try out his fresh thoughts on us.” Finally, Piper writes, “Nobody was more committed to showing that much reading is not the essence of scholarship, but that assiduous, detailed, meticulous, logical analysis of great texts can lift you into the greatest minds.”<sup>88</sup>

### **Soteriological Calvinism to the Glory of God**

Piper became a Calvinist at Fuller Seminary. When he was at Wheaton College, he hardly knew what the terms Calvinism and Arminianism meant.<sup>89</sup> He believed in the freedom of the will, that is, ultimate self-determination.<sup>90</sup> He later wrote, “I had not learned this from the Bible; I absorbed it from the independent, self-sufficient, self-esteeming, self-exalting air that you and I breathe every day of our lives in America.”<sup>91</sup> As a first-year seminarian, Piper functionally understood the sovereignty of God to mean that God “can do anything with me that I give him permission to do.”<sup>92</sup>

In the early 1960s, Fuller received a book on the thought of Jonathan Edwards

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<sup>88</sup>Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 38–39. For another summary of Fuller’s influence along these lines, see Piper, “A Vision of God for the Final Era of Frontier Missions,” where Piper writes of Fuller’s relentless application of the following methodological principles: “the tireless quest to be troubled about the problems that really count, the pursuit of honest solutions through the severe discipline of seeing, the rigors of careful textual analysis (arcing), submission to the evidences, dependence upon the humbling work of the Holy Spirit, the passionate pursuit of coherence, and the effort to let every text have its full and normal say.” See also Piper’s “Books That Have Influenced Me Most,” where he says that Fuller taught him “the importance of *seeing* what is there, the importance of asking hard *questions*, the importance of seeking *unity* in theology and the importance of a Spirit-given, docile, *humility before the text of Scripture*.” Finally, see Piper’s foreword to *The Unity of the Bible* for another testimony to Fuller’s influence, including his understanding of faith and obedience.

<sup>89</sup>John Piper, “Let Your Passion Be Single,” November 12, 1999, <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/let-your-passion-be-single> (accessed July 18, 2014).

<sup>90</sup>John Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God,” November 3, 2002, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-absolute-sovereignty-of-god-what-is-romans-nine-about> (accessed July 18, 2014).

<sup>91</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>92</sup>Piper, “Let Your Passion Be Single.”

as a Christmas present, and he was intrigued by a reference to Edwards's *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*.<sup>93</sup> Edwards's works were not widely available at the time, and Fuller wanted to secure an old and unabridged edition. His bibliophilic colleague Wilbur Smith mentioned that a used bookstore in Wisconsin carried a tattered old copy of the four-volume *Works of President Edwards*, so Fuller secured these volumes and read Edwards's treatise.<sup>94</sup> He then incorporated into his "Unity of the Bible" syllabus Edwards's argument for the glory of God as God's ultimate end of creation as God created out of an overflow of abundance rather than out of need. This was Piper's introduction to God's end in creation, which proved to have a massive impact upon his life and theology.<sup>95</sup> So it was Daniel Fuller, Piper says, who "opened my eyes, like nobody ever had, to the beauty of the sovereign glory of God."<sup>96</sup>

Piper then needed to wrestle with the nature of the human will. As with virtually all of his doctrinal development, it came first and foremost through exegesis.<sup>97</sup> In a class with Fuller, working proposition by proposition through the book of

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<sup>93</sup>Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, 403–536.

<sup>94</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards in Four Volumes* (repr. of the Worcester ed.; New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1856).

<sup>95</sup>See, in particular, John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).

<sup>96</sup>Piper, "John Piper's Candidating Testimony," January 27, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource/john-pipers-candidating-testimony> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>97</sup>In the preface of *Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards disavowed the influence of John Calvin upon his Calvinism: "I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught" (Jonathan Edwards, preface, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 1 [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957], 131.) Piper shares the sentiment: "I pray that I am open to changing any of my ideas which can be shown to contradict the truth of Scripture. I do not have any vested interest in John Calvin himself, and find some of what he taught to be wrong. But in general I am willing to be called a Calvinist on the five points because this name has been attached to these points for centuries and because I find this Calvinist position to be faithful to Scripture. The Bible is our final authority" (John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace* [Ross-shire, Scotland: Christians Focus, 2013], 15).

Philippians, Piper was confronted with “the intractable ground clause” of Philippians 2:12–13: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; *for* it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” The grounding relationship between these propositions entailed that the will of God was beneath the will of man, making God the worker beneath man’s work.<sup>98</sup> “The question was not whether I had a will; the question was why I willed what I willed. And the ultimate answer—not the only answer—was God.”<sup>99</sup> Piper would later take an independent study with Fuller to read through and interact with Edwards’s *The Freedom of the Will*, which left him completely convinced of God’s absolute sovereignty over all things.<sup>100</sup>

It was in a concurrent class that Piper directly confronted the issues of unconditional election and irresistible grace. Jaymes Morgan (1933–1970)—a popular professor who died of stomach cancer during Piper’s time in seminary—used an exegetical approach in his systematic theology class to address these issues. Piper became quite angry and would weep while reading his Bible as he worked through texts confronting his worldview.<sup>101</sup> He describes one memorable encounter:

Emotions run high when you feel your man-centered world crumbling around you. I met Dr. Morgan in the hall one day. After a few minutes of heated argument about the freedom of my will, I held a pen in front of his face and dropped it to the floor. Then I said, with not as much respect as a student ought to have, “I [!] dropped it.” Somehow that was supposed to prove that my choice to drop the pen was not governed by anything but my sovereign self.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>99</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>100</sup>John Piper, “*Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards: A Review,” September 21, 1970, John Piper Papers.

<sup>101</sup>Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony.”

<sup>102</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God,” bracketed exclamation point in original.

Romans 9, in particular, became a life-changing, watershed text for Piper.<sup>103</sup> By the end of the semester, writing in his “blue book exam,” Piper wrote, “Romans 9 is like a tiger going about devouring free-willers like me.”<sup>104</sup> That, he says, “was the end of my love affair with human autonomy and the ultimate self-determination of my will. My worldview simply could not stand against the scriptures, especially Romans 9. And it was the beginning of a lifelong passion to see and savor the supremacy of God in absolutely everything.”<sup>105</sup>

### **Christian Hedonism**

In the same month that Piper received his initial affirmation from Fuller—the first quarter of his first year at Fuller Seminary—he also learned about Christian hedonism, though Fuller used the traditional terminology of Christian eudaemonism (from εὐδαιμονία, Greek for happiness, flourishing, well-being).

Fuller’s Hermeneutics syllabus—in essence, an unpublished book of several hundred pages—first introduced him to the concept.<sup>106</sup> Fuller invested a great deal of time in seeking to show the rational basis for Christianity. Part 1 of the syllabus, following the work of Adler and Hirsch, established the means by which an interpreter could grasp an author’s intended, shareable meaning and then engage the text with critical interpretation and interaction. In Part 2, Fuller looks at why we can know the good news is true news. Simply to believe the Bible’s claim to be the Word of God on

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<sup>103</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>104</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.” Blue Books were small paper booklets with light blue covers containing inexpensive line-ruled notebook pages where students would record essay answers for a classroom examination.

<sup>105</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>106</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, “Hermeneutics: A Syllabus for NT500” (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1969). Piper describes this syllabus, along with *The Unity of the Bible*, as the two most influential books in his life after the Bible (Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most”). In what follows I am relying upon the sixth revision of the syllabus from 1983; in my possession.

faith would be insulting to its authors, for failing to investigate the veracity of a claim is tantamount to treating it as a mere opinion and implying that others are justified in seeing it differently.<sup>107</sup> The Bible itself, Fuller seeks to show, attaches moral fault to those who refuse to determine whether something in the Bible is true.<sup>108</sup>

But of all the competing claims to divine inspiration, why single out the Christian Bible for critical examination to determine whether it is truly the word of God? In answer to this question, Fuller offers a three-step argument. First, he argues, all people seek happiness, quoting the 250<sup>th</sup> *pensée* of Blaise Pascal:

All men seek happiness without exception. They all aim at this goal however different the means they use to attain it. What makes those go to war and those bide at home is this same desire which both classes cherish, though the point of view varies. The will never makes the smallest move but with this as its goal. It is the motive of all the actions of all men, even of those who contemplate suicide.<sup>109</sup>

Fuller notes that “happiness” is vague and general term. He specifies that this happiness is not merely pleasant feelings but rather the satisfaction one feels after overcoming an obstacle.<sup>110</sup> Fuller argues, “no matter how sharply human behaviors may differ, all men are ultimately seeking happiness by showing themselves capable of overcoming finitude. If our desire for happiness so controls our actions and even our ways of thinking about things, then this fact must be reckoned with in giving account of why we should be particularly concerned with the Bible.”<sup>111</sup>

Second, Fuller argues that this happiness cannot be found in this world.<sup>112</sup> He

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<sup>107</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-1.

<sup>108</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-1.

<sup>109</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensées*, ed. H. F. Steward (New York: Pantheon, 1950), 143.

<sup>110</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-5.

<sup>111</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-5.

<sup>112</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-6.



quotes from the same *pensée* by Pascal: “There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”<sup>113</sup> In response to this universal hunger for happiness, people employ various strategies: some seek to anesthetize the pain through indulgence of their sensual appetites; others try to fool themselves into believing that this world truly does satisfy; still others seek to escape the problem by saying they do not really care about their own happiness.<sup>114</sup> With regard to this third option, Fuller quotes the opening paragraph of C. S. Lewis’s sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” which we examined in chapter 3 above. Fuller points out, “we can no more turn off the desire each of us has for happiness than we can cease to be attracted to the earth by gravity.”<sup>115</sup> If Jesus had denied this, he would not have been realistic. Instead, “he enjoined people to find fulfillment for their craving for happiness in God and in the great blessings he stood ready to bestow on those who turned to him.”<sup>116</sup> This, for Fuller, is a reason for seriously investigating the truth claims of the Bible: “If all that people are and have comes from God, it just might be that the fulfillment they crave but cannot gain by their own efforts could be found in God. Certainly there would be nothing unreasonable in earnestly seeking how contact might be made with him.”<sup>117</sup>

Finally, Fuller argues, “since our aim is to find the happiness after which the heart craves, we can check out each religion on the basis of whether or not its claims, if

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<sup>113</sup>Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensées*, 143.

<sup>114</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-7.

<sup>115</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-9.

<sup>116</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-9.

<sup>117</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-9.

true, would fully satisfy the heart. Any religion whose teachings would fail to do this would be quite irrelevant, even if true.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, if a religion claims to be true *and* promises fulfillment, then one is justified in expending the time and energy required to investigate its truth claims, “for news is only good news if it is true news.”<sup>119</sup> From there Fuller briefly examines, and finds wanting, polytheism, animism, Hinduism, Buddhist, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. None offer meaningful pathways for achieving our quest for happiness.<sup>120</sup> Fuller then turns to Judaism and Christianity, seeking to show that the latter has a “slight edge” over the former because with Christianity, (1) immortality is made explicit, (2) how God can forgive is made explicit, (3) the future blessings of the Old Testament become present, and (4) the offer of blessings is made explicitly to the people of all nations.<sup>121</sup> “Surely, then, if the Old and New Testaments are true, then enduring joy, rustless treasure, contentment’s camping ground, and deathless pleasure can be found in the Old and New Testaments and consummated in the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>122</sup> If the Bible is true, Fuller says, then it is not boring, and this therefore justifies making the Bible’s truth claims an object of our investigation: “all we are saying is that its claim to truth merits our consideration because it alone would answer to our heart’s cry.”<sup>123</sup>

As noted in chapter 3, Piper first published on Christian hedonism nine years later.<sup>124</sup> The structure of Piper’s case for Christian hedonism largely follows Fuller’s

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<sup>118</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-10. Fuller explains that a solution that is true but not truly satisfying would be “boring and unimportant.”

<sup>119</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-9.

<sup>120</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-10–13.

<sup>121</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-14.

<sup>122</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-15.

<sup>123</sup>Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” VII-15.

<sup>124</sup>John Piper, “How I Became a Christian Hedonist,” *His* 37 (March 1977): 1, 4–5. This article

order of presentation, with both Pascal quotes and the lengthy quote by Lewis. Several differences may be noted. First, Fuller's aim in bringing together universal experience with the promises of the Bible is meant to justify the time required to investigate the truth claims of the Bible. While Piper also seeks to bring together our universal experience with the offer found in God's Word, he assumes the Bible's truthfulness on these issues. Fuller, in other words, is offering an exercise in apologetics, while Piper is primarily using this as a theological framework for the Christian life. Second, Fuller makes his case through an objective theological essay, while Piper relays his argument in the form of theological autobiography, enabling readers to join his process of joyful discovery and liberation. Third, Fuller specifies the quest for "happiness" as overcoming finitude, whereas Piper uses it in a more general sense to refer to seeking pleasure. Fourth, Fuller uses the lengthy quote of Lewis from "The Weight of Glory" in a negative sense in order to describe one species, among several, of wrong thinking about the desire for happiness. Piper, while also employing the negative use, turns the incorrect thinking in a more universal direction, suggesting that *all* of us are inclined to think this way and focusing upon sin itself as being "far too easily pleased" with things less than the true treasure. Piper also uses this quote as a springboard for *further* desire: man "is not nearly selfish enough; he doesn't seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and passion that he should."<sup>125</sup>

The different purposes of their essays also account for the additional emphases that Piper adds on worship. He quotes C. S. Lewis's "A Word about Praise," where Lewis argued that worship is essentially adoration.<sup>126</sup> Since we adore only that in which

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was picked up, largely verbatim, in Piper, *Desiring God*, 18–24, but by then he had added quotations from Edwards for support.

<sup>125</sup>Piper later abandoned the use of talking about a need for greater "selfishness," presumably because it was liable to misunderstanding and therefore counterproductive, even if provocative.

<sup>126</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 94–95. For a summary, see chapter 3 above.

we delight, the praise of God entails the consummation, not the renunciation, of the joy we so desire.<sup>127</sup>

The final difference between Fuller and Piper on Christian hedonism is that Piper sought to make this pursuit of pleasure radically God-centered so that the focus was not merely pleasure *from* God but first and foremost pleasure *in* God. Fuller repeatedly emphasized that God is “not served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). Therefore, God works for us and serves us rather than us working for and serving him as though we were meeting his needs (Acts 17:25 Ps 50:15; Mark 10:45; 2 Chron 16:9; Isa 64:4; Rom 11:34–35; 1 Cor 4:7; etc.). Piper took this teaching and simply pressed it deeper: in what *sense* does God ultimately work for us? If one answers “for our ultimate good” (Rom 8:28), Piper will continue to press: “And what is our ultimate good?” The answer is: himself (Ps 16:11).<sup>128</sup> Ultimately the good that God gives us is the gift of joy in God himself. All other gifts—even eternal ones like bodily resurrection and escape from hell and deliverance from sickness and sin-free holiness—are *means* to the enjoyment of God.<sup>129</sup> Adding Edwards’s argument that one does not glorify what he does not enjoy, Piper came to his mature formulation of “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”

Piper’s fullest summary definition of Christian hedonism is as follows:

Christian Hedonism is a philosophy of life built on the following five convictions: (1) The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful. (2) We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead, we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction. (3) The

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<sup>127</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 21–23.

<sup>128</sup>John Piper, email to Daniel Fuller, June 11, 2014; in my possession.

<sup>129</sup>On this theme, see especially John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God. (4) The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love. (5) To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: The pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue.<sup>130</sup>

In a more technical discussion, Piper says that Christian hedonism observes that “all true virtue must have in it a certain gladness of heart,” and therefore, “the pursuit of virtue must be, in some measure, a pursuit of happiness.” Framed as a syllogism, we could say this: all Christians should pursue and desire to exhibit true virtue; true virtue involves gladness; therefore, all Christians who pursue required virtue will also need to pursue joy. It follows from this that the attempt to deny, mortify, or abandon the pursuit of happiness is to set oneself against the path of true virtue, which would be contrary to the good of man and the glory of God. The happiness essential to true virtue entails “the happiness of experiencing the glory of God. In all virtuous acts we pursue the enjoyment of the glory of God, and more specifically, the enjoyment of the *presence* and the *promotion* of God’s glory.”<sup>131</sup>

By popularizing, nuancing, and expanding upon Christian hedonism, Piper was also able to engage with criticisms of the concept, which afforded him the opportunity to refine and clarify his understanding and meaning. First, Christian hedonism does not

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<sup>130</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 28. One schema for analyzing this definition is to distinguish between descriptive Christian hedonism (all people already pursue joy as part of their God-given human nature) and prescriptive Christian hedonism (all people *should* seek to glorify God by enjoying him forever through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit). The former is seen in proposition 1a above, the latter in propositions 1b–5. One could logically hold to the descriptive without the prescriptive, and vice versa. Piper holds to both but clearly states that the latter is more important than the former: “What matters to me is that not that all people are motivated by the pursuit of pleasure, but that all people *should* be motivated by the pursuit of full and everlasting pleasure in God” (Piper, *Desiring God*, 309). Another distinction can be made between vertical Christian hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure in God is necessary for loving him) and horizontal Christian hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure is necessary for every kind of human love that pleases God) (Piper, *Desiring God*, 111). The former is expressed in proposition 3 and 5, and the latter in propositions 4 and 5. Piper holds to both ideas, with the former foundational for the latter.

<sup>131</sup>John Piper, “Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?” September 29, 1987, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/was-jonathan-edwards-a-christian-hedonist> (accessed October 18, 2013).

make God a means to help us get worldly pleasures. Rather, “The pleasure that Christian Hedonism seeks is the pleasure that is in God Himself.”<sup>132</sup> Second, Christian hedonism does not make a god out of pleasure. Rather, “It says that one has already made a god out of whatever he finds most pleasure in.”<sup>133</sup> Third, seeking God out of self-interest does not put us above God. Rather, the person who presumes to set himself up to come to God in order to give to God under the pretense of self-denial for God is the one actually setting himself above God. “Christian hedonism pays God the respect of acknowledging (and really feeling!) that He alone can satisfy the heart’s longing to be happy.”<sup>134</sup> Fourth, Christian hedonism is not a theory of moral justification, suggesting that an act (like loving God) is right because it brings pleasure. Rather, Piper is simply observing that God *commands* that we find joy in these acts.<sup>135</sup> Fifth, Christian hedonism is saying more than that pleasure seeking demands virtue. It also says, “virtue consists essentially, though not only, in pleasure seeking.”<sup>136</sup> Sixth, Piper argues that Christian hedonism is not a distortion of Reformed confessionalism but compatible with it, pointing out that the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with asking about how we might glorify God and enjoy him forever and that the Heidelberg Catechism begins by asking for our only comfort in life and death.<sup>137</sup> Finally, in the most recent edition of *Desiring God*,

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<sup>132</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 24.

<sup>133</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 24.

<sup>134</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 95–96.

<sup>135</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 24–25.

<sup>136</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 25.

<sup>137</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, 26. This was one of Richard Mouw’s criticisms of Piper’s Christian hedonism in Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990), 36. See John Piper, “A Response to Richard Mouw’s Treatment of Christian Hedonism in ‘The God Who Commands,’” May 28, 1993, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-response-to-richard-mouws-treatment-of-christian-hedonism-in-the-god-who-commands> (accessed March 23, 2015).

responding to criticism from Wheaton philosophy professor (and friend) Mark Talbot, Piper admits that it was misleading to cite the technical definition of “hedonism” from the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Instead, Piper reverts to the basic dictionary definition of hedonism as the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>138</sup>

### Conclusion

Piper has said that in terms of theology, Daniel Fuller was “probably the most significant person in shaping the way I think today who’s living.”<sup>139</sup> In addition to introducing him to the beauty of God’s sovereign glory, Fuller buttressed this life-changing discovery with “a technique of Bible study that today forms the backbone of my teaching and shapes my preaching and feeds my heart every day. And I don’t have enough life to live to give thanks to Dr. Fuller for what he taught me.”<sup>140</sup>

The two men would move on from a relationship of professor and student to one of mentor and protégé, and eventually into correspondents, friends, and sparring partners. They exchanged letters throughout Piper’s doctrinal studies in Munich, offering some personal updates but mainly sharing discoveries, proposing exegetical and theological solutions to difficulties, and reviewing proposed works the other had written. During Piper’s tenure at Bethel College the two formed the “Fellowship of the Arc,” an annual gathering of Fuller and some former students that usually met in Pasadena for a few days to work through texts and theology together. The relationship between Piper

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<sup>138</sup>Piper, *Desiring God*, rev. ed., 308. In the 2003 edition of *Desiring God* (Sister, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 365–66, Piper had appealed to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* when he wrote: “I would be happy with the following definition as a starting point for my own usage of the word: *Hedonism* is ‘a theory according to which a person is motivated to produce one state of affairs in preference to another if, and only if, he thinks it will be more pleasant, or less unpleasant for himself.’ I would only want to add ‘forever.’” For Talbot’s criticism, see Mark R. Talbot, “When All Hope Has Died: Meditations on Profound Christian Suffering,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 70–101.

<sup>139</sup>Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony.”

<sup>140</sup>Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony.”

and Fuller has been marked by mutual admiration and appreciation, even if the development of Piper's theology eventually led to some bumps along the way.<sup>141</sup>

In the late 1970s, the two men almost became colleagues at Fuller Seminary, but the faculty rejected a plan from Dan Fuller and Calvin Schoonhoven to establish a new hermeneutics institute of division where Piper could teach and which would enable Fuller to devote more time to studying and writing.<sup>142</sup> At one point Schoonhoven—always more of an optimist than Fuller—told Piper that the chances of him being hired were 99.9

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<sup>141</sup>Two events converged in 1998 that would result in Piper and Fuller's only public disagreement and exchange. First, on April 26, 1998, Piper preached his first sermon in a series on the book of Romans (the series would take over eight and half years to complete, with various interruptions). Preaching expositively at this pace required Piper to examine afresh the complicated issues of God's righteousness in Christ and the role of faith and obedience in justification. Second, in August of 1998 the inaugural class of The Bethlehem Institute began studies at the church, including a weekly preaching class with Piper to discuss the exegesis of the texts he was preaching. The combination of these two events produced a new awareness that Piper's theology had become different from Fuller's on the doctrine of justification. Piper held to the classic Reformed doctrine of Christ's righteousness, both active and passive, being imputed or credited to the account of the believer by grace through faith alone. Fuller, on the other hand, rejected the covenant of works and therefore also seemed to see little place for the active obedience of Christ as part of imputation. His understanding of imputation seems to be exhausted by the concept of forgiveness (cf., e.g., Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible*, 255–56). Fuller also seemed to conflate faith and obedience, as well as gospel and law, in a way that Piper no longer accepted. In 2001, Robert H. Gundry penned an article questioning the Reformed understanding of imputation: "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' . . . Even Though I Wasn't Asked To," *Books & Culture* 7 (January/February 2001): 6–9. Piper issued a full-length exegetical response entitled, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). In it he briefly refers to the fact that Fuller sees imputation only in terms of forgiveness (116 n. 63). John Armstrong, the editor of *Reformation and Revival Journal*, commissioned Fuller to write a review of the book: Daniel P. Fuller, "Another Reply to *Counted Righteous in Christ*," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 12 (Fall 2003): 115–20. Fuller did not discuss imputation but focused upon the nature of faith, arguing that Piper made justifying faith distinct from sanctifying faith and suggesting that "the Galatian heresy consists precisely in modifying justifying faith in some way or supplementing it with helps, so that sanctification can function" (119). Piper disagreed with Fuller's understanding of his views and declined the opportunity to offer a surrejoinder. For critical interaction with Fuller's views on gospel and law, see Douglas Moo, "Review of *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*," *TrinJ* 3, no. 1 (1982): 99–103; O. Palmer Robertson, "Daniel P. Fuller's *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum: A Review Article*," *Presbyterion* 8, no. 1 (1982): 84–91; W. Robert Godfrey, "Back to Basics: A Response to the Robertson-Fuller Dialogue," *Presbyterion* 9, nos. 1–2 (1983): 80–92; Meredith G. Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack," *New Horizons* 15 (February 1994): 3–5. For critical interaction with Fuller on justification, see Samuel E. Waldron, *Faith, Obedience, and Justification: Current Evangelical Departures from Sola Fide*, Reformed Baptist Dissertation Series #1 (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2006), 127–55.

<sup>142</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to John Piper, February 1, 1978, John Piper Papers.



percent.<sup>143</sup> In February of 1978, Piper wrote, “It looks as if my call to Fuller is as certain as any human plan for the future can be certain.”<sup>144</sup> But two months later, the plan failed to materialize. Perhaps Fuller and Schoonhoven had over-reached in wanting to establish a special division. Fuller was dejected, suspecting that the older faculty still seemed to resent his role in the inerrancy debacle. Schoonhoven expressed to Piper a “very deep sorrow” that the proposed department of hermeneutics had been rejected.<sup>145</sup> Months later Fuller wrote to Piper, “I still haven’t fully recovered from the shock of finding such resistance to your coming on the faculty.”<sup>146</sup>

As a good Calvinist, Piper undoubtedly recognized in his disappointment that God does not withhold anything good from those who walk uprightly (Ps 84:11) and that God was working even this for his good (Rom 8:28). It is impossible to know, of course, how history would have been different if Piper had gone to teach at Fuller Seminary, but if he did, he would not have had a sabbatical in 1979, which he used to complete his book on *The Justification of God*. It also seems doubtful that he would have felt called to leave the academy for the pastorate in 1979. Even if he did, it is highly unlikely that he would have landed at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. The closed door at Fuller Seminary opened up further doors that Piper walked through by faith.

What we know for certain is that no living teacher made more of an impact upon John Piper than Daniel Fuller. His content, example, methodology, and personal friendship decisively shaped Piper’s life, including his Christian hedonism. Without Fuller’s influence, we would not have the John Piper that we have today.

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<sup>143</sup>Calvin Schoonhoven, letter to John Piper, January 1978, in Piper, Journal 23, John Piper Papers.

<sup>144</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to John Piper, February 1, 1978.

<sup>145</sup>Calvin Schoonhoven, letter to John Piper, April 28, 1978, John Piper Papers.

<sup>146</sup>Daniel Fuller, letter to John Piper, July 6, 1978, John Piper Papers.

## CHAPTER 5

### JONATHAN EDWARDS: AFFECTIONAL CALVINISM

Many younger evangelicals, especially in the resurgence of so-called New Calvinism, have been introduced to the work of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) through John Piper, and Piper continues to serve as an influential model, mediator, and interpreter of the Edwardsean vision of the Christian life. Douglas Sweeney refers to Piper as “today’s most famous Edwardsian minister,”<sup>1</sup> Nathan Finn says he is “Edwards’s most famous contemporary protégé,”<sup>2</sup> and Stuart Piggin calls him “the best-known populariser of Edwards in America today.”<sup>3</sup>

The mission statement of Bethlehem Baptist Church, forged under Piper’s leadership, reads as follows: “We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.” Elaborating upon their distinctives, Piper once described the church—and himself—in these terms: “Calvinistic in theology, baptistic in polity, and charismatic in our affections, and driven by the truth that ‘God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.’”<sup>4</sup> Apart from the

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas A. Sweeney, “Evangelical Tradition in America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 230.

<sup>2</sup>Nathan A. Finn, “Andrew Fuller’s Edwardsean Spirituality,” in *The Pure Flame of Devotion: The History of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Steve Weaver and Ian Clary (Dudas, ON: Joshua Press, 2013), 392n21.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart Piggin, “‘Sweet Burning in My Heart’: The Spirituality of Jonathan Edwards,” unpublished lecture for the Jonathan Edwards Centre at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, 2010, 15, <http://www.cte.mq.edu.au/public/download.jsp?id=11408> (accessed April 30, 2014).

<sup>4</sup>John Piper, “Gravity and Gladness on Sunday Morning: The Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship,” September 12, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/seminars/gravity-and-gladness-on-sunday-morning-part-1> (accessed October 18, 2013). The quote within the quote is from John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011), *passim*.

reference to credobaptism, the influence of Jonathan Edwards is profoundly evident in these summary statements, with an emphasis upon the supreme glory of God, the affectional satisfaction of souls, and the global spread of the gospel.

Piper is a significant influencer within contemporary evangelicalism, of that there can be no doubt. But he is also an interpreter, re-presenting Edwards in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 1986, J. I. Packer’s endorsement of Piper’s breakthrough book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* noted that “Jonathan Edwards, whose ghost walks through most of Piper’s pages, would be delighted with his disciple.”<sup>5</sup> As a 40-year old pastor, reading this commendation for the first time, Piper recorded his response in his personal journal: “This was better than I could have dreamed he would be willing to say. The personal touch, that JE would even be delighted with me, is what moved me so deeply. I love Jonathan Edwards and hold him in such high regard that to think of his great soul delighting in my labor to make his doctrine live again touches roots of joy that are at the foundations.”<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I want to look at this labor—this multi-decade effort to learn from Edwards and to make his doctrine “live again”—examining how Piper came to encounter Edwards, where precisely the influence resides most deeply, and finally evaluating whether Piper can be considered a faithful interpreter of Edwards for today.

### **Piper’s Encounters with Edwards: A Chronology**

When Piper entered Fuller Seminary in 1968, all he knew of Edwards was that he had preached “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741). Piper likely encountered an excerpt of this sermon in his high school literature anthology,

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<sup>5</sup>John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986), endorsement on the back cover.

<sup>6</sup>John Piper, Journal E-2, Entry for January 27, 1987, John Piper Papers.

highlighting Edwards’s famous (or infamous) language about the reality and danger of eternal hell awaiting those who do not repent.<sup>7</sup> Piper would later write, “Identifying Jonathan Edwards with ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ is like identifying Jesus with the woes against Chorazin and Bethsaida [Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13]. This is a fraction of the whole, and it is not the main achievement.”<sup>8</sup>

### **1968–1969: Essay on the Trinity**

As recounted in chapter 4, Piper took his first class with Daniel Fuller in his first quarter at Fuller Seminary in the fall of 1968. Fuller would soon become a mentor to Piper and a major influence on his life and theology, perhaps his most significant “living teacher.” Little did Piper realize as he entered Fuller’s “Hermeneutics” class one fall day that he would soon be introduced to what would become his most important “dead teacher,” Jonathan Edwards.<sup>9</sup>

Fuller’s large class that year (with approximately 80 students) combined the theology students with the new psychology students.<sup>10</sup> Fuller, a committed evidentialist

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<sup>7</sup>Edwards had preached this sermon on Deuteronomy 32:35 (“Their foot shall slide in due time”) to his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, to unknown effect, but famously reprecached it on July 8, 1741, at the Second Meeting House of the congregational church in Enfield, Massachusetts, and the sermon was published later that year. (In 1748, the town seceded from Massachusetts on account of a surveyor’s error, thus the present-day location is in Connecticut.) For the text and background of this sermon, see Wilson Kimmach, Caleb Maskell, and Kenneth Minkema, eds., *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Casebook* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 83. When asked whether it is accurate to call Edwards a “fire and brimstone” preacher, Piper responded, “It’s accurate, if it’s not lopsided.” He went on to explain that Edwards spoke true things about hell, but spoke beautiful things about heaven far more often. See “Interview with John Piper on Jonathan Edwards,” Preaching Today broadcast, October 27, 1984, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/interview-with-john-piper-on-jonathan-edwards> (accessed October 20, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>For the distinction between living and dead teachers, which Piper utilizes, see Mortimer Adler’s chapter, “Teachers, Dead or Alive,” in his book *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), 48–64.

<sup>10</sup>Fuller Seminary’s School of Psychology had begun just a few years earlier, in 1965.

who insisted on arguments over presuppositions and biblicism over systems, was challenged by one of the psychology students for being too rational. The objection was along the lines that rational engagement was inimical to faith and piety. Upset at the suggestion and throwing his hands in the air, Fuller retorted that he saw no reason for logic and piety to be pitted against each other. Piper—who, as we have seen, had been captivated by the vision of C. S. Lewis’s “romantic rationalism” as an undergraduate—later recorded that his heart “was beating fast with pleasure and expectation” as Fuller continued.<sup>11</sup> Fuller rhetorically asked the class, “Why can’t we be like Jonathan Edwards who in one moment could be writing a devotion that would warm your grandmother’s heart and in the next give a philosophical argument that would stump the chief thinkers of his day?”<sup>12</sup> That was all Piper needed—after class he went straight to the library, almost completely ignorant of Edwards, and checked out his posthumously published *Essay on the Trinity*.<sup>13</sup> In the third quarter (spring of 1969) Piper took church history with Geoffrey Bromiley (1915–2009) and decided to write his paper on Edwards’s Trinitarian essay. “It was,” Piper writes, “one of those defining moments when my view of God’s being was forever stamped.”<sup>14</sup>

Edwards’s efforts at analyzing the Trinity produced at least three lasting effects for Piper. First, it helped him “conceptualize (at least in part) the affirmation that God is three in one.”<sup>15</sup> Second, Edwards’s labors taught Piper a more foundational and

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<sup>11</sup>John Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most,” November 1, 1993, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/books-that-have-influenced-me-most> (accessed October 20, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>John Piper, “The Pastor as Scholar: A Personal Journey and the Joyful Place of Scholarship,” in D. A. Carson and John Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, ed. Owen Strachan and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 39–40.

<sup>13</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity, Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, *WJE*, vol. 21 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 109–45. Edwards began writing this essay in early 1730 and continued working on it into the mid 1730s.

<sup>14</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 84.

<sup>15</sup>John Piper, “A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards,” *The Reformed Journal* 28

methodological lesson about mystery and Scripture. When accused of reducing God to manageable proportions through definitions and analysis, Edwards responded that he was aware that for any difficulty lessened, a new one appears. His only goal was to offer his understanding of the divine truth that did appear. Then he wrote, “I think the Word of God teaches us more things concerning it to be believed by us than have been generally taken [notice of], and that it exhibits many things concerning it exceeding glorious and wonderful than have been taken notice [of].”<sup>16</sup> In this line Piper saw a truth that would affect his entire approach to scholarship and piety: “It is the knowledge, not the ignorance, of God that inspires awe and true worship.”<sup>17</sup> Edwards had shown Piper great heights of Trinitarian reality, and yet here he was confessing how much more there was to see. Piper comments: “Those who have climbed highest see more clearly than those in the cloudy regions below how much higher the reaches of the mountains of God really are. Below we talk about mystery because we cannot see above the clouds. Above the clouds Edwards talks of mystery because the peaks of divinity stretch out into space.” This encounter taught Piper a decisive third lesson: “the Edwards I had met in high school was a caricature.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Fall 1970: Freedom of the Will**

In the first quarter of his senior year (September 1970), Piper did an independent study with Fuller on Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will*.<sup>19</sup> The resulting paper

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(November 1978): 13. For Piper’s restatement of Edwards on the Trinity, see Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 84.

<sup>16</sup>Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, 139.

<sup>17</sup>Piper, “A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards,” 13.

<sup>18</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 86.

<sup>19</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

evidences no interaction with secondary literature, or even other writings from Edwards on this theme, but seems mainly to have consisted in a detailed reading of this one classic text, with questions raised for further exploration and discussion.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting on this encounter eight years later, Piper summarized his experience in working through this material: “I found it totally compelling philosophically, and in perfect harmony with my emerging Biblical theology. St. Paul and Jonathan Edwards conspired to demolish my previous notions about freedom.”<sup>21</sup> But Piper’s memory simplifies his actual conclusions at the time. In reality, he found some parts persuasive and other parts inconclusive. In the closing of his review essay, Piper wrote, “Edwards’ argument for moral determinism is to me inescapably compelling.” In particular, he pointed to Edwards’s arguments from divine foreknowledge to determinism and his argument that every event necessarily has a cause. But Piper was less convinced of Edwards’s theodicy and defense of compatibilism: “His argument, however, for the compatibility of moral determinism with moral agency, and his defense of God’s righteousness, are somewhat less than adequate solutions in my own thinking. There are too many questions left unanswered at this time.” In an appendix to the paper, Piper listed four of these unanswered questions: (1) Piper asks, “What criteria do we use for determining what is a sine qua non of responsibility?” (2) Piper offers a thought experiment whereby a surgeon implants a remote-controlled electrode in the brain that can cause strong sexual desires, and yet the man is unaware of the electrode or the source of the desire. Piper asks, “Is this man responsible, i.e., morally reprehensible, for committing sexual offenses under the influence of such a motive? If not, wherein lies the difference between the motive sent by God and the one sent by electricity?” (3) Piper

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<sup>20</sup>John Piper, “*Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards: A Review,” September 21, 1970, John Piper Papers.

<sup>21</sup>Piper, “A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards,” 13.

wonders if Edwards begs the question regarding the way God orders evil for good ends. “Is not the real question ‘Why is there evil?’ instead of, ‘What does God do with it now that it is here?’ But can we pass judgment on the existence of evil? If we say that it is evil that evil exists, then even our judgment depends for its validity on the existence of evil.” (4) Finally, Piper asks, “Can I any longer pray ‘Thy will be done’ if I believe it is not possible that it should be otherwise?”<sup>22</sup>

These questions apparently receded as Piper became fully convinced that Edwards had rightly identified the Achilles’ heel of Arminianism and the compatibilistic presuppositions of the biblical text. He now counsels those who want to understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, “if you want to read one of the world’s greatest books on one of life’s most fundamental and difficult problems, read Jonathan Edwards’ *On the Freedom of the Will*.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Summer 1971: The Nature of True Virtue**

In the spring of 1971, Piper’s last semester at Fuller Seminary, he took an ethics class from Lewis B. Smedes (1921–2002). Smedes advised his students that in addition to the Bible, they should devote themselves to one great theologian, seeking to understand and apply his thought. In this way they would “sink at least one shaft deep into reality, rather than always dabbling on the surface of things.” In time, they might “become this man’s peer and know at least one system with which to bring other ideas into fruitful dialogue.”<sup>24</sup> Having already written papers on Edwards’s views on the Trinity and the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, Piper decided to make Edwards his lifelong theological mentor and companion. Years later

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<sup>22</sup>Piper, “*Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards,” 13.

<sup>23</sup>Piper, “A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards,” 14.

<sup>24</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 83.



Piper commended the wisdom of Smedes's advice and the decision in particular to study Edwards:

To make it your aim to understand Jonathan Edwards is to set one of the highest and most fruitful theological goals possible. I have plodded along in pursuit of this goal for years and the effort has been rewarded one hundred-fold in profundity of theological, ethical, psychological insight. But more than that, Edwards has ushered me closer into the presence of God than any other writer has. He has done this by depicting God in a way so authentic and so powerful that to read and understand is to experience the Reality beyond the description. Edwards has been there where few of us ever get to go in this life and he has sought and found words that, for me at least, not only inform but transport. Penetrating logic and spiritual responses of the affections mingle in Edwards like branch and fruit, fire and heat, pain and weeping. They are inextricably wed. It is impossible to have understood Edwards and ever to be satisfied again with "rationalism" or with "enthusiasm." Logic and affection are happily married in the healthy heart of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>25</sup>

Before beginning doctoral work that fall at the University of Munich, Piper and his wife visited her family on their small farm in Barnesville, Georgia. With pen in hand, Piper spent several of those warm summer days sitting on an old-fashioned two-seater swing tied to a large hickory tree in the backyard, absorbing Edwards's essay on *The Nature of True Virtue*.<sup>26</sup> The book had two effects on Piper: first, he says, it "aroused in me a deeply pleasurable aesthetic experience," an "aesthetic sense of awe at beholding a pure idea given lucid expression." Second, and more importantly, it gave him "a brand-new awareness that the categories of morality ultimately resolve into categories of spiritual aesthetics, and one of the last things you can say about virtue is that it is 'a kind of beautiful nature, form or quality.'"<sup>27</sup> Along these lines, Piper quotes Perry Miller's observation that *The Nature of True Virtue* "is not a reasoning about virtue, but a beholding of it." Edwards gazes upon the conception of virtue "until it yields up meaning

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<sup>25</sup>Piper, "Books that Have Influenced Me Most."

<sup>26</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 8 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 539–627.

<sup>27</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 90.

beyond meaning, and the simulacra fall away. The book approaches, as nearly as any creation in our literature, a naked idea.”<sup>28</sup> When Piper finished reading the work, he not only had “a deep longing to be a good man” but was reawakened both poetically and rationally, the former reawakening expressed through a poem he wrote entitled “Georgia Woods” (“because nothing looked the same when I put the book down”) and the latter expressed in part by a long personal journal entry using Edwards’s argument to work out why Christians are obligated to forgive wrongdoing when the moral law in our hearts cries out against injustice in the world.<sup>29</sup>

Piper also found Edwards’s radical exercise in God-centeredness to be deeply instructive. In this essay Edwards makes the stunning argument that “if there could be an instinct or other cause determining a person to benevolence towards the whole world of mankind . . . exclusive of . . . love to God . . . [and] supreme regard to him . . . it cannot be of the nature of true virtue.”<sup>30</sup> To embrace the whole world minus God, Edwards says, would be to embrace “an infinitely small part of universal existence.”<sup>31</sup> Piper paraphrases: “to delight in the good of all the universe, but not to delight in God, is like being glad that a candle is lit, but being indifferent to the rising sun. Apart from embracing God as our chief delight, we are (quite literally) infinitely parochial.”<sup>32</sup> Calling this “the great achievement” of Edwards’s life and the “great message” to modern evangelicals, Piper says that Edwards was seeking

to make God absolutely indispensable in the definition of true virtue. He is refusing to define virtue—no matter how public, no matter how broad—without reference to

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<sup>28</sup>Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, The American Man of Letters Series (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 286.

<sup>29</sup>John Piper, Journal 6, Entry for July 14, 1971, John Piper Papers.

<sup>30</sup>Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 602–03.

<sup>31</sup>Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 601.

<sup>32</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 108.

God. He means to keep God at the center of all moral considerations, to stem the secularizing forces of his own day. . . . Edwards could not conceive of calling any act truly virtuous that did not have in it a supreme regard to God.<sup>33</sup>

Piper reinforces the point:

His main message is that, if we would not be infinitely parochial, and thus fail in true virtue, then our private life, our public life, and our global life must be driven not by a narrow, constricted, merely natural self-love, but by passion for the supremacy of God in all things—a passion created through supernatural new birth by the Holy Spirit, giving us a new spiritual taste for the glory of God—a passion sustained by the ongoing, sanctifying influences of the Word of God—and a passion bent on spreading itself through all of culture and all the nations until Christ comes.<sup>34</sup>

### 1971–1972: Charity and Its Fruits

While in Munich, Piper read two biographies of Edwards, one by Samuel Hopkins<sup>35</sup> and the other by Henry Bamford Parkes.<sup>36</sup> He also read three additional works by Edwards, beginning with *Charity and Its Fruits*, an exposition of 1 Corinthians 13.<sup>37</sup>

Piper and his wife read aloud to each other a 360-page edition of *Charity and*

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<sup>33</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 109.

<sup>34</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 113.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel Hopkins, *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards, President of the College of New Jersey: Together with a Number of His Sermons on Various Important Subjects* (Boston, MA: S. Kneeland, 1765). Hopkins (1721–1803), who had studied theology with Edwards, described him as “the *greatest*—best—and most useful of men.” Hopkins used Edwards’s diary, *Personal Narrative*, resolutions, and letters, as well as his own eyewitness recollections, to set forth a “faithful and plain narrative of matters of fact” about Edwards, offering him as an example to follow.

<sup>36</sup>Henry Bamford Parkes, *Jonathan Edwards, the Fiery Puritan* (New York: Menton, Balch & Co., 1930). Parkes (1904–1972), professor of history at New York University, saw Edwards as the “Father of American Puritanism” and argued that his Calvinistic philosophy was either “repulsive or absurd,” so though Edwards was America’s “biggest intellect” he was a “most tragic” figure and “not truly an American.”

<sup>37</sup>Jonathan Edwards preached this sermon series in 1738 and it was published posthumously. Paul Ramsey says “the sermons on 1 Corinthians 13 may be interpreted (a) as a finely woven systematic treatise on the Christian moral life, (b) as one that follows the story line of the work of redemption, and (c) as one of Edwards’ major accounts, composed in the context of the revivals, of gracious affections (divine love) in heart and life” (Editor’s Introduction, “*Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 8 [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989], 2). The text of *Charity and Its Fruits* is found in this volume, 129–397.

*Its Fruits* during their family time in the evenings. They both agreed that the work was “terribly verbose and repetitive,” but for Piper it put flesh onto the “naked idea” of *The Nature of True Virtue*. It also raised a set of questions for Piper about Edwards’s own approach to the relationship between personal piety and public witness: “What did it mean to this intensely religious Puritan to be a good man? Did it only mean not telling jokes on Sunday and warning people to flee the flames of hell? Did goodness relate only [to] the personal habits or did it reach out to embrace larger social dimensions?”<sup>38</sup> What Piper saw is that Edwards’s intense piety was anything but privatized. For example, Edwards wrote:

We ought to seek others’ spiritual good. A Christian spirit will dispose us to seek others’ spiritual happiness; it will dispose us to seek their salvation from hell, and that they may obtain eternal glory. . . . A Christian spirit will dispose persons to seek others’ wealth and outward estate. 1 Corinthians 10:24, “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth.” . . . A Christian spirit is contrary to a selfish spirit as it *disposes persons to be public spirited*. A man of a right spirit is not of a narrow, private spirit; but he is greatly concerned for the good of the public community to which he belongs, and particularly of the town where he dwells.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, *Charity and Its Fruits* caused Piper to wrestle with a possible internal tension with respect to the so-called “Christian hedonism” that Piper had learned in part from the writings of Edwards. In order to see this tension, we must first allow Piper to unpack his understanding of Christian hedonism:

Christian Hedonism teaches that all true virtue must have in it a certain gladness of heart. Therefore the pursuit of virtue must be, in some measure, a pursuit of happiness. It’s not enough to say that happiness will be the eventual *result* of virtuous choices. Rather, since a certain gladness of heart belongs to the nature of true virtue, that gladness must be pursued, if virtue is going to be pursued.<sup>40</sup>

It follows from this, Piper says, that “if we try to deny or mortify or abandon that pursuit

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<sup>38</sup>Piper, “A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards,” 14.

<sup>39</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 259, 260.

<sup>40</sup>Piper, “Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?”

of happiness, we set ourselves against virtue. And that would mean we set ourselves against the good of man and the glory of God.”<sup>41</sup>

For Piper, then, what sort of happiness is essential in all virtuous acts? He answers: “the happiness of experiencing the glory of God. In all virtuous acts we pursue the enjoyment of the glory of God, and more specifically, the enjoyment of the *presence* and the *promotion* of God’s glory.”<sup>42</sup> It is clear that Edwards was a strong influence on this emerging matrix of glory and joy in Piper’s theology.

Edwards first identifies two ways in which God is glorified within himself: “(1) by appearing or being manifested to himself in his own perfect idea, or, in his Son, who is the brightness of his glory; (2) by enjoying and delighting in himself, by flowing forth in infinite love and delight towards himself, or, in his Holy Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> When God then pursues his glory from his creation there is a parallel twofold manifestation and communication: “(1) by appearing to them, being manifested to their understandings; (2) in communicating himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying the manifestations which he makes of himself.”<sup>44</sup> Putting together God’s actions *ad intra* and *ad extra*, Edwards is saying that just as in the immanent Trinity the Father generates the Son, who is the perfect *idea* of himself, so now in the economic Trinity God appears to his creatures’ *understanding*. And as the eternal delight of the Father and Son *flows forth* between one another through the Spirit, so God *manifests and communicates* himself to his creatures as their hearts delight and rejoice in him through the Spirit. Edwards explains:

By one way it goes forth towards their understandings; by the other it goes forth

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<sup>41</sup>Piper, “Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?”

<sup>42</sup>Piper, “Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?”

<sup>43</sup>Edwards, *The “Miscellanies”*: (Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500), 495.

<sup>44</sup>Edwards, *The “Miscellanies”*: (Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500), 495.

towards their wills or hearts. God is glorified not only by his glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in, when those that see it delight in it: God is more glorified than if they only see it; his glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that he might communicate, and the creature receive, his glory, but that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his having an idea of God's glory don't glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.<sup>45</sup>

But if we are always to glorify God by pursuing our holy joy, how does that fit with 1 Corinthians 13:5, which teaches that "Love seeks not its own"? Edwards's seventh sermon in *Charity and Its Fruits*, entitled "Charity Contrary to a Selfish Spirit," proved to be enormously helpful to Piper in sorting this out. Edwards argued that "seek not its own" did not preclude seeking joy but rather precluded seeking *confined* joy. He explains:

Some, although they love their own happiness, do not place that happiness in their own *confined* good, or in that good which is limited to themselves, but more in the *common* good, in that which is the good of others as well as their own, in good to be enjoyed *in* others and to be enjoyed *by* others. And man's love of his own happiness which runs in this channel is not what is called selfishness, but is quite opposite to it. . . . This is the thing most directly intended by that self-love which the Scripture condemns. When it is said that charity seeketh not her own, we are to understand it of her own private good, good limited to herself.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, Piper restates, "if what makes a person happy is the extension of his joy in God into the lives of others, then it is not wrong to seek that happiness, because it magnifies God and blesses people. Love is the labor of Christian hedonism, not its opposite."<sup>47</sup> Reflecting later on these days of discovery and clarification, Piper writes, "This kind of thinking was simply mind-boggling to me in those days."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Edwards, *The "Miscellanies": (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, 495. Edwards's statement that "God is glorified not only by his glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in" is the closest Edwards comes to Piper's formulation, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Cf. also Lewis's statement (cited in chap. 3), "Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."

<sup>46</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 257, 258; the first two italics are my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 91.

<sup>48</sup>John Piper, email to author, July 8, 2013; in my possession.

Related to this is the question of what Edwards means by “self-love.”<sup>49</sup> Piper writes that Edwards “had a love-hate relationship with the term, because it carried so much potential truth and so much potential error.”<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, Edwards could write regarding the fall of Adam: “Self-love became absolute master of his soul, and the more noble and spiritual principles of his being took wings and flew away.”<sup>51</sup> “Self-love, as the phrase is used in common speech, most commonly signifies a man’s regard to his confined *private self*, or love to himself with respect to his *private interest*.”<sup>52</sup> This narrow, negative sense of the term is the most common use for Edwards. On the other hand, however, he could at times use the same term as a neutral, and potentially positive, feature of our humanity:

It is not a thing contrary to Christianity that a man should love himself; or, which is the same thing, that he should love his own happiness. Christianity does not tend to destroy a man’s love to his own happiness; it would therein tend to destroy the humanity. Christianity is not destructive of humanity. That a man should love his own happiness is necessary to his nature, as a faculty of will is; and it is impossible that it should be destroyed in any other way than by destroying his being. The saints love their own happiness; yea, those that are perfect in holiness. The saints and angels in heaven love their own happiness. Otherwise their happiness, which God

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<sup>49</sup>For a helpful overview of this concept, with particular attention to its function in the prelapsarian state, see Peter Beck, “The Fall of Man and the Failure of Jonathan Edwards,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2007): 209–25. For the concept in dialogue with Edwards’s context, see Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1981), 150–99. Whereas Piper identifies the two main ways Edwards wrote of “self-love,” Fiering goes into more detail and delineates four aspects: “Edwards’s early writing took note of four forms of self-love: (1) a universal psychological principle of seeking happiness defined as that which is agreeable to oneself, true of all creature sin heaven and hell and of God Himself; (2) the seeking of one’s own exclusive good, which necessarily is at the cost of other people, called ‘simple self-love’ (and in common language, selfishness); (3) an enlarged sense of one’s own good, which may include others to a greater or less degree, called by Edwards ‘compounded self-love’; this could be the result of a process of reasoning (such as is meant by the term used later in the century, ‘enlightened self-interest’) or be the result of natural instincts that propel men into caring for others; (4) a measured and proportional esteem for oneself as a creature of God, which may be called limited self-regard” (159–60).

<sup>50</sup>John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012), 388.

<sup>51</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 253.

<sup>52</sup>Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 577.

has given them, would be no happiness to them; for that which anyone does not love he can enjoy no happiness in.<sup>53</sup>

What Piper came to see is that Edwards was using “self-love” in two very different ways. On the one hand, he could use it neutrally in such a way that sin was not necessarily involved. Piper explains that the neutral sense of self-love

is simply our built-in capacity to like and dislike, or approve and disapprove, or be pleased or displeased. It is neither good nor bad until some object is fastened upon as liked and approved and pleasing. If the thing fastened upon is evil, or the fastening upon it is disproportionate to its true worth, then our being pleased by it is shown to be corrupt. But the sheer faculty of desiring and liking and approving and being pleased is neither virtuous nor evil.<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, “self-love” is virtually synonymous with the faculty of the will. “Self-love is to the soul what hunger is to the stomach. It is simply there with our creaturehood; it’s the inescapable desire to be happy.”<sup>55</sup> As Edwards put it, “self-love is only a capacity of enjoying or taking delight in anything.”<sup>56</sup>

So whereas the neutral sense is akin to “will,” the negative sense is synonymous with “selfishness”: those who are governed by it “place their happiness in good things which are confined or limited to themselves exclusive of others. And this is selfishness. This is the thing most directly intended by that self-love which the Scripture condemns.”<sup>57</sup> It is this meaning, Edwards says, that Paul is thinking of when he explains

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<sup>53</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 254. Cf. also: “That to love ourselves is not unlawful is evident from that, that the law of God makes it [i.e., self-love] a rule and measure by which our love to others should be regulated. Thus Christ commands, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’ [Matt 19:19]; which certainly supposes that we may and must love ourselves. . . . And it also appears from this, that the Scripture from one end of the Bible to the other is full of things which are there held forth to work upon a principle of self-love. Such are all the promises and threatenings of the Word of God, and all its calls and invitations; its counsels to seek our own good, and its warnings to beware of misery” (Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 254–55).

<sup>54</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 106.

<sup>55</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 107.

<sup>56</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies,” no. 530, in *The “Miscellanies,” 501–832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain, *WJE*, vol. 18 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 73.

<sup>57</sup>Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 257.



in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that “love seeks not its own.” Piper summarizes, “true, spiritual love is not governed by a narrow, limited, confined pursuit of one’s own pleasure.”<sup>58</sup> So from the perspective of Christian hedonism, “What is evil about self-love is not its desire to be happy—that is essential to our nature as creatures, whether fallen or not. What is evil about self-love is its finding happiness in such small, narrow, limited, confined reality, namely, the self and all that makes much of the self. Our depravity is our being exactly the opposite of public-spirited.”<sup>59</sup>

### **1971–1972: The End for which God Created the World**

The second Edwards book that Piper read in Munich was *Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World*,<sup>60</sup> which Edwards intended to be read in conjunction with *The Nature of True Virtue*. In their little apartment, Piper transformed his eight-by-five-foot pantry into a makeshift study, and it was there that he read this book, which would mark his ministry for life. Decades later he would write, “In that book, a vision of God is displayed that took me captive thirty years ago and has put its stamp on every part of my life and ministry.”<sup>61</sup>

Piper paraphrases Edwards’s answer to the question of why God created the world: “to emanate the fullness of his glory for his people to know, praise, and enjoy.” Here is Edwards in his own words, expressing what Piper calls “the heart” of Edwards’s theology:

For it appears that all that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of

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<sup>58</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 105.

<sup>59</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 107.

<sup>60</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 8 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 403–536.

<sup>61</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 21.

God's works is included in that one phrase, "*the glory of God*"; . . . In the creature's knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an *emanation* and *remanation*. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is *of* God, and *in* God, and *to* God; and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.<sup>62</sup>

"From my perspective now," Piper writes, "I would say that if there were one book which captures the essence or well-spring of Edwards' theology it is this."<sup>63</sup> "That is the heart and center of Jonathan Edwards and, I believe, of the Bible too. That kind of reading can turn a pantry into a vestibule of Heaven."<sup>64</sup>

### **1973: Religious Affections**

There were no Sunday evening services for the German Baptist church the Pipers attended during his doctoral studies at the University of Munich, so Piper would often spend that time reading. In late 1973 he received by mail a "crackly old" edition of *Religion Affections*, printed in 1796 in London, and spent several weeks reading it while sitting on a black rocking chair in their flat.<sup>65</sup> He would slowly read two to three pages at a time, and then stop to close the book—to think, to savor, and to be changed by Edwards's words of wisdom. "They taught me and they moved me. I came to feel ever more deeply that no possessions could compare to sitting at the feet of people who have

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<sup>62</sup>Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, 526, 531.

<sup>63</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 91.

<sup>64</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 92.

<sup>65</sup>In a letter to Daniel Fuller dated December 22, 1973 (John Piper Papers), Piper writes, "Perhaps most exciting of all is the reception in the mail of Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* printed in 1796 in London. I have only read 17 pages but can hardly do my other work for my desire to pick it up." A month later, January 23, 1974 (John Piper Papers), he mentions the book again in a letter to Fuller: "One of my latest book delights is finding a copy of Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1796. So far I've read 170 pages in coveted periods on the weekend. It is very timely in view of the prevalence of much and various spiritual experiences today. I'm sure I will not be the same, having read it."

the ‘lips of knowledge’ [Prov 20:15].”<sup>66</sup> “For several months,” Piper writes, “it was the meat of my Sunday evening meditation. I can remember writing letters week after week to former teachers, to friends and to my parents about the effect this book was having on me. Far more than *The Nature of True Virtue*, this book convicted me of sinful lukewarmness in my affections toward God and inspired in me a passion to know and love God as I ought.”<sup>67</sup>

Edwards argues that “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections,” and that “the affections are no other than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.”<sup>68</sup> His approach—on the one hand, defending the genuineness and necessity of religious affections in religious experience; on the other hand, refusing to endorse the enthusiastic excesses of the Great Awakening—resonated with Piper in part because of his own experience: “Perhaps the reason the book moved me so is because it was Edwards’ effort to save the best of two worlds—the very worlds in which I grew up and now live.”<sup>69</sup> He explains that Edwards “struggled to bring together” two worlds: “revival fervor and the reasonable apprehension of truth.”

My father is an evangelist. He conducted evangelistic crusades for over fifty years, and I respect him very highly. I wish I had some of his gifts. I will probably never attain the fruitfulness of his soul-winning life. Rather, I am a theologically oriented pastor. I love my people and cherish our life together in worship and ministry. But I am fairly analytic and given to study. The ministry of the Word is my (protecting and guiding and encouraging) shepherd’s staff. It is not surprising, then, that the *Religious Affections* should seem to me a very contemporary and helpful message. It brought together more of my personal history and personal makeup than any other

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<sup>66</sup>John Piper, “The Lips of Knowledge Are a Precious Jewel,” October 5, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-lips-of-knowledge-are-a-precious-jewel> (accessed October 20, 2013).

<sup>67</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 92.

<sup>68</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *WJE*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

<sup>69</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 93.

of Edwards's books.<sup>70</sup>

Piper's prediction was right: he would never be the same again after reading it.

### 1974–1980: Bethel Years

After returning to the United States and during his six-year tenure of teaching biblical studies at Bethel College, Piper read three more biographies of Jonathan Edwards (by Ola Elizabeth Winslow,<sup>71</sup> Sereno Edwards Dwight,<sup>72</sup> and Perry Miller<sup>73</sup>).

During one of his years at Bethel, Piper resolved to read Edwards for fifteen minutes a day for the entire year.<sup>74</sup> It was in this way that he read *An Humble Inquiry* (1749)<sup>75</sup> and *The Great Doctrine of Original Sin* (1758).<sup>76</sup> During his Bethel years, Piper also read Edwards's *A Faithful Narrative* (1737),<sup>77</sup> his posthumously published *Treatise*

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<sup>70</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 94.

<sup>71</sup>Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1940). Winslow (1885–1977) won the 1941 Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography for this work. Contra Parkes, she argues in this full-length biography that Edwards was “neither Puritan nor fiery.”

<sup>72</sup>Sereno Edwards Dwight, ed., *Life of President Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New York: S. Converse 1829). Dwight (1786–1850) was a great-grandson of Edwards. This set of Edwards's works comprised ten volumes, and Dwight's extensive biography was dependent, in part, on the work of Samuel Finley and Samuel Hopkins.

<sup>73</sup>Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*. Miller (1905–1963), a professor at Harvard University, is most famous for his monograph a decade earlier, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1939).

<sup>74</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 95. In a sermon Piper once said, “Suppose you read slowly like I do—about the same speed as you speak—200 words a minute. If you read 15 minutes a day for one year (just 15 minutes, say just before supper, or just before bed), you will read 5,475 minutes in the year. Multiply that by 200 words a minute and you get 1,095,000 words that you would read in a year.” John Piper, “If My Words Abide in You . . .,” January 3, 1993, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/if-my-words-abide-in-you> (accessed November 19, 2014).

<sup>75</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*, ed. David D. Hall, *Ecclesiastical Writings, WJE*, vol. 12 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 167–349.

<sup>76</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended, Evidences of Its Truth Produced, and Arguments to the Contrary Answered*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, *Original Sin, WJE*, vol. 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 102–437.

<sup>77</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative*, ed. C. C. Goen, *The Great Awakening, WJE*, vol. 4

on *Grace* (1740),<sup>78</sup> his posthumously published *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1739),<sup>79</sup> and his bestselling work, *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749).<sup>80</sup>

In addition to his reading, Piper also began writing on Edwards. In 1976 he wrote an unpublished response to a chapter by James Strauss critiquing Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*.<sup>81</sup> Strauss's paper, published in a collection of essays defending Arminianism and criticizing Calvinism, suggested that (1) "a central fallacy, if not a lethal fallacy," in Edwards's argument is the ambiguity in which he defines the determination of the will; (2) Edwards's claim that moral agency and radical determination are compatible actually generates a *reductio ad absurdum*; and (3) Edwards's argument from foreknowledge to necessity is logically invalid. Piper examined each of these points and concluded, "this article by Strauss succeeds in none of the three criticisms it levels against Jonathan Edwards' view of determinism, volition, and moral agency."<sup>82</sup>

Piper's only published academic article on Edwards was "Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Faith and History."<sup>83</sup> Using *Religious Affections*, Piper explores how

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(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 97–212.

<sup>78</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, *WJE*, vol. 21 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 149–98.

<sup>79</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, *WJE*, vol. 9 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>80</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, *WJE*, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984). For Piper's explication of Brainerd's life with lessons, see his essay, "'Oh, That I Might Never Loiter on My Heavenly Journey!' Misery and Mission in the Life of David Brainerd," *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 123–59.

<sup>81</sup>John Piper, "James D. Strauss' Critique of Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*," November 1, 1976, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/james-d-strauss-critique-of-jonathan-edwards-freedom-of-the-will>; James D. Strauss, "A Puritan in a Post-Puritan World—Jonathan Edwards," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Press, 1975), 242–64.

<sup>82</sup>Piper, "James D. Strauss' Critique of Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*."

<sup>83</sup>John Piper, "Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Faith and History," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (June 1978): 217–28. This article, Piper's only academic foray into Edwardsian studies,

Edwards grounds faith in relation to historical knowledge, a subject which had not (at least at that time) been addressed in the growing body of secondary literature on Edwards. Piper argues that Edwards's arguments warrant our serious consideration because he is "able to hold together things that in our own day are often isolated into various theological camps."

First, he respects the validity of and encourages the pursuit of historical arguments for the truth of the gospel. Second, he recognizes that these arguments have a limited function not because they are inimical to the nature of faith (as modern existentialist theologians say), but because the great mass of ordinary people cannot carry through a detailed historical argument. Third, faith must nevertheless be reasonable if it is to be saving faith; that is, it must have a just ground for certainty. This ground, Edwards argues, is really there in the gospel record for all who have eyes to see.<sup>84</sup>

That same year Piper also published "A Personal Encounter with Jonathan Edwards," offering a narrative of his own discovery of Edwards along with a narrative of Edwards's life.<sup>85</sup>

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affords the best window into his awareness of and appropriation of the growing secondary literature. In addition to Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758*, Piper lists the following monographs in his endnotes: Douglas Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); David Levin, ed., *The Puritan in the Enlightenment: Franklin and Edwards* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1963); Alfred O. Aldridge, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966); Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966); Edward H. Davidson, *Jonathan Edwards, the Narrative of a Puritan Mind* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966); James Carse, *Jonathan Edwards and the Visibility of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967); Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); John Opie, ed., *Jonathan Edwards and the Enlightenment* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1969); David Levin, ed., *Jonathan Edwards, a Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969); Elizabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man, the "Uncommon Union" of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); Dorus Paul Rudisill, *The Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and His Successors* (New York: Poseidon Books, Inc., 1971); Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973); Harold Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). Of these, he cites the following throughout the essay: Carse, *Jonathan Edwards and the Visibility of God*; Opie, ed., *Jonathan Edwards and the Enlightenment*; Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart*.

<sup>84</sup>Piper, "Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Faith and History," 227–28.

<sup>85</sup>This essay was then revised and incorporated into the first half of Piper's *God's Passion for His Glory*.

### Piper’s Encounters with Edwards: A Ranking

Writing in 1993, Piper sought to rank the works of Edwards as most influential in his life and theology.<sup>86</sup> Piper placed them in this order: (1) *Freedom of the Will*, (2) *The End for which God Created the World*, (3) *Religious Affections*, (4) *The Nature of True Virtue*, (5) *Essay on the Trinity*, (6) *Original Sin*, (7) *Charity and Its Fruits*, and (8) other sermons.

When asked to revisit this ranking 20 years later, Piper now tentatively reverses his choices for 1 and 2, as well as 6 and 7.<sup>87</sup> The different order is represented in Table 1. In analyzing this ranking, Piper rightly asks, “Who can really know how deep and pervasive an impact is?”<sup>88</sup>

Table 1. Piper’s ranking of Edwards’s works

	1993	2013
1.	<i>Freedom of the Will</i>	<i>The End for which God Created the World</i>
2.	<i>The End for which God Created the World</i>	<i>Freedom of the Will</i>
3.	<i>Religious Affections</i>	<i>Religious Affections</i>
4.	<i>The Nature of True Virtue</i>	<i>The Nature of True Virtue</i>
5.	<i>Essay on the Trinity</i>	<i>Essay on the Trinity</i>
6.	<i>Original Sin</i>	<i>Charity and Its Fruits</i>
7.	<i>Charity and Its Fruits</i>	<i>Original Sin</i>
8.	Other sermons	Other sermons

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<sup>86</sup>Piper, “Books that Have Influenced Me Most.”

<sup>87</sup>John Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013; in my possession.

<sup>88</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.

Piper explains several things that *Freedom of the Will* did for his theology.

“The impact of this issue,” he writes, “is pervasive in its main point.” First, it solidified for him the thesis of the book:

God’s moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents, making them the objects of his commands, counsels, calls, warnings, expostulations, promises, threatenings, rewards and punishments, is not inconsistent with a determining disposal of all events, of every kind, throughout the universe, in his providence; either by positive efficiency, or permission.<sup>89</sup>

Piper describes the impact of this as “vast in every direction.”<sup>90</sup>

Second, Piper believes that Edwards is right that “the settling of this issue undoes the Arminian scheme at every turn”:

’Tis easy to see how the decision of most of the points in controversy, between Calvinists and Arminians, depends on the determination of this grand article concerning *the freedom of the will requisite to moral agency*; and that by clearing and establishing the Calvinistic doctrine in this point, the chief arguments are obviated, by which Arminian doctrines in general are supported, and the contrary doctrines demonstratively confirmed.<sup>91</sup>

In particular, *Freedom of the Will* introduced Piper to the distinction between moral ability and natural ability. “This has been huge,” Piper writes, “in enabling me to help people grasp what we mean when we say those who are in the flesh ‘can’t’ please God (Rom. 8:7) and yet are accountable because the inability is moral not natural.” Finally, Piper notes that in his copy of the book, Part 1, Section 11, is heavily underlined. This is undoubtedly owing to the open theism controversy that Piper was involved with in the 1990s. Piper notes, “Edwards fitted me early and then refitted me for this battle.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite these foregoing reasons, Piper now judges that *The End for Which God*

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<sup>89</sup>Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 431.

<sup>90</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.

<sup>91</sup>Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 431.

<sup>92</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.



*Created the World* has a slight edge over *The Freedom of the Will*. It answers a higher-level or more ultimate question: given that God is sovereign over all actions in the universe, what is he up to? Toward what end is he aiming in governing the world this way? Even though the end of creation has been more dominant and prominent in Piper's actual teaching and presentation, he still judges it a close call between these two books. "The subterranean influences of the river of God's sovereignty may be a wider and deeper influence than the fact that 'the end' of it all is more prominent in one's teaching."<sup>93</sup>

With respect to the reversal of *Original Sin* and *Charity and Its Fruits*, what Piper found so influential in the former first needs to be examined. For Piper, Edwards's "stunning insight"<sup>94</sup> into the morality of original sin offers a "remarkable analogy."<sup>95</sup> In addressing how one man (like us) can be morally implicated in the sin of another (like Adam), Edwards compares our own individual continuity. The reason that the "I" of today can be held responsible for acts done or left undone in the past is on account of a union between the "I" of today and the "I" of the past. The reason this is so, Edwards avers, is that "God's upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an *immediate production out of nothing*, at each moment."<sup>96</sup> This union or identity of past and present "depends on the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he *treats them as one*, by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances."<sup>97</sup> As Piper restates, "This means that ultimately

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<sup>93</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.

<sup>94</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 96.

<sup>95</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.

<sup>96</sup>Edwards, *Original Sin*, 402.

<sup>97</sup>Edwards, *Original Sin*, 403.

the reason the me of today is morally responsible for the actions of the me of yesterday is that God has arbitrarily willed that it be so.”<sup>98</sup> It is not difficult to see how Edwards then extends the analogy to show the unity or identity of Adam and his posterity, so that in Adam’s sin the rest of humanity fell and was condemned (Rom 5:18). For Edwards, after all, “a *divine constitution* is the thing which *makes truth*, in affairs of this nature.”<sup>99</sup> As we saw earlier with the influence of Edwards’s Trinitarianism on Piper, it was not so much that Edwards taught Piper a doctrine he did not know, but he creatively demonstrated that there was more to see in what he saw, giving him new conceptual tools to understand the doctrine more deeply. Regarding this analogical argument on original sin, Piper writes, “it certainly helped me, not by making it all simple and clear, but by showing me that there are possibilities of conceptuality and reality that I have not yet begun to think of. Which means it behooves me to keep my mouth shut rather than question a hard Biblical teaching. That is a humbling work, which Edwards has performed for me more than once.”<sup>100</sup>

But in now ranking *Charity and Its Fruit* higher than *Original Sin*, Piper writes, “I can’t escape the thought that Edwards’s exposition of ‘Love seeks not its own’ [1 Cor 13:5] in *Charity* was more extensively influential than the solution to the morality of original sin. . . . I am pretty sure that the impact of this chapter [i.e., sermon seven: “Charity Contrary to a Selfish Spirit”] was more influential than *Original Sin*.” In particular, Edwards showed (as we saw above) that “seeks not its own” is not a prohibition on seeking one’s own joy but on seeking *confined* joy. Piper found this chapter especially illuminating in his attempts to communicate Christian hedonism, “because one of the hardest things for a 21<sup>st</sup> century person to get his mind around is the

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<sup>98</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 96.

<sup>99</sup>Edwards, *Original Sin*, 404.

<sup>100</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 96–97.

use of ‘disinterested’ in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It did *not* mean the absence of love to happiness.”<sup>101</sup> In our discussion above regarding *Charity and Its Fruits* and Christian hedonism, we saw that Edwards could use “self love” in two ways: in a neutral, observational sense (functionally, a reference to the will) and in a negative sense (akin to selfishness with the seeking of private or confined pleasures). Similar ambiguity exists with respect to “disinterested love.” Piper explains: “When Edwards speaks of a *disinterested* love to God, he means a love that is grounded not in a desire for God’s gifts, but in a desire for God himself. . . . It is simply his way (common in the eighteenth century) of stressing that we must seek our joy in God himself and not in the health, wealth, and prosperity he gives. It is a word designed to safeguard the God-centeredness of joy, not to oppose the pursuit of it.”<sup>102</sup> Norman Fiering explains the Edwardsean reasoning: “Disinterested love to God is impossible because the desire for happiness is intrinsic to all willing or loving whatsoever, and God is the necessary end of the search for happiness. Logically one cannot be disinterested about the source or basis of all interest.”<sup>103</sup> Bringing the discussion of self-love and disinterested love full circle, Piper concludes, “*Disinterestedness* is affirmed only to preserve the centrality of God himself as the object of our satisfaction. And *self-love* is rejected only when it is conceived as a narrow love for happiness that does not have love as its supreme focus.”<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to provide a chronological account of John Piper’s

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<sup>101</sup>Piper, email to author, August 7, 2013.

<sup>102</sup>Piper, *Future Grace*, 393.

<sup>103</sup>Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1981), 161. Fiering is referring here to the perspective of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), but says his conception is similar to Edwards’s, and thus his statement is applicable to both.

<sup>104</sup>Piper, *Future Grace*, 395.

encounters with Jonathan Edwards, including some discussion of key points in Edwards's theological and philosophical analysis that have influenced Piper's own theology and spirituality. In conclusion, I would like to look briefly at the issue of Piper's influence as an interpreter of Edwards and to ask whether his appropriation of Edwards has been faithful. Several points may be (at times tentatively) proposed.

First, it would be difficult to deny that John Piper is one of the key secondary agents under the providence of God responsible for the resurgence of Calvinistic soteriology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as well as the resurgence of interest in Edwards at the popular level. If Piper is the father of the new Calvinists, Edwards is the grandfather. As Edwards scholar Gerald McDermott notes, "We are all in John's debt for taking JE out of the musty attic and bringing him down into the living room for today's churches. He has restored JE to his rightful place as America's theologian, not only for the academy but also for the pulpit and small group and the turned-on Christian's study."<sup>105</sup>

Second, it is important to remember what Piper is trying to do, and what he is not claiming to do, in his appropriation of Edwards. As we noted in the beginning of this paper, his "labor" is to make Edwards's "doctrine live again."<sup>106</sup> Toward this end, he clarifies what he is claiming for Edwards and his use of him: "I do not claim that Edwards would have chosen my way of bringing biblical truth to bear on the modern church. Nor do I assume it is the only or even the best way. But I do want to claim that it is biblical, and that it is in the Reformed tradition of Jonathan Edwards, and that, if properly understood and applied, it leads to a God-centered life of joyful and sacrificial love."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Gerald McDermott, email to author, June 10, 2013; in my possession.

<sup>106</sup>Piper, Journal E-2, Entry for January 27, 1987.

<sup>107</sup>Piper, *Future Grace*, 388.

Third, it is legitimate to raise questions about the sufficiency of Piper's own endeavors to retrieve Edwards's theology and piety for today. For example, McDermott writes, "John seems to have ignored much of the last 40 years of scholarship on JE. That's not all bad, but I think he has missed some of the more exciting and intriguing turns, as we have gone deeper into the twists and turns in that beautiful mind."<sup>108</sup> In my judgment, Piper's limitations as an interpreter come not so much from misappropriations as from downplaying those elements that do not resonate as deeply with his own theology and piety. For example, Piper makes appropriate and strong use of the display of glory as demonstrated in Edwards's *End of Creation*, but the themes of *theosis* and participation in the Godhead scarcely get a mention.<sup>109</sup> At times, Piper seems to glide over potentially problematic implications of Edwards's metaphysics. For example, is Edwards's view of the God-world relationship panentheistic? Do some of the claims in Edwards's theocentric idealism go beyond the biblical evidence? Is Edwards's doctrine of continuous creation compatible with the reality of genuine secondary causation? In raising these questions, I am not automatically assuming that Edwards is wrong, but I am observing that these are issues that have not bothered Piper sufficiently for him to address them publicly. Piper has written of Edwards, "Seeing the unlimited expanse of divine

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<sup>108</sup>McDermott, email to author, June 10, 2013.

<sup>109</sup>Roland Delattre has persuasively argued that Edwards's theological ethics can be organized around the theme of "participation in the life of God" (Roland Delattre, "The Theological Ethics of Jonathan: An Homage to Paul Ramsey," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 [Fall 1991]: 74). For Edwards, union with God and a participation in the divine life is both the foundation and the means for glorifying God by enjoying him forever. When he writes about God's threefold communication of his fullness to his creatures—namely, sharing with them "his infinite knowledge, his infinite holiness, and his infinite joy and happiness"—this involves "a participation of what is in God" (Edwards, *End of Creation, Ethical Writings*, 442). This is something that Piper does not tend to emphasize, or at least not make explicit, and therefore it can be obscured for readers who get their Edwards only through Piper. Whereas Piper highlights the Edwardsian theme of beholding and esteeming the display of God's glory, Edwards grounds this reality in a mystical ontology, arguing that the Christian life as at root a life of participation in the life of the divine. It is only in this way that we can enjoy his presence and promote his glory.

Reality that is really there in Scripture, not imagining new things, was his passion.”<sup>110</sup> But one wonders if Piper’s appreciation of Edwards can potentially obscure a nuanced analysis of the eighteenth-century divine as to whether he was always as biblicistic as Piper suggests.

Finally, I close with what I think gets to the heart of Piper’s own appreciation for and appropriation of Edwards. When Edwards was dying, he picked up a copy of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), recalling the pleasure and profit he had from reading this book while at Yale. He recounts that he had “more Satisfaction and Pleasure in studying it, than the most greedy Miser in gathering up handfuls of Silver and Gold from some new discover’d Treasure.”<sup>111</sup> In many ways this is a fitting illustration of Piper’s own approach to Edwards. Piper is not a professional historian or philosopher; rather, his primary calling has been as a pastor—one who needs to be led and fed in order to do the same for his flock. And it is clear that Piper comes to Edwards not as a dispassionate or disinterested scholar but as a hungry fellow shepherd.

Edwards himself understood the power of not only true doctrine but also the importance of faithful exemplars. This is seen most fully in his work on David Brainerd, where he commented in the preface: “There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other is by instance and example: Both are abundantly used in the holy Scriptures.”<sup>112</sup> Edwards reminded his own congregation, “Useful men are some of the greatest blessings of a people. To have many such is more for a people’s happiness than almost anything, unless it be God’s own gracious, spiritual presence

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<sup>110</sup>Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, xii.

<sup>111</sup>Hopkins, *Life and Character*, 4.

<sup>112</sup>Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, 89.

amongst them; they are precious gifts of heaven.”<sup>113</sup> This is the effect that Edwards has had upon Piper’s own soul. Not only has he been a theological mentor and teacher, but he is an object of Piper’s admiration and affection. Edwards once wrote, “If the subject be in its own nature worthy of very great affection, then a speaking of it with very great affection is most agreeable to the nature of that subject, or is the truest representation of it, and therefore has the most of a tendency to beget true ideas of it in the minds of those to whom the representation is made.”<sup>114</sup> Even if Piper is not an academic scholar of Edwards and his work, his greatest contribution to Edwardsian retrieval may be his embodiment of the Edwardsian spirit and the passionate way in which he has sought to raise high the affections of his hearers as he commends his most influential dead teacher and his vision of God. Mark Noll once lamented: “Edwards’ piety continued on in the revivalist tradition, his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world-view . . . The disappearance of Edwards’s perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.”<sup>115</sup> Through the work of Piper, this perspective is now being increasingly discovered and recovered. For this, both Edwards and Piper would argue, the glory must belong to God alone.

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<sup>113</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “The Death of Faithful Ministers a Sign of God’s Displeasure,” in *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 34, 39.

<sup>114</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival,” 387.

<sup>115</sup>Mark A. Noll, “Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought: Two Important Books,” *The Reformed Journal* 33 (February 1983): 26, 28.

CHAPTER 6  
JOHN PIPER’S USE OF SCRIPTURE

**Introduction**

On Easter Sunday of 2013, John Piper preached his farewell sermon as senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church after thirty-three years of expositional ministry from that pulpit. Though acknowledging it was his final sermon, Piper decided to preach an Easter text. As he reminded the congregation, “People ought not to go to church to hear the sentiments or the ideas of a man, but to hear the word of God.”<sup>1</sup> As he had told the people of Bethlehem during his candidating sermon in 1980, “my main goal—my tremendously fulfilling and joyful goal—[will be] to feed that flock the Word of God every week, week in and week out.”<sup>2</sup>

In the preceding chapters we have examined the key influencers in the life of John Piper. We now turn to examining two primary ways he has in turn influenced the church. In this chapter, I want to examine Piper’s passion and skill for biblical interpretation, exploring where it came from, how it was honed, and how it has been deployed. This will require an examination of Piper’s educational training, his exegetical methodology, and an initial analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of his approach as an interpreter of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, “God Raised Your Great Shepherd from the Dead: A Farewell Sermon,” March 31, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/god-raised-your-great-shepherd-from-the-dead> (accessed November 6, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>John Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Sermon at Bethlehem Baptist,” January 27, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/john-pipers-candidating-sermon-at-bethlehem-baptist> (accessed July 10, 2014).



### The University of Munich (1971–1974)

In chapter 3 we saw that Piper felt decisively called to the ministry of the Word after hearing Harold John Ockenga preach on the campus radio at Wheaton College. In chapter 4 we traced the significance of Piper’s study at Fuller Seminary. In his final quarter at Fuller, Piper applied to study with I. Howard Marshall (1934– ) at the University of Aberdeen, sent an inquiry letter to the University of St. Andrews, and corresponded with Bo Reicke (1914–1987) at the University of Basel. Piper had enjoyed taking a class with Bruce Metzger (1914–2007), who had taught on Galatians at Fuller as a visiting professor, so he applied at Princeton Theological Seminary, only to be turned down. (Metzger wrote him a personal letter explaining that they only accepted four applicants that year.) George Ladd recommended that Piper study under Leonhart Goppelt (1911–1973) as his *Doktorvater*. Piper wrote him a letter, to which Goppelt responded: “I am glad to hear that you would like to become one of my candidates for a doctor’s degree. Since you come from Professor Ladd you will soon feel quite at home here with us.”<sup>3</sup> Piper applied and was accepted.

While in Munich, Piper discovered a historical hero in the New Testament scholar Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938), whose motto was “*Wissenschaft ist erstens Sehen und zweitens Sehen und drittens Sehen und immer wieder Sehen*” (“Science is first seeing and secondly seeing and thirdly seeing and again and again seeing”).<sup>4</sup> Piper had already had this idea drilled into him from “Agassiz and the Fish” and Fuller’s inductive exegesis classes, but “Schlatter’s name still had enough esteem in the university that I could lay

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<sup>3</sup>Leonhard Goppelt, letter to John Piper, May 27, 1971, John Piper Papers.

<sup>4</sup>Piper paraphrases this as “*Die Wissenschaft ist erstens Beobachtung, zweitens Beobachtung, drittens Beobachtung*,” with the translation, “Science/scholarship is first observation, second observation, third observation.” See Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 28, and Piper, “Preface to the 2012 Republication,” *Love Your Enemies*, vi. For the source of the original quote, see Adolf Schlatter, “Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie,” in Ders., *Dass. Mit einem Beitrag von Paul Jäger, hrsg. von Heinzpeter Hempelmann* (Wuppertal, 1985). For an English translation, see Adolf Schlatter, “Appendix D,” in Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany’s Premier Biblical Theologian*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 218. I am grateful to Andreas Köstenberger for pointing out this source.

claim to it to warrant my method, should any not feel the esteem for its real source, Daniel Fuller.”<sup>5</sup>

Piper was not impressed with what he saw in the academy of Germany, either in terms of spirituality or scholarship: they “could not come close to the theological and methodological goldmine that I had found in seminary. I used my Fuller-taught method of observation and analysis to research and write an acceptable dissertation, and then left Germany as quickly as I could.”<sup>6</sup> He elaborates on what he found so distasteful:

It seemed driven by the need for peer approval. It used technical jargon that only insiders could understand and that often concealed ambiguity. It put enormous weight on speculative methodologies (*Formgeschichte*, *Traditionsgeschichte*, and *Redaktionsgeschichte*, and *Sachkritik*) that gave rise to scholarly articles which began in the mode of *Wahrscheinlichkeit* (probability) and by the end had been transformed into the mode of *Sicherheit* (certainty) by waving the wand of scholarly consensus.

There was the use of linguistic skills to create vagueness and conceal superficiality. Few, it seemed to me, would press the real question of meaning until it yielded the riches of theological truth. The whole enterprise lacked the aroma of heaven or the odor of hell, and there did not seem to be any burden for the lostness of the world.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the superficiality of the methodology, Piper was also bothered by the lack of corresponding doxology:

Exultation over anything glorious was not allowed into their explanations—which meant that the greatest realities were left unexplained, because there are realities that are so great they can only be illumined in the light of exultation. By and large, there seemed to be little apprehension of the incoherence between the infinite value of the object of the study and the naturalistic nature of their study. The whole atmosphere seemed unplugged from the majesty of the object.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Piper, “Preface to the 2012 Republication,” vi.

<sup>6</sup>Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 41–42.

<sup>7</sup>Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 42.

<sup>8</sup>Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 42.

In short, he writes, “I saw it up close, and from the inside, and found early on that this global king of biblical scholarship had no clothes on.”<sup>9</sup>

Piper completed his dissertation in 1974, and in 1979 it was published by Cambridge University Press in their Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series as *Love Your Enemies: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis*. The thesis had its origin in Piper’s observation of the close parallels between the New Testament’s epistolary commands to “Repay no one evil for evil, but bless . . .” (Rom 12:14, 17–20; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 3:9; 1 Cor 4:12) and Jesus’s commands in the Synoptics to “Love your enemies, bless . . .” (Matt 5:38–48; Luke 6:27–36). Investigating the relationship between these two commands was attractive, in part, because it is one of the few sayings of Jesus that most critical scholars accepted as authentic. Goppelt had suggested that both the paraenetic command and the synoptic command have their source in the actual words of Jesus. Piper’s work set out to test this hypothesis, which he found to be confirmed: “the interpreted, paraphrased and applied command of Jesus forms the center of the paraenetic teaching on enemy love, and the peculiar character of his command constituted the unique criterion according to which the non-Christian paraenetic elements were taken up into the early Christian paraenetic tradition.”<sup>10</sup>

Piper then asked and answered two questions: (1) If the paraenetic commands and the synoptic commands for enemy love rest on the actual command of Jesus, what accounts for their distinct differences in form and use? (2) Despite these differences, is there an essential unity or continuity between Jesus’s original command and these later formulations?

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<sup>9</sup>Piper, *The Pastor as Scholar*, 42.

<sup>10</sup>Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, 172.

With respect to the former question, Piper first had to demonstrate that there really was such an oral paraenetic tradition current among the earliest Christian churches; that that command of enemy love in the New Testament paraenesis belonged to this tradition, and that the similarity of the passages of Romans and 1 Peter were on account of using this common tradition. Piper then sought to reproduce the form, as far as possible, that the command of enemy love had in the paraenetic tradition. With this done, he was finally in a position to conclude that the differences were owing to the fact that “the paraenetic tradition and the gospel tradition formed two distinct streams in the early church and had different intentions and settings.”<sup>11</sup>

With respect to the question of continuity among the three spheres—i.e., Jesus’s earthly ministry, the early Christian paraenetic tradition, and the Gospels’ formulation—Piper was able to identify four common features: (1) the prevenient mercy of God as manifest in Jesus is the fundamental motivation to love one’s enemies; (2) in some sense, final eschatological blessing depends upon obedience to the command to love one’s enemies; (3) the eschatological situation inaugurated by Jesus determines the content of the command to love one’s enemies; (4) a renewed mind is the ground and goal of the command to love one’s enemies.<sup>12</sup>

### **Bethel College (1974–1980)**

#### **Inerrancy**

In 1974 Piper was hired as assistant professor of biblical studies at Bethel College in Arden Hills, Minnesota (a suburb of Saint Paul). One potential challenge in the hiring process came with respect to the doctrine of inerrancy in Bethel’s “Affirmation

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<sup>11</sup>Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, 172.

<sup>12</sup>Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, 173–75.

of Faith,” which stated that “The Bible is . . . without error in the original manuscripts.”<sup>13</sup> Piper had been influenced by Dan Fuller’s nuanced views on inerrancy, though it is unclear how aware Piper was of some of the more progressive aspects and background of Fuller’s view.

During the hiring process at Bethel, Piper seems to have held to some aspects of Fuller’s view on inerrancy. So when he read Bethel’s affirmation precluding all “error” from the original manuscripts, he knew he could sign onto this but only if he was upfront with the administration about how he was defining his terms and could ensure that it did not violate their authorial intent. On his application, he pointed out that “there is a wide diversity of opinions about the meaning of ‘error’ in such an affirmation.” This is especially the case, he said, when it comes to the Synoptic Gospels. Piper suggests two definitions of “error,” the first of which he considered proper for judging the reliability of a piece of literature, and the second of which he considered improper:

1. A writer is in error when the basic intention in his statements and admonitions, properly understood in their nearer and wider context, is not true. (In reference to the indicative statements, “true” means that obedience of [*sic*] these admonitions is in harmony with reality, i.e., it accords with the will of God.)
2. A writer is in error if any of his individual statements is not literally true.<sup>14</sup>

Piper argues that the synoptics are “inerrant” with respect to the former but not the latter. To illustrate this, he offered some examples. First, Jesus says in Mark 4:31 that “a grain of mustard seed . . . is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.” Piper understands the authorial intent of this statement, in the original context, to be “the great contrast between the smallness of the seed and the largeness of the full-grown shrub. Jesus capitalized on the proverbial smallness of the mustard seed to make a perfect, inerrant

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<sup>13</sup>The Affirmation of Faith of Bethel University, <http://www.bethel.edu/about/faith> (accessed October 31, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>John Piper, “How Are the Synoptics ‘Without Error?’” October 7, 1976, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-are-the-synoptics-without-error> (accessed November 15, 2014).

point about the kingdom of God.” According to definition 1 of error (above), Jesus spoke truth not error, as “his basic intention was not in the least botanical.” But according to definition 2, Jesus would have erred—and hence Piper rejects that definition.

Second, Piper argues that given definition 2, the Gospel authors would have to be charged with error in their chronology of the events of Jesus’s life. But Piper argues that if we hold to definition 1, they are without error, because strict chronology was not among the authors’ basic intentions. Thematic rearrangement of events can produce a “literary unit which beautifully and inerrantly sets forth the essential features of our Lord’s ministry.” Piper sees himself as gladly aligning with “the long-proved tradition: *perfectio respectu finis* (perfection with respect to purpose).”<sup>15</sup>

Piper closes with a reaffirmation of his own deep commitment to the Word of God:

But I think just as important as agreeing with Article One in detail is my deep commitment to the spirit of it. From history, and from my own experience, I can say that it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Bible. We humans are incapable of finding out what we need so much to know: how to overcome sin, to escape the wrath of God, to become new creatures, to walk pleasing to the Lord. God must reveal this to us or we perish. This he has done, and continues to do, by means of a written Word, the Bible. When a man has understood the Bible, he has understood the revelation of God infallibly, inerrantly and verbally.<sup>16</sup>

Bethel judged Piper’s views to be within the bounds of their doctrinal confession.

A few years later, October 26–28, 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) gathered over 200 evangelical leaders to ratify the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>17</sup> R. C. Sproul and J. I. Packer were the two primary authors of the

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<sup>15</sup>Here he appeals to the 1677/1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith as containing “no better statement of my own position on this matter”: “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all *saving* Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience” (1.1).

<sup>16</sup> Piper, “How Are the Synoptics ‘Without Error’?”

<sup>17</sup>“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” [http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_1.pdf](http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf) (accessed October 31, 2013).

eight-page document, with Sproul doing the lion's share of the drafting.<sup>18</sup> The next week, Piper wrote to Fuller: "I have just read the Chicago inerrancy statement drafted last weekend (Wayne Grudem and Walt Wessel [New Testament professors at Bethel Seminary] went and signed it). I don't think I can." On the one hand, the Chicago Statement claims, "Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its author aimed." Piper and Fuller would agree. But on the other hand, it asserts the Bible's "infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches." It asserts that divine inspiration "guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Bible authors were moved to speak and write." It denies that "Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science." It asserts that the term "*Infallible* . . . safeguards . . . the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters."<sup>19</sup> Piper wrote to Fuller: "There is no point it seems to me in trying to say I have the same view when the whole effort of the document is to set itself apart from people like you and me. I am not optimistic about what will come of this."<sup>20</sup> The key issue at play, in Piper's view, centered on the problem of defining authorial intent.

This should not be taken to imply that Piper endorsed or would agree with all of Fuller's presuppositions or applications on inerrancy (for which, see ch. 4 above). First, Piper rejected Fuller's distinction between revelatory and non-revelatory Scripture, which means that he was always uneasy with Fuller's claim that the numbers of Scripture

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<sup>18</sup>Stephen J. Nichols, email to author, October 31, 2013; in my possession.

<sup>19</sup>Chicago Statement, Article XII and the Exposition section on Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation.

<sup>20</sup>John Piper, letter to Daniel Fuller, November 3, 1978, John Piper Papers.

were inaccurate or incompatible. Second, Piper never accepted Fuller's explanation that God needed to use cultural accommodation in order to communicate intelligibly. For example, Piper thinks the problem of Jesus saying that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds can be handled in ways differently from Fuller.<sup>21</sup>

Today, Piper would offer a more charitable reading of the Chicago Statement. "Intentionality," he writes, "is a difficult thing to define when an author aims to communicate something, but may not be elevating all his ideas about what is being communicated to the level of what he means for his reader to embrace. So an author may have ideas about the distance of stars or the size of the earth or the miles to Emmaus, but then when he speaks about those things his intention may not be for his reader to embrace all those ideas even though it may be evident from the writing that he held them." Applying this to his previous correspondence with Fuller, he notes: "So today I would probably give a more generous reading to the Chicago statement when it, for example, 'asserts the Bible's 'infallible divine authority in all matters *upon which it touches*.'" I would now take that 'touches' to mean: 'upon which it touches, intending for the reader to embrace as true.' In that sense I want to affirm that 'meaning' is inerrant, and meaning is author[ial] intention, and intention is . . . that which he . . . affirms as true and wants the reader to embrace as true. . . . Also I think I have a better sense now of phenomenological language (the sun rises) as true and as not drawing us into a cosmological argument about world-views."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>John Piper, email to author, July 18, 2014; in my possession.

<sup>22</sup>John Piper, email to author, January 10, 2013; in my possession. For more on Piper's views on intentionality, though not necessarily related to inerrancy, see John Piper, "The Intentional Fallacy and the Meaning of Textual Meaning," January 1, 1977, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-intentional-fallacy-and-the-meaning-of-textual-meaning> (accessed November 15, 2014).



## Pedagogy and Publishing

Piper's primary teaching courses included New Testament introduction, New Testament Greek, and exegesis of New Testament books. The primary tools that Fuller had used—"Agassiz and the Fish," Adler's *How to Read a Book*, Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*, sentence diagramming, and arcing—were employed by Piper as well.<sup>23</sup> He sought to model for his students, and to draw out from them, the habit of relentlessly querying the biblical text.

It was during this time that Piper began publishing works of biblical interpretation and interacting with historical criticism. Up to this point, his only published work had been a biblical and systematic study of the image of God, published in the new Fuller Theological Seminary journal while he was still a student there.<sup>24</sup> While at Bethel he wrote articles or reviews on German research of the historical Jesus, canon criticism, historical criticism,<sup>25</sup> as well as some original works of New Testament interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Piper, a slow reader himself, had a pedagogical aversion to assigning more than one or two textbooks for a semester. "We have been schooled (quite erroneously) that there is a direct correlation between reading a lot and gaining insight. But, in fact, there is no positive correlation at all between the quantity of pages read and the quality of insight gained. Just the reverse for most of us. Insight diminishes as we try to read more and more" (John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Nashville: B&H, 2013], 93–94).

<sup>24</sup>John Piper, "The Image of God: An Approach from Biblical and Systematic Theology," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 1 (March 1971): 15–32.

<sup>25</sup>John Piper, "Was Qumran the Cradle of Christianity? A Critique of Johannes Lehmann's Jesus Report." *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 4 (October 1974): 18–29; John Piper, "The Authority and Meaning of the Christian Canon: A Response to Gerald Sheppard on Canon Criticism," *JETS* 19:2 (1976): 87–96; John Piper, "A Reply to Gerhard Maier: A Review Article," *JETS* 22, no. 1 (1979): 79–85; John Piper, "Historical Criticism in the Dock: Recent Developments in Germany," *JETS* 23, no. 4 (1980): 325–34.

<sup>26</sup>John Piper, "Prolegomena to Understanding Romans 9:14–15: An Interpretation of Exodus 33:19," *JETS* 22, no. 3 (1979): 203–216; John Piper, "The Demonstration of the Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25, 26," *JSNT* 2, no. 7 (1980): 2–32; John Piper, "Hope as the Motivation of Love: 1 Peter 3:9–12," *NTS* 26, no. 2 (1980): 212–231; John Piper, "The Righteousness of God in Romans 3:1–8," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 36, no. 1 (1980): 3–16.

### **Bethlehem Baptist Church (1980–2013)**

In May of 1979, having completed six years of teaching, Piper was due for a sabbatical that fall. In every class Piper had encountered students who sought to discount his Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9. So he resolved that on his eight-month leave he would “study Romans 9 and write a book on it that would settle, in my own mind, the meaning of these verses.” Or put differently, “to analyze God’s words so closely and construe them so carefully that I could write a book that would be compelling and stand the test of time.”<sup>27</sup> What Piper did not anticipate was that the subject of his study—the absolute and inscrutable providence of God—had more designs for this sabbatical than the production of a book. Piper would come to interpret this sabbatical as God calling this professor to the pastorate.

As Piper labored over the text of Romans 9, a new desire emerged: “to see the word of God applied across a broader range of problems in people’s lives and a broader range of ages.” In other words, he increasingly longed “to address a flock week after week and try to draw them in . . . to an experience of God that gives them more joy in him than they have in anything else and thus magnifies Christ.”<sup>28</sup> And he found that in studying the majestic, free, and sovereign God of Romans 9 day after day his “analysis merged into worship.”<sup>29</sup>

The decisive night of wrestling was on Monday, October 14, 1979. His wife and two young sons were asleep. But Piper was up past midnight, writing in his journal, recording the direction toward which God was irresistibly drawing him. The journal entry

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<sup>27</sup>John Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What Is Romans Nine About?” November 3, 2002, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-absolute-sovereignty-of-god-what-is-romans-nine-about> (accessed November 5, 2013). The book was published four years later as *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>28</sup>John Piper, “John Piper’s Candidating Testimony,” January 27, 1980, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource/john-pipers-candidating-testimony> (accessed July 10, 2014).

<sup>29</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

for that evening begins in this way: “I am closer tonight to actually deciding to resign at Bethel and take a pastorate than I have ever been. . . . The urge is almost overwhelming. It takes this form: I am enthralled by the reality of God and the power of his Word to create authentic people.” In effect, the Lord seemed to be saying: “I will not simply be analyzed; I will be adored. I will not simply be pondered; I will be proclaimed. My sovereignty is not simply to be scrutinized; it is to be heralded. It is not grist for the mill of controversy; it is gospel for sinners who know that their only hope is the sovereign triumph of God’s grace over their rebellious will.”<sup>30</sup>

The calling to preach and pastor had become irresistible. On January 27, 1980, John Piper was presented to the congregation of Bethlehem Baptist Church in downtown Minneapolis as the candidate to become their pastor, and he received an affirmative vote shortly thereafter.<sup>31</sup> On July 13 he preached his installation sermon from 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 on “The Wisdom of Men and the Power of God.”

### **Piper’s Exegetical Method**

We now turn to Piper’s own exegetical methodology, learned from Fuller, exhibited in his scholarly work, transmitted through his classroom teaching, and modeled in his pulpit ministry and book writing.

Piper argues that “The principles of Biblical exegesis are simply the principles of good reading.”<sup>32</sup> He sees five steps an interpreter must pass through on his way toward understanding an expository text in the New Testament.

First, the interpreter must find a reliable text. “You cannot begin to rethink an author’s intention until you have a text which corresponds substantially with what the

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<sup>30</sup>Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God.”

<sup>31</sup>The vote by secret ballot was 149 in favor (89 percent), 17 opposed (10 percent), and 1 abstention (1 percent).

<sup>32</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 8.

author actually wrote.” For those who can read Greek, “textual criticism is foundational to all reliable exegesis.” Those who cannot read Greek have to depend not only on the text critics, but also on the translators. But, Piper reminds his readers, “those who taste the exhilaration of theological discovery through careful grammatical exegesis will never be satisfied until they can drink fully at the fountain of the original source!”<sup>33</sup>

Second, the interpreter must come to terms with an author. Leaning on Adler, Piper defines a “term” as a word or phrase used with a determinate meaning in a given context; to “come to terms” is to discover that meaning. This cannot be achieved through dictionary definitions—which can only give the semantic range of a word—but rather by discerning the meaning of a word through the context of words one already understands. How then do we avoid the “merry-go-round” of the hermeneutical circle? After all, “words can only be understood from their context,” and yet, “A context is nothing more than words and phrases which also need to be understood.” Piper responds: “The fact that we all communicate with words every day, with a great deal of success, shows that the hermeneutic circle is not as vicious as it sounds. Most words, phrases, and syntactical patterns are, to a certain degree, autonomous. Some aspects remain the same regardless of context. We should make every effort to understand the context in which a word stands so that we ascribe to it only the meaning that the author intended.”<sup>34</sup>

Third, the interpreter must understand the propositions. “Propositions,” Piper writes, “are the basic building blocks of a text.” A proposition has a subject and predicate, making a simple assertion about something,<sup>35</sup> and it can only have meaning

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<sup>33</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 8. For Piper’s plea to pastors to study the original languages, see John Piper, “Brothers, Bitzer Was a Banker,” in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 98–105.

<sup>34</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 8–9.

<sup>35</sup>Piper later acknowledges this is oversimplified, and he observes that at times “a keen, sometimes delicate, sensitivity to the author’s intention is needed to tell whether a certain grammatical construction should be construed as a proposition or not” (Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 26). There are no rigid rules for making these decisions, he says, but only general guidelines. He offers some special help in the

because it is put together according to the “established rules” of grammar and syntax. Therefore, “Whether you are reading the Greek or English New Testament, you must attend to the appropriate rules of grammar if the meaning of an author’s propositions is to be understood,” and the syntactical rules are different in each language. “Words,” Piper writes, “begin to convey determinate meanings only as they are seen to be parts of a proposition.” Therefore this step (understand the propositions) is related reciprocally, not sequentially, with the previous step (come to terms). “Each is pursued simultaneously and is an aid to the attainment of the other.” Piper laments that these two steps are often ignored due to unbiblical presuppositions about the nature of revelation: “Much of God’s Word remains unheard today because some devout people think it is unspiritual to look for subjects, objects, modifiers and antecedents in a Biblical sentence. And others, alas, have never even been taught that there are such things.”<sup>36</sup>

Fourth, the interpreter must relate the propositions to each other. Just because one has determined a reliable text (step 1) and mastered the syntax of a proposition while coming to terms with the words within it (steps 2–3) does not entail that meaning has been understood. “Just as words derive meaning from their use in a proposition, so a proposition receives its precise meaning from its use in relationship to other propositions.”<sup>37</sup> This not only allows the interpreter to understand the meaning of the proposition but to understand the flow of the author’s argument. The idea is to find the main point of each literary unity and to see how each proposition fits together in unfolding and supporting the main point.

In order to understand the relationship between propositions, two things are needed: (1) an understanding of the kinds of relationships that can exist, and (2) a method

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areas of questions, relative clauses, participial clauses, and infinitives (26–29).

<sup>36</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 9–10.

or device that provides a way to capture visually the relationships within a larger or complex argument. The latter can be achieved by arcing; the former through a schema of eighteen possible coordinate or subordinate relationships between propositions originally developed by Fuller in his “Hermeneutics” syllabus.<sup>38</sup>

Having identified the four exegetical steps for understanding the meaning of an author’s argument, Piper then offers his final step in the exegetical process: meditate upon the biblical author’s intention. Piper suggests that this must be done “especially in relation to things he [i.e., the biblical author] and the other Biblical writers have said elsewhere. As we muse over the interrelationships of these things, implications start to emerge which take us deeper and deeper into reality as the author conceived it. Thus, little by little we come to perceive the unity of the Bible.”<sup>39</sup>

### **The Role of the Intellect, the Affections, and the Holy Spirit**

Citing Isaiah 66:2b (“this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word”), Piper writes, “there is no hope for the exegete who never trembles in his trade; God has no regard for him, and he will come to nothing, though he write a thousand books. . . . The Scriptures aim to affect our hearts and change the way we feel about God and his will.” Therefore, the exegete must not be content with uncovering merely what the Scriptures originally meant but instead must press on toward “the ultimate goal of Scripture: its contemporary significance for faith.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Coordinate relationships are independent propositions that do not directly support another proposition but contribute to the argument as a whole. Subordinate relationships exist when one proposition supports another in some way. There are three types of subordinate relationships: support by restatement (five possible relationships are defined therein), support by distinct statement (eight relationships), and support by contrary statement (two relationships). See Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 11–20.

<sup>39</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 30.

<sup>40</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 4.

Piper believes that exegesis, sooner or later, should “touch our emotions, and through us, the emotions of others.” Exegesis that does not do this is “ultimately a failure because it does not mediate the effect which the Scripture ought to have.” Instead, biblical exegesis should be “the cognitive catalyst that triggers a combustion of divine joy in the human heart” and “the intellectual enzyme that transforms the stupor of our worldly and futile affections into a deep and glad and living hope.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to these ultimate goals of biblical exegesis (goals shared only by those who have been born again) there is a more immediate goal (one that can be shared in common with competent unbelieving exegetes), namely, “to understand and state accurately what the original Biblical authors willed to communicate. The goal is to see reality through another person’s eyes.”<sup>42</sup>

Several implications follow from this. First, “the exegete is inevitably somewhat of an intellectual.” Truth must come through a book, and a book must be read, and “good reading is an intensely intellectual act.” Second, God’s revelation comes to us in human language (there are no distinctively divine language conventions), and therefore meaning must be discerned through the particular language conventions of particular human authors in particular times and places, understanding what they willed to communicate in their historical situation. “Therefore, we must make every effort to deal with the Bible grammatically (and historically since an author’s specific use of language is determined by his situation in history).” Third, if the Bible is infallibly authoritative in all matters of faith and practice, then good exegesis is “a threat to our pride” and an inherently “humbling task.” Good exegesis “demands that our own ideas take second place. The way we feel and think about life is restrained as we allow ourselves to listen to

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<sup>41</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 4, 5.

<sup>42</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 6.

what the author feels and thinks.” Finally, the role of the Holy Spirit is indispensable if we are to achieve the ultimate goal of exegesis. As fallen creatures, we love our own glory and devise ingenious evasions to hide our rebellion, tempted to twist and distort God’s word to reinforce our own agenda. But for the believer who is reliant upon God, this need not be the case. The Holy Spirit “does not whisper in our ears the meaning of a text. He cares about the text which he inspired and does not short circuit the study of it.”

Rather, Piper writes:

The primary work of the Holy Spirit in exegesis is to abolish the pride and arrogance that keep us from being open to the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit makes us teachable because he makes us humble. He causes us to rely wholly on the mercy of God in Christ for our happiness so that we are not threatened if one of our views is found to be wrong. The person who knows himself finite and unworthy, and who thus rejoices in the mercy of God, has nothing to lose when his ego is threatened.

Good exegesis, Piper argues, “reduces us to our true finiteness, so that we may see and enjoy the magnificent eternal truth revealed in the Scripture.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Evaluation of Piper’s Use of Scripture**

Having looked at the way in which Piper was called to the ministry of the Word, how he was trained in exegesis, and how he has sought to teach it to others, we are now in a position to offer some preliminary observations.

#### **Positive Evaluation**

**Piper models the art of intelligently querying the text.** I would suggest that Piper’s greatest skill as an exegete is his ability to ask hard questions of the biblical text and his ability to work diligently and prayerfully for biblical solutions. He argues that insight or understanding from a text can only be produced by “intensive, headache-producing meditation on two or three propositions and how they fit together,” that the

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<sup>43</sup>Piper, *Biblical Exegesis*, 5–7.



fruit of this reflection and rumination only comes from asking the text questions, and that it cannot be done in a hurry. “Take two hours to ask ten questions of Galatians 2:20,” he counsels, “and you will gain one hundred times the insight you would have attained by quickly reading thirty pages of the New Testament or any other book. Slow down. Query. Ponder. Chew.” He writes, “One of the greatest honors I received while teaching biblical studies at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, was when the teaching assistants in the Bible department gave me a T-shirt which had the initials of Jonathan Edwards on the front and on the back the words: ‘Asking questions is the key to understanding.’”<sup>44</sup>

One of the challenges in the church preventing acceptance of Piper’s proposal is that to ask questions is to pose problems, and we think it irreverent to pose problems with the Word of God. In response, Piper argues that “reverence for God’s Word demands that we ask questions and pose problems *and* that we believe there are answers and solutions which will reward our labor with treasures new and old (Matt. 13:52).”<sup>45</sup>

Two examples must suffice to demonstrate the exegetical fruitfulness of Piper’s relentless querying. First, Piper asks why Paul seems to skip sanctification in the golden chain of Romans 8:30. In other words, “Why didn’t Paul say, ‘Those whom he justified he also sanctified, and those whom he sanctified he also glorified’?” Piper answers, “One of the reasons Paul didn’t say that is that ‘glorification’ includes sanctification. Paul thinks of glorification beginning in this life as we are incrementally changed into the likeness of the all-glorious Christ.”<sup>46</sup> Although this view is often not

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<sup>44</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Query the Text,” 93, 94.

<sup>45</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Query the Text,” 95. Piper gives examples of some of the tensions he sees and the questions he tends to ask of the text, such as: how can Paul say he is anxious for nothing (Phil 4:6) but confess that he has daily anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11:28)? How can he command the church to rejoice always (1 Thess 5:16) and to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15)? How can he tell us to give thanks always and for everything (Eph 5:20) and admit that he has unceasing sorrow and anguish of heart (Rom 9:2)? When do we know the difference between turning the other cheek when struck (Matt 5:39) and fleeing when persecuted (Matt 10:23)? In what sense can God be slow to anger (Exod 34:6) and yet have his wrath quickly kindled (Ps 2:12)? See Piper, “Brothers, Query the Text,” 95–96.

<sup>46</sup>John Piper, “Prelude to Acting the Miracle: Putting Sanctification in Its Place,” in *Acting the*  
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considered by New Testament scholars, there is sophisticated biblical-theological warrant for this conclusion, and it would not have been discovered apart from asking why the expected term is missing here.<sup>47</sup>

Another example of Piper’s fruitful question-asking is seen in a sermon on Romans 1:24–28, where he asks why, given all the possible sins in the world, Paul chooses to focus upon homosexuality in the context of sin and idolatry. Was he identifying homosexuality as a higher-level sin than all the others? Piper answers that homosexuality “is the most vivid dramatization in life of the profoundest connection between the disordering of heart-worship and the disordering of our sexual lives.” Appealing to Ephesians 5:31–32, “the right ordering of our relationship to God in heart-worship was dramatized by heterosexual union in the covenant of marriage,” and therefore “the disordering of our relationship to God is dramatized by the breakdown of that heterosexual union.” Piper then applies this to homosexuality:

Homosexuality is the most vivid form of that breakdown. God and man in covenant worship are represented by male and female in covenant sexual union. Therefore, when man turns from God to images of himself, God hands us over to what we have chosen and dramatizes it by male and female turning to images of themselves for sexual union, namely their own sex. Homosexuality is the judgment of God dramatizing the exchange of the glory of God for images of ourselves. (See the parallel uses of “exchange” in verses 25 and 26 [of Rom 2].)

This is a rare insight into the text, and it would not have come to light apart from asking why Paul chose this sin in particular to highlight.

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*Miracle: God’s Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 38.

<sup>47</sup>For a survey, along with an argument that substantiates Piper’s conclusion, see Dane C. Ortlund, “Inaugurated Glorification in Romans 8:30,” *JETS* 57, no. 1 (March 2014): 111–34. Ortlund’s thesis is that “when Paul says in Rom 8:30 that God has ‘glorified’ believers he is saying that those incorporated into Christ are those in whom God has decisively reinstated his own image—the *imago dei* granted in fullness at creation, marred at the fall, displayed perfectly in Christ, graciously restored in an already/not yet way to those united to Christ, and to be finally perfected in a way that transcends even the prelapsarian Adam and Eve.”

**Piper’s labors demonstrate that fruitful and competent exegesis can come as the result of prayerful desperation.** Piper feared that leaving academia would mean losing the relative freedom for concentrated study (teaching repeated college courses three times a week and having time off during summers and sabbaticals) and gaining in exchange the constant pressure of pastoral ministry—preparing sermons and devotionals and writing newsletters and performing weddings and funerals—which would result in the loss of joyful discovery and insight into biblical texts that emerge as the result of long observation. What Piper found, however, is that “In the pastoral ministry there is not as much freedom to study, but there are two other more-than-compensating factors.”<sup>48</sup>

First, the relentless pressure to prepare a message or devotion based on the Bible meant that Piper of necessity had to be “in the word for myself daily with prayerful desperation so that I was finding new treasures, new food, for my soul. . . . I really felt the continual danger of dying spiritually.” The fear of being bored with the Bible kept him “praying over the word with great pleas for light.” Further, this pressure kept him in the word in preparation for all of these events, “specifically looking with a view to finding tasty and nourishing food for the people. It needed to be nourishing for their faith, and it needed to be tasty, that is, not dull and insipid and boring. This pressure was a golden gift.”

The second compensating factor was that “all my preparations felt less like academic discovery for the guild to assess, and more like rations for hungry troops who will not survive the battle without being well fed.” Piper is often bedeviled with the second guessing of his own motives, and therefore he would regularly pray to the Lord over his preparations: “Father, as much as it lies within me to know my heart and put to death selfish motives, I renounce the desire to be thought wise or clever or smart and I set

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<sup>48</sup>All of the quotes that follow in this sub-section are from John Piper, email to author, October 29, 2013; in my possession.

my face now to find wonderful food for your people—for their joy, and their faith and their hope, and their boldness and their healing and their perseverance and their holiness, and their worship.”

Leaving academia gave Piper a new perspective on his exegetical studies: “I was not analyzing a text in general for insights. I was analyzing a text specifically for a flock. I believe with all my heart that I owe most of what I have spoken and written for the good of people to the fact that God loves his church and helped me feed them with wonderful food, that he himself put in the pantry of his word and helped me find.”

So whereas it may seem logical to conclude that Piper’s exegetical discoveries could have been greater had he remained in the academy, his experience has convinced him otherwise: “I think there are discoveries and ways of saying them I never would have had any other way than in this pressured life of preparing meals for the people God loves.”

### **Critical Evaluation**

We must now turn to the question of whether there are weaknesses or deficiencies in Piper’s approach to the task of exegesis.

**Piper does not give sufficient attention to the redemptive-historical development of the Scripture’s storyline.** Piper has a passion for seeing the unity of the whole Bible.<sup>49</sup> “This noble quest has fallen on hard times because so much artificial harmony has been discovered by impatient and nervous Bible defenders. But if God’s mind is truly coherent and not confused, and if the Bible is really His God-breathed Book (2 Tim. 3:16), then exegesis must aim to see the coherence of biblical revelation and the profound unity of divine truth.” As he writes, “If the Bible is coherent, then

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<sup>49</sup>Note, for example, his foreword for Daniel Fuller’s *Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), x–xii.

understanding the Bible means grasping how things fit together. Becoming a biblical theologian, which every pastor should be, means seeing more and more pieces fit together into a glorious mosaic of the divine design. And doing exegesis means querying the text about how its many propositions cohere in the author's mind and, through that, in God's mind."<sup>50</sup>

What Piper has in mind by this, it seems, is ultimately the task of exegesis in the service of systematic theology. He would undoubtedly take Herman Bavinck's description of the systematician's vocation and apply it to all exegetes: "The imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God's thoughts after him and to trace their unity . . . to think God's thoughts after him and to reproduce the unity that is objectively present in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture."<sup>51</sup> And it seems that he would be very comfortable operating within the framework of systematic theology identified by D. A. Carson, who described it as "the branch of theology that seeks to elaborate the whole and the parts of Scripture, demonstrating their logical (rather than their merely historical) connections and taking full cognizance of the history of doctrine and the contemporary intellectual climate and categories and queries while finding its sole ultimate authority in the Scriptures themselves, rightly interpreted. Systematic theology deals with the Bible as a finished product."<sup>52</sup>

The question then arises: does John Piper believe in, and practice, biblical

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<sup>50</sup>Piper, "Brothers, Query the Text," 92, 94.

<sup>51</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:44. Cf. Berkhof: "God certainly sees the truth as a whole, and it is the duty of the theologian to think the truths of God after Him. There should be a constant endeavor to see the truth as God sees it, even though it is perfectly evident that the ideal is beyond the grasp of man in his present condition." Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* [1932], in *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 15.

<sup>52</sup>D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 69–70.

theology? Biblical theology has been most succinctly described by one of its early Reformed pioneers, Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), who argued that biblical theology should be defined as the presentation of special revelation in its historic continuity and diversity.<sup>53</sup> The focus of biblical theology, Carson avers, is to study each corpus of Scripture on its own with respect to its place in the unfolding drama of divine revelation.<sup>54</sup> G. K. Beale notes that a biblical-theological approach interprets a text first with regard to its own literary context, but then primarily relates the text to its own redemptive-historical epoch and the epochs that precede and follow it.<sup>55</sup>

Although Piper holds to both the unity and the diversity of Scripture—recognizing that its ultimate coherence is expressed through different historical authors in different historical places at different historical times—his inclinations are more inclined to the overarching unity, which can cause him to downplay elements of diversity or development. To be sure, Piper understands and advocates the discipline: “Biblical theology aims to read the authors of Scripture along the trajectory of redemptive history in light of the authors’ own categories that are shaped by the historical milieu in which they lived. Done properly, this is an essential part of responsible exegesis and theology.”<sup>56</sup> But in practice, his inclinations and intuitions remain more in the domain of

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<sup>53</sup>Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 15. “Biblical Theology deals with the material from the historical standpoint, seeking to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive pre-redemptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the New Testament canon” (Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* [1948; repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975], v–vi).

<sup>54</sup>Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 69.

<sup>55</sup>G. K. Beale, “What Is Biblical Theology and Why Do We Need It?” [http://www.simeoncourse.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=213&Itemid=610](http://www.simeoncourse.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=213&Itemid=610) (accessed October 30, 2013).

<sup>56</sup>John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 34.

an exegetically detailed and precise systematician than that of a biblical theologian proper. If Piper is right that biblical theology proper is essential, then to the degree that his own interpretive work tends to downplay the redemptive-historical development of themes and doctrines, his labors remain incomplete.

**Piper tends to downplay historical-cultural background studies.** In Piper's critique of N. T. Wright, he notes that while many interpreters warn of the distorting effects of systematic theology upon good exegesis, "the possible distorting effect of the categories of *biblical theology* is not commonly sounded."<sup>57</sup> Piper offers three reasons why "first-century ideas can be used (inadvertently) to distort and silence what the New Testament writers intended to say." (1) The interpreter may misunderstand the extra-biblical idea or text. Piper believes there is a *prima facie* reason to assume extra-biblical interpretations are more tenuous than biblical ones, given that they have been studied less and the Spirit can illumine our minds to the word of God. (2) The extra-biblical text or idea may represent in reality a small slice of what first-century Judaism actually believed. (3) The interpreter may grasp a general truth from an extra-biblical text but inappropriately apply it to a biblical text.<sup>58</sup>

Piper has been misunderstood by some to imply here that he is against the use of any nonbiblical texts or historical information to illumine biblical texts.<sup>59</sup> But Piper's point is simply to raise some cautions and to warn of potential distorting effects, not to

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<sup>57</sup>Piper's comment here is a bit confusing, in so far as there is nothing inherent to biblical theology that would require unwarranted or naïve dependence on historical reconstructions or extra-biblical parallels (one thinks, for example, of the work of John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 7–22). What Piper really seems to mean here by "biblical theology" is biblical theology as he sees it being practiced and advocated by N. T. Wright.

<sup>58</sup>Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 34–36.

<sup>59</sup>E.g., Michael Bird analyzes this section and writes that Piper is "dismissive" of the idea and "does not want us using Qumran or the Apocrypha to understand the NT." See Michael F. Bird, "What Is There Between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third Way in the Wright-Piper Debate," *JETS* 54 (June 2011): 300, 301.

level a decisive critique and to argue for inevitable distortion.<sup>60</sup> He is concerned that pastors have settled confidence in the authority of God's word and can communicate its sufficiency with authority without devoting a great deal of time to historical background research.<sup>61</sup>

Though Piper surely does more cultural-historical exegesis than he might think,<sup>62</sup> it nevertheless remains true that Piper offers little instruction or encouragement for this aspect of biblical interpretation. Piper's point is well taken: if forced to choose between study inside and outside the text, interpreters should stay in the text. However, Piper runs the risk of implying a false dichotomy, for we should practice both if we want to become competent interpreters of the whole counsel of God as revealed in spatiotemporal history.

### **Piper's exegetical methodology is most insightful for New Testament**

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<sup>60</sup>See, e.g., Piper's citation of Bruce Winter's historical study to understand and illumine Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians: "One of the most compelling books on the background of Paul's words about eloquence in 1 Corinthians is Bruce Winter's *Philo and Paul among the Sophists*. Winter's argument is that it is precisely the Sophists and their view of eloquence that form the backdrop of what Paul says about his own speech and how he ministered in Corinth." John Piper, "Is There Christian Eloquence?" in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 73. For Piper's general argument that the Bible is served by extra-biblical information in all sorts of ways, and yet we can rightly defend a nuanced understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture, see his blog post on "Thoughts on the Sufficiency of Scripture: What It Does and Doesn't Mean," February 9, 2005, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/thoughts-on-the-sufficiency-of-scripture> (accessed November 15, 2014).

<sup>61</sup>In a 2011 roundtable discussion with D. A. Carson and Tim Keller, <http://vimeo.com/24636177> (accessed November 4, 2013), Piper said, "If you tell me . . . if you tell the average pastor, you have to do historical research to know first-century Corinth well before you can preach authoritatively from 1 Corinthians, I'm going to say, 'I think preaching is just about over.' . . . The person who spends ten hours on the paragraph and its biblical context will probably make fewer exegetical mistakes than the person who spends ten hours reading about cultural Corinth and comes and spends an hour on the text. . . . I'm talking about the average pastor and how he can maintain his balance and his authority. I want to encourage him that the vast majority of contextually relevant things—both socially and linguistically—are in the book. And if he will be a master of this book, he will probably be a better exegete than the master of historical context." Carson responds that Piper's point is well taken, but it applies more to the New Testament epistles than it does to more obscure books like Ezekiel, which leads to the third criticism.

<sup>62</sup>A point made by Carson in the 2011 roundtable discussion.



**exposition but does not sufficiently account for the full breadth of divine revelation.**

Piper's exegetical methodology for tracing an author's argument and discerning his meaning is a sophisticated and fruitful approach, especially for the New Testament epistles. But note that the title of Piper's fullest guide to exegesis promises something more comprehensive than understanding the epistles: *Biblical Exegesis: Discovering the Meaning of Scriptural Texts*. The problem is not that arcing is inadmissible outside of the epistles, or outside of the New Testament, for wherever didactic arguments appear they can be traced through this means of textual analysis. Rather, the problem is the insufficiency of this method for interpreting the whole counsel of God with all of its concomitant genres and literary features, including non-didactic arguments expressed through narrative. The interpreter will also have to seek to discover the historical backgrounds that influence or inform the author's meaning (including the judicious use of mirror reading), as well as to learn the conventions and norms associated with biblical forms like apocalyptic, parable, poetry, prophecy, lament, song, genealogy, etc. In particular, Piper's work does not offer a great deal of guidance in interpreting narrative, though these more non-discursive texts contain their own unique conventions for conveying their argument and main point.

### **Conclusion**

Piper's academic training as a New Testament scholar put him in position to interact with, and to contribute to, the best of evangelical biblical interpretation. His personal piety and spirituality, shaped and forged by an Edwardsian worldview, allowed him not only to serve as an expositor of texts but one who practiced "expository exultation."<sup>63</sup> While his exegetical methodology needs to be supplemented so that the

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<sup>63</sup>See John Piper, "Preaching As Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation." *TrinJ* 16, no. 1 (1995): 27-45.

interpreter may be fully equipped for “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15),<sup>64</sup> Piper’s own practice of “painstaking observation” combined with his affectional engagement with the reality of the text and the God behind it, remain an encouraging model for us in the crucial quest for good exegesis to the glory of God.

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<sup>64</sup>James Hamilton Jr. suggests that another way to approach this is to view “exegesis, BT [Biblical Theology], ST [Systematic Theology], and backgrounds as tools used to accomplish a task, like maintaining the lawn. Piper is such a strong exegete and theologian that he largely accomplishes the task, and does so more effectively than most, even if he could do better at using the right tool for the right job. So his neglect of BT and backgrounds can be likened to his not employing his weed-eater and his chainsaw, which would help him with certain tasks. He doesn’t use the chainsaw, but he goes after even big limbs with his loppers, so his trees are still in good order. He doesn’t use his weed-eater, but he mows the lawn closely, so even if the edges aren’t manicured, the grass can’t grow into the driveway . . . The work on the lawn could be perfected if Piper brought all available tools to the project, but using the tools he knows well, his lawn has won the neighborhood prize for years running, if we measure by the growth of his influence and the way he has helped so many.” James M. Hamilton Jr., email to author, November 7, 2013; in my possession.

## CHAPTER 7

### JOHN PIPER'S USE OF HISTORY

The two most famous men of the transatlantic First Great Awakening provide us with warrant and warning on the Christian uses and abuses of history and biography for the purposes of spirituality. Jonathan Edwards, who diligently recorded contemporary examples of biblical piety, prefaced his edited memoirs of David Brainerd in 1747 by noting: “There are two ways of recommending true religion and virtue in the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other by instance and example.”<sup>1</sup> For Edwards, reading about the exemplary spirituality of fellow Christians could be a means of growing in godliness. Writing the very same year, the famed evangelist George Whitefield sounded a different note: “In the accounts of good men which I have read, I have observed that the writers of them have been partial. They have given us the bright, but not the dark side of their character. This, I think, proceeded from a kind of pious fraud, lest mentioning persons’ faults should encourage others in sin. It cannot, I am sure, proceed from the wisdom which cometh from above.”<sup>2</sup> These two quotes are not necessarily incompatible, but they do reveal a tension that Christians face as they think about the intersection of history and spirituality. To what degree should Christians utilize the canons of academic historiography in writing about figures from the

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, *WJE*, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 89.

<sup>2</sup>George Whitefield, *The Full Account of the Life and Dealings of God with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (London, 1747), 4, cited in Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 4. The fact that Whitefield recorded this thought in an autobiography indicates he still found value in Christians studying an account of a Christian life.

past, and to what degree should Christians use history as an explicit means of edification, even if it is dismissed by the academy as filiopietistic hagiography? In what ways, and to what degree, can the hand of God in history be interpreted as we seek to interpret the past?

Historian John Coffey, in a recent critical analysis of Martyn Lloyd-Jones's use of history, noted that "Few pastors have displayed such a sustained interest in both reading and promoting church history, though a similar emphasis can be seen in the writings of the contemporary American Reformed pastor John Piper, who shares many of the same passions as Lloyd-Jones."<sup>3</sup> Piper can serve as a test case for exploring some of these issues, since he has become a well-known popularizer of historical biography for the purposes of spirituality. In this chapter I will summarize and evaluate Piper's use of history as a means of edification for the Christian life. I will then seek to situate his perspective within the wider conversation about the purposes and place of providence in Christian historiography.

## **Piper and Biography**

### **Piper's Attraction to Biography**

Piper's relationship to biography can be analyzed in accordance with his use of biographies for his own spiritual nourishment and his production of biographies for the edification of others. I will explore the first, followed by the second. "Biographies," Piper writes, "have served as much as any other human force in my life to resist the inertia of mediocrity."<sup>4</sup> Upon becoming pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1980, Piper sought

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<sup>3</sup>John Coffey, "Lloyd-Jones and the Protestant Past," in *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of 'the Doctor,'* ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2011), 301.

<sup>4</sup>John Piper, "Brothers, Read Christian Biography," *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 107.

out biographies in order to charge his “pastoral batteries” and to give him both guidance and encouragement.<sup>5</sup> There was a season in his pastorate when Warren Wiersbe’s *Walking with the Giants* and *Listening to the Giants* greatly encouraged him in his work.<sup>6</sup> “The main reason these collections of mini-biographies have been helpful is that they showed diversity of pastoral styles God has chosen to bless. There have been great and fruitful pastors whose preaching patterns, visitation habits, and personalities were so different that all of us may take courage.”<sup>7</sup> Piper recognizes that “many of the most faithful and fruitful missionaries are almost completely unknown, except in the all-important books of heaven. But the lives of some have been recorded on earth.” Piper expresses gratitude for this: “They are a source of great strength to me. That’s why I read about their lives.”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere he writes, “Few things inspire me to live radically for Christ more than the story of those who did.”<sup>9</sup>

Well-chosen Christian biography, Piper argues, uniquely combines several things that pastors need but usually have little time to pursue, which means that “Good biographies of great Christians make for remarkably efficient reading.”<sup>10</sup> First, good biography is history, which guards us against what C. S. Lewis calls “chronological snobbery.”<sup>11</sup> Second, good biography is the most powerful kind of theology, “because it

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<sup>5</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 107.

<sup>6</sup>Warren Wiersbe, *Walking with the Giants: A Minister’s Guide to Good Reading and Great Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); Warren Wiersbe, *Listening to the Giants: A Guide to Good Reading and Great Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>7</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 108–09.

<sup>8</sup>John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ: The Cost of Bringing the Gospel to the Nations in the Lives of William Tyndale, Adoniram Judson, and John Paton* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 16.

<sup>9</sup>Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions*, 10.

<sup>10</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 107.

<sup>11</sup>For a brief discussion of this theme in Lewis and its impact upon Piper, see ch. 3 above.

bursts forth from the lives of people.”<sup>12</sup> Third, good biography is adventure and suspense, for which we naturally hunger. Fourth, good theology encompasses psychology and personal experience, which deepen our understanding of human nature, especially knowledge of ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

Piper also sees biography as a means of perseverance and a ballast against discouragement:

What I have found . . . is that in my pastoral disappointments and discouragements there is a great power for perseverance in keeping before me the life of a man who surmounted great obstacles in obedience to God’s call by the power of God’s grace. I need very much this inspiration from another age, because I know that I am, in great measure, a child of my times. . . . When you are surrounded by a society of emotionally fragile quitters, and when you see a good bit of this ethos in yourself, you need to spend time with people—whether dead or alive—whose lives prove there is another way to live.<sup>14</sup>

Piper is a pastor inspired by biography who wants other pastors to be helped in the same way. He writes that God “regularly uses human agents to stir up His people. So the question for us pastors is: Through what human agents does God give us vision and direction and inspiration? For me, one of the most important answers has been great men and women of faith who, though dead, are yet speaking (Heb. 11:4).”<sup>15</sup>

### **Piper’s Delivery of Biography**

In 1988 Piper founded the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, an annual event designed to serve and instruct pastors through teaching and fellowship. At the first conference, Piper gave a biographical address on “The Pastor as Theologian: Life and

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<sup>12</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 107.

<sup>13</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 107.

<sup>14</sup>John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 17–18.

<sup>15</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 107.

Ministry of Jonathan Edwards.”<sup>16</sup> Piper later reflected on the significance of this yearly endeavor and commended the practice to fellow pastors, calling it “One of the most fruitful disciplines I have ever undertaken . . . . This has forced me to do more reading than I would have without this commitment. . . . I would encourage all pastors to consider presenting to their people an inspiring biographical study of some great Christian at least once a year.”<sup>17</sup>

Piper has now produced an “inspiring biography study” each year. Beginning in 2000, six volumes of three addresses each have been published in Piper’s *The Swans Are Not Silent* series, published by Crossway. The books published thus far are grouped together by the topics of joy, affliction, perseverance, defense of truth, cost of missionary service, and poetic effort.<sup>18</sup> In addition to these published pieces, Piper has also delivered unpublished biographical messages on Charles Simeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Charles Spurgeon, George Müller, William Piper (John’s father), Robert Murray McCheyne, J. C. Ryle, and Hudson Taylor.

Table 2 shows Piper’s biographical subjects in terms of their chronology, primary place of ministry, and vocation. Of the 27 biographies delivered, all of the subjects are male; over half (56 percent) are primarily associated with the eighteenth and

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<sup>16</sup>John Piper, “The Pastor as Theologian: Life and Ministry of Jonathan Edwards,” April 15, 1988, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/the-pastor-as-theologian> (accessed May 31, 2014). This biographical talk has largely been incorporated into Piper’s chapter on “Jonathan Edwards, the Man and His Life: Learning from an Unmodern Evangelical,” in *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 49–75.

<sup>17</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 113 n. 18.

<sup>18</sup>John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God’s Triumphant Joy in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*; John Piper, *Contending for Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ*; John Piper, *Seeing and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

nineteenth centuries, over two-thirds (67 percent) are British (with 19 percent American), at least two-thirds (67 percent) would be sympathetic to or proponents of Calvinistic soteriology, and nearly half (48 percent) are vocational pastors.<sup>19</sup>

### **Piper's Limitations and Genre**

Piper knows that he is not doing professional or academic history, and therefore he offers a disclaimer to his work:

There are enough academic remnants left in me to include even more of a disclaimer, and enough of the pastor in me to restrict it to a footnote and be unashamed: My historical efforts in these biographies lay claim to no comprehensiveness or originality of research. I lean heavily, but not totally, on secondary sources that I cite generously as a tribute and for verification. In search of God's providence and grace, I ransack the sources for evidences of what makes a person tick spiritually.<sup>20</sup>

Piper acknowledges that he brings “huge Christian assumptions” to this task—for example, “that God exists and is involved in the lives of these men, and that the Bible is true and gives valid interpretations of experience. . . .” He knows that he is not giving “deep and broad attention to the wider historical setting and culture in which they lived.” The list of limitations, he says, could be multiplied. The point, he explains, is that “I am a pastor reading and writing between sermon preparation, staff leadership, prayer meetings, building programs, church-planting efforts, and so forth. If academic historians say, ‘Farewell,’ I don’t blame them. I only hope that what I write is true and helps people endure to the end.”<sup>21</sup>

Piper does not consider his biographical messages to be either “expositions of Scripture” or “lectures.” They are, he writes, “passionately personal and, at times, will

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<sup>19</sup>For these purposes I am counting Edwards and Brainerd as Americans, given their location, though they were still British citizens living in the Colonies.

<sup>20</sup>Piper, *Roots of Endurance*, 11 n. 4.

<sup>21</sup>Piper, *Roots of Endurance*, 11 n. 4.



Table 2. Piper's biographical subjects

Subject	Born–Died	Country	Profession
Athanasius	c. 299–373	Egypt	Pastor-theologian
Augustine	354–430	Roman Africa	Pastor-theologian
Martin Luther	1483–1546	Germany	Professor-theologian
William Tyndale	c. 1494–1536	England	Scholar
John Calvin	1509–1564	Switzerland	Pastor-theologian
George Herbert	1593–1633	England	Pastor-poet
John Owen	1616–1683	England	Pastor-theologian
John Bunyan	1628–1688	England	Pastor-author
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	American colonies	Pastor-theologian
George Whitefield	1714–1770	England/American colonies	Evangelist
David Brainerd	1718–1747	American colonies	Missionary
John Newton	1725–1807	England	Pastor-hymnist
William Cowper	1731–1800	England	Poet
Andrew Fuller	1754–1815	England	Pastor-theologian
William Wilberforce	1759–1833	England	Politician
Charles Simeon	1759–1836	England	Pastor
Adoniram Judson	1788–1850	Burma	Missionary
George Müller	1805–1898	England	Evangelist
Robert Murray M'Cheyne	1813–1843	Scotland	Pastor
J. C. Ryle	1816–1900	England	Pastor
John Paton	1824–1907	New Hebrides Islands	Missionary
Hudson Taylor	1832–1905	China	Missionary
Charles Spurgeon	1834–1892	England	Pastor
J. Gresham Machen	1881–1937	United States	Scholar
C. S. Lewis	1898–1963	England	Scholar-author
D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones	1899–1981	England	Pastor
William S. H. Piper	1919–2007	United States	Evangelist

taste like preaching. There is no attempt here at dispassionate distance from my subject matter.” He is up-front with the fact that these messages have a goal which is not hidden: “I long to endure to the end for the glory of Christ, and I want to help others do the same. I believe God has ordained the history of sustaining grace in the lives of his living and long-dead people as a means to that end. God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated saints who have endured to the end are one of the roots of our own endurance.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Piper’s Selection of Biographical Subjects**

Piper chooses the subjects for his biographical studies primarily by looking at pastors in history, finding one that has something that other pastors need, and then studying the person’s life and work for several months.<sup>23</sup> He is influenced in his selection of biographical subjects by the perspective of Benjamin Brook (1776–1848), a nonconformist divine and historian:

Of all the books which can be put into your hands, those which relate the labors and suffering of good men are the most interesting and instructive. In them you see orthodox principles, Christian tempers, and holy duties in lovely union and in vigorous operation. In them you see religion shining forth in real life, subduing the corruptions of human nature, and inspiring a zeal for every good work. In them you see the reproaches and persecutions which the servants of God have endured; those gracious principles which have supported their minds; and the course they have pursued in their progress to the kingdom of heaven. Such books are well calculated to engage your attention, to affect your feelings, to deepen your best impressions, and to invigorate your noblest resolutions. They are well calculated to fortify you against the allurements of a vain world; to assimilate your characters to those of the excellent of the earth; to conform your lives to the standard of holiness; and to educate your souls for the mansions of glory.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Piper, *Roots of Endurance*, 10–11.

<sup>23</sup>John Piper, “The Tough Roots of His Habitual Tenderness,” January 30, 2001, audio version, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/john-newton-the-tough-roots-of-his-habitual-tenderness> (accessed May 31, 2014).

<sup>24</sup>Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, 3 vols. (1813, repr., Pittsburgh, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994, orig. 1813), 1:vi–vii, cited in Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 10–11.

## Piper's Reasons Why Christians Should Read Biography

Piper offers several reasons why Christians should read biography as a means of grace. First, good biographies are enjoyable and give us joy. “O, the refreshing, liberating, exhilarating experience of living for several days with the saints in another century!”<sup>25</sup> Second, “The story of a good and holy life is a strong defense and confirmation of true Christianity and the beauty of goodness.”<sup>26</sup> Third, there is Scriptural precedence and prescription for recalling and benefiting from the lives of the saints in the past. Piper concludes from Hebrews 13:7—“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their life way of life, and imitate their faith”—that “we are commanded to ponder the lives of faithful leaders, and trace out the issue of their lives to the end, and imitate the way faith shaped their conduct.”<sup>27</sup> He points out that in Hebrews 13:7, ἔκβασις (translated “outcome”) is used in only one other place in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 10:13 (“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide *the way of escape* [ἔκβασις], that you may be able to endure it”). The idea behind this word, Piper writes, is both “a way out” and the “result of a way.” Therefore, he interprets Hebrews 13:7 to refer to “*the finishing of a way of life that leads out of this life into the next.*” Christians are commanded to “consider the *outcome* of his [i.e., a leader’s] way of life,” which entails considering “how a leader’s life leads to the completion of his journey.”<sup>28</sup> As a Christian, Piper writes, “I am commanded to remember my leaders who spoke to me the word of God,

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<sup>25</sup>John Piper, “Thank God for Diaries, Journals, and Biography!” January 29, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/thank-god-for-diaries-journals-and-biography> (accessed May 31, 2014).

<sup>26</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 50.

<sup>27</sup>Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 49–50.

<sup>28</sup>Piper, “When You Start to Outlive Your Heroes.”

and to watch them finish, and then imitate the faith that bore them safely and fruitfully to the ‘outcome.’”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to Hebrews 13:7, Piper also appeals to Hebrews 11 as “a divine mandate to read Christian biography.”<sup>30</sup> As the writer to the Hebrews works through seventeen figures from the Old Testament and alludes to several more without specifying their names, Piper sees a connection between the use of the past and being equipped for the present: “The unmistakable implication of the chapter is that if we hear about the faith of our forefathers (and mothers), we will ‘lay aside every weight, and sin’ and ‘run with endurance the race that is set before us’ (Heb. 12:1).” “If we asked the author [of Hebrews], ‘How shall we stir one another up to love and good works?’ (10:24), his answer would be: ‘Through encouragement from the living and *the dead*’ (10:25; 11:1–40).”<sup>31</sup>

### **Piper on Heroes and Flawed Saints**

Piper believes with all his heart that God wants us to have heroes.<sup>32</sup> He wants Christians “to feel drawn . . . to the value of having some great heroes in the ministry. There are not many around today. And God wills that we have heroes. . . . It seems to me that the Christian leaders today who come closest to *being* heroes are the ones who *had* great heroes. I hope you have one or two, living or dead.”<sup>33</sup>

Piper recognizes that our relationship to the saints of the past can be

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<sup>29</sup>Piper, “When You Start to Outlive Your Heroes.”

<sup>30</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 106.

<sup>31</sup>Piper, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography,” 106.

<sup>32</sup>John Piper, “The Chief Design of My Life: Mortification and Universal Holiness: Reflections on the Life and Thought of John Owen,” January 25, 1994, audio version, <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/the-chief-design-of-my-life-mortification-and-universal-holiness> (accessed May 31, 2014).

<sup>33</sup>Piper, *Contending for Our All*, 82.

complicated. Those who are worthy of sustained attention—especially when the aim is edification—will often be regarded as heroes. At the same time, there is no such thing as a saint who is not a sinner. It takes wisdom to encounter this paradox in a wise and godly way. Piper writes:

When it comes to heroes, there is an easy downward slip from the desire for imitation to the discouragement of intimidation to the deadness of resignation. But the mark of humility and faith and maturity is to stand against the paralyzing effect of famous saints. The triumphs they achieved over their own flagrant sins and flaws should teach us not to be daunted by our own. God never yet used a flawless man, save one. Nor will he ever, until Jesus comes again.<sup>34</sup>

Of Charles Spurgeon, who evidenced legendary productivity in the cause of the gospel, Piper asks, “What shall we make of such a man?” He answers, “Neither a god nor a goal. He should not be worshiped or envied. He is too small for the one and too big for the other. If we worship such men, we are idolaters. If we envy them, we are fools.” He explains: “Mountains are not meant to be envied. They are meant to be marveled at for the sake of their Maker. They are mountains of God. . . . We are to benefit from them without craving to be like them. When we learn this, we can relax and enjoy them. . . . Let us be, by the grace of God, all that we can be for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 15:10). In our smallness, let’s not become smaller by envy, but rather larger by humble admiration and gratitude for the gifts of others.”<sup>35</sup> Piper also argues that we must view the flaws of our heroes through the lens of the gospel: “thank God with me that when we fail, and when all of our earthly examples fail, we can—we must—look to the flawless author and finisher of our faith, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:2).”<sup>36</sup>

Even as we seek to resist the paralysis of envy, we must also work against the

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<sup>34</sup>Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 143–44.

<sup>35</sup>John Piper, “Mountains Are Not Meant to Envy: Awed Thoughts on Charles Spurgeon,” in *A Godward Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 264–65.

<sup>36</sup>Piper, “When You Start to Outlive Your Heroes.”

impulse of disillusionment as we encounter the sins of the saints. “God ordains,” Piper writes, “that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God.”<sup>37</sup> “The history of the world is a field strewn with broken stones, which are sacred altars designed to waken worship in the hearts of those who will take the time to read and remember.”<sup>38</sup> At the end of the day, “The lives of our flawed Christian heroes are inspiring for two reasons: because they were flawed (like us) and because they were great (unlike us). Their flaws give us hope that maybe God could use us too. Their greatness inspires us to venture beyond the ordinary.”<sup>39</sup>

### **The Purposes of History**

Piper distinguishes between the primary and secondary purposes of history. The primary purpose, he says, is “to glorify the God who plans, sustains, governs, enters, transforms, and renovates history. That’s why he does all those things.”<sup>40</sup> Beneath this overarching purpose of history are several secondary designs. For example, Piper argues, history rescues the Psalmist from despair (Ps 77:11–14, “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples”).<sup>41</sup> History also educates the next generation (Ps 78:4, “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and

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<sup>37</sup>Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 19.

<sup>38</sup>Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 19.

<sup>39</sup>Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 17–18.

<sup>40</sup>John Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014; in my possession.

<sup>41</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

his might, and the wonders that he has done”).<sup>42</sup> History also provides us with knowledge and wisdom: “God ordains that events happen and that they get recorded as history so that we will learn them and become wiser and more insightful about the present for the sake of Christ and his church.”<sup>43</sup> History can also inspire us to do great things: “How does it come about that an ordinary person breaks out of the ruts of humdrum life to do something remarkable? It usually happens because of the inspiration of a man or woman they admire.”<sup>44</sup> Finally, history offers us “one of the best protections against the folly of the future.”<sup>45</sup> “If we do not know history, we will be weak and poor in our efforts to be faithful in our day.”<sup>46</sup>

Piper believes that “there are life-giving lessons written by the hand of Divine Providence on every page of history.”<sup>47</sup> And the purpose of providence in history is worship: “Ten thousand stories of grace and truth are meant to be remembered for the refinement of faith and the sustaining of hope and the guidance of love.” Citing Romans 15:4 (“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”), Piper writes, “Those who nurture their hope in the history of grace will live their lives to the glory of God.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

<sup>43</sup>Piper, “The Value of Learning History,” 96.

<sup>44</sup>Piper, “Thanksgiving for the Lives of Flawed Saints,” 74.

<sup>45</sup>Piper, “The Value of Learning History,” 96.

<sup>46</sup>Piper, *Contending for Our All*, 139.

<sup>47</sup>Piper, *Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 37.

<sup>48</sup>Piper, *Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 17–18.

## The Evangelical Historiography Debate

For several years Christian historians have engaged in discussion, and at times contentious debate, about the proper way that Christian history should be written. As John Fea notes, “we are all in search of a usable past.”<sup>49</sup> But Christian historians divide over whether the primary purpose of biography and history should be hagiographical (for purposes of edification) or critical (taking a “warts and all” approach), and whether historians should interpret the past through the lens of God’s providence or concentrate on secondary causation in accordance with the accepted canons of academic historiography.<sup>50</sup> We will consider these issues in turn.

### Hagiography vs. Criticism

In 1991 Harry S. Stout, professor of American Christianity at Yale University, wrote a critical biography of George Whitefield. Piper judges it to be “the most sustained piece of historical cynicism I have ever read. In the first 100 pages of this book, I wrote the word *cynical* in the margin 70 times.”<sup>51</sup> He goes so far as to say that Stout, a Reformed evangelical, should be ashamed of his work.<sup>52</sup> Tom J. Nettles likewise takes Stout to task:

[W]hen a Christian historian reads the diary of a successful minister, in this case George Whitefield, who says, ‘Lord, not unto me, but unto Thy free grace be all the glory!’ he should have enough documentation to nullify a judgment that the

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<sup>49</sup>John Fea, *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 48.

<sup>50</sup>For a helpful *status quaestionis* on the debate, see Ian Hugh Clary, “Reformed Evangelicalism and the Search for a Usable Past: The Case-Study of Arnold Dallimore, Pastor-Historian” (PhD diss., University of the Free State [Bloemfontein], 2015), chap. 1.

<sup>51</sup>Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 91. Stout’s biography is *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>52</sup>John Piper, “‘I Will Not Be a Velvet-Mouthed Preacher!’ The Life and Ministry of George Whitefield: Living and Preaching as Though Were Real (Because He Is),” February 3, 2009, audio version available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies/i-will-not-be-a-velvet-mouthed-preacher> (accessed June 1, 2014).



minister's popularity was due to 'shameless self-promotion through the press and word-of-mouth.' Christian experience should give a historian empathy with such expressed spirituality and should forestall the conclusion that the words are a cloak for self-promotion unless irrefutable evidence to the contrary can be produced."<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, someone like Iain H. Murray is regularly taken to task by professional Christian historians for his lack of criticism toward those whom he admires. David F. Wright, in a review of Murray's *Evangelicalism Divided*, writes: "This book would be a more humanely sympathetic exercise if only it betrayed some slight recognition that Lloyd-Jones, too, had feet of clay."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Carl R. Trueman laments that Murray wrote a "massive two volume biography" of Lloyd-Jones "which contained virtually no criticism whatsoever."<sup>55</sup> "The world is full of Lloyd-Jones fans," Trueman writes, "who keep telling us that the man had his faults, but who never specify exactly what they are or what impact they had, and who are merciless with those who attempt to do so."<sup>56</sup> Stout points to Murray's biography of Jonathan Edwards, where there is no mention of Edwards's bill of sale for slaves, or Sarah Edwards's purchase of a slave from Joseph Bellamy: "These do not reflect well on the subjects, so they are left out. The omissions are justified out of loyalty to the faith and its propagation."<sup>57</sup>

Stout suggests there are "two different models for Christian history-writing, each with its own legitimately theological justification."<sup>58</sup> He explains the method he

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<sup>53</sup>Tom J. Nettles, "Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*: A Review Article," *The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie* 6 (Spring 1996): 67–79.

<sup>54</sup>David F. Wright, "Review Article, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*, by Iain H. Murray," *Reformation & Revival* 10 (Spring 2001): 128.

<sup>55</sup>Carl Trueman, "On the Gloucestershire Way of Identifying Sheep: A Response to Iain Murray," *Reformation* 21 (March 2010), <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/on-the-gloucestershire-way-of-identifying-sheep-a-response-to-iain-murray.php> (accessed May 31, 2014).

<sup>56</sup>Trueman, "On the Gloucestershire Way of Identifying Sheep."

<sup>57</sup>Harry S. Stout and Iain H. Murray, "Reviewers Reviewed," *Banner of Truth* 378 (March 1995): 9.

<sup>58</sup>Stout and Murray, "Reviewers Reviewed," 8–9.

sees Murray advocating:

In this tradition of church history writing, any historical fact or quality that is not salutary or praiseworthy is forgotten for the larger spiritual sake of propagating the gospel. This history-as-propagation is history in the service of witness, and secondarily, history in the service of theology. It originated in the crucible of persecution when the faith was a minority faith, and when writers felt their only obligation was to encourage the persecuted faithful and celebrate faithfulness. Early historians of the church dwelt on martyrs and the faithful, never acknowledging there were cowards who renounced their faith. Considerations that might discredit the faith and the faithful were consigned to silence. As Calvinists, we recognize that controversies and fall-outs—to say nothing of cowardice—have always been part of the church militant. Yet these church historians deliberately ignored instances of cravenness.<sup>59</sup>

Mark A. Noll summarizes it this way:

With Iain Murray . . . history is an explicit subdiscipline of theology. As a staunch Calvinist, Murray aims singlemindedly at spiritual edification, as that edification is defined by his interpretation of the Scriptures. In this approach, history is an arena in which to trace God's manifest actions with individuals, groups, and societies—in order to reinforce the truths of Calvinism about the innate sinfulness of humans, the freedom of God's grace, and the foolishness of thinking that people can in any way bring about their own salvation.<sup>60</sup>

Stout contrasts Murray's approach with his own perspective, where the “implicit theological grounding says, in effect, ‘it's ok to treat our subjects critically, even as we share a common faith and worship’.”<sup>61</sup> Stout appeals here to both the Old Testament and New Testament, “whose model of history-writing and story-telling is emphatically ‘warts and all’.”<sup>62</sup> In the historical records of Scripture we see Abraham

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<sup>59</sup>Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 9. Stout quotes Eusebius of Caesarea as an example: “But it is not for us to describe their miserable vicissitudes, as things turned out, just as it is not part of our task to leave on record their faction-fights and their unnatural conduct towards each other, prior to the persecution. That is why we have decided to say no more about them than suffices for us to justify God's Judgment . . . We shall rather set forth in our whole narrative only what may be of profit, first, to our own times, and then to later times.”

<sup>60</sup>Mark Noll, “How We Remember Revivals: The Virtues and Vices of Tribal History,” *Christianity Today* 39 (April 24, 1995): 31.

<sup>61</sup>Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 9.

<sup>62</sup>Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 9.

selling his wife into slavery, Moses murdering an Egyptian slave guard and smashing the autographed Word of God against a mountainside, David pursuing an adulterous relationship and setting up the husband of his mistress for death and then presiding over a household of traitors and murderers while crying “Absalom, Absalom,” Saul murdering Stephen, and Peter running scared.<sup>63</sup> “We serve a risen Christ,” Stout writes, “who has died to set us free—sinners all.”<sup>64</sup>

Murray, in response, denies that “the best interests of Christian biography are served by the suppression of facts which would be detrimental to the reputation of its subject. Biography which is not true to life is seriously artificial and it also carries with it the danger of inculcating an unrealistic kind of idealism in the younger generation.”<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, however, Murray critiques the “warts and all” approach to biography, lamenting that a biographer will be accused of “hagiography” if he doesn’t take his subject down a notch or two. “Hagiography,” in Murray’s worldview, is “a strange word to use in a pejorative sense.”<sup>66</sup> Appealing to a Christocentric reading of Psalm 112:6 (“the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance”), Murray writes that “True Christian biography should therefore concentrate on what is edifying and for the praise of Christ.”<sup>67</sup> “By all means let us appeal to Scripture as a guide for honest historical writing, but Scripture never stops at the sins and failures of believers, it goes on to show the triumph of God’s purposes and grace in their lives.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 9.

<sup>64</sup>Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 9.

<sup>65</sup>On his omission of slavery from the life of Edwards, Murray says, “the practice was so universal at that time that, like other biographers of Edwards, I saw no particular occasion to draw attention to it.” Stout and Murray, “Reviewers Reviewed,” 11.

<sup>66</sup>Murray, *Heroes* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), x.

<sup>67</sup>Murray, *Heroes*, xi.

<sup>68</sup>Murray, *Heroes*, x–xi.

## Historical Interpretations of Providential History and Observable Causations

A related, though distinct, issue is the legitimacy or illegitimacy of providential readings of Scripture among Christians engaged in the historical task. Fea notes that “With the establishment of the historical profession in the late nineteenth century, serious attempts at providential history began to fall out of favor. History became a science, and thus references to God’s intrusion in human affairs were no longer considered a legitimate way of practicing the discipline.”<sup>69</sup> Among Christians, the shift became more pronounced with the rise of the “the new evangelical historiography,” a cohort of evangelical historians who came to prominence in the 1980s.<sup>70</sup> The best known of these historians in the United States include Reformed historians George M. Marsden, Harry S. Stout, Mark Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, along with non-Reformed historians like Grant Wacker, Edith Blumhofer, and Donald Dayton. The late George Rawlyk in Canada and David Bebbington in Great Britain are also counted among this group. Timothy Larsen notes: “Significantly, the members of this cohort—although self-identifying as evangelical—carefully positioned themselves and their work inside the wider academy and the mainstream history guild. A rarity for evangelical scholars at that time, they have earned their Ph.D. degrees at prestigious research universities. . . . Their research articles have been published in leading peer-review journals and their books with elite university presses.”<sup>71</sup>

The issue being debated is not whether providence exists or whether it should be affirmed. Although Christian historians may disagree among themselves regarding the

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<sup>69</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 70.

<sup>70</sup>See Maxie B. Burch, *The Evangelical Historians: The Historiography of George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, and Mark Noll* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

<sup>71</sup>Timothy Larsen, “Evangelicals, the Academy, and the Discipline of History,” in *Beyond Integration? Inter/Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education*, ed. Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and David L. Riggs (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 107.

precise nature or extent of God's providence, all affirm its reality and importance as those who trust in the God who has decisively revealed himself through Christ in his authoritative Word. On the one hand, the area of contention has to do with epistemological confidence: can a historian read providence from events as an interpretive tool of historiography? It also has to do with contextualization: is a Christian historian writing for a secular audience obligated to convey all that he believes?

Nettles provides a vigorous defense of providential historiography. He critiques the new evangelical historiographers as "cautious evangelical historians who discipline their writing by the conviction that their final product must be profane, not in the sense of aggressive blasphemy, but in the sense of being defined by non-religious purposes."<sup>72</sup> Nettles believes that "A theist who tries to write history as if there were no God, performs as, and presents the world as, an atheist."<sup>73</sup> Providence is key for Nettles: "If the factor of providence . . . may be as easily excluded with no loss of coherence in argument, does this not qualify as an argument for atheism?"<sup>74</sup> Nettles suggests that the Christian faith involved "a kind of connectedness with history that expands the possible explanatory framework of empirical data" and that Christian experience involves "an expansion of awareness which operates both subjectively and objectively in the historiographical process."<sup>75</sup>

But not all who object to providentialist readings do so for the same reasons. Trueman offers two objections. First, providential readings of history "attempt to explain particulars in terms of a universal, which is remarkably unhelpful in its limitations." Trueman gives the illustration of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Saying that the Twin

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<sup>72</sup>Nettles, "Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*," 70.

<sup>73</sup>Nettles, "Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*," 71.

<sup>74</sup>Nettles, "Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*," 72–73.

<sup>75</sup>Nettles, "Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*," 77.

Towers fell because of providence says little more than saying they fell because of gravity. “To claim the latter is to speak truth, but it is also to explain nothing about what really happened that day.” The provenance of the historian is found in the particulars, but providence is a universal, since God causes all things. According to Trueman, “universal causes are of no great use in particular explanations.” Second, Trueman judges that providential readings of history “claim to read God’s will off the surface of historical events in a glib and easy manner.” The problem, Trueman avers, is that the claim is unfalsifiable. “Once the ‘God’s providence’ card is played, the argument is over.” Furthermore, the providence pronouncement entails a “gnostic connection to which others have no access.” In summary, “providence may well be a sound theological doctrine, but it really has no place in the toolbox of the historian because it pushes the historian beyond the realms of what is and is not verifiable according to the canons of evidence and interpretation.”<sup>76</sup>

Fea shares this perspective. “Providence,” he writes, “is a theological idea that is directly related to the character and behavior of God. History, however, is a discipline that seeks to explain the character and behavior of humans as they lived through time.”<sup>77</sup> According to Fea, “providence is an unhelpful category in the interpretation of the past.”<sup>78</sup> It belongs in the toolbox of the theologian but not that of the historian. Fea builds his case theologically. God’s providence is an inscrutable mystery, and human interpreters are finite and fallible. Therefore, “Christian historians would do better to approach their task with a sense of God’s transcendent mystery, a healthy dose of humility, and a hope that one day soon, but not now, we will all understand the

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<sup>76</sup>Carl R. Trueman, *History and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 166–67.

<sup>77</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 68.

<sup>78</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 69.

Almighty's plans for the nations.”<sup>79</sup> Fea's plea is that writers of providential history “resist the temptation to bow to the gods of modernity—gods who want to scientifically decipher the workings of the divine and claim to know, with a degree of Enlightenment certainty, the will of a sovereign God who created the modern world and will end it when he sees fit. Until then, we see through a glass darkly.”<sup>80</sup>

Timothy Larsen, who writes academic history using “methodological naturalism,” insists that “This is not, as is often said or at least implied, a mere pandering to the secular academy, a refusal to say all that I know or ought to know as a believer in order to gain outside recognition.”<sup>81</sup> Nor does Larsen, who is theologically charismatic, deny that Christians can have access to a divine perspective on contemporary events.

What he objects to

is the assumption that doing historical research generates such insights. This is to confuse the work of an academic historian with the ministry of the prophet. Events by themselves are too ambiguous—good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to faithful people—to identify definitively any such cause-and-effect chain by natural means. To declare that an earthquake is a divine judgment and not just a tragedy to be endured is to speak for God; and more, to the point, to declare ‘thus saith the Lord’ without being inspired by the Holy Spirit is a foolish, dangerous, and indeed sinful, act. A major theme of both the Bible and the Christian tradition (not least Reformed thought) is that God's ways are often inscrutable.<sup>82</sup>

Stout frames his discussion by delineating three levels of history, each of which is proper within its sphere and improper when applied outside of it: (1) temporal or mundane history, (2) providential history, and (3) divine or inspired history. Temporal or mundane history has to do with “natural or secondary causes; the social, political, economic, and intellectual history that all historians, whatever their personal beliefs,

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<sup>79</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 81.

<sup>80</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 83.

<sup>81</sup>Larsen, “Evangelicals, the Academy, and the Discipline of History,” 110–11.

<sup>82</sup>Larsen, “Evangelicals, the Academy, and the Discipline of History,” 110–11.

practice by observing the rules of evidence and adhering to a common pursuit of truth that all can agree upon.” Providential history is “seen through the lens of supernatural faith.” This is what makes Christian historians different from non-Christian historians. The former believe and assert that “the ultimate force in history, lying behind and above all secondary causes, is the God of Scripture.” The non-Christian historians might ascribe finality to this or that mundane force or factor, but Christians see God’s sovereign hand not only in Scripture but also in the ongoing history of the church. The Christian historian should affirm God’s grand providence, a perspective distinct from both non-Christian historians (who assign determination and sovereignty to the mundane) and fellow Christians (who are tempted to assign definitive finality to their own interpretation of providence). Divine or inspired history is confined to a small company: “God and to those ancient biblical chroniclers who wrote through direct, divine inspiration.” As a Protestant, Stout believes that Scripture is the only text of divine and sacred history. “There is no other inspired history anytime, anywhere . . . it must be read and received as *sui generis*.”<sup>83</sup>

Whereas Stout critiques non-Christian historians for confusing the first and second levels of interpretation (mundane history and providential history), he critiques some of his fellow Protestants for failing to make the necessary distinctions between the second and third levels (providential history and divine history). He admires and commends the deep faith of people like the Puritans or those who debate whether American is a “chosen nation,” while disagreeing with their “conviction bordering on biblical certainty.”<sup>84</sup> They might affirm the uniqueness of the Bible, but their writing can read like another chapter added to the Holy Scriptures. Stout argues that if the

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<sup>83</sup>Harry S. Stout, “Biography as Battleground: The Competing Legacies of the Religious Historian,” *Books & Culture* 2 (July/August 1996): 10.

<sup>84</sup>Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 10.



interpretive layers are not kept within their proper spheres, the result is a problem of “massive propositions,” namely, that of “horribly distorted legacies.” He gives an example from his biography of Whitefield, showing two things that he could have done but would have been serious mistakes. If he had made a factor in Whitefield’s life (class, culture, gender, childhood experience) the sole determinant of his ministry, he would have “crossed a line the Christian cannot cross—the line of misplaced providence.”<sup>85</sup> He would have attributed sovereignty to a secondary feature whereas, in reality, “there is only one sovereign determiner of people and events.”<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, Stout says that if he were to proclaim with finality that the Calvinistic friends of Whitefield were coterminous with the friends of God and that the Arminian antagonists of Whitefield were the enemies of the gospel, then “I would be guilty of assuming a divine vantage point on the past.”<sup>87</sup>

Bebbington argues that “Divine interventions seem to be a necessary element in a Christian view of history.”<sup>88</sup> The Christian historian “can write in conformity with his convictions that God is guiding the whole historical process. . . . He can say, for instance, that when good surprisingly emerges from evil, God is evidently at work. . . . The historian should take providence into account.”<sup>89</sup> Bebbington even sees the danger of *not* recognizing divine providence in history: “If a Christian historian tries to write without a thought for providence, he is likely to succumb to some alternative view or

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<sup>85</sup>Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 10.

<sup>86</sup>Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 10.

<sup>87</sup>Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 10..

<sup>88</sup>David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought*, repr. ed. (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>89</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 184.

blend of views that happen to be in fashion.”<sup>90</sup> But providence is something a Christian cannot plausibly deny given what he has experienced: “The Christian . . . is aware of divine activity not only in the world but also in his own life. Personal experience of the intervention of God inclines him to discern it in the world as well.”<sup>91</sup> At the same time, Bebbington sounds a note of warning: the Christian historian “remains a fallible human being who can speak only with diffidence beyond his own experience. He will be cautious about identifying the divine interventions that he believes to take place in the historical process. He does not so much see them as glimpse them. The perception of particular providences, however real they may be, is no straightforward matter.”<sup>92</sup>

### **Different Approaches for Different Audiences**

Bebbington raises a practical problem that confronts a Christian historian: “If he makes plain his religious commitment in his writing, will he not be excluding it from general notice and certainly from academic attention?”<sup>93</sup> Bebbington states the situation frankly: “Historiography that draws attention to traces of providence is unacceptable to the world at large.”<sup>94</sup> Bebbington responds by reminding us of the rhetorical function of historiography. The historian writes not for himself but for a specific audience, and therefore, “His arguments have to be framed so as to persuade his audience of the validity of his case.”<sup>95</sup> If what the historian writes is likely to be ignored outside of the community of faith, then perhaps “a providential framework should be more explicit in

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<sup>90</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 186.

<sup>91</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 173.

<sup>92</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 173.

<sup>93</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 186.

<sup>94</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 186.

<sup>95</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 186.

some pieces of writing than in others.”<sup>96</sup>

Even when a piece of history has been shorn of specific Christian allusions, the Christian vision of history can still have shaped its composition. The task can be conceived from the beginning as an investigation of the historical process under God’s control although no reference is eventually made to his activity. The final version will still be entirely consistent with the Christian view of history. What is written will be a distinctively Christian product, but the Christian content will be implicit rather than explicit. If the same piece of history is needed for a Christian audience or to vindicate a Christian position, reference to providence can readily be restored. The Christian historian can discern God at work in the past without necessarily writing of him there. . . . [T]he Christian historian is not obliged to tell the whole truth as he sees it in every piece of historical writing.<sup>97</sup>

Bebbington writes that “There is sometimes a need for the providential framework of history to be portrayed without reserve. For the church, it provides the encouragement of knowing that hitherto the Lord has helped his people.”<sup>98</sup> Stout’s approach is similar. He wants to follow Paul’s maxim to be “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22): “I am both a professional historian and a Christian historian, a dual practitioner sometimes emphasizing one or the other without ever wholly neglecting either.”<sup>99</sup>

Andrew Atherstone reaches a similar conclusion: pastors and scholars can learn from one another, recognizing that their primary vocations are not the same: “The one is called to expound biblical truth; the other to examine historical evidence. Both are important. Both are to be valued. . . . Let us not then dismiss either the ‘confessional’ or the ‘professional’ historian as lacking in critical rigour or spiritual vigour. The church needs both because they serve different functions in edification and witness to a watching

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<sup>96</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 187.

<sup>97</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 187.

<sup>98</sup>Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 188.

<sup>99</sup>Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 10; emphasis added.

world.”<sup>100</sup> Both styles of writing history have their strengths and weaknesses as they address different audiences for different purposes: “We need providentialist history which explicitly sets out to encourage the Christian believer, to teach, exhort and challenge. . . . It is often the calling of pastors to write them. But we also need naturalist history which speaks to a wider audience, taking careful note of culture and context as well as doctrine and devotion.”<sup>101</sup>

### **Piper on Providential Historiography and Audiences**

Piper sees himself as aligning more closely with the historiography of Murray than he does with the academic work of Noll, Marsden, and Stout. He does not believe that the new evangelical historiographers would define the aims of history differently than he does, but what sets them apart is the way in which those aims are pursued. “I have always seen my biographies as a kind of preaching. I read looking for biblical lessons. This is partly owing to my audience, partly to the space of time I have to prepare and deliver, and partly to the limits of my own abilities.” Piper hopes his approach “does not necessitate any falsehood or any whitewashing of the subject.”<sup>102</sup> He also does not believe that close attention to secondary causation justifies the “snide” approach of Stout in the first half of his biography of Whitefield. Of the new evangelical historiographers, Piper judges that Marsden “is able to be scholarly in his thoroughness and objectivity while at the same time letting his sympathies and admiration show.”<sup>103</sup>

Piper recognizes a fundamental difference between contemporary history and

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<sup>100</sup>Andrew Atherstone, “Hagiography and History,” in *Truth at Any Cost: Papers Read at the 2012 Westminster Conference* (Stoke-on-Trent, England: Tentmaker Publications, 2013), 59.

<sup>101</sup>Atherstone, “Hagiography and History,” 58. For further elaboration on and defense of a dual-practitioner model, see Nathan A. Finn, *History: A Student’s Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming), ch. 3, “Faith and the Historian.”

<sup>102</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

<sup>103</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

biblical history. History writing about non-biblical history cannot follow the same processes as the biblical authors, who were able to cite inspired documents. “Therefore, historians not only are not inspired, but lack inspired sources for reconstructing the battle of Gettysburg.” Piper believes strongly in the absolute sovereignty of God, who does whatever he pleases with all events (Ps 115:3; Eph 1:11), but this belief “does not give precise meaning to those events. It gives broad meaning: all for the glory of God. All for the advancement of his kingdom. But there are so many switchbacks to go forward one cannot look at any event and know in what direction it is moving in the short run.”<sup>104</sup> The inscrutability of providence, however, does not entail agnosticism when it comes to the history of our personal experience:

I think that there are sufficient biblical promises that one could probably draw out true lessons in providence from a life based on the overall twists and turns. For example, as I consider the promises of God’s faithfulness and keeping power (Jer. 32:40), and as I look at my life, and how prone I am to discouragement and how many times I felt emotionally fragile and vulnerable, and how many conflicts I have tasted at home and at church, I feel warranted in saying as a historical truth that God has kept me from falling away from him and from marriage and from ministry. That is a judgment based on general biblical truth combined with a habit of prayer for his keeping combined with many obstacles and yet perseverance.<sup>105</sup>

Piper, who has read both Noll and Murray extensively throughout the years, suggests that the difference between the two is that Murray would say that “the quote above is true,” while Noll, even if he agrees personally, would say that “John Piper believed deeply that it was true.”<sup>106</sup>

When it comes to the suggestion that Christian historians can be “bilingual” or “dual practitioners,” serving different audiences and making their Christian interpretations more explicit or implicit accordingly, Piper responds:

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<sup>104</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

<sup>105</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

<sup>106</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

I don't see it as dual but multi. It seems to me that we have not two ways but a hundred ways on a continuum from the most pietistic to the most religiously skeptical. I would find some overly pietistic and simplistic renderings of history unhelpful. And I find skeptical and negative renderings unhelpful. Near the middle of this continuum I am sure I would benefit from many approaches. As it moves out to the edges I would find them less helpful and probably less accurate. I am skeptical that over the long haul much good is done for the kingdom by concealing our worldview or writing as if it had no bearing on how we interpret the world. In other words, I am not sure that smuggling history into the secular academy by imitating their God-omitting ways, does too much to magnify God and advance his cause in the academy and in the world.<sup>107</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Piper, as we have seen, is explicit about his limitations, genre, selection, and aims. He is a working pastor seeking a usable past by selecting flawed but heroic Christians from history to instruct and strengthen Christians today (pastors in particular) to endure faithfully to the end. He benefits from the new evangelical historiography while modeling his own work more along the lines of providential historians, though perhaps with a more chastened approach. His focus on individuals, rather than movements or cultural periods, of necessity makes his focus and therefore his claims more limited.

I would suggest there are even situations where Piper can do more insightful historical interpretation than many professional historians, in part because of his gifts of interpreting the Bible and the human heart. One example of his insights into historical figures from the past is his observation about human nature: "It seems to me that any serious analysis or exploration of a human being's life will always deal in paradoxes. It will see tensions. Again and again, the serious effort to understand another person will meet with ironic realities."<sup>108</sup> Piper uses this rubric effectively in analyzing his own father, whose ministry, theology, and personality are paradoxically related to his fundamentalism.

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<sup>107</sup>Piper, email to author, May 12, 2014.

<sup>108</sup>Piper, "Evangelist Bill Piper."

Another example of Piper’s insight into historical figures can be seen in his analysis of Whitefield. We have already noted the criticisms Stout received for his analysis of the first part of Whitefield’s life. Stout calls him “the consummate actor” who sold the New Birth “with all the dramatic artifice of a huckster” and who used tears as a “psychological gesture.”<sup>109</sup> Whitefield was “plying a religious trade,” pursuing “spiritual fame,” craving “respect and power,” driven by “egotism,” and putting on “performances.”<sup>110</sup> Piper agrees with Stout that there is data related to acting that must be taken into account when understanding and evaluating Whitefield. But Piper believes that Stout’s take is not only cynical but superficial. Piper offers a deeper explanation, based upon Whitefield’s own understanding of preaching about spiritual reality: “*George Whitefield is not a repressed actor, driven by egotistical love of attention. Rather, he is consciously committed to out-acting the actors because he has seen what is ultimately real.*”<sup>111</sup> Piper explains:

His oratorical exertion—his poetic effort—is not in *place* of God’s revelation and power but in the *service* of them. It is not an expression of ego but of love—for God and for the lost. It is not an effort to get a hearing at any cost but to pay a cost suitable to the beauty and worth of the truth.

He is acting with all his might not because it takes greater gimmicks and charades to convince people of the unreal, but because he had seen something more real than actors on the London stage had ever known. In the very acting, the very speaking, he was seeing, experiencing, the reality of which he spoke. The poetic effort to speak and act in suitable ways wakened in him the reality he wanted to communicate. For him the truths of the gospel were so real—so wonderfully, terrifyingly, magnificently real—that he could not and would not preach them as though they were unreal or merely interesting. He would not treat the greatest facts in the universe as unworthy of his greatest efforts to speak with fitting skill and force.

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<sup>109</sup>Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, 42, xxi, 40, cited in Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 92.

<sup>110</sup>Stout, *Divine Dramatist*, xvii, 21, 36, 55, 71, cited in Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 93.

<sup>111</sup>Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 94.

This was not a repressed acting. This was a released acting. It was not acting in the service of imagination. It was imaginative acting in the service of reality. This was not rendering the imaginary as real. It was rendering the realness of the real as awesomely, breathtakingly real. This was not affectation. This was a passionate re-presentation—replication—of reality. This was not the mighty microscope using all its powers to make the small look impressively big. This was the desperately inadequate telescope turning every power to give some small sense of the majesty of what too many preachers saw as tiresome and unreal.<sup>112</sup>

Christian historians, indeed all Christian readers, must judge which interpretation—Piper’s or Stout’s—fits best with all of the evidence, but it is an instructive example of where a non-academic reading of history may yield a fresh interpretation that must be taken into account. As all three groups—providentialist historians, pastors presenting inspirational biography, and the new evangelical historiographers—seek to “consume or put to good use [the past] as we live our lives in the present,”<sup>113</sup> we can benefit from all three as they seek to operate within their perspective and spheres by pursuing truth with careful research under the lordship of God in Christ.

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<sup>112</sup>Piper, *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*, 94–95.

<sup>113</sup>Fea, *Why Study History?* 48.



## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

This thesis does not constitute a biography of John Piper, since numerous aspects of his life and ministry remained unexplored (e.g., his relationship to his wife, his children, his church, and his surrounding culture). It is not even a full intellectual biography, since there are numerous theologians who have significantly influenced Piper's thought but whose works are scarcely mentioned in the preceding chapters (e.g., Augustine, Spurgeon, the Puritans, and John Owen in particular), and there are key aspects of his approach to the Christian life that are hardly touched upon (e.g., prayer, fasting, missions, marital and neighbor love, suffering). Rather, my aims have been more modest and focused: to make an initial foray into the study of Piper's life and thought by seeking to identify the four primary influencers in his life (his parents, C. S. Lewis, Daniel Fuller, and Jonathan Edwards), with particular attention to his development and defense of Christian hedonism. I have also sought to explore two manifestations of his theology and thought in practice, namely, his use of Scripture and his use of church history.

John Piper once rhetorically asked, "Who can really know how deep and pervasive an impact is?"<sup>1</sup> The issue is not one that can be explored with scientific or philosophical precision, for it is not that kind of question. As Piper's question indicates, it is sometimes difficult to determine for ourselves exactly how we have been influenced, let alone to make that evaluation for another person. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of the

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, email to author, July 8, 2013; in my possession.

question of influence does not lead us to epistemic despair, as if there were no ways to determine the truth of the matter. Some of the criteria that can be used in determining the influence upon a thinker's thought include the subject's use of the influencers in his writing and teaching and his second-order reflections on those who shaped his thought. When various candidates for influencers are considered, the question of the duration of the influence and the extent of the influence combine to raise some influencers as more significant than others. Seen in this light, I think it would be difficult to suggest there is someone more influential in the life of John Piper than Bill and Ruth Piper, C. S. Lewis, Daniel Fuller, and Jonathan Edwards. There are other influences, to be sure, but none show up so frequently and so deeply in his own reflections on his life and development. The four spheres of influence—two of whom he knew personally and two of whom he knew only through their writings—are irreducibly crucial to who Piper is and who he has become. In fact, an implicit argument throughout this entire thesis has been that to remove any one of these four would result in a different John Piper than the one we see today.

The title of this thesis is "John Piper: The Making of a Christian Hedonist." Although I have covered other aspects of Piper's thought, the unifying theme of this work has been Piper's application of his thesis that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Chapter 2 demonstrated that Piper's parents provided a picture of Christian hedonism before Piper had the language and categories to understand the concept and the theology. As "joyful fundamentalists" they exemplified what Piper would later expound. Chapter 3 explained that C. S. Lewis, the "romantic rationalist," flipped Piper's world upside down by arguing that our problem was not the strength of our desire for happiness but rather its weakness. Lewis further showed Piper the essence of praise, where adoration, glorification, and satisfaction coalesced in one Godward, hedonistic matrix. Chapter 4 witnessed the influence of Daniel Fuller's "exegetical

biblicism” upon Piper’s thinking, which enabled Piper to ground all of his developing theology in God’s inscripturated self-revelation, mining the propositions of Scripture and their relationship to each other in holy argument. Fuller not only served as a key academic and spiritual mentor and encourager for Piper, but he was the first living influencer he met who was advocating for the categories of Christian eudaemonism, using Lewis and Edwards for support. Finally, in chapter 5 we saw how Piper’s greatest theological influence, Jonathan Edwards—who modeled and taught Piper “affectional Calvinism”—provided a steady and sophisticated ballast to the ship of Christian hedonism, going deeper than all the rest in exploring how happiness related to the purpose of the universe and answering exegetical difficulties like how this quest for joy fit with the biblical prohibitions against self-seeking and self-love.

In the final two chapters of this dissertation I have sought to step back from the roughly chronological narrative trajectory and the question of influence to look at two of the tools Piper uses to instruct and edify the body of Christ. Chapter 6 explored Piper’s exegetically rigorous approach to interpreting, proclaiming, and applying the whole counsel of God. Chapter 7 reviewed Piper’s use of church history, searching for a useable past and using an explicitly pastoral approach while still seeking to do faithful, even if not academic, historical retrieval. One of the key themes binding these two chapters together is that although Piper has an academic background, his primary calling and vocation has been a teacher and preacher of everyday people who are hungry to be fed by God’s Word. This is not to excuse any limitations there may be in Piper’s biblical or historical endeavors but to orient our analysis and expectations in accordance with his primary calling and purpose.

At the heart of any interesting narrative are the interwoven themes of contingency, conflict, and resolution. To my mind, these features make Piper’s intellectual and spiritual development compelling—a story worth retelling, analyzing,

and applying. Even if we believe that God has determined the end from the beginning, it still remains the case that from an earthly perspective, without access to the secret counsels of the divine will, contingency is a key feature of our experience. As the narrative progresses in Piper's life—as for all of us—there is a continual series of forks in the road, as events and decisions change the direction of the path. How might Piper's life have been different if his father had not gone to Bob Jones College? What if his father had not been a full-time evangelist, gone for two-thirds of a year so that John was raised the majority of the time by his mother? What if his father had not split with Bob Jones over Billy Graham? What if John had decided to go to Emory or Johns Hopkins instead of Wheaton? What if John had not met Noël in the summer of 1966? What if Chaplain Welsh had not asked him to pray? What if he had not contracted mononucleosis? What if Ockenga had not come to campus for Spiritual Emphasis Week, leading to John's call to ministry? What if he had chosen a pre-med major instead of a literature major and not taken any classes with Clyde Kilby? What if no one had ever recommended to him a book by C. S. Lewis? What if John had not enrolled in Fuller Theological Seminary? What if he had not studied under Daniel Fuller? What if Fuller and Morgan had not been Calvinists? What if he never read *The Weight of Glory* or *Reflections on the Psalms*? What if he had chosen another theologian as a lifelong companion instead of Jonathan Edwards? What if he had gotten into Princeton instead of Munich? What if he had been hired at a school other than Bethel? What if Fuller Seminary had offered him a teaching position to work alongside his mentor Dan Fuller? What if his mother had survived the bus accident on the road to Bethlehem? What if he had not had a sabbatical where he could sense the call to pastoral ministry? What if there were no pastoral openings at Bethlehem Baptist Church? The list of contingencies goes on and on.

When John Piper was growing up on Bradley Boulevard in Greenville, he and his older sister had their own rooms. In John's room, the bed was by the door, and on the

wall at the foot of the bed hung a painting, made from a log. On it was a print of Warner Sallman's "Christ Our Pilot" (1950). It was the last thing John looked at every night before he went to sleep. Here is how he later described the painting:

[A] boy [was] standing at the helm of a ship. A storm was raging in the sea. The waves were breaking over the side of the boat. The wind was whipping the boy's hair. His hands were tight on the wheel of the ship. And he was looking straight ahead into the storm. It was a picture full of adventure and danger and challenge. And standing at the boy's side was Jesus, large and strong and serious. His hand was on the boy's shoulder, and he looked very much in charge.<sup>2</sup>

As John looked at that picture night after night, he recalls, "I came to believe it. The Lord stands by me. In every storm his hand is on my shoulder."<sup>3</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of people around the world now testify to God's grace to them through the influence of John Piper's preaching and writing. And yet Piper's testimony would be that none of this usefulness "for Christ and his kingdom" would exist if the Lord had not been at his side, guarding and guiding, protecting and providing, sanctifying and sustaining, as Piper labored to help others see the all-satisfying supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. As Piper himself would remind us, to God alone should belong all the glory.

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<sup>2</sup>John Piper, "The Lord Stood by Me," April 22, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-lord-stood-by-me> (accessed November 10, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Piper, "The Lord Stood by Me."

## APPENDIX

### A CHRONOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF JOHN PIPER'S PUBLISHED WRITINGS (1971–2015)

A comprehensive bibliography of everything John Piper has written would likely require an entire volume, since the listing would include thousands of sermons and blog posts found at <http://www.desiringgod.org>. What follows, instead, is an attempt to catalog all of the original writings of Piper that have been published by journals, magazines, and book publishers. The bibliography is arranged by chronologically by year in the following categories: books, articles and chapters, reviews, and forewords. The complete text of these resources is planned for publication in John Piper, *The Collected Works of John Piper*, edited by David Mathis and Justin Taylor, 13 volumes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming).

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## ABSTRACT

### JOHN PIPER: THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

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This dissertation on noted pastor and author John Piper (1946– ) constitutes an early effort in the field of intellectual biography, tracing four key influences—in roughly chronological order—upon Piper’s life and theology. Those with primary influence in Piper’s formative years were his parents, William S. H. Piper (1919–2007) and Ruth Mohn Piper (1918–1974), who exhibited a unique combination of joyful fundamentalism. Piper’s next major influence was C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), discovered during his undergraduate studies at Wheaton College, who introduced him to romantic rationalism. Piper’s first teacher at Fuller Seminary was Daniel P. Fuller (1925– ), a hermeneutics professor who planted the seeds of Christian hedonism and who gave him a love for exegetical biblicism. It was during these seminary days and into his time of doctoral study that Piper discovered Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), whose affectional Calvinism would go on to shape Piper’s theology more than anyone else. Piper’s three primary venues of ministerial vocation—teaching, preaching, and writing—are all examined to reveal the ways in which each of these influencers played various roles in Piper’s

development of Christian hedonism and his distinct contribution to a theology of the Christian life. The dissertation concludes with two applications of the foregoing analysis, exploring how Piper uses Scripture and how he appropriates church history for pastoral ends. Also included is a comprehensive bibliography of Piper's published works (1971–2015).

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