

# Unity in Christ

A photograph of a church building with a steeple, silhouetted against a sunset sky. The foreground is a snow-covered field, and bare trees are visible behind the church. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange near the horizon.

Ordained Servant  
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# Ordained Servant Online

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### CURRENT ISSUE: UNITY IN CHRIST

February 2026

### From the Editor

Many of the conflicts which threaten the peace and harmony of the visible church could be avoided if our eyes were turned heavenward. John Fesko's "Unity in Our Great High Priest" was a sermon preached at the last general assembly (91st, 2025). Fesko reminds us that the Spirit who impresses this unity on Christ's church works through, not around, the cross. Unity and peace are never to be sought at the expense of truth, but in our circles we are in danger of following our own paths beyond the unity that our confession provides. The cross humbles us and puts our differences in perspective. One of Machen's favorite verses should help us to keep our vows as officers to maintain the purity, peace, and unity of the church. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died" (2 Cor. 5:14).

Many of us struggle with the volume of electronic mail we receive. Christian McShaffrey understands the demands of pastoral ministry and of being a clerk. So, in his article, "Email Management: The DURSA Method," he provides wise guidance based on his own management of email to help us keep the inbox empty.

Shane Lems reviews Elaine Pagels's latest book, *Miracles and Wonder: The Historical Mystery of Jesus*. Lems's title tells it all, "No Miracles, No Wonder: Review of a Recent Rationalist Critique of the New Testament." "How Jesus Became God" is out there in many forms from the Great Courses to movies and books. Lems's review provides a nice template for critiquing these popular forms of this great error, which Pagels presents in an academic form.

The Baby Boom generation, born from 1946 to 1964, is retiring in large numbers. Generation X is not far behind. While the world tells us to save our money and maintain good health so we can indulge ourselves in retirement, Gordon Cook reviews *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, by J. I. Packer—his last book (2014)—which gives us a very different perspective on our latter years. Our Committee on Ministerial Care has tremendous resources for ministers. For all of us retirement can offer greater freedom to serve the Lord in a variety of capacities.

Cynthia Rowland reviews *Thomas Boston: Christian Biographies for Young Readers*, by Simonetta Carr. Her years of homeschooling have heightened her appreciation of Carr's series designed to acquaint young readers with important people in church history.

Our poem this month is by George Herbert (1593–1633), "Aaron." "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron" (Ps. 133:1–2). Aaron is a type of our great high priest Jesus Christ, who is the foundation and life of the unity of his church.

The cover photo is one I took with my first digital camera, a point and shoot Canon. It was taken at a winter sunset in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. It reminds me that photographic technology is not the most important aspect of creativity.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church: A Reformed (Continental) Perspective – Part 1.” (James de Jong) 11:1 (Jan. 2002): 2–9.
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- “The Biblical View of Church Unity.” (Archibald A. Allison) 10:3 (Jul. 2001): 60–64.
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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Truth

## Unity in Our Great High Priest

by John V. Fesko

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Unity is a vital element in any community, organization, or nation, and it is something that King David did not know in the wake of his anointing by the prophet, Samuel.<sup>1</sup> The nation was divided between Saul and David. And while there were many twists and turns that led to this event, there was a point when the nation was finally united under David's reign: "Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron" (2 Sam. 5:1). Perhaps it is this unification of Israel under David's rule that gave rise to his words here in Psalm 133, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (v. 1a). As he reflected on unity, he did so through the lens of the anointing and ordination of Aaron, Israel's first high priest. God commanded Moses to assemble the people before the tent of meeting to anoint Aaron (Lev. 8:1–3). The nation was united for this hallowed event, and so David looked to it to characterize the unity he observed in his own day. But here in David's Psalm these events were more than just a celebration of history—they were pregnant with shadows of the revelation of Christ.

Psalm 133 comes on the heels of Psalm 132, which is a reminder of God's covenantal promise to David that one of his sons would sit upon Israel's throne (Ps. 132:11; 2 Sam. 7:12–17; Ps. 89). Psalm 133 also precedes Psalm 134 and the call to praise God in his holy place, the temple (Ps. 134:2). All three Psalms focus our attention upon God's temple-presence and his king, though in this case we can also include the high priest as a focal point of Psalm 133. These Psalms all foretell and foreshadow God's blessings in Christ. We find promissory roots that have origins in eternity with the Father's covenantal appointment of the Son: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever'" (Heb. 7:21; Ps. 110:4). These roots grow in the rich soil of eternity and the covenant of redemption, and its branches jut forth into the air of history in the covenant of grace as they flower in the promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As we look at Psalm 133 and consider David's words, we want at the same time to cast a gaze back to before the foundations of the world, while we also look forward to the advent of Christ so we can see the full picture of where the church's unity lies. There are many siren calls for unity through church programs, abstract doctrines, tribal identities, but David's message is clear—from eternity to eternity, we only find unity in Christ through the Spirit. Unity in Christ is the theme of Psalm 133, and we can meditate upon this truth both by reflecting upon the idea of unity through Christ as well as through how the triune God brings about this unity through the outpouring of Christ's Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally a sermon preached by the 2024 moderator at the opening of the 91st (2025) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.



## Unity in Christ

David begins his Psalm with words of rejoicing: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). His language recalls phrases used to describe Israel’s peaceful dwelling in the Promised Land (Deut. 25:5). God established a pattern of harmonious dwelling in the land where all were brothers (Deut. 15:3, 12). There are many things that bind people together such that they feel a sense of brotherhood. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) famously captures the bonds of brotherhood in his play *King Henry V*. Dramatically outnumbered by French soldiers at the Battle of Agincourt, Shakespeare places inspiring words of brotherhood on the lips of King Henry:

From this day to the end of the world,  
But we in it shall be remember’d;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition:  
And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare powerfully captures the bonds of brotherhood formed in battle. More recently, filmmaker Sebastian Junger has documented how soldiers returning from war find it difficult to adjust to life because they have lost their sense of purpose apart from their band of brothers—connections of camaraderie grown in the soil of blood, sweat, and tears.<sup>3</sup> And yet, as strong as the brotherhood of combat can be, David envisages a unity of even greater strength—a unity forged in the fires of Christ’s outpoured Spirit. David draws the eyes of our faith by recalling God’s gift of dwelling in the land as brothers, and he does so through the powerful imagery of Aaron’s anointing as high priest.

As we noted above, God called the whole congregation to assemble before the tent of meeting to witness Aaron’s anointing and ordination. David recalls this event in the verse that follows: “It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!” (Ps. 133:2). David could have focused upon the Israelites gathered around Aaron, and yet he draws our mind’s eye to the oil that was poured upon Aaron’s head and how it cascaded down his beard and onto the collar of his robes (Exod. 29:7). Here we need to meditate upon the nature of Aaron’s robes. We should remember that Aaron did not stand alone in God’s presence in his capacity as High Priest but was the people’s representative. This truth was captured in the very nature of his garments. Aaron had two shoulder pieces and two onyx stones with the names of the sons of Israel engraved upon them (Exod. 28:6–11): “And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance” (Exod. 28:12).

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<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. J. H. Walter (Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1954), act IV, scene III, 58–67.

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (Twelve, 2016).

Aaron symbolically carried Israel upon his shoulders. But Aaron also had a breast piece fashioned in a perfect square that he wore upon his chest that carried four rows of precious stones—one stone for each of the twelve tribes (Exod. 28:15–22). Aaron was a living symbol of Israel’s unity—a unity bound together in one man who entered God’s presence for blessing. This is the unity that David has in mind and to which he points the church throughout the ages.

The shadowy revelation of Christ’s priesthood flowers in his incarnation, and the apostle Peter explains its significance in his Pentecost sermon. Peter authoritatively tells the church that David was a prophet who foresaw Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2:30–31). The significance of David’s prophetic office is that the whole complex of the Psalms is a revelatory symphony to Christ. The whole book of Psalms, even the Old Testament, points us to Christ, but in this case David’s focus is upon his priestly office. Aaron was not the terminus of God’s revelation, but as Hebrews reminds us, Aaron pointed to Christ, our great High Priest: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Heb. 4:14). Jesus is our High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, a priesthood with eternal roots in the covenant of redemption. David points us to Christ, who is the source of our unity. Theologians in the church’s history have recognized this point.

In 1873 Charles Hodge (1797–1878), a theologian with narrow convictions but broad associations, delivered an address to the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, a meeting of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. The title of his address was, “The Unity of the Church Based on Personal Union with Christ.” Among the many edifying things he said, he reminded the conference: “The Church of Christ is one. There is one fold and one Shepherd; one King and one kingdom; one Father and one family. In this sense the Church includes all the redeemed—those now in heaven, those now on earth, and those who are hereafter to be born.”<sup>4</sup> Would you believe that there were some who took offense at what he said? The simple truth is that Christ is a “stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:23–25).

The only way we can foster and promote unity in the church, therefore, is to rest in the high priestly work of Christ. Jesus points us to this very truth in his high priestly prayer. As he prayed to his Father, he said: “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me” (John 17:22–23). Think of the unity between Father and Son. There is an ontological unity—the Father and the Son share one essence. There is an ethical unity, as the Son in his incarnation as the God-man perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father’s will. One of the marks of beauty is symmetry—when things are symmetrical, they convey beauty and harmony. Think of the perfect symmetry between the Father’s will and the Son’s obedience. Christ was, as Paul reminds us, “obedient to the point of

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Hodge, “The Unity of the Church Based on Personal Union with Christ,” in *Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance*, eds. Philip Schaff and Irenaeus Prime (Harper & Brothers, 1874), 139–44, here 139.



death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). This is the unity that exists between the Father and Son, but it is also the end to which Christ has saved us in him. To try and build unity in the church on anything less than Christ is to build with wood, hay, straw, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:11–15). This is David’s point—unity comes through our great high priest, Christ. But there is more to David’s Psalm that points us to how Christ unites us in him.

### Unity through Christ’s Spirit

David writes in verse 3: “It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” David draws our attention to the heavenly origins of the dew when he writes that it *falls* on the mountains. The English translation, however, veils David’s artistry and emphasis, so we need to modify it to bring this out: “It is like the precious oil on the head, *descending* on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, *descending* on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, *descending* on the mountains of Zion” (vv. 2–3, trans. alt., emphasis added). The threefold repetition of *descending* reminds us that both the source of the oil and the dew come from above—above the head of Aaron and above Mt. Hermon. What prophetic message does the anointing oil upon Aaron’s head teach us? Why does David draw our attention to the dew that descends from the heavens?

The Old Testament closely aligns the anointing with oil and the Holy Spirit rushing upon a person, such as when Samuel anointed David as king (1 Sam. 16:13; cf. Isa. 61:1–3). As such, Old Testament anointings point forward to the anointing of Christ. *Christ*, of course, means *anointed*, and in this case Aaron’s anointing ultimately points us to the Father’s anointing of his Son with the Holy Spirit, a truth foretold in the prophet Isaiah: “And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD (Isa. 11:2; cf. 42:1; 61:1). This prophecy was fulfilled in Christ’s baptism when the Father rent the heavens asunder, poured out the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, and bellowed from the heavens: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). The Son, our great high priest, was anointed with the Holy Spirit and conducted his ministry in the power of the Spirit. Our own Westminster Confession speaks of this:

The Lord Jesus, in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure, having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge . . . [that] he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a mediator, and surety. (WCF 8.3)

But recall the direction of the oil that descended from Aaron’s head upon his robes as it fell upon the shoulder pieces bearing the names of Israel’s tribes and the breast piece with twelve precious stones. The oil flowed over the stones bearing Israel’s twelve tribes, which pointed forward to the time when the Father would pour out the Spirit upon Jesus, the head of the body, and then Jesus would pivot, and pour out the Spirit upon his body, the church. As the oil flowed upon Aaron’s body, so the Spirit flows upon the church. Peter testifies to this when he told the gathered crowd at Pentecost: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). And so now, the Spirit descends from the throne of Christ upon the whole church.

The Heidelberg Catechism beautifully captures the truth of the bond between the anointing of Christ and his body when it asks why Jesus is called *Christ*, which means “anointed.” The Catechism responds: “Because he is ordained of God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit” (Q. 31). The Catechism then pivots from Jesus the head to the body, the church, when it asks: “But why are you called a Christian?” The Catechism responds: “Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I participate in his anointing” (Q. 32, trans. alt.).<sup>5</sup> We participate (or share) in Christ’s anointing. Christ is the “life-giving Spirit” who baptizes the church (1 Cor. 15:45, trans. alt.). The Holy Spirit is how the triune God joins us to himself through our union with Christ. And by union with Christ through the Spirit we participate in God and enjoy communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But as we are all individually united to Christ through the Spirit, we not only have fellowship with the triune God but also with one another.

The Holy Spirit is the bond of our unity. The Spirit sanctifies and purifies us—he conforms us to the image of Christ, which draws us into a greater and more intimate communion with our triune God. As the Psalmist asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3–4). As the Spirit applies the work of Christ to us through faith, he makes us fit for God’s holy presence and thus brings unity to the body, the church: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6). Christ by the Spirit is our bond of love. Note what Paul says about the outpoured Spirit: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Theologians such as St. Augustine (354–430) have rightly explained that if the Holy Spirit has a proper name, it is *Love*.<sup>6</sup> Surely this is fitting because Paul equates the outpouring of the Spirit with the outpouring of love upon us all. This means that the only way we can foster unity in the church is by abiding in Christ’s Spirit—drawing upon the love of the triune God so that we can love one another. Only in God’s love can we truly love.

We must not forget, however, the path of this blessing of the Spirit. The path to Christ’s royal session whence he poured out the Spirit of unity and love did not go around but through the cross. Paul presents this powerful truth in a pint-sized but potent proclamation: “the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10). Only because Christ was obedient unto the point of death, even death on a cross, do we have life in the Spirit. The unity of the Spirit, then, is cruciform in nature. The voice of unity utters with Christ, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV). The mind of unity says through “participation in the Spirit,” “Give me the mind of Christ that I might ‘count others more significant’ than myself” (Phil. 2:1, 3). The heart of unity says, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Such is the nature of the unity between head and body, Christ and church, Spirit and limbs.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism in German, Latin, and English* (Charles Scribner, 1863), Qs. 31–32 (pages 165–67): “et unctionis ipsius particeps.”

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, Fathers of the Church, trans. Stephen McKenna (Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 451–70.



## Conclusion

As we contemplate Aaron's anointing, pray that your eyes of faith would be ineluctably drawn to Christ our head. Pray that his outpoured Spirit would saturate your heart and mind as the oil saturated Aaron's robes. Pray that the Spirit would conform you to Christ's holy image and thus give you his mind that we would desire, love, and seek unity in the body of Christ, a beautiful unity captured in the symmetry between our will with God's will and our lives with Christ's. Only by the Father's covenantally appointed Son, Jesus our great high priest, and the Son's outpouring of the Spirit do we have any hope for unity. In the words of poet and hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748):

Thus when on Aaron's head  
They poured the rich perfume,  
The oil through all his raiment spread,  
And pleasure filled the room.

Thus on the heav'nly hills  
The saints are blessed above,  
Where joy, like morning dew, distils,  
And all the air is love.<sup>7</sup>

The love of unity only comes through Christ, our great high priest, and through the outpouring of his Spirit.

**John V. Fesko** *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as Harriett Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.*

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Watts, "Psalm 133," in *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London: Thomas Ward and Co., 1718), 276–77.

# ServantTechnology

## Email Management: The DURSA Method

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by Christian M. McShaffrey

I have been working in a clerical capacity for twenty years and am rather good at it. The current total for messages in my inbox is three, and I will probably reduce that to zero by the end of the day. There are some, no doubt, who are now wondering, “How?!” and the purpose of this article is to equip you to do the same.

My approach is called the DURSA Method. It is not something I was taught, but rather something I developed over the years. As you probably suspect, it is an acronym. I borrowed from the name of a sixteenth century wordsmith and warrior. Those two professions may not seem related, but if you think of incoming messages like I do—as a work assignment—it should make perfect sense.

### **The Daily Battle**

Before email existed for the average person, I worked in an office and had a three-tier paper tray on my desk. The top tray was for incoming correspondence, the second was for outgoing, and the third was reserved for long term projects that could not be processed in a single day. Other than items that arrived just before my shift ended, a “successful” day was having the two top tiers empty.

The world eventually stopped communicating through printed media, so I had to adapt. Now my paper trays are digital, and I even had to add two more in order to remain in control of the ever-increasing onslaught of work assignments.

I continue to gain daily victory, but I have noticed that some of my comrades are falling. In a recent Zoom meeting, for example, one of my co-workers shared his screen and I saw that he had over ten thousand messages in his inbox. That would keep me up at night.

### **The Fallen Comrade**

Who knows? Maybe having that many messages in the inbox does not bother my friend in the slightest, but I think it should. Communication is essential in the maintenance of relationships. Some relationships are personal, some are professional, and some are even romantic. All are important.

In my capacity as an ecclesiastical clerk, I receive, respond to, and dispose communications. I work according to hard deadlines and, as a courtesy, I often send reminders to others so that everyone is aware of how quickly the clock truly ticks.

Most of my correspondents are ministers, which means they are men who have obtained, at bare minimum, a master’s degree. One would assume that they are fully capable of managing their time and responding to time-sensitive requests. Sadly, many are not. I hesitate to call this a character flaw, but it does need to be corrected, and that is why I am sharing my method. My goal is to help my brothers love their neighbors better by communicating with greater fidelity and efficiency.



## **The DURSA Method**

This method is really simple enough, and once you begin using it, I think you will come to love it. No more lost emails, no more slighted clients, no more feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of notifications. Sound good? Well, here it is:

### **D – Delete**

When it comes to the “delete” button, I have developed quite the trigger-finger over the years. Your father shares a patriotic meme, your mother sends a picture of a kitten, your friend sends a reminder of something that is already on your calendar, something is on sale this week, etc.

If you have some interest in the content, go ahead and afford it a few seconds of your attention, but if there is no obligation or request behind it, send it to the trash. It has served its purpose, and its purpose has passed.

By the way, and lest any be plagued by false guilt, the sender will never know. If mom happens to ask about the kitten, you saw it, and can simply say, “Yes, that was cute.” Using your delete button will declutter your digital world like never before.

### **U – Unsubscribe**

This is a discipline that can yield serious dividends. Every time you buy something online, your email ends up on a distribution list. Worse, many companies sell your email address to others. In the end, you are bombarded by advertisements.

I have always hated advertisements. When our family had a TV, I would mute every commercial out of personal resentment (and also to protect my children, of course). The marketers eventually adapted their approach and now accost my inbox.

The easiest thing to do when receiving “junk email” is to ignore or delete it, but if you invest ten seconds of time to unsubscribe, you will be removed from the distribution list. I have noticed my daily inbox messages decrease steadily through this discipline.

### **R – Reply**

“Are you coming to the meeting?” “Do you have that report?” “Are you interested in our new initiative?” These are inquiries that deserve an answer, so answer them. It is the professional thing to do because a person needs to know (otherwise they would not have asked).

This is where the so-called “Golden Rule” may be applied to electronic communication. Jesus taught the rule, and it is usually summarized as “Treat others as you would like to be treated” (cf., Lev. 19:18, Matt. 7:12, Luke 6:31).

If you needed some information, would you not expect your colleagues to provide it in a prompt manner? Of course you would, so afford that courtesy to them. A simple “Yes” or “No” or “Let me get back to you” will suffice, so respond and delete. That is, unless you chose the “Let me get back to you” option.

### **S – Schedule**

People are naturally hesitant to delete messages that request some action on their part because they do not want to forget about it. However, once the request is buried under a hundred other messages, that is exactly what will happen. You will forget about it.

Calendars are crucial to prioritizing and fulfilling requests that cannot be dealt with at the moment. It is a judgment call. I afford myself about two hours a day to

correspondence, so here's how I weigh it in my own mind: "Can I offer a full and satisfactory reply in the next thirty minutes?" If not, I will schedule the task, send a brief and polite reply, and delete the email.

My calendar will automatically remind me of the task and I will then complete it. The client is satisfied, my inbox is cleared, and I also have a record of when the task was completed for future reference (if needed).

### **A – Archive**

Some tasks cannot be completed in thirty minutes. Some might take thirty days, some even three years. These are called "projects", and they do not belong in your inbox. These items deserve a folder on your desktop, and if your desktop is already filled with folders, then you have deeper problems than email management. Sorry, but true.

I have folders on my desktop named "Drafts to Publish" and "Minutes to Approve", which stand as visible reminders of incomplete projects. How and when I engage that material is between me and my schedule, but these projects will never be left incomplete because they went adrift upon the sea of a ten-thousand-message inbox.

### **Enter the Fray**

I have shown you how easy it can be to process your inbox down to zero on a weekly, if not daily basis. All you need is a plan and some personal discipline.

The plan has been provided. It has worked for me over the years and even without the mnemonic—DURSA—many others have followed my general approach. It leads to liberty and peace of mind.

If you like the idea, but you are one of those people who has ten thousand messages in your inbox, you may need to take the nuclear option to begin. Spend an entire day archiving important messages dating back one year. By that, I specifically mean scheduling and archiving. Then "select all" and delete.

"What!? What about . . . ?" What about what? The thing you forgot about two years ago? The opportunity you lost because you did not respond? The great idea that died because no one replied? If you forgot about it, either everyone else also did or they moved on without you.

Set yourself free with the DURSA Method. It will revolutionize your email management. There is no book to buy, and no need to subscribe. Just re-read this article and put the system into practice. If you have any questions, please feel free to send me an email. I promise you will receive a timely response.

**Christian M. McShaffrey** *is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving as pastor of Five Solas Church (OPC) in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, and clerk of the Presbytery of Wisconsin and Minnesota.*

# ServantReading

## No Miracles, No Wonder: Review of a Recent Rationalist Critique of the New Testament A Review Article

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by Shane Lems

*Miracles and Wonder: The Historical Mystery of Jesus*, by Elaine Pagels. Doubleday, 2025, xi + 320 pages, \$30.00.

Imagine for a moment that you would like to read an older historical document. You decide to read the exploration journals of Lewis and Clark. Now imagine that you read these journals in a hypercritical way. You very much doubt the distances Lewis and Clark say they travelled. You are totally antagonistic about their reports of the flora and fauna they saw. You believe Lewis and Clark were possibly real people, but you are very suspicious about almost everything they wrote. After reading the journals, you say some nice things about these explorers, but for the most part, you believe the journals are more fiction than fact. You appreciate historians who are also very critical of these journals, but you mostly avoid authors who say the journals are accurate and historical. Because you doubt the journals, you implicitly judge anyone who believes they are correct.

I share this fictional story as a backdrop to my review of Elaine Pagels's 2025 publication *Miracles and Wonder: The Historical Mystery of Jesus*. As some readers of *Ordained Servant* may already know, Pagels is a long-time and well-known critic of the New Testament (NT). She does not objectively approach the NT. Instead, Pagels approaches the NT with presuppositions that the historic Christian understanding of the Gospels is flawed. Like many critics—past and present—Pagels believes that the authors of the NT Gospels crafted their stories in such a way as to make Jesus the Son of God and Messiah. Basically, in her view, the authors of the Gospel mostly meant well, but they did not get the story of Jesus correct. Pagels's beliefs are similar to NT critics before her in the various "quests" for the historical Jesus. Her admittedly "rationalist assumptions" of the NT lead her, of course, to rationalist conclusions about the NT (60).

Each of the seven chapters of *Miracles and Wonder* asks and answers a specific question. Chapter 1 asks, "The Virgin Birth: What Happened?" Pagels says that the birth stories of Jesus in the gospels have discrepancies and are "wildly divergent" (19). She believes Matthew and Luke "revised" Mark's birth story about Jesus for their own purposes (34). Pagels also believes that the NT Gospels are Christian propaganda stories to get people to think that Jesus is the Messiah that God promised in Old Testament (OT) texts (e.g., Isa. 7:14). This means that the authors of the Gospels took the liberty to stretch the OT messianic texts as references to Jesus. In chapter 1, Pagels also utilizes some Gnostic gospels in an attempt to prove her point that Jesus's birth story in the NT Gospels is not historical.

In chapter 2, Pagels asks, “Who is Jesus?” This chapter focuses on the miracles and mysteries of Jesus in the NT Gospels. When discussing Jesus’s miracles, Pagels is antagonistic. For example, she talks about the story where Jesus raises a little girl from the dead (Mark 5:41). However, for Pagels, the girl may have been in a coma (64). Jesus, she says, was like other “healers” of his day who may have used various tactics to heal people. The Gospels were written, Pagels notes, not necessarily to convey historical facts, but to get people to jump on board the Jesus movement (71). Her position on Jesus’s miracles, as far as I can tell, is that the Gospels do not really help us know the truth about the miracles. Her rationalist assumptions (miracles cannot happen) lead her to rationalist conclusions (Jesus’s miracles were not really miracles).

The third chapter covers the NT Gospels’ teaching on the kingdom of God. Pagels notes the OT background to the theme of God’s kingdom but says the OT prophets disagree on what this kingdom is (88). She approaches the topic of the kingdom in the NT, also doubting whether the Gospels are in harmony about it. Pagels reads Jesus’s teaching about the Kingdom of God as insight into how Christianity began. Jesus believed that God’s kingdom was coming soon, and people needed to be totally committed to enter it (100). At the same time, Pagels says Jesus’s beatitudes are “strange” (100). Furthermore, in Pagels’s view, the Gospel of Thomas is beneficial in understanding Jesus’s teaching. In my understanding, Pagels appreciates and admires the early Gnostic writings more than the NT Gospels.

Chapter 4 is about Jesus’s crucifixion. Pagels starts this chapter by admitting she believes Jesus’s predictions about his death were added *after* his death—the disciples put words into his mouth (118). Pagels also argues that Jesus’s trial before Pilate was purposely obscured by each of the Gospels to explain away the fact that Pilate never condemned Jesus (125). In fact, Pagels mentions that some scholars say Jesus’s trial before Pilate was so bizarre it never actually happened. She says Mark wrote about the crucifixion during the war in Rome (68–70 AD). This means Mark used the crucifixion story to give people hope during war (128). Pagels believes that the Gospel writers “spun” the story of Jesus’s crucifixion as if the Jews had initiated Jesus’s death (140). Pagels also says this is where Christianity has been antisemitic. She is “distressed” by this (144–45). From this chapter, I understand Pagels to believe the NT crucifixion story is a silly, antisemitic, and strange spin on Jesus’s death.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Gospel stories of Jesus’s resurrection. Again, Pagels says Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead based on the Gospel stories. However, we cannot know what really happened (163). Pagels even tries to argue that “many Christians have come to think of these [resurrection] stories only as myth masquerading as fact” (162). The fact is, Christians from many backgrounds and denominations strongly affirm that belief in Christ’s bodily resurrection is a non-negotiable part of true Christianity (1 Cor. 15). Pagels’s view is indeed convoluted. I read her view as this: Jesus probably did not rise from the grave, but his followers may have had spiritual experiences of his resurrection. Their writings reflect their spiritual experiences. Her unsympathetic view of Jesus’s resurrection is also colored by her reading of the secret texts of Nag Hammadi (185).

“How did Jesus become God?” is the question Pagels answers in the seventh chapter. This chapter has the same critical arguments as the earlier chapters. Pagels certainly does not believe that Jesus is God; she insists he is not God in the flesh. For Pagels, John wrote his Gospel in such a way as to make people believe Jesus was God. Pagels mentions early



Christian writers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, arguing that they helped shape the belief that Jesus is God. In her opinion, John's Gospel is the only one that specifically equates Jesus with God. The other NT Gospels, she believes, are ambivalent about this question. Pagels's rationalist assumptions again are explicit: Jesus was not God, but early Christians made him out to be God.

The final chapter focuses on present views of Jesus. In this chapter, Pagels interacts with the beliefs of new converts, artists, and filmmakers about Jesus. Pagels believes that just as Jesus's earliest followers constantly revised their views about Jesus, his followers do the same today (209). She discusses the Vineyard church's views of Jesus and groups in Peru, the Philippines, and other people-groups' views of Jesus. Finally, and oddly, Pagels explains various painters and movie producers' views of Jesus. This chapter was Pagels's attempt to give evidence supporting her critical views: People today have very different views of Jesus, just like his followers in the first century. I found this chapter very selective and lopsided. In it, Pagels failed to mention anything about historic Christian orthodoxy through the years.

Much more could be said about Pagels's book. One must read it to understand Pagels's arguments and viewpoints about who Jesus is (or is not). At first, when I was reading it, I was rather upset at her extreme criticism of the NT. But shortly after starting the book, I recognized her criticism was like that of other NT critics I have read. When I finished the book, Pagels's rationalist arguments and repeated antagonism became banal and monotonous. She never attempted to explain any part of the NT objectively. Almost every one of her citations referred to critical scholars. She had no intention of seriously interacting with non-critical scholars who opposed her views. Her goal was not to truly interact with the Gospel texts with an open mind and heart. Instead, in this book, Pagels's goal was to prove—based on her personal story and biases—that the NT is unreliable in its teaching about Jesus. She used to believe it was true, but then she read some first-century history and some Gnostic texts and now she claims to *really* know the truth: The Gospels are a fabrication. At the end of the day, Pagels believes her insights are true and those of the Gospels are false. It is the same movie, script, and ending as the arguments of other NT critics.

If I can use a courtroom metaphor, Pagels puts the NT Gospels on trial in *Miracles and Wonder*. The charge is this: The Gospels are guilty of not telling the truth about Jesus. In this trial, Pagels cherry picks evidence to suit her case. There is no suitable defendant in the courtroom to defend the Gospels. And in this kangaroo court, Pagels plays judge, jury, and prosecutor all at the same time. Of course, the outcome of the sham trial of the NT Gospels is “guilty as charged.”

If you want a scholarly resource that seriously and honestly interacts with various viewpoints about the credibility of the NT gospels, *Miracles and Wonder* is not that book. This book is not an open-minded look into the stories of Jesus in the NT Gospels. Instead, it is a critical rationalistic attempt to discredit the teaching of the NT. The same rationalist path has been trodden many times—it is well-worn! Blaise Pascal once said that there are two extremes: “To exclude reason and to admit reason only.” The book *Miracles and Wonder* displays the extreme of admitting reason only, making it quite unreasonable.

**Shane Lems** is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Hammond, Wisconsin.

# ServantReading

## Finishing Our Course with Joy, by J. I. Packer

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by Gordon H. Cook, Jr.

*Finishing Our Course with Joy*, by J. I. Packer. Crossway, 2014, 106 pages, \$10.99, paper.

J. I. Packer—English/Canadian Theologian (1926–2020)—is well known to all of us, particularly through his many books. I cut my Reformed teeth on Packer’s treatment of evangelism, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (1958, 1984). It left me eager for more, and I found great help in his now modern Christian Classic, *Knowing God* (1973, 1993). I grew into Christian maturity reading another classic, *A Quest for Godliness* (1990), a modern reconsideration of the Puritan ideals. This review focuses on his last book, *Finishing our Course with Joy* (2014).

The Puritan idea of “finishing well”—a life of perseverance culminating in those final years, months, and days in the life of a believer and “dying well”—looking beyond this life to the glory which is to come for all who die in the Lord. The thought comes both from the life of Paul which brought him to his martyrdom and the Puritan idea of *momento mori* (remembering our mortality).

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Tim. 4:6–8)

If you are reading this, especially if you are reading the print edition of *Ordained Servant*, you are probably getting older. Just ahead of you, or in my case, just behind, is retirement.

Some mistakenly think that retirement is not biblical. They fail to note the requirement that Levitical priests were required to retire from service in the tabernacle at age 50 (Num. 8:23–26). Notice that even those who were required to retire from service in the tabernacle still were to perform the task of “keeping guard.” Noting how shaky my own hands have become when serving the Lord’s Supper, the instruction to the priests makes a great deal of sense to me.

J. I. Packer’s final book, *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, is a short book, a little over one hundred pages, which can easily be read in an evening. It was written immediately following the diamond jubilee of Her Britannic Majesty, Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth. Sixty years earlier, Elizabeth had vowed before God to serve her subjects all her life. Packer notes, “She is a Christian lady resolved to live out her vow till she drops. She merits unbounded admiration from us all” (12). In his short book, Packer commits himself to do the same, and writes “in hope of persuading others to do the same” (13).

He begins with a profound observation that we are all getting older. You know the poetry of Ecclesiastes: trembling house keepers, bent strong men, few grinders, dim windows, closed doors, low sounds, white hair, early rising, dragging oneself along,

readiness to go off to one's eternal home (Eccl. 12:3–7). It is well worth looking at pages 15–17 just to read Packer's comical take on the Ecclesiastes passage. The question is, How shall we live through this period of advanced age?

Packer quotes from a hymn by Thomas Ken, "Awake My Soul and with the Sun" (1674): "live each day as if thy last." From this Packer draws wise counsel for living in this world:

- Live for God one day at a time.
- Live in the present moment.
- Live ready to go when Christ comes for you.

This is even more true for those who have attained the years of "ripeness." "[The righteous] still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green" (Ps. 92:14). The point is, actively awaiting glory is a very different approach to retirement than that endorsed by the secular world. The secular world seeks to retire comfortably, with enough resources to live a life of self-indulgence up until a comfortable passing. Key themes are money (lots of it) and adequate health insurance to meet one's needs and enjoy one's prosperity right up until the end.

The Christian, in contrast, seeks to continually glorify God through the period of retirement and on into eternity. This includes

- life-long learning, growing both in our knowledge of God and in faith, trusting in him;
- leading others, serving as an influence or perhaps even a mentor for younger believers.

The Christian life is often described as a race. Even in old age we are to run this race with endurance, looking to Jesus (Heb. 12:1–2). We run to win the prize (1 Cor. 9:24–27). Packer writes of continuing that race through the "last lap," ever seeking to glorify God, ever aware of God's presence with us.

Packer includes a discussion of our souls and bodies and the purpose each bears in the plan of God. As I struggle with health issues, I can appreciate his wise counsel about the temptation toward "obstinate unrealism" and "pride" as we continue along the course God sets for us. His call to gratitude, to continued walking with the Lord, and to zeal is encouraging.

As we enter into advanced years, our hope of glory becomes far more concrete. It is no longer a far distant future for us, but rather just around the corner. We can almost taste the desire to leave this mortal body for eternal glory in the presence of our Redeemer. A new body, a resurrected body, a deepened fellowship with the exalted Christ should become a virtual obsession for those trusting in him. Even the thought of final judgment is no deterrence when we remember that Christ himself is both king and judge of all.

Retirement affords added time for service within God's kingdom, but at the expense of energy. Teaming with younger Christians provides the balance needed within God's church.

**Gordon H. Cook, Jr.** is a retired pastor, coordinator of the Pastoral Care (Chaplain) program for Mid Coast Hospital, and a retired chaplain for hospice care with CHANS Home Health in Brunswick, Maine. He resides in White River Junction, Vermont.

# Church Heroes Come to Life

Cynthia Rowland

*Thomas Boston: Christian Biographies for Young Readers*, by Simonetta Carr; with illustrations by Matt Abraxas. Reformation Heritage, 2025, 63 pages, \$20.00.

As part of our family devotions, our family watched Sinclair Ferguson’s video series *The Whole Christ*.<sup>1</sup> Ferguson introduces his subject matter by describing the “Auchterarder Controversy” and “the Marrow Men” (a group of men with whom Thomas Boston was identified). In chapter 5 of her book, Simonetta Carr clearly and concisely describes this controversy at a level a child could understand—a challenging accomplishment, since we had difficulty understanding it ourselves. My husband and I became so interested in Boston because of Ferguson’s series that we went to visit the site of Thomas Boston’s church in Scotland. It is almost in the middle of nowhere! Our quest to find his church and the discovery of its remoteness gave us great respect for Boston, especially his perseverance. We are delighted to see that Simonetta Carr has included him in her series of biographies on the great heroes of the faith.

*Thomas Boston* is one in a series of books subtitled *Christian Biographies for Young Readers*, written about distinguished characters from church history. Carr’s inspiration began while she was homeschooling her children. She always had a keen interest in history, especially philosophical and biographical history. During her homeschooling days, she attended a conference at her church on church history. Much of this information was new to her, especially the way the development of theology (incorrect and correct), through the ages, informed and shaped the church. She went in search of good sources to teach her children this particular kind of history—biography with an emphasis on theology and its influence on the church—but found nothing suitable for young audiences.<sup>2</sup> Friends and family encouraged her to do something about it, so she tried her hand at filling the void, produced a book, sent it to several publishing houses, and it was eventually published by Reformation Heritage Books from Grand Rapids, Michigan. She has since written a whole series consisting of twenty-three books. When asked how she decides on her subjects, she said she tries to choose “men and women who’ve had a major influence on Christian thought.”<sup>3</sup> Her main goal is to teach kids “to know what they believe and why,”<sup>4</sup> which has become a sort of slogan.

In the book *Thomas Boston*, Mrs. Carr focuses primarily on the topic of *the true gospel*. Thomas Boston grew up in Scotland in the seventeenth century when Christianity was the religion of the culture, but it was not necessarily pure. These were the days of the Scottish *Covenanters*—Boston’s father was one of those who was imprisoned. It was a time of struggle between the Church of England and true believers. The gospel was being mixed with tradition and legalism. Since his youth, Boston had loved the Bible and even mastered Greek and Hebrew so he could learn more about it, but “there was still much he

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Ligonier Ministries, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Travis Bohlinger’s interview with Simonetta Carr, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-TrLMIHdh4>.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Trueman’s interview with Simonetta Carr, <http://www.mortificationofspin.org/mos/archive/201305>.

<sup>4</sup> Trueman’s interview with Simonetta Carr.

did not understand about it.” King Charles II’s laws had made it illegal for faithful preachers to teach outside the Church of England, so learning of the true gospel was stunted. But after these laws were rescinded, Boston heard a sermon on John 1:29, “‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ Thomas had never heard anyone explain so clearly the good news that Jesus came to take the punishment for all the sins of believers. . . . ‘I was like one amazed with some new and strange thing,’ he said” (12–13).

Carr describes how Boston, after receiving license to preach, became “eager to attack the sins he had noticed in some places” and “spent most of the sermons speaking against them, as if he could by his words ‘set fire to the devil’s nests.’” This left him “exhausted and discouraged.” A more experienced pastor told him, “If you started to preach about Christ, you would find it very pleasant” (18–19).

The theme regarding the true gospel continues when Carr develops the “Auchterarder” and the “Marrow Men” controversy. The details surrounding this controversy can be difficult to understand, in part due to the negative wording of the so-called Auchterarder creed (making conclusions from negative arguments is often difficult, but this time it is especially so). Carr explains them well. The topic of this debate was near and dear to Boston. He had not understood the true gospel as a young person, had not preached it well as a new pastor, and even continued to doubt his own worthiness as a more mature pastor (23).

In *Thomas Boston*, Carr nicely knits together Boston’s theological convictions, ministry concerns, and details of his personal life to create an inspiring picture of a man driven by his love for the gospel (“the whole Christ,” as Sinclair Ferguson called it). We see a man who struggled in the remote and sometimes spiritually hostile areas of Scotland and endured opposition from within the church itself. In short, his ministry was not easy.

Carr’s presentation style in *Thomas Boston* is eye-catching. The parchment backdrop sets a seventeenth-century mood. Some pages incorporate landscape photographs or sketched objects as the background. These alternating backdrops complement the text and the graphic design, and the way they fade into the page is subtly attractive. The type-set size and style combine to provide a pleasant visual experience. There are illustrations on almost every page. Portraits of the main characters balance the narrative. From time to time Carr includes period sketches of buildings and scenes which help to guide the mood. Tasteful artistic renderings of scenes from Boston’s life give the narrative realistic texture. Photographs of the landscapes and buildings from the areas where Boston lived and ministered reflect the remoteness of Boston’s ministry.

At the end of the book, Carr provides further helpful information: a simple timeline of Boston’s life and a “Did you know?” section with interesting tidbits about his life and times. She also includes a short extract from Boston’s work *A Crook in the Lot* in modernized language, capturing a nice summary section.

From my own experience as a homeschooling mother, I own a few books with similar content: *Trial and Triumph, Stories from Church History* by Richard M. Hannula (Canon Press, 1999) is a 300-page book summarizing the lives of forty-six church mothers and fathers, and *Reformation Heroes* by Diana Kleyn and Joel R. Beeke (Reformation Heritage, 2007) is a 240-page book covering the lives of about thirty reformers. A book more similar to Carr’s is a biography about Martin Luther called *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World* by Paul Maier (Concordia, 2004). Hero Biographies published



by YWAM Publishing is a series of books in the same genre as Carr's, but it focuses on the broader history—not theology—of the times through the lens of an individual hero.

A few minor criticisms are as follows: The caption on page 4 refers to a map of Great Britain, but the map is actually only of Scotland; In addition, Carr did not mention Boston's major work *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, but this is likely due to her need to be selective in order to weave together a coherent biography for younger readers in a constrained space. She has certainly succeeded in accomplishing that with this excellent introduction to Thomas Boston. Simonetta Carr's well-researched, clearly written, attractive books educate children on church history from a Reformed perspective, teaching them what we believe and why.

**Cynthia Rowland** *is member of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Concord, Massachusetts.*

# ServantPoetry

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Aaron

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Holiness on the head,  
Light and perfections on the breast,  
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead  
To lead them unto life and rest:  
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profaneness in my head,  
Defects and darkness in my breast,  
A noise of passions ringing me for dead  
Unto a place where is no rest:  
Poor priest, thus am I drest.

Only another head  
I have, another heart and breast,  
Another music, making live, not dead,  
Without whom I could have no rest:  
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my only head,  
My alone-only heart and breast,  
My only music, striking me ev'n dead,  
That to the old man I may rest,  
And be in him new-drest.

So, holy in my head,  
Perfect and light in my dear breast,  
My doctrine tun'd by Christ (who is not dead,  
But lives in me while I do rest),  
Come people; Aaron's drest.