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What Happens If We Say Two Plus Two Makes Five? The Role of Wisdom and Creation in Matters of Salvation

Peter J. Scaer

To Tell the Truth

Amen, amen! Our Lord speaks the truth, and is the truth (John 14:6). He came not only to redeem but to reveal: “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). Come to Jesus, and “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). For the truth lights the path that leads to life.

So then, when Satan lies, he does so in character, “for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Having been thrown down from heaven, the great dragon seeks to deceive the whole world (Rev 12:9). Satan offers the kind of knowledge that turns what would otherwise be wise men into fools (Rom 1:22). The devil’s promise of liberation is a mirage that ends in an enslavement to sin (John 8:24), mammon (Matt 6:24), and the elementary principles (Gal 4:3). This slavery leads to death (Rom 6:16; Gen 2:17). For good reason, a “lying tongue” stands next to “hands that shed innocent blood” in Solomon’s list of abominations (Prov 6:17).

Accordingly, our Lord warns us to be on the lookout for pseudo-prophets whose aim is deception (Matt 24:24). In these latter days, “Some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). As it was in the serpent’s deception of Eve (1 Tim 2:14), so will it intensify during the time of strong delusion, when condemnation will come on all who, delighting in unrighteousness, do not believe in the truth (2 Thess 2:11–12).

What Is Truth?

Pontius Pilate asks, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). The answer begins with declaring that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor 12:3). Confess that Jesus is Lord, and all else follows. But confession can never be boiled down to a single and solitary statement. Faith in Christ fits within a matrix that includes the virgin birth, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Deny any of these events, and Christianity comes to nothing, and our faith is in vain (1 Cor 15:14).

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But then, no portion of the truth can be hermetically or hermeneutically sealed off from truth in its entirety. An infection left untreated can turn the corpus into a corpse. We confess the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds for our bachelor's and master's degrees, with doctorates in the Athanasian. The Book of Concord takes us further still. Such a full confession is more than enough for our salvation. And yet, at the same time, it may not be nearly enough. While the Bible may be found in a wonderful museum, it cannot be left there, for the truth must be asserted anew everywhere the lie is told, everywhere sheep are being led astray.

Steeple and Foundations

What is truth? Long before Augsburg and Nicaea, there was Caesarea Philippi. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And upon this confession, Christ built his church (Matt 16:13–19). Peter was soon pressed to incorporate the upcoming crucifixion into his thinking. But instead of moving forward, we must now contend with things prior. While our attention may be drawn to crumbling steeples, it is the foundation that cries out for our attention. Though we crave heavenly food, we must return to the milk. How might we confess Christ when the meaning of our words is stripped away, when our language no longer comports with reality? When the story of salvation is divorced from creation? When two plus two no longer makes four?

Women's Ordination: The Coal Mine's Canary

Word on the street is that certain church bodies are in crisis over the question of women's ordination. With our Lord, we pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). But having seen this movie so many times, we know how it ends. Long before the pronoun wars, liberal churches were addressing God as mother, turning him into a her. With women's ordination, the secular agenda takes the seat of authority, with abortion seemingly a given, along with rainbow pride, gender madness, and whatever else happens to be on the secular agenda. Allow women's ordination, and the Holy Spirit is replaced with the spirit of the age. We must take to heart the teaching of 1 Corinthians.¹ One word of Scripture outweighs the world of the progressives. But St. Paul's prohibitions are not Levitical laws given for a few and for a time. In the minister and his congregation, we have a glimpse into things deeper.

¹ For a helpful summary of the situation, see Gregory Lockwood, "Excursus: The Ordination of Women," in *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 516–544. For an up-to-date look at the exegesis, see John Nordling, "The Women's 'Speaking' at Corinth," *CTQ* 86, nos. 3–4 (July/October 2022): 241–259.

Theological Sand: The Challenge of Birthing Persons

St. Paul preaches the great mystery of a groom's love for his bride. Our Lord beckons us to pray, "Our Father." But how can people hope to attain such heights if they can no longer give coherent answers to such elementary questions as "What is marriage?" or even "What is a woman?" Is it possible somehow to keep the faith, even if we concede the reality that undergirds it? Will our people become such skilled jugglers so as to keep the gospel ball up in the air, when so many torches are thrown their way? How can they trust God when he tells them who he is, when they do not trust him to tell them who they are?

Parents Magazine: A New Catechism

Consider the popular and decidedly mainstream *Parents* magazine, a go-to resource for raising happy and healthy children. A typical example of the trouble is found in Alex Hazlett's article "When Can You Find Out the Sex of Your Baby?"² Though writing about pregnancy, Hazlett never makes mention of a woman or a mother, but speaks only of "the pregnant person." And this is no accident. From a blood test, one may learn a baby's biological sex, but we cannot yet say whether the baby is a girl or boy. As Hazlett explains, "Babies grow up to be kids who can tell their parents about themselves, and the labels they're assigned at birth don't always match their feelings about themselves."³ Whether a child is a boy or girl cannot be determined by biology, and therefore, it is suggested that parents forgo the traditional birth certificate designation of male or female and choose "x," leaving the ultimate choice up to a child who is purposefully left dazed and confused.

Granted, the new regime takes some getting used to, but Stefanie Lefeunesse, childbirth educator and lactation counselor, wishes to ease our minds on the matter: "Changing the language around pregnancy and birth is not difficult; in fact, it's one of the easiest ways to improve affirming baselines. Using accurate terms like 'pregnant parent' and 'breast/chest feeding' does nothing to diminish the magic and honor of guiding a new parent through their pregnancy, labor, and birth."⁴ Meanwhile, reality-affirming language is deemed psychologically damaging. David Minerva, who identifies as a transgender man, describes her pregnancy experience

² Alex Hazlett, "When Can You Find Out the Sex of Your Baby?," *Parents*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.parents.com/pregnancy/my-baby/gender-prediction/qa-how-soon-can-you-find-out-babys-sex/>.

³ Hazlett, "When Can You Find Out the Sex of Your Baby?"

⁴ Amber Leventry, "Trans and Nonbinary People Can Be Pregnant Too," *Parents*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.parents.com/pregnancy/my-body/pregnancy-health/trans-and-nonbinary-people-can-be-pregnant-too/>.

this way, “I was deeply uncomfortable with how cis-normative the whole culture of pregnancy was. Phrases like ‘pregnant women’ and ‘expectant mothers’ made my skin crawl and made me feel wrong.”⁵ Skin crawls indeed.

As this is indeed something new, Amber Leventry urges, “Continued education is a must.”⁶ She adds, “And with more mindfulness, folks will start to accept what was once considered impossible as normal.”⁷ It is doubtful that the angel Gabriel had this in mind when he told Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). But given the widespread acceptance of things that quite recently seemed unthinkable, the fulfillment of Leventry’s prophecy seems a pretty safe bet.

Parents magazine reminds us that abortion, rainbow pride, and the transgender phenomenon are not so much separate lies as they are the chief and complementary parts of the secular catechism. In the same article that we learn about men having babies, we are also told, “Abortion rights are not just women’s rights, nor is access to birth control or fertility treatments.”⁸ As gender activists promote abortion, abortionists promote gender madness. Appearing before the Oversight and Reform Committee of Congress, Planned Parenthood doctor Bhavik Kumar testified, “Men can have pregnancies, especially trans men.”⁹ Wholly in character, Planned Parenthood, the center for our national holocaust, has become the go-to source for adolescent women to be treated with testosterone in the transitioning process. And thus the business that takes little lives with syringes and scissors now offers the kind of medical care that leads to top surgery.

Teach Your Children Well: Government Schools and Children’s Television

While *Parents* magazine is written for would-be mothers, the indoctrination of our children is also in full swing. Public schools catechize gender fluidity, introducing such characters as the Genderbread Person and the Gender Unicorn.¹⁰ According to TSER (Trans Student Educational Resources), “Biological sex is an ambiguous word that has no scale and no meaning besides that it is related to some sex characteristics.”¹¹ Add to that the presence of boys in girls’ bathrooms, and males

⁵ Leventry, “Trans and Nonbinary People Can Be Pregnant Too.”

⁶ Leventry, “Trans and Nonbinary People Can Be Pregnant Too.”

⁷ Leventry, “Trans and Nonbinary People Can Be Pregnant Too.”

⁸ Leventry, “Trans and Nonbinary People Can Be Pregnant Too.”

⁹ Alec Schemmel, “‘This Is Medicine’: Men Can Get Pregnant, Planned Parenthood Doctor Tells Congress,” *The National Desk*, September 30, 2022, <https://thenationaldesk.com/news/americas-news-now/this-is-medicine-men-can-get-pregnant-planned-parenthood-doctor-tells-congress-bhavik-kumar-andrew-clyde-transgender-trans-pregnancy-abortion#>.

¹⁰ Learn about this teaching in Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), 29–33.

¹¹ Trans Student Educational Resources, “Gender Unicorn,” <http://www.transstudent.org/gender>.

awarded trophies in female sports, and we get a sense of the problem. These oddities are in fact representative of the ideology espoused by our nation's largest teachers union. Speaking at an NEA convention, President Becky Pringle rallied a cheering crowd: "As we have for decades we will fight tirelessly for the right to choose. We will fight unceasingly for the rights of our LGBTQ+ students and educators. We will say gay. We will say trans."¹² Parents are beginning to rebel, if only in fits and starts.

As at school, so also at play. Drag queens tell stories at our public libraries. Disney movies feature same-sex kisses. American Girl puts out a children's book on "Body Image" featuring a chapter on gender joy.¹³ Nickelodeon's beloved show *Blue's Clues* recently produced an episode featuring a drag queen leading a rainbow pride parade, accompanied by songs of infectious propaganda.¹⁴ But things get worse. Social media is flooded with videos and channels targeting our children, urging transitioning as a means to self-discovery. Children are advised to keep their new identities secret from their parents. As one mother told me, by the time you learn about the problem, it is usually too late.¹⁵ The harrowing documentary *Dead Name* captures the heartbreak of parents desperately trying to save their children from the predators and groomers.¹⁶

Can the Lambs Lie Down with the Lie?

The truth will not save us if it is no longer on our lips, if we do not take pains to protect our children, and ourselves, from the great delusion. Lying becomes a habit, and when coerced, it claims our highest allegiances. No man can serve two masters. Many young lambs have already been led astray or to the slaughter, and many old goats have swallowed the new ideology hook, line, and sinker. Is it possible to play along? Might we utter the lie with fingers crossed? While too heavy a burden should not be placed on tender faith, Paul reminds us that "with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:10). Will it be possible to hold the truth within our hearts, while playing along with the lie? Or having spoken the lie long and often enough,

¹² Richard Smith, "Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Becky Pringle, President, National Education Association, to the 101st Representative Assembly," *National Education Association*, July 3, 2022, <https://www.nea.org/about-nea/media-center/press-releases/remarks-prepared-delivery-becky-pringle-president-national-education-association-101st>.

¹³ Mel Hammond, *Body Image: How to Love Yourself, Live Life to the Fullest, and Celebrate All Kinds of Bodies*, Smart Girl's Guides (Middleton: American Girl, 2022).

¹⁴ "The Blue's Clues Pride Parade Sing-Along Ft. Nina West!," *Blue's Clues & You* (video blog), YouTube, May 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4vHegf3WPU>.

¹⁵ Parents who wish to join forces and learn more may wish to learn about The Kelsey Coalition: Working to Change the Systems That Failed Our Kids (<https://genderresourceguide.com/kelsey-coalition/>).

¹⁶ See <https://www.deadnamedocumentary.com/>.

will we not also become comfortable and complicit, and even begin to believe it ourselves? And what of our children and grandchildren who have never lived in a world in which the lie was not put on parade?

Pronoun Hospitality?

Understandably, many are looking for ways out of the trap, striving to be as clever as serpents, while staking a claim on the innocence of doves. Writing for The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, Gregory Coles has popularized the phrase “pronoun hospitality.” In what is labeled a “Pastoral Paper,” Coles suggests that “Christians can and should use pronouns that reflect the expressed gender identities of transgender people, regardless of our views about gender identity ethics.”¹⁷ For Coles, the use of false and new pronouns is simply a matter of referring to a person the way he/she/they/ve/ze wishes to be identified. Pronoun hospitality is offered as a means to meet people where they are at.

One wonders whether Coles understands the situation. When we speak about pronouns, we enter into a minefield of tripwires and booby traps meant to silence and stifle frank conversation. This is not a world in which a naïve boy is rewarded for saying that the emperor has no clothes, nor is it a matter of a poor and demented fellow who claims to be the Queen of England. This is, as Anthony Esolen has called it, “the war over reality.”¹⁸ And the stakes are high.

Caesar’s Incense

The use of prescribed pronouns, along with other participatory rites of the rainbow religion, is more akin to burning incense to an emperor. Consider the Orwellian-named Respect for Marriage Act, which puts the truth of marriage on par with the bigotry of those who deny interracial marriage.¹⁹ As the emperor places his fingers on the scales of justice, the faithful must brace for social and legal consequences.

At many workplaces, the new pronoun usage is mandatory. Indiana music teacher John Kluge, fired for using last names instead of false pronouns, was in no position to engage in hospitality. Minnesota’s Professional Educator Licensing and

¹⁷ Gregory Coles, “Pastoral Paper: What Pronouns Should Christians Use for Transgender People?,” The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources/pastoral-papers/11-what-pronouns-should-christians-use-for-transgender-people>.

¹⁸ Anthony Esolen, “Pronouns, Ordinary People, and the War over Reality,” *Public Discourse*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2016/10/17811/>.

¹⁹ See Gregory S. Baylor, “What You Should Know about the Respect for Marriage Act,” *Alliance Defending Freedom*, December 14, 2022, <https://adflegal.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-respect-marriage-act>.

Standards Board will soon require teachers “to affirm the validity of students’ backgrounds and identities,” a list which includes gender identity and sexual orientation.²⁰ As Doug Seaton, president of Minnesota’s Upper Midwest Law Center, says, “Their teachers are going to have to be faced with hiding their beliefs or getting denied [for a state teaching license].”²¹ Again, the ACLU has received a summary judgment in a case against a Catholic hospital that has refused to perform a hysterectomy, removing a healthy organ from a woman claiming to be transgender.²²

What will we say to our people, many of whom are teachers in the public school, or are medical professionals, or pharmacists and businesspeople? For something analogous, we might consider the martyrdom of Polycarp. Larry Hurtado observes of early Christianity, “And yet it seems clear that the aim of Roman authorities was not particularly to execute Christians, but to turn them from what the authorities (and large numbers of the public at large) saw as their perverse and dangerous allegiance. That is, the object was not death but conformity to the demands of imperial authority.”²³ So also today.

So Paul urges, “Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth” (Eph 6:14). “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake,” said our Lord (Matt 10:22). This is not simply a matter of loving a Christ of popular imagination, but of abiding in him and his words (John 15:7). Clinging to Christ will surely bring division, even within our own families (Luke 14:26). That is to say, salvation is free, but faithfulness comes at a price. Truth has consequences.

To Every Thing There Is A Season

As Christians, we are witnesses to Christ and his love for all people. Christ died for sinners, and as God’s enemies we have been reconciled (Rom 5:10). Our Lord came precisely to save tax collectors and sinners. Our Lord goes so far as to say, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). The redeemed speak with the humility that comes with a keen awareness of their own and abiding fallen nature.

²⁰ Joy Pullmann, “Minnesota Poised to Ban Christians, Muslims, and Jews from Teaching in Public Schools,” *The Federalist*, January 12, 2023, <https://thefederalist.com/2023/01/12/Minnesota-poised-to-ban-christians-muslims-and-jews-from-teaching-in-public-schools/>.

²¹ Pullmann, “Minnesota Poised.”

²² Wesley J. Smith, “Maryland Catholic Hospital Liable for Refusing Transgender Hysterectomy,” *National Review*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/maryland-catholic-hospital-liable-for-refusing-transgender-hysterectomy/>.

²³ Larry W. Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016), 57.

But our present challenge is to speak the truth in love, most especially to speak frankly for the sake of our people (Lev 19:17). Our Lord talks so often of hell not because he is fixated on judgment, but because he wants something better for us (Heb 6:9). Perhaps shockingly, the preacher reminds us that while there is a time for love, there is also a time for hate (Eccl 3:8). Accordingly, the psalmist instructs, “You who love the LORD, hate evil!” (Ps 97:10). Knowing the destructive and eternal power of the lie, the psalmist sings, “I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law” (Ps 119:163). While we are encouraged to bless those who persecute us, repaying no evil with evil, Paul adds, in the very same breath, “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom 12:9). When the world confesses that love is love, they are spreading a confusion that leads to chaos, heartache, and death. We are called to offer a better way, to the love that is wedded to truth.

A Secular Prophecy and a Maccabean Witness

Christians have no monopoly on insight. George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* memorably depicts the power of the lie and its effect on the human spirit. Protagonist Winston Smith says, “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four. If that is granted, all else follows.”²⁴ Natural law cannot lead us to revealed knowledge, but its denial puts up roadblocks on the path to true wisdom. Perhaps, we may propose, “Say that two plus two makes five, and all else falls apart.” This simple math is available to all, as is the difference between a boy and a girl.

When Orwell says that two and two makes four, he is urging us to the integrity of truth that relies on natural knowledge. When the Maccabean martyrs refused to eat pork, they were being faithful to a Levitical command given specifically for God’s people through revelation. Friends urged Eleazar to dissemble, to bring his own meat to the feast, but he refused, lest he scandalize the young and make a mockery of the God whom he served. As Eleazar put it, “At our age it would be unbecoming to make such a pretense; many of the young would think the ninety-year-old Eleazar had gone over to an alien religion. If I dissemble to gain a brief moment of life, they would be led astray by me, while I would bring defilement and dishonor on my old age” (2 Macc 6:24–25).²⁵ Eleazar would not cross his fingers behind his back. He understood that his life and death would be, for better or for worse, a witness to others.

And when at the birth of a child, we cry out, “It’s a boy,” or when, in defiance of the dominant culture, we confess that a marriage is between one man and one

²⁴ George Orwell, *1984* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press, 2017), 133.

²⁵ New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

woman, and that a woman is an adult female, we are speaking from both natural and revealed knowledge. In speaking simple truth, we encourage others, and we keep open the road to higher truth still. Lies are dispiriting, while courage buoys the spirit. When a Christian suffers for the truth, he offers up a witness to the way, the truth, and the life. By speaking the truth, we are saying that there are things that matter more than our lives and livelihoods, even if it means we become a laughingstock. Our Lord says, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much” (Luke 16:10, KJV).²⁶ And, we must add, speaking the truth about things so basic is no little thing.

What Is Required of a Prophet?

The truth is one and whole, but we have different duties given our various stations in life. To the apostles, our Lord said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32). Pastors must teach all that our Lord has commanded (Matt 28:20). Seminaries and ordination aid in that process. But a faithful shepherd must also be willing to teach those things that are unpopular, things that could cause all sorts of worldly problems for himself and his hearers. For that, there is courage.

What Is Required of All Christians

While prophets are called to speak, all Christians are called to listen. “The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” (Matt 10:41). This means that we must never be ashamed of our Lord or his words (Mark 8:38), including the words he has to say about male, female, and marriage (Matt 19:4–5).

Say that two plus two equals four, and all else follows, says Orwell. But should we expect our people to shout that truth from the rooftops? A few Christians take signs or megaphones to the public square, and for that we should be thankful. The opportunities are myriad. Others caution that certain behaviors might cross the line from courageous to foolhardy, but prayers for discernment should never be used as an excuse for silence or inactivity.

Sheep should not be expected to face perils from which their shepherds flee. The waters are tricky, our people will tell us, *sotto voce*. That being said, it is striking that thus far, the greatest heroes of our time have included a baker, a florist, photographers, high school teachers, and others whose seemingly simple faith may put

²⁶ Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

our own faith to shame. When such courageous people rise in our midst, we should run to them, and not away from them, sharing their burden, and identifying with their faithfulness, supporting them with our tithes and offerings so that their example might strengthen us.

The Failure of the Christian Elite

While liberal denominations promote the lie, too many Bible-believing churches seek to distance themselves from the truth and its consequences. Carl Trueman speaks of this phenomenon in his *First Things* article “The Failure of Evangelical Elites.” These elites crave the approval of our cultured despisers, and accordingly remain silent about abortion, and most especially the rainbow pride. A seat at the table of our betters requires our acquiescence. Better still if we can join in their cause. As Trueman notes, Christian leaders see promotion of the diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda as “a perfect opportunity for Christian leaders to place themselves (for once) on the ‘good’ side of a moral debate that is generating turmoil in a wider society, and thus to stand with the cultured despisers.”²⁷ Within the ruling elite’s definition of inclusion, we find again the rainbow pride, and within equity is embedded Marxism. Christians will be called upon to judge the angels (1 Cor 6:3), and yet in their schools, too many follow the secular trend of ceding judgment to offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion, whose rulings are based on an ideology inimical to the faith.²⁸

Among the cultured despisers may be numbered Andrew L. Seidel. In his book *American Crusade: How the Supreme Court Is Weaponizing Religious Freedom*, Seidel speaks disparagingly of Jack Phillips, Kim Davis, and even our own Trinity Lutheran Church.²⁹ Seidel indicts Jack Phillips for the sin of discrimination. Kim Davis is labeled a bigot, simply because she did not want to become complicit in the lie. Catholic charities are called out for not adopting out children to same-sex couples. Jemar Tisby, who may be numbered among the evangelical elite, seems to have no sympathy for such faithful Christians, endorsing Seidel’s book with the blurb, “I couldn’t stop highlighting as I read . . . because my understanding of religious freedom’s uses and abuses increased with every page.” Churches that invite the likes of Tisby to be their teachers would do well to think of the faithful whom the elite

²⁷ Carl R. Trueman, “The Failure of Evangelical Elites,” *First Things*, November 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/11/the-failure-of-evangelical-elites>.

²⁸ Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2021).

²⁹ Andrew L. Seidel, *American Crusade: How the Supreme Court Is Weaponizing Religious Freedom* (New York: Union Square, 2022). See Supreme Court of the United States, *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer, Director, Missouri Department of Natural Resources*, October 2016, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-577_khlp.pdf.

have abandoned. Paul speaks to us today, “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor 1:26–27). Perhaps, instead of seeking the approval of our betters, we would do well to recalibrate, and make for ourselves friends in low places.

Live Not by Lies

What is expected of us? Not everyone is ready to be a hero. Upon his arrest and subsequent release into the West, Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn released the text of the essay “Live Not by Lies.” Solzhenitsyn spoke of living under the tyranny of atheistic communism. During the darkest of times, people lost hope, saying, “But really, there is nothing to be done! Our mouths are gagged, no one listens to us, no one asks us. How can we make *them* listen to us? To make them reconsider—is impossible.” Many of today’s faithful feel the same way. So what shall we say to our own soldiers of the cross? Solzhenitsyn suggests: “We are not called upon to step out onto the square and shout out the truth, to say out loud what we think—this is scary, we are not ready. But let us at least refuse to say what we *do not* think!”³⁰ If we cannot change the world, at least we may safeguard our souls. If we are not yet ready to speak the truth, we can refuse to repeat the lie.

Drawing upon Solzhenitsyn, Rod Dreher describes our present situation: “Today in our societies, dissenters from the woke party line find their businesses, careers, and reputations destroyed. They are pushed out of the public square, stigmatized, canceled, and demonized as racists, sexists, homophobes, and the like. And they are afraid to resist, because they are confident that no one will join them or defend them.”³¹ For every faithful confessor, there are a dozen ready to say that he could have said things more politely, delicately, or quietly—that he had it coming.

In what ways can Christians exercise their faith and confess the God of creation? In our day and age, this might be as simple as declining an invitation to a so-called gay marriage, even if it includes a close family member. It may mean declining to offer up our own personal pronouns. For someone in the medical profession, it may mean refusing to take part in a gender transition surgery, or to dispense damaging drugs. It may mean challenging those who claim authority. The list is endless and may be different in every situation. We need not know calculus. We must simply be

³⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not by Lies,” The Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center, 1974, <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>.

³¹ Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), 8–9.

willing to refuse to say that two plus two makes five. Refuse to deny the biblical and biological math, that apart from one man and one woman, two cannot become one.

It may be good to think of courage as a muscle. Baby steps are encouraged. Taking part in a pro-life march may be the easiest starting point. If we would be faithful in much, we must first be faithful in things little. It should not surprise us that the Coptic martyrs who died on the Libyan shore had themselves lived lives of bodily and spiritual discipline.³² It may be good to hear the simple testimonies of those who have refused to play along. Such preparations are best made as pastors and people gather, and the possibilities are many. But for faith to grow strong, it must first be exercised.

The Great Heresy of Our Age

Many have seen that a new religion has filled the void left by Christianity's decline. Nancy Pearcey's *Love Thy Body* speaks of a new Gnosticism, in which the body becomes purely instrumental.³³ Noelle Mering calls it the Cult of Progressive Ideology.³⁴ Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* demonstrates how the road to our present delusion can be traced through such thinkers as Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud.³⁵ Has there ever been a time such as ours? A Roman emperor may have married a horse, but those of the equestrian class were not fooled, and neither were the plebeians or patricians. Call this new ideology yet another example of Gnosticism, or a hyper-nominalism, or simply secularism run amok. But a thorn by any other name is still a thorn, and what we have is a real problem on our hands.

Anthropology at the Center

Even as our people are under fire, our churches are breaking apart and dividing on these same issues. Carl Trueman recently offered up a *Wall Street Journal* editorial "The Church of the Sexual Revolution," subtitled, "Today's theological fault lines mostly concern matters of earthly morality." Trueman writes, "Whereas the problems for Christian institutions in the early 20th century might be described as having been a crisis in the understanding of God—could he become incarnate, rise

³² See Martin Mosebach, *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2019).

³³ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

³⁴ See also Noelle Mering, *Awake, Not Woke: A Christian Response to the Cult of Progressive Ideology* (Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2021).

³⁵ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

from the dead and reveal himself to his creatures?—the problems of the 21st century are different in kind.”³⁶ This virus seems not to discriminate, and no church bodies seem to be immune. According to Trueman, our divisions may be categorized under the heading of anthropology. He explains, “They can be characterized as a crisis in what it means to be human. Are embryos persons? Are sex differences morally significant? Is ‘gender identity’ different from sex?” Trueman closes, “It’s ironic that disagreements about the creature may prove more devastating than those about the Creator.”³⁷

Is It Really about the Creature Rather Than the Creator?

But are the fault lines simply about morality and anthropology? Such a proposition is appealing, for we might then be tempted to think that the higher things will remain untouched. Might we lose anthropology but save Christology? Katherine Schuessler reacted to Trueman’s op-ed in this way: “A Christian’s confession, however, is that Jesus Christ was and is both fully human and fully God. That means that Christ is the definition of what it means to be a human being, and subsequently the incarnation and resurrection say everything about what humans are and will be. Christians can only address gender and sexuality, then, by constantly considering Christ.” Schuessler hits the nail’s head. Any assault on our humanity is an assault on the one through whom the world was created, the one in whose image we were created, and the one who became a man that he might win for us salvation. If we are to think rightly, we must behold the man (John 19:5).

The Assault on the God of Our Salvation: Mary’s Baby Boy

Indeed, every assault on true anthropology is an assault on Christology. Through abortion, Satan expresses his hate for the Christ child. Through transgender hormones and surgery, Satan takes aim at the God of creation. Paul’s sweet gospel depends on the truth of creation and procreation, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman” (Gal 4:4).

If Mary is simply a birthing person, if at the birth of a child, we are no longer able to say, “It’s a boy,” everything else falls apart. Everything depends on us confessing “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Have you not read, “Therefore a man shall

³⁶ Carl R. Trueman, “The Church of the Sexual Revolution,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-church-of-the-sexual-revolution-moral-teaching-lgbtq-methodist-catholic-pride-religion-gender-identity-theology-pastor-11668091110>.

³⁷ Trueman, “The Church of the Sexual Revolution.”

leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Matt 19:5; see Gen 2:24)? And if you do not believe and confess this, whatever do you mean when you say that Christ is the groom who laid down his life for his bride, the church? Pull a string, and it all unravels, and our confession is reduced to babble.

The Deceivers and the Deceived

Charity is a must. Many are deluded, others are confused and hurt. Still many others are rightfully fearful. In a recent journal article, we read, “Abortion is a cultural issue in the United States because some Americans think a woman’s right to choose is overall good while other Americans believe abortion is wrong and therefore think that right allows, even promotes, evil. It is the same with same-sex marriage, critical race theory, climate change, socialism, social media, and many other topics.”³⁸ To be sure, the culture wars have many causes, and people fall on either side for various reasons. And that confusion can be found in our own pews. But that is all the more reason for the church to preach and teach the truth apparent in nature, and given to us in God’s revelation of his holy word.

As we have seen, core cultural issues are predicated on competing worldviews. While we battle in politics and culture for the preservation of flesh and blood, we do so against powers and principalities. This so-called culture war has a decidedly theological dimension. In *Irreversible Damage*, journalist Abigail Shrier tells the story of Lucy, who has enrolled at a liberal arts college in the Northeast. Upon entrance, she is asked her name, sexual orientation, and gender pronouns: “Lucy registered the new chance at social acceptance, a first whiff of belonging. When her anxiety flared that autumn, she decided, with several of her friends, that their angst had a fashionable cause: ‘gender dysphoria.’ Within a year, Lucy had begun a course of testosterone. But her real drug—one that hooked her—was the promise of a new identity. A shaved head, boys’ clothes, and new name formed the baptismal waters of a female-to-male rebirth.”³⁹ Remarkably, Shrier, though not a Christian, sees clearly what many who bear the name do not.

Abortion, Culture, and Religion

It is good to learn from others, to delight in the food, dress, and wisdom that other people have to offer. Such openness is encapsulated by our Lord’s directive to

³⁸ Joel Okamoto, “How Culture Matters,” *Concordia Journal* 48, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 18.

³⁹ Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2020), xviii.

the seventy to eat and drink what is provided for them (Luke 10:7), not declaring anything unclean that our Lord has declared clean (Acts 10:9–16).

But not every cultural practice can be enjoyed or baptized. Thus, as the flock of Israel is about to enter the promised land, Moses warns them not to be ensnared by the customs of the pagans: “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods” (Deut 12:31). The Israelites were especially forbidden against offering up children as sacrifices to Molech (Lev 20:1–5). Indeed, our Lord refers to hell itself as Gehenna (Mark 9:43, 45, 47), which is the valley of Hinnom, the place where sons and daughters were offered up in sacrificial fire to Molech (Jer 7:31; 32:35).

As is so often the case, the sons of this age are shrewder than the sons of light. The enemy so often sees that what we call cultural issues run to the very core of our existence, and to the essence of our faith. A prime example of this may be found in Planned Parenthood’s Margaret Sanger who aimed to rewrite the very book of Genesis. Sanger compared husbands to priests, as those who would keep us from eating the tree of knowledge. As such, they must both be toppled. For Sanger, “The marriage bed is the most degenerating influence in the social order.”⁴⁰ She looked forward to a day when “interest in the vague sentimental fantasies of extra-mundane existence would atrophy . . . for in that dawn men and women will have come to the realization, already suggested, that here close at hand is our paradise, our everlasting abode, our Heaven and our eternity.” In this new age, women would be freed from the lies of the church, and “through sex, mankind may attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which will light up the only path to paradise.”⁴¹

Carl Trueman is right to awaken us to the lies of Rousseau, Shelley and Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud. But we may well have to stop thinking about them simply as philosophers, poets, and scientists, and understand that they pose as the theologians of the church and would now supplant our own.

Proverbs: The Truth Is Written into Creation

What then shall we say and do? For the present crisis, faithfulness and courage are key. Parents can take nothing for granted when it comes to their children’s

⁴⁰ Bishop Victor Galeone, “Death or Life: The Choice Is Ours,” Banquet talk at the Florida Respect Life Conference, October 14, 2006, https://www.dosafl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/oct2006_HomilyTalk.pdf.

⁴¹ Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922; reprint, New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 237.

education, the information and images they consume, or the people who influence them. The place of screens, computers, and cellphones must be topics for counsel.⁴² A purposeful experience in nature, to the truth of the birds and the bees, may be in order. Young children should not be sent as evangelists to wolves. Christians must gather in discussion and encouragement towards faithfulness.

It would be foolish to claim that any individual or group has the answer or knows precisely the path forward. Some will attempt to reform the public schools, some to strengthen the Lutheran schools, some to homeschool. Some public school teachers may try to maneuver their way through the system, others will stick it out until retirement, while still others will abandon the enterprise for something new. To be sure, one size does not fit all, and Christians will see the situation differently and will make different choices. But whatever we choose, Christian freedom must be exercised in accordance with the truth. That which is lawful may not be helpful. And while we have a certain freedom, our choices have consequences. And for that, there is wisdom.

Wisdom and Common Sense

When a man wins a beauty contest for women, or a teenage boy is declared prom queen, it is hard not to conclude that the world has gone mad. As we contend for the truth, we are battling for reality, the notion that things make sense. Consider George Orwell's secular assessment of totalitarian ideology. "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of the experience but the existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense."⁴³ For the secular ideology to thrive, it must deny lived experience, that which can be plainly seen. In such a world, nothing is more dangerous than a walk in the woods, an old book or movie, or the wisdom of those who came before us.

Wisdom Cries Aloud in the Street

The Psalms have seen a resurgence within the devotional life of our people. Their rugged poetry is a powerful resource for the spiritual life. But it may be just as important to recover the book of Proverbs. Wisdom literature occupies a special place within the biblical canon, residing at the intersection of natural and revealed

⁴² Editor's note: For a start to the conversation, see Cal Newport, "On Kids and Smartphones," *Cal Newport* (blog), May 4, 2023, <https://calnewport.com/on-kids-and-smartphones/>.

⁴³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983), 62.

knowledge. It should come as no surprise that Solomon busied himself studying the workings of the created world: “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish” (1 Kgs 4:33). That is, Solomon spent much time exploring the truth of Genesis chapter one. Wisdom comes from experience, and with wisdom comes a return of common sense.

Every culture has a wisdom tradition whether oral or written. Ben Franklin can tell us about hard work, and African proverbs can tell us that excess leads to waste. Indeed, scholars have noted an overlap between the wisdom of Proverbs and that which is found in the Egyptian *Wisdom of Amenemope*, which appeared at least one hundred years before Solomon’s reign.⁴⁴ Much can be learned about life from reading Cicero or Seneca.

Biblical wisdom runs deeper. Our Lord himself is the Wisdom from on high, “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Before John spoke of the divine *Logos*, Wisdom let us in on the mystery, saying,

When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man. (Prov 8:27–31)

Indeed, it was through Wisdom that the world was created. Ignatius of Antioch understood this Wisdom to be the Holy Spirit, while Irenaeus identified Wisdom as the pre-incarnate Son.⁴⁵ The question is admittedly complicated, but then, when a matter is spiritual, it is surely christological, and vice versa. James writes, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (Jas 3:17). When James speaks of wisdom, does he mean the fruit of the Spirit or that of Christ? For today, we may speak of the Spirit of Christ, and leave it at that.

Since wisdom is present in creation, it leaves a divine mark on the very order of things. As Andrew Steinmann notes, wisdom “is characterized by insight into ways that God has ordered the world and into the ways that sin corrupts the world.”⁴⁶ Wisdom in its highest form can be found in Christ, but wisdom is especially that

⁴⁴ See Harold C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs*, SBL Dissertation Series 142 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 11–24.

⁴⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.3.

⁴⁶ Andrew Steinmann, *Proverbs* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 25.

truth that is passed down through the generations. Wisdom can be won through the school of hard knocks, though such learning may leave the student physically or emotionally damaged, or worse.

Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother

Wisdom at its heart is the passing down of practical knowledge from one generation to the next. Men and women are sinners, but fatherhood and motherhood remain. For good reason, honoring mother and father is the first commandment of the law's second table. In this commandment, we are reminded that fatherhood and motherhood are written into the created order, neither incidental nor changeable. To abandon the truth of marriage is to do an injustice to children. Fathers and mothers have different but complementary roles. A mother holds her child tightly to her breast. A father tosses that child into the air. A child needs both, and this, not simply according to law, but to wisdom.

Wisdom, building off of the law, seeks practical application. Accordingly, the book of Proverbs calls children to the wisdom of mom and dad. "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck" (Prov 1:8–9). Since there is a command to honor parents, so also parents have an obligation toward their children. Reproof is necessary, for "a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Prov 29:15). And again, "Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart" (Prov 29:17). For how to do such things, there is no law, but there is wisdom.

There is much more to think about here, but David Lawrence Coe's work *Provoking Proverbs: Wisdom and the Ten Commandments* may be a helpful way to begin the process of recovering wisdom in our own families and congregations.⁴⁷ Do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, nor covet. These are not merely Levitical commands, nor is the breaking of the commandments simply a kind of code violation. The commandments are good, and they are for our good. The Proverbs make the commands practical.

Hard work may not always lead to prosperity; nevertheless, we should know and teach that "a slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich" (Prov 10:4). A get-rich scheme may end up well, but not usually: "Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it" (Prov 13:11). That girl, though attractive, might end up more trouble than good (Prov 5:1–14).

⁴⁷ David Lawrence Coe, *Provoking Proverbs: Wisdom and the Ten Commandments* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020).

Lies not only endanger one's own soul, but they hurt others: "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (Prov 26:28).

This is not to say that the Proverbs have all the answers we need today. But they set us on the right course. In a world gone mad, we may very well need to begin at the beginning. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7). Therefore, let us begin.