

# OpenTheo

## Tearing Down Statues, Kneeling During the National Anthem, the Imago Dei, Favorite Writers

August 10, 2020



### Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Originally released on June 16th, 2020, Kevin DeYoung, Collin Hansen, and Justin Taylor discuss the tearing down of statues, kneeling during the National Anthem, what it means that we're made in the image of God, their favorite writers, and how to avoid bad writing.

### Transcript

[MUSIC] This is Life and Books and everything hosted by Kevin DeYoung, Justin Taylor and Colin Hansen.

[MUSIC] Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything.

I'm Kevin DeYoung, Colin Hansen and the ever mysterious, often glitchy, but never underestimated. That right? Justin Taylor, Justin, are you with us? >> I believe that I am. >> Yes.

>> Nice. >> They have 30 for 30 of me trying to connect to the network. >> What if I told you? >> I've grown man.

>> In Sioux City, Iowa. >> Well, the networks run on ethanol there, isn't it? >> That's true. >> Prices have been awful lately.

>> Yeah. Okay. So 30 for 30.

Speaking of, have you guys seen after the Jordan one, did you watch the Lance Armstrong or yesterday the Mark McGuire, Sammy Sosa, Colin? >> I was too busy trying to read books, so I'd have something to say on this podcast, Kevin. No, I missed those. >> And Justin? >> No.

>> No. Yeah, after basketball and football, my interest in sports drops off considerably. In fact, I think I was unaware of McGuire and Sosa when it was happening.

>> Is that that note? >> No. >> No, that can't be true. I mean, if you told me, like, those guys played at the same time, I would say, what? I didn't know that.

That's plausible. I was one of the greatest sports stories of our generation. >> So is the 30 for 30 about who did more steroids or is it about something else? >> It's actually not very much about steroids, but it's about the home run chase in the summer of 1998 and how that saved baseball.

And the two guys were, I mean, they were good to each other and it was a feel good story. And yeah, it's great. And they talk about, well, it was all fake, but it's not fake to hit a baseball.

I mean, there was actually some, I'll wax a little metaphysical. At one point, Mark McGuire, I don't know what sort of religious faith. He did talk about the man upstairs and- >> That's usually a good sign.

>> Yeah, right. The criterion man upstairs. >> He did say, he said, I feel like God puts us on this Earth for a purpose.

And we spend a lot of life just trying to figure out what that purpose is. And I knew from an early age, the one thing I could do better than anybody was hit a baseball really far. So there's some self-awareness there.

>> And then as dealer said, God put me on the planet. >> Give you Andrew. >> Have they both admitted it? Or they both say like, no, I just was taking vitamin B supplements and suddenly rub something on my ham strength and- >> Careful.

>> I thought was- >> I think- >> Yeah, I don't think Sammy has fully acknowledged it, but McGuire did a few years ago. So this is my question, which is relevant to what we're seeing in the world around us. How do you guys think we should handle fallen heroes? I mean, do you think those guys should be in the Hall of Fame? Is Lance Armstrong, as the documentary put it, is he a good person who did bad things or a bad person who did good things? What do we do when our heroes fall from grace? What do you think- >> If you want to come up with complicated, I'd say that- >> Yeah.

>> I get almost nothing about baseball. But Pete Rose is a harder example, isn't he? >> Right. >> Because those guys cheated at the game itself.

And there's somebody doing something that didn't necessarily affect what he was doing on the field. Should he be punished for his accomplishments? I think that's a harder case than somebody like a Sosa or McGuire who cheated in such a way to give them a physical advantage that potentially others didn't have. >> And it's hard because take those, I mean, certainly McGuire and Bonds and Roger Clemens, they were all Hall of Famers.

They were all going to be Hall of Famers. And now they're not because of what- and the baseball is interesting because it has some language in the voting that some sort of character clause or something. So Colin, how do you think of it with sports or otherwise heroes who fall from grace? >> We don't have any heroes who aren't fallen, right? So, I mean, especially when we're looking theologically, if you're looking for your Martin Luther or your John Calvin or your George Willfield or your Jonathan Edwards to be pristine, you're going to have a lot of problems.

It just isn't going to work and that's why we have Jesus, the only not fallen hero. So at some level of Christians, we should be able to deal with that. I think specifically though, when I think about baseball, the tricky thing with baseball is that, I mean, one reason why people are upset about it is because it's a historical sport.

If all of a sudden some technological advancement comes along that makes everything skewed. All of a sudden the new baseline is 70 home runs, something like that. Then you just lose any ability to be able to compare somebody to different eras, except if you have to use wins against replacement or a buzz replacement, I should say, and things like that compared to their peers.

But I think that the challenge for me with baseball and why I've been against steroids is that I think when- >> For the record against steroids also. >> There we go. When you see somebody do it in a competitive environment like that, it really almost puts the burden of responsibility on everybody who doesn't do it.

And that just really messes up the entire sport. And so while I understand that baseball has always included elements of cheating, I also wonder, there was a lot of pushback to what the Astros did in terms of surveillance. And I think rightly so.

And I think it's for the same reasons if everybody else is using surveillance against you, then you feel like to be competitive, I have to use it. And nobody's going to cut you a break if you say, yeah, but I was the only person who didn't use steroids, or I was the only person who didn't use surveillance. And so I think it's just an important part of baseball being able to keep the playing field level.

Now, of course, we can talk about football where there's always been widespread tolerance for performance enhancing drugs at some level. And they can part because we don't expect football to be a historic sport. We want our athletes to ever be bigger, faster, stronger, and to be able to crush the men who came before them.

So I think part of it just has to do with what you're talking about there. And some sports are easier to manipulate than others, right? Baseball is somewhat easy to manipulate. But I should say, not in the ways we always think of, because you pointed out right there with Clemens, pitchers were using too.

So it wasn't just hitters. There were certain advantages for pitchers as well. >> Yeah, and it doesn't, the argument is it doesn't help you have a better swing or help you with hand-eye coordination.

But certainly you see the physical changes and it helps you endure 162 game season. And as you said, baseball is unique because baseball is not nearly as popular as football or basketball now. But if you ask people, who has the record for most points all time in basketball? They probably say, isn't that Jordan? Well, no, Jordan was, I don't know, 6, 7. I don't even know.

Kareem, she still have the point record. LeBron might catch him. But the records in baseball are sacred, you know what I mean? With home runs and RBIs and average and it gets lost to some of the saber metrics now.

But that's why those numbers matter. And the Lance Armstrong one too, I mean, it's a similar argument though. It was the Wild Wild West.

Everyone was doing it. You had to do it in order to be competitive. We're just the ones who got caught.

But rather than just talk about sports, Justin, what about historical symbols? Right now as we record this, we're seeing around the world statues being toppled, thrown into rivers sometimes against the authorities, sometimes with the blessing of the powers that be. We determine which of our heroes, all of whom are flawed as we know theologically, still ought to have a place on our literal or figurative pedestals. Yeah, that's one of 10,000 issues where I would rather hear what you guys think.

And then I adjust to my point of view based upon your considered wisdom on such topics. I don't have a fully formed theory or philosophy when it comes to public statues. I mean, we have to acknowledge, I think, what Colin said, there are no, you know, there's only one person who has walked on earth who is worthy of, I can't say building a statue because we're talking to a Presbyterian here, but yeah, no.

We're the, we're the of agile movies, no TV shows. No children's book or yeah, another time. You can't even imagine him in your mind.

Yes, I mean, we know that there's only one person who is perfect and worthy of infinite respect and everybody else has fallen. Everybody else is problematic. Everybody else has clay feet.

It does seem like there are certain sins that disqualify someone from public honor and sub-ball like representation. And it seems to me that it would be hard to kind of open up your computer, start a Microsoft Word document and enumerate what sins those are exactly and what sins are fine and what proportion it seems like you almost have to have a case by case basis. I mean, we can all think of people that no matter what they might

have accomplished in terms of science or progress for humanity did so many terrible things, whether it was a racist nature or sexual nature that they're just not, it's not helpful.

It's not contributing to the common good. There's always going to be disagreements on those. So I don't know exactly how to sort through all of that.

It's not, I'm gonna say a black and white issue and I'm not intending to be pun there. It just seems like one of those complex was I think there's some that are easy cases and there's others where if you kind of pressed me to have a fully formed theory of what is your criteria, what's in, what's out, what's acceptable sin, a respectable sin and what is so problematic that it's not worthy of being honored. And then it's different too when you're talking about, you know, should we make a new statue for person X, Y, or Z or should we tear down a statue for somebody that already exists? So you guys tell me what to think and then I'll look at this.

Can we afford to be somewhat case by case? I mean, I think it's hard to develop a hard and fast rule for every single case because some monuments like we talked about last week, I'm very happy statues. I'm very happy for us to take down other ones. I'm very sad about Kevin, is there any talk there in North Carolina about Fort Bragg? Oh, yeah.

I agree. Yeah. Yeah.

There's a lot of talk about that. Yeah. Part of what I'm trying to figure out here is that maybe if somebody hears Fort Bragg, they hear, oh, famous Confederate general, you know, part of unifying the country or something like that.

Well, as somebody reads a lot of civil war, I'm thinking, "Rackston Bragg, and the Southerners hated him. He was awful. He was terrible, basically lost all the time.

Why in the world will we name a military base after him?" Or John Bell Hood, Fort Hood in Texas. How does that make any sense at all? He was a terrible general. He got his own men massacre.

He lost the Battle of Atlanta. He lost the Battle of Franklin. He lost the Battle of Nashville.

It doesn't add up. So that's why I'm saying on a case-by-case basis, I might stand in one case for a Winston Churchill and say, "Yeah, I get it. He's definitely not up to standard for us today, but certainly we ought to be able to appreciate a lot of what he did, but I can't really find anything in Bragg or Hood that we should be celebrating." So does that mean if they were successful in attacking the U.S. Army that they are worthy of honor? No, I'm just trying to evade that argument altogether to say something is strange here that we're not even celebrating successful Southern generals.

We're celebrating unsuccessful, hated Southern generals. So it can't be about something

of nobility or popularity. It's got to be something more, I don't know if I'd say insidious, but more just awkward.

I mean, we can't be talking, what we're definitely not talking about here is some sort of notion of Southern honor. I guess is what I'm trying to get at there because these were not men who were held to honor. I mean, they were not held as honored figures, even in their time.

So something else is going on there. It's confusing. Yeah.

So it is very confusing. I think statues at least, well, it depends on where they are. I mean, you could have a museum that is solely the purpose of remembering history, and that's a different discussion.

I certainly don't think we should erase our history as complicated and messy as it is at times. But statues in prominent places, in parks and in Rotunda's, there's no doubt there. They're honoring someone or something.

So some of the questions I ask myself, is this person a hero with flaws? That's always true. Or is the cause for which this person is deemed heroic, itself flawed? So someone who is heroic for a noble purpose, and yet it is discovered, I mean, what was the statue in the UK last week that was torn down because his father was in, made money from slavery. That seems fundamentalist in the truest sense of the word second degree of statue separation.

So might we consider someone is honored and for the cause that was noble, be it of science or humanitarian in some way? And yet some aspect of their character was significantly flawed. I think Justin's right, there would be some aspects of character so flawed that would mitigate any other good of human flourishing. But then if we look at it as a Christian perspective, I think it gets even more complicated because while our whole world largely would agree that racism or slavery or bigotry is sinful and is a significant character flaw, as Christians we know, that's not the only way to be dishonorable.

That's not the only sin. So yes, what if the person had sins of anger or greed or sexual immorality, then do we, as Christians insist that those persons ought to be no longer honored? So it becomes very complicated. Certainly you're right.

It has to be a case by case basis. I think at least with the case of statues, at least there's some clarity that a statue is meant to honor someone so we can ask the question, should this person be honored? What I find even a more frustrating and difficult conversation are the more ambiguous signs. So the whole discussion about kneeling with the national anthem and that's become its own culture, warrior, flashpoint for everyone.

Now a fist raise or kneeling or all of these things have their context where they mean

something, but they can be so amorphous and they change with time and what someone first meant by them is lost and then they become something else and someone else means something that I find them to be some of the, not that people don't have legitimate strong opinions one way or another on some of those flashpoints, but I find them to be the most, they do the least for our public discourse. They generate more heat than light because what you mean by kneeling to the anthem is what someone else means by not kneeling, vice versa or so it becomes very complicated and I think it's not usually a very profitable discussion with those more ambiguous signs. How do you see it Justin? Yeah, I think that the flag one is one that, I don't hear people in my circles or church or neighborhood talking about statues and about military bases.

The flag one, I'm surprised when I hear that come up just the, I mean that's so deeply embedded into our American psyche and to family members and to veterans that it's not even sort of for some people a matter of debate, but inherently a college student who does that, Colin and I were at the Nebraska Northwestern game, a few Nebraska players knelt, we didn't even realize it until we heard out in the news later. You have powers that be in the state of Nebraska saying that the student should be expelled from the team. I mean, not even, hey, here's an idea, here's a suggestion, it's such an emotional flashpoint.

So that to me feels like a debate where the sim, everything has symbolism, but the symbolism of the flag, what that means to people deep down is not just a respectful sign. It's, I mean, people talk as if they were committing treason in and of itself and it's hard. It seems to me like the flag should be respected.

I mean, we were all kindergartners in the Midwest learning to stand and never hand over our hearts and say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. When you have that ingrained in you and it's hard to separate that out from truth and righteousness and goodness and justice and apple pie. Well, especially if the person kneeling and it's, and it's morphed a bit, but they say, no, I do respect all that.

I respect our military. Here's what I mean is, of course, I'm going to kneel because I think that the country is guilty of injustice. And if you don't kneel, then you're complicit somehow in that injustice or you just don't get it.

Well, that's where I think it, is it possible? I mean, that we can agree, respect the military, respect the flag, be patriotic, injustice is bad. I know that's so simplistic, but it becomes this absolute zero sum game. The only way it seems like my point can be made is if your point is not made and that is going to lead to greater and greater consternation in our country of a dangerous kind.

Have you guys ever studied the history of the American flag in church worship or in congregational worship? When did it come in? Yeah. I never have. I would love for somebody alert to somebody who runs an evangelical history blog, maybe.

Maybe our friend Tommy Kidd. I would love to know the history of when did the American flag start to appear in churches? I mean, I'd just be interested to know where did that Christian flag come from? Yeah, where I think I've seen some of the apostles. Paul designed that one.

Paul designed it. Yeah. Yeah.

There's Paul. One of the things that Justin suggested early on this podcast off air was maybe from time to time we would discuss a theological topic. We're going to get to books.

It'll be our third segment, but there aren't many podcasts just trying to give some good theological discussion on important theological topics. So I thought we'd spend a few minutes and you'll see the relevance here, but talk about the Amago day, if you say it in Latin, you sound really cool, the image of God. Justin, where do we see this in the Bible? What does it mean? What is the significance of being made in the image of God? Yeah, we get the image of God in the first few chapters of the book of Genesis and God tells us that he created man and woman in his own image.

Genesis 1, 26, let us make man in our image after our likeness. And then he talks about the dominion that they're supposed to have over fish and birds and livestock. And then verse 27 says, so God created man in his own image in the image of God.

He created him, male and female. He created them and then God blesses them, tells them to be fruitful and to multiply, fill the earth, have dominion. We see it picked up in the New Testament in terms of the image of Christ that we are to be conformed to the image of Christ and the book of James tells us that we should not curse a fellow human being who is created in God's image.

So it seems like I think I first read in Jack Collins work on Genesis where he identifies three big picture views of how scholars have tried to sort through what we mean by the image of God. And he's got a nice little alliteration and as a Baptist friendly contributor here, I like three iterations. So man resembles God, man represents God and then man in relationship with God.

So on the one hand, you have the view of image of God is about man resembling who God is. The second one is more representing God, representing what God does, ruling creation on behalf of God. And then the third one often associated with Karl Barth has man in relationship in terms of male and female.

So in terms of God and others. So my own view is that all three are present in the text and the representation, the relationship are really a consequence of the first one, which is more ontological that man is to resemble in some sense, not God physically, of course, but morally. So we objectively have the image of God and then we lose something at the



fall and seek to regain it in Christ.

But there's another aspect that ontologically doesn't change that we represent and resemble God, even if we are unregenerate and despite ourselves, we are still made in the image of God. That's good. That's a great summary.

Colin, what would you say and why is it important doctrine for us? I was going to say a lot of what Justin said. So he stole my material, which is not very helpful there. A lot of what I like to do doctrinally is to be able to put it within its historical context, its reception, its development over time.

And specifically, I think it's so interesting here that when you're preaching through, you're teaching through Genesis one, it's going to land on different people in different ways in different times. So specifically, I think about the revolutionary effect of female being made in the image of God and what that would have meant in so many different ancient cultures, including Roman culture of the early church and how revolutionary that would have been. But our own church ran through Genesis this year and you guys probably won't be surprised to know that there was a different aspect that was super controversial in our church about this passage.

And it was that there are categories of male and female that God created two categories, two sexes, male and female, both made in the image of God, not a spectrum, but two, male and female. I don't think that would have been controversial to the Romans. I don't think it would have been controversial to the Hebrews, but to the 21st century west that required a different emphasis.

You're stashing on with that remark. That's right. Oh my goodness.

So yeah, I mean, that's what I think about the development of doctrine. It's why I think preachers, when they go through and we've done Genesis a couple different times in our church, when you go through, you're going to have different thoughts in your head, you're going to have different needs in your congregation. And so the image of God is a foundational doctrine that will pay pretty remarkable dividends in terms of its application in a wide variety of situations.

And so any doctrine, I mean, we produced last year curriculum with Life Way at the Gospel Coalition written by Mike Cospers called Amago Day. And part of what we were looking at was the way it can unify such disparate, well, situations that are disparate in our political environment, but ought not to be, biblically speaking, things like the dignity of people made in the image of God of every tribe, tongue and nation. And then also at the same time, including those, the weakest among us, those children in the room and also people at the end of life and things like that.

So a doctrine that can be applied to racial unrest and to abortion and at the same time

to COVID and how we care for the elderly. I mean, that's a really important and helpful doctrine that I think deserves a lot of emphasis. And I think, I mean, I don't know, Kevin, you're the expert here.

I don't want to put you in a position to have to play historical theologian, but I wonder, has this doctrine always been appreciated the same way? Has it always been seen? Or is there any times in history when it's kind of come to the fore in any particular way? I'm not sure. I mean, it's changed quite a bit. I don't think in ways that have to be mutually exclusive, but a lot of the Reformation theologies, they don't spend as much time on the image of God as more contemporary theologies may with all of these issues in mind.

And there certainly has been a significant shift toward the relational aspects of the image of God. So for, I think, most of church history, the emphasis, certainly through Aquinas and many of the Reformers would have been on the structural aspect of being made in the image of God. And it would have seen that to be in the image of God is to be rational, to be a free moral agent, to have the capacity for worship.

And I don't think we should completely lose that though. There are dangers there. What if, you know, is a human person who is of such an impairment or such an age that they don't at least display those abilities for rational thought? Are they no longer made of the image of God? We would want to answer that question.

No, they still are made in the image of God. So whereas it used to be of what distinguishes us from the animals, it's moved more toward the functional, what it is that we do, the ruler aspect, we have dominion. And now, you know, given our time more toward the relational aspect that we are, that we have, we're a reflection and a connection of God.

That's what it means to be made in the image. I think there's something to all of those. I think we have to be careful with if we go back to the structural image for those reasons.

But we can certainly overemphasize. It's always good to be aware of our own time and proclivities, to overemphasize the relational aspect to the detriment of, if you want another R, I'd say, the image of God as rectitude, that is as moral uprightness. One of the recent books on the image of God by Professor at Trinity International is titled *Dignity and Destiny*, that the image of God gives us dignity as human beings.

And it also points to our destiny. What is God's intention for us as human beings? Actually, the *Imago dei* is much less precisely defined in scripture than we would like. And whereas the emphasis on dignity is certainly true, and you can go to Psalm 8, what is man that you're mindful of him and just the order of creation, where the crown of creation, all of that about dignity is true and significant.

Yet it's not mainly what the Bible stresses when it talks about the image of God. And

looking back to the New Testament, we have to say there's a difference between us made in the image and likeness of God, but we are not the image of God. That is Jesus Christ is the image.

So our destiny, the intentionality God created us toward the end that we would be like his son. So the image of God is not just a static thing that you have, but it's what you're to grow into. That's why I think if we're really to teach people robustly the significance of the image of God, we need to tell them, yes, this means you have intrinsic worth and value as a person, no matter how small, no matter your age, no matter your mental acuity, no matter your skin color.

And at the same time, it also speaks to God's intention for your life that you are to be renewed in the image of Christ to become more and more like him. So you can say the image of God in one sense is alone, that we squandered. It's also a gift that we retain.

It's also a deposit that God wants to see mature. And then it's an inheritance that we're going to receive in fullness for Christians at the end of time. So it says something about who we are.

And just as importantly, it says something about who we ought to be made in the image of God. Any other thoughts, Justin? I think that's really helpful to lay out. I think a truism of theology that if you emphasize one aspect of the exclusion of the others, you often end up in theological, even ethical problems there.

So I really like how you laid out that multi-orbed way of thinking about it because it's tempting those of us who are pro-life to so emphasize the objective image of God and to see it only as something that is static and rather than something dynamic. And I think there's something laudable and something important about that. But if you only kind of bring that construct to the pages of Scripture, once you get to a New Testament and you're talking about a conformity of the image of Christ and the son being in the image of the Father, I think you just don't have categories in to have a more robust biblical theology of the image of God.

In the ancient Near East, the king, the suzerain would put an image of his likeness in his land and it was to represent that this belonged to him. It was to indicate that this is his possession. He has dominion over it.

And so we are placed in the world to say, this belongs to God. This belongs to the one in whose image we are made and he has given us dominion over it. I do think it's important and counter-cultural, whatever good there can be in environmentalism or certainly in stewardship of God's creation, a lot of important things there.

The Bible is unapologetically, it is not a biocentric text in the sense of just life generically. It is an anthropocentric text. Now it's more than that, it's a theocentric, it's

God.

But the crown of his creation is man and we are stewards of this creation in a way that supports the flourishing of human beings. Now that can be abused and you say we're going to just pillage the earth because it's good for somebody's bottom line that would be an abuse of the doctrine. And yet it's important for us if we do believe that men and women are the crown of God's creation and that the storyline of Scripture is not ultimately about the noots or the salamanders or the trees, we believe that all of creation is renewed, but it's those things pulled into the redemption of all things as they long for the revealing of the sons of God to be redeemed.

There is a profound anthropocentric reading of the text that I think is really the way that the Bible story is told with humanity and God's redemption of it at the center of the text. All in the last word before I bring us this in books. You don't hear too often about Genesis 9.6 anymore, one of the applications of the image of God.

Why capital punishment? Yeah, well I don't want you to get into that whole argument, but Kevin what would be just give a brief explanation for them as one of the first immediate applications. And just to your point right there, killing man is not the same thing as killing an animal. That has different expectations, different requirements there.

In Genesis, those first chapters, they're at three turning points you have reiterated the image of God, which is significant because we don't hear a lot about it in the rest of the Old Testament. So they're in Genesis 1, it's there in Genesis 5, and then it's again in Genesis 9 by man's blood he'd been shed so that because you are made in the image of God, so you face capital punishment. So I do believe capital punishment is biblical.

Now it's, you can always debate on is it carried out in a way that is equitable and unfair, but as a principle, it's imminently biblical and it may seem counterintuitive, but it's because human life is so valuable, the argument of chapter 9 in the image of God that the punishment for those who unjustly snuff it out is for themselves to lose their life. That is one way to uphold the honor of the image of God in man. Is to say this is so sacred that you face the supreme penalty if you deface it in this such a serious way.

I alluded earlier to the book of James, but it's James 3 9 where he says about the tongue, we bless our Lord and Father, and with the same tongue, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. And he doesn't elaborate, but I think the implication there is what in the world are you doing cursing somebody who is an image bear? So you have not only Genesis 9 with ethical implications of the image of God, but also James 3 9 where it impacts how we should talk and how we should look at a fellow human being, they are image bearers and therefore that has ethical implications upon how we talk and about how we act and how we create other people. Great.

Good. Okay. Here's what we're doing now.

As we transition to books, there's no segue. It's not related, but this is a topic that three of us have talked about before, some recording somewhere and the gyps in mind somewhere is our previous discussion about this topic and we're going to revisit it several years later. But we're all readers, we're also all writers, and we also read a lot of writing, some that is good, some that is not so good.

I want us to talk about good writing, maybe we'll talk about some bad writing, but the entree into this discussion and let's limit ourselves to this question to think about Christian writers of nonfiction. Give me some of your, I want to say favor, I want to say who you think are exceptionally and the skill of writing. Now, hopefully they're also what they're saying is good, but good Christian because there's a difference between someone who may be, have a lot of good insights, but somewhat workman-like or a sort of writing that doesn't really soar, but is still helpful and technically very useful, somebody's dissertation or something, but good writing.

While you're thinking of that, one of the reasons I think this is so important is I'm of the conclusion that good writing is one of the most underappreciated aspects of what makes a Christian classic become a Christian classic. So one of my answers is certainly C.S. Lewis. He's not the most influential person for me, like he is for one of the most influential people for a piper or a killer, but I certainly learned from him, but he's undeniably a very gifted writer.

And there's a reason why generations later, people still read mere Christianity, which began as a series of radio addresses because it's such good writing, the way he talks about a poached egg and the way he lays out liar, lunatic, or lord. It's good writing. He doesn't just say really pedantic like, now listen, there are three options that we may have when we consider Christ.

First of all, he may be a liar. And of all, now that may be a fine for a lecture, but he writes it in such a way that it's very good writing. And I think one of the reasons we keep coming back to certain authors is they have such a punch and a vitality to it.

And we don't always insist upon it in our own day, but it's a very underappreciated, overlooked aspect of what makes a good nonfiction Christian book. And that's the quality of its writing. So Colin, who would you say past or present are some very good Christian writers in the writing itself? That is a good, good question.

I need to give myself a little bit more time to think about it thoroughly because I don't, I think people get confused as to what they mean by good writing. So you've done a good job of laying that out. Because I think people imagine that it's being very colorful or that it's being ornate or that it's being kind of complex of what we imagine to be literary and simple prose.

Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And there's some people who can pull that off and there's some

people who imitate it and can't pull it off.

I will, this is, this is off the top of my head and I can give this more thought, but the people I tend to appreciate are the ones who write in such a way that in gay, I mean, I forget that I'm reading, I guess is what I'm getting at there. I forget that I'm reading, I'm just, I'm drawn into it. And I'm going to mention two colleagues who I think do this really well.

So I'm going to talk contemporary and maybe I think it over a little bit more and come back to historical ones, but two of them really well. And then Justin, I mean, come on. You don't have to.

Other than the other. Okay. All right.

This is a long preface to say you guys. I'm going to mention Sam Allbury and Matt Smithers. Matt does not publish enough.

Hint, Matt, listen to this podcast. The man is a genius at Twitter. We get to, but the reason he's a genius at Twitter is because he has a sense for what is going to cut through the noise.

He knows how to, he is one of the best writers I know at communicating popular information, or at least communicating at information at a popular level. And we've got him working behind the scenes. So anything that you appreciate at TGC, he's edited, but that is really one of his amazing gifts.

And you can see it come out in his tweets. You can see it come out elsewhere. But that's Matt.

And then Sam. Sam has such an interesting compelling story that you might think he would fall into the trap of memoir. And that's not always a bad trap.

It can often be really good. But Sam, I just get engrossed into his presentation of a topic. I get drawn into his world of understanding.

Neither one of these guys, I mean, the kind of work that I am trained in and that I write is basically journalistic. So I'm not an expert in literature and things like that. But that kind of journalistic communication.

And those two guys are absolutely excellent at doing that. And I'll throw another one. And this is going to sound like a backhand, just complimenting people I work with.

But Meghan Hill is also exceptionally good as a writer when it just comes to simple clarity. And maybe that's what I'm getting at. That I think the point of writing is to be able, not always, but to be able to teach, to be able to persuade and to be able to illumine a topic.

And those are three writers who consistently do it well. But they're not going to win awards as being like best writer because they don't seem to fit the criteria that a festival on faith in writing or something like that might look toward. Right.

Justin, what do you say? Yeah, I think it's a great question. And the three of us are thinking about this all the time, just by the very nature of our jobs and being writers and being editors and being readers. So from the past, I know that J.I. Packer is still alive, but I'll categorize him as sort of a 20th century evangelical figure.

Packer is a great writer and a distinctive writer. He's got a voice. He's got a style, a style that would be very difficult, I think, to imitate.

But he's a bit like C.S. Lewis, I think, in his clarity and his use of imagery and his use of just the right word in his use of syntax that is not always predictable. It never seems like he's showing off or trying to be cute or trying to be clever. Our pastor at our church just started preaching on Ephesians.

I picked up a couple of Ephesians commentaries and got off Amazon, John Stott's Ephesians commentary. He's been dipping into it and you just have to read like one sentence of Stott or one paragraph to realize like every word matters, everything's clear. You don't read a sentence and say, "Now, what did he mean by that?" Or, "I have to reread that sentence." You never have to reread a sentence.

He's just unbelievably straightforward and clear and you get the sense that he's read an enormous amount, he's thought an enormous amount. I think one of the signs of good writing is that it just seems effortless. You imagine these guys just sitting down and just flowing, just not usually the case.

I think clarity is at the foundational level. You can do lots of fancy things. You can wow people, but if you're not clear, you're not a good writer.

We could do a whole podcast episode on academics who have international reputations for brilliance and can't figure out what they're saying or you feel like you've got to have a PhD in order to figure it out. Or pastors who are great preachers who can't write. They might be very clear in the pulpit, but they cannot be clear on the page or on the screen.

Yeah, it is. That is so important and it goes both ways. These pastors have to hammer this to myself and to my students.

It is a very different means of communication. You can be a good writer and if you write and then you preach from that and you've written for the eye, it sounds very stilted. If you just turn preaching into prose, that's what Lloyd Jones did.

He had very strong convictions that he wanted to sound like sermons. They do sound like sermons and he edited his books so that they're readable and we benefit from them.

They work because he was such a good preacher, but as writing, they're very repetitive and they're not going to win literary masterpieces, but they still have the force and the punch of a sermon.

I was going to add to the list, certainly G.K. Chesterton. I mean, his books are like a stream of Twitter before there was Twitter. I mean, almost every sentence is some epigrammatic.

It's just sometimes it's almost too much you think. That sounds better than maybe what it says, but orthodoxy, the everlasting man, I mean, he was very gifted with the turn of the phrase. There's a wit there that I don't think would necessarily be characteristic of even a lot of the favorite writers that I have who are very clear.

It's hard to be clear and witty. It's like trying to be funny in the pulpit. You can pull it off.

Great. Most people can't. Most people can't.

You know, contemporary, I think Carl Trueman is a very good writer. He seems to do it quickly, effortlessly. I think Russell Moore can really write with a power and an eloquence behind it.

I find David Wells is really a very good writer, theological, social commentary. If you haven't read David Wells, read David Wells. Kevin is the reason that I like Wells so much.

I don't read a lot of systematic theology and I find it very difficult and tedious in many cases, but I'll read anything from Wells. Is that just because I love how he fits together culture, history, sociology, theology together infuses it? I've assumed that's the case or is it a writing thing with him? It's both in British by way of Africa. Right.

But he gives you the payoff and we need both of those kinds of writing. We need the very technical, systematic theology that I find invigorating. That's one of my jobs.

But you need the kind that are giving you the payoff and you need the RC sprawl that are giving you as clear as possible. I think J.C. Ryle from the 19th century for clarity and simplicity is a very good writer. Calvin.

It's hard whenever you're dealing with somebody through a translation, not reading Calvin in the French and in the Latin, but he wasn't accomplished. Rederition and his style is much easier and much more eloquent than in Edwards might be. Don Carson is a very good academic writer and has the ability to write world-class commentaries that you're still underlining and have a little bit of his personality and humor and put downs come through.

His popular stuff is well written. We're going to do a podcast at some point of Don Carson Bookendarsments. We will.



We will. Don, if you ever listen to this, one, I don't know why you are, but two. Don't waste your time.

Yeah, don't waste your time. Finish the commentaries. We need them.

They're so well done. You guys both read a lot of writing and I'm not asking you to reveal trade secrets, but you read bad writing. You get from submissions, maybe from people who's by the time we see them, it's good writing because you've worked your magic.

What are some of the characteristics of the bad writing that comes across your desk? Justin? I think the first thing that comes to mind is really what Colin was saying earlier. This is in terms of the effect. This is not in terms of the technical things, but when I'm looking at a proposal or I'm reading something, this is not a published book.

Everybody out there who is listening, 90% of what you're reading is, it's already been vetted, it's been published, whether it's online or it's in a newspaper or it's a published book. We're reading a lot of unfiltered things that maybe we're the first people reading it. There is such a distinct difference between being carried along and feeling like you have to push along.

There's a difference between saying, "Suppers ready and I need to get going here and I really don't have time to do this, but I can just do one more page or one more paragraph or I'm almost done." Versus, "Oh, I just, this is like painful to work my way through this or I have to keep pushing my way forward." Good writing is like when you're walking through an airport and you get on one of those magical little moving sidewalks and you're walking, but it's kind of carrying you twice as fast. Your writing is like pushing your luggage through the airport. So I see us Lewis talked about a good writer as like a shepherd and the reader is going to get like a sheep veered off the road one way or the other and you need to make them go where you want them to go.

I think that's one thing. I think lack of clear thinking is another one. You can have all the bells and whistles, but if you aren't thinking logically and building your argument in such a way that your terms are clear, that the steps actually follow, that they're supported by evidence, a lot of times people will not like writing, but they don't know how to identify what's wrong with it.

And hopefully that's where an editor can help and say, "Here's what you're doing wrong. You might be writing things so much in the passive voice that it feels like things are happening to the subject and the subject isn't actually doing things." So lack of clarity I think is a huge part of it. Lack of imagination, lack of the empathetic mind where you're putting yourself in the mind of the reader who has not been thinking about this subject for years and years and hasn't read everything that you have read.

Those are some of the things I think that can go wrong for writers. Justin, what

percentage, and this could be a question for you two Colin, I'll let you answer the first question as well. But can you put a percentage on the work that comes to you, it all needs to be edited, the best writers.

I mean, C.S. Lewis or who said, "There's no writing, there's only rewriting." Most everyone is always editing. Part of great writers know how to edit themselves. What percentage comes to you and is, it's already really good and you need an editor to fix some typos and make a few suggestions.

And what percentage of it needs a lot of work yet in the sausage factory? Yeah, that's a great question and I don't know exactly how to quantify it. I think most of the time the proposals that we are green lighting, we are happy enough with them that it's, you know, they need some massaging and they need some help and working through it. It would be much more rare that we would receive something that would say, you know, this is a really great author, a really great subject, but it's going to need a lot of developmental work.

Now, I would put that more in the 5% category perhaps. But there's a huge spectrum between that and something that has just been meticulously copy edited before we even see it. And even something like that that can be technically free from typos, that doesn't mean that the argument holds together, there's not weaknesses or distracting elements to it.

Colin, you probably see more writing in a very raw state. What does bad writing look like and how often are you and your editors having to do a lot of work to get things presentable? Well, answer the latter question first. We don't, I learned years ago when I was the news editor at Christianity today that you just don't have enough time in journalism to be able to rewrite people's work.

So if something comes in and it's unusable, you're better off just cutting and going somewhere else. Also, interestingly, you might often think that somebody's proximity to an issue is what will make them good at presenting something. But the fact is good writers can do just about anything, whereas somebody who is an eyewitness or some sort of an expert in something does not mean that they can do a good job of talking about it.

So we don't do, I mean, if something comes in and it's totally unpresentable, we don't really do a lot. Unless that person, we wouldn't rewrite something certainly, unless that person is the only one who can tell that story. They're the only one that their name attached to it is what makes it work.

So those are rare occasions, but usually we're trying to cut, we're trying to simplify, we're trying to use active voice, we're trying to help with organization. There are a couple tips I want to share when it comes to bad writing. I think the major challenge is

that is organization.

Organization of your thoughts is why books are harder than blog posts and things like that. So there's a reason that with the amount of volume that's published on the internet today, you see so many listicles. Also Q&A.

It's because it's a foolproof formula for organization. And almost anybody can write introduction point, four points, three points, something like that. Almost everybody can do that.

Seven ways to make your marriage better. Exactly. Six ways to walk my dog.

Yeah, exactly. And also it's not only is it helpful with organization, but it's easy to browse and the internet is a browsing medium in many cases. And also it's just people know exactly where they're going in the article.

So they're more likely to click on it in the first place. And then the Q&A format is just really easy. I ask you a question, you answer, and they keep it short there.

The difficulty comes in, the longer it gets, and certainly when you come into books and things like that, that's where the writing, the week in the chat will be separated in that process. So yeah, I mean, way more than half the battle is organization. Well, one, having something to say, and then two, organization.

If you've achieved those two things, you're just about there. The rest of it an editor can help you with. But bad writing is going to come into place where somebody doesn't have anything to say.

And if they did have something to say, they don't know how to organize it in a way that other people can latch onto. So but thankfully, one benefit to being an editor where we publish a lot of material is that if people want to know how to get published with us, they have a standard that they can look at and they can know if it doesn't match that standard, then why would they be submitting it to us? And it reminds me of how I paid a lot of money to study journalism in college. And it got into a magazine class in my last year, magazine writing class.

For magazines when they were around, and the professor said, all right, I'm going to tell you the secret. Read and imitate. Yeah.

Read and imitate. Okay. So find whatever somebody can help you understand is good writing and then do that.

And then find somebody to tell you how bad you are and don't compare to that and then keep trying. It's very hard. I mean, it's a, I don't want to say it.

Just for anybody listening. Those won't buy quickly, but they're really, really important

points. Go ahead.

Sorry. No, I was, I was going to agree with them that I am always trying to find a way to help people write better. I do a lecture for one of my classes on writing and I tell my students, says, I don't know what other professors say, but for your, your final paper, I am going to grade you on writing.

I know there's some that just say, I'm just want to see you get the content. I'm going to say, no, what does it matter as a pastor, if you have content and you can fill in the blank on a test, that's fine to test you for knowledge. I want to know how you can communicate this.

So I'm a stickler with word counts and column surprise by that because we're now past an hour here, but it is important for writing. I tell them, I will not read your paper if it's over, you know, 2,000 words, 500 words, because you need to learn how to say it and to say it in a specific allotted time. It's very difficult to teach people how to write and, you know, about the best advice is just what you guys said.

Read a lot and write a lot. If you're not reading a lot, you won't pick up vocabulary and tricks and things that you just, it starts to imitate. And if you don't write a lot, so I tell people, if you're, when you're writing, try to write well, I use punctuation in emails and text even in Christmas letters, when you're writing practice writing well, I think I agree with all of which you said, clarity is king organization.

I'd also add that in bad writing, the writer expects the reader to do the work to bridge the gap. So I find that a lot of writing and a lot of students writing think, you used almost the right word. It's almost the right preposition.

And I know what you mean to say, but you're making me stop and think about it. I'm sure this is what you're trying to say. And rather than like Justin said, getting on the people mover so that it's very clear what you're saying.

And it's easy for me to understand. From a technical standpoint, I'm sure you know as editors, cutting words, you know, murder your darlings, simplify helps. And often people put weak verbs at the end of their sentences instead of saying, you know, Colin ran to the bank.

One of the things that is often true about Colin is that he, and you put the is or the was after a big huge setup that doesn't need to be there and put your verb at the very end. Lots of technical help we can give people and yet it really is a matter of reading a lot and writing a lot. And it's to serve one another.

It really does serve. It helps communicate truth as Christians were in the truth business. And to have our own voice, have our own style is certainly helping communicate the truth.

Last question. Do you have off the top of your head any good books? I would recommend on writing. Okay, I'll give you two because I knew I was going to ask the question.

There's lots of them out there, but Strunk and White elements of style. That's an old classic and I know some people hate that book because of it, but I had to read it in college. In fact, I had a professor who said it was just a religion class.

He said, you have to read this book. It's a little book on style and common writing mistakes. He said, if I see more than five mistakes, rules you're breaking from Strunk and White, I will hand your paper back.

Now, I'm not sure he actually did that or who would want to be that tedious to go through and find those, but it did get the point across. Read this book, pay attention to these rules and try to imitate the good advice. Another one that I've benefited from, writing tools by Roy Peter Clark.

It's very well written. If you're going to write a book on writing, it has to be well written. He follows his example.

He gives lots of examples of even his own writing in the book of how editors helped him make his voice more active or shrink the word count. There's lots of really pithy, good advice writing tools, Roy Peter Clark. Justin, books on writing that come to mind? Yeah, one that comes to mind is Helen Sords, writer's diet.

She's at the University of Chicago Press. I think published the book and it's a short book. It has, I think it's organized around five ways to make your writing more active and more compelling and more clear.

Also, you've got a little writers diet.com or something like that where you can enter your prose into a little window and it will tell you based on her five metrics where your writing is flat or flabby or what have you. William Zinzer's on writing has a classic that everybody refers to and is clear and is enjoyable and he gives examples from even his earlier drafts of the book on how it can be improved and how it can be edited. Stephen King, I mean, is it called on writing? I can't remember what the exact title is.

Colin Br Br. is a good one in terms of stepping back and thinking more philosophically and hearing somebody who just loves the writing process. Brian Gardner's got an app.

It is a big book but on American usage, modern American usage and any serious writers should probably have access to that app or talks about the correct usage. So, those are a couple. I would echo with Strunk and White even if you move on from Strunk and White.

This is something I didn't say earlier. You have to know the nuts and bolts of grammar. It's like somebody going out and trying to imitate Michael Jordan's crazy shots.

Michael Jordan didn't know how to do that unless he learned the fundamentals and the grammar is the fundamentals of good writing. So, if you don't know the difference between the active and passive ways, you don't know how prepositions work. You don't know about subject verb agreement.

You can be brilliant with metaphors. You can know a lot of things. You can have a lot of passion.

But without that kind of grammatical baseline, your writing is just not going to be clear and communicate effectively. Colin, any suggestions? You guys covered them. I prefer to read writing than to read about writing.

So, but you guys cover the ones that I would recommend. We just had one more quick thing to that. Not only you guys have mentioned, I think the importance of you have to read good writing, but I'd also say if the next level beyond that is to figure out why is this an effective paragraph? Why does this sentence work? Colin's right.

You get into great writing. You hardly even know where that you're reading. You're being carried along.

But if you could stop, go back and say, "Now, why did that sentence grab me? Why could I picture that in my mind?" What's the author doing there? Take it apart. See what techniques they're using. See how they could have set it in a more flat, prosaic way.

I think that's another level of seeing why a writer is good, not just that they're good. I did a blog post several years ago on the power of the poached egg, where I just pulled apart that paragraph from C.S. Lewis and tried to explain mere Christianity, why that works. Partly it's the metaphor.

It's about liar, lunatic, lord. You'd be a mad man on the level of a poached egg. That's funnier and wittier than you'd be a crazy man, or even saying a poached egg.

That's just a, it's got a punch and it's funny. I sit in there, he could have said beluga whale. I think that would have worked well.

There's certain things. And you follow that paragraph. He varies from short to long sentences.

One of the rules of thumb and good writing is the more, the less serious your subject, the more playful you can be with it and almost show off your writing and the more serious this subject, the more you play it straight because the subject itself is carrying it forward. Lewis had a real knack for that kind of sense. And above all, this is probably the most important thing is you need to understand the difference between an M dash and an M dash.

Back to that one we are. Well, yeah, I mean, it's hardly even worth reading those writers who can't understand the difference. Just for anybody listening Kevin, how do you do that like on Microsoft? What, I mean, is there like a shortcut? Well, there is like a dash, like the little dash dash space.

But here's the thing, you know what, I use word perfect. Wait, I use word perfect. I do all of my, now I use word because I can't communicate with people in the real world.

But I still use, all of my sermons are on word perfect. It still exists. I still have a new version and I believe it's better than word.

Yes. Well, I mean, that's words not perfect. I mean, but word perfect is.

Who would you get to do perfect response to this episode? Yeah. Then my tune would change. I won't let me use word for overlords.

Have you ever used word perfect, Colin? Not since the 80s. Well, I was in elementary school. Who even, who even, who owns word perfect? Corral.

I think I went from typewriter to Microsoft Word and skipped over word perfect in between. I'm pulling it up right now. You can't see it, but it's really, I got all my sermons on here.

Corral, I got word perfect, eight. I probably need to get a new version. It's got some next time.

I mean, we could be, have a whole episode. I could really tell you some nice. Do they also make like a cookware? Different people.

Oh. It's so different than the office guy. Oh, okay.

All different corrals. Okay. I just.

Okay. We have hit all of the high points. Thank you, Justin.

Thank you, Colin. Thank you for Justin's phone and hotspot for making this all possible. We look forward to joining.

Hey, last thing, if you made it this far, just know we're listening to the feedback that we're getting from our Legion of listeners. And we are hoping to kind of launch a season two later this summer and have some improvements with some show notes and to get the books out there written down. So you don't have to be feverishly writing them down, maybe some time stamps so you can skip over all the parts that you don't like where we're talking about things you find boring.

We are hoping to re up for a 2.0. So bear with us as we go a couple of more weeks here

in this season one as we call it. And then Lord willing in season two and we'll try to continue to improve. Thanks for being with us.

Until next time. Love God. Glorify him and join forever and read a good book.

See you next time. Bye.

[Music]