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Gospel Assumptions and the Rise of New Age Spirituality

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This is not the paper I was originally tasked to give. That one, on the topic of Natural Law, will have to wait for another occasion. I have promised Dave Theobald that it will not fall by the wayside. This one instead is borne out of 2 things:

1st I find myself very much in the cast of Jude 3 (ESV): “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

2nd And what evokes Jude 3 in my heart and mind at this particular point in time is an experience my wife and I had in January of this year in Fort Worth, TX.

Hence this paper will take on the cast of an urgent exhortation and warning.

In January, Sky and I were invited to a weekend with two other couples at the lake house belonging to one of the couples. But we had an assignment: We were asked to listen to a speaker by the name of Jamie Winship on the topic of the Christian’s identity.¹ The weekend was then to revolve around our impressions of the talk given. Being the nerd that I am, I not only listened to the initial presentation, but also did some background work on the speaker, and accessed several more addresses he had given at Churches and other venues. The balance of this paper is for all intents and purposes, an analysis of Winship’s core teaching as articulated in his book: “Living Fearless: Exchanging The Lies Of The World For The Liberating Truth Of God.” Much of the analysis presented here was also contained in a follow-up letter I wrote to our hosts after returning home.

For background on Winship, the following is taken verbatim from the Christianity Today website, and the “Guest Bio” they included on their Oct. 11, 2022 interview with Winship, season 3, episode 4 of their “Voices” podcast.²

¹ [AYM Summer Camp: Identity Intro Part 1 - Antioch Bible Church Podcast | Listen Notes](#)

² [‘Discovering Your Identity’ with Jamie Winship | Christianity Today](#)

On Jamie Winship's first day as a police officer in Washington, DC, his mentor told him, "Keep your mouth shut for one year," and to listen closely. He applied this important lesson to his professional and spiritual life and found listening and abiding was the way to hear God's voice and bring peace to the conflicted spaces he was working in. His methods were successful, and he was asked to do his reconciliation work across the globe to the world's highest conflict areas.

Jamie Winship has decades of experience bringing peaceful solutions to some of the world's highest conflict areas.

After a distinguished career in law enforcement in the metro Washington, DC area, Jamie earned an MA in English and developed a unique process called the Identity Method. This process of identity transformation is the key to resolving inner conflict and acquiring new levels of learning and creativity in any field. His unconventional efforts to bring about societal and racial reconciliation led him to Indonesia, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, Israel and back to the US.

Jamie has worked with leaders in professional sports, business, education, law enforcement, government, non-profit, and other sectors. He is the author of *Living Fearless: Exchanging the Lies of the World for the Liberating Truth of God*.

Jamie and his wife, Donna, are co-founders of Identity Exchange and its corporate arm, Identity Method, providing training and consulting in the transformative power of living fearlessly in your true identity.

So as not to make this paper either too esoteric to be useful, nor overly long, I want to summarize some of the concepts of Winship's teaching, and in the process tie it directly to the title of this paper as I believe it concerns the Church of Christ at a critical moment in time. At least in American Evangelicalism.

At its base, (others can read his book and listen to his addresses to check my assessment) is the concept of “identity.” More specifically, what is our God-given identity as opposed to how we might understand our own identity as shaped by others, life and experiences? Who and/or what – am I, especially in God’s eyes?

Obviously, there is much truth to be grasped here. As I wrote to our host afterward: “let me say at the very outset that I fully agree that the concept of the Christian’s identity is Biblically emphasized and vitally important. I fault no one for pursuing that line of understanding – just the opposite, I applaud it. I wish more engaged it and understood it...The issue of a true Biblical identity **is** important. The question is – where do we get that from so as to be absolutely sure it is sound and in concert with God’s revealed plans and purposes? I believe the answer must be – in His Word.”

And herein is the rub, my concern with Winship’s teaching; the inroads it is making in the Church and the highly subjective nature of it all. Subjectivity being central to my concerns. And a core tenet of all New Age thinking – though I cannot not develop that connection much more fully here.

As J.I. Packer notes in his powerful and useful little book: “God’s Plans for You”:

“Evangelicals differ from most Roman Catholics and liberals in that they are constantly uptight about guidance. No other concern commands more interest or arouses more anxiety among them nowadays than discovering the will of God. It was of evangelicals that Joseph Bayly wrote in 1968: “If there is a serious concern among Christian students today, it is for guidance. Holiness may have been the passion of another generation’s Christian young men and women. Or soul-winning. Or evangelizing the world.... But not today. Today the theme is getting to know the will of God.” Again it was of evangelicals that Russ Johnston declared in 1971: “I’ve spoken at many conferences where part of the afternoons are set aside for workshops.... If you make one

of the workshops ‘Knowing the Will of God,’ half the people sign up for it even if there are twenty other choices.”³

As is often the case with discerning God’s will or leading, the nature of the pursuit, the mechanism appealed to, is some sort of subjective feeling, or a sign or omen (typically tied to some coincidence) or some sort of “confirmation” as determined by the one seeking.

We’ll come back to this over and over.

Getting back to Winship, we find his idea of someone ascertaining their identity and what he terms “identity transformation” from God presented the following way – this is excerpted from his book, where he is conducting a meeting with businessmen on getting their identities:

“Let’s pray and ask God about your true identity...We are going to be listening for the voice of God in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. This is not mindfulness or self-affirmation...I’m going to ask the Lord to say what he calls you or how he refers to you or sees you—not just a moniker, but your identity. Whatever you sense, think, or hear, write it down immediately. Usually, it is the very first thing that comes to your mind...You may ask, “Jamie, how will I know it’s God speaking and not my own mind?” You will know it’s God speaking because whatever it is you sense from the Holy Spirit will be encouraging, it will align with Scripture, and it won’t involve accusation or condemnation. And, whatever you hear, think, or sense from the Holy Spirit should resonate with you.”⁴

Now there are myriad subtleties to be wrestled with here we cannot unpack in this paper – but so that you understand – each person is to pray, ask God (whatever conception of God one might have) for their identity, and **whatever He speaks to them** – it is ALWAYS God speaking, and this is what they are to live their lives on. But note – this is true for EVERYONE, regardless

³ Packer, J. I. [*God’s Plans for You*](#). Crossway Books, 2001, p. 89

⁴ Winship, Jamie. *Living Fearless* (p. 124-125). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

of their being a Believer, or having any profession of faith. This is how God will work with anyone and everyone. In fact, on page 27, after sharing this technique with a Muslim cab driver he says:

“This is how Jesus talks to people. In the entire conversation, I never said one thing about being a Christian. The conversation was about personal identity, not empty ideology. When the guy dropped me off, he asked for my card. We’re going to meet so he can hear God tell him his identity. I didn’t suggest that, he did. That’s called sharing your faith.”

Here the edge of the New Age appears on the horizon: A common godness or god power – who need not be defined - who mystically speaking to us, gives us our identity. And in the end, Winship asserts, it is Jesus doing so.

What I wish I could do here is give you a full treatment of his book to tease out all of the concerning portions. But as I wrote to my friend, I reduced my chief concerns to the following key categories:

- I. Scripture:** The authority and sufficiency of Scripture is directly set aside in favor of subjective impressions and mystical encounters, not to be questioned.

In this movement, Scripture is expounded (if the word expounded can even be used) to reinforce certain points the preacher/teacher or individual wants to make, rather than exposition being the unfolding of the points Scripture is actually making. This in itself is nothing new.

But in searching all of this out, I found at the very base that Winship is a true universalist. Actually he goes beyond universalism. For it is not that everyone will be saved one day, it is that no one is lost now, and no one actually needs to be saved. Noting his friendship and admiration for William Paul Young (of “The Shack” Fame); theologians C. Baxter Kruger and Brad Jersak, well known and published with this same view – Winship’s technique “works” for everyone because we all simply need to wake up to the fact that we are all already accepted by God fully,

irrespective of any or no belief system, or relationship to Christ. So Jesus will come to everyone and tell them their identity personally even if they hate Him. In this cast, he often refers to “Muslim Believers.” They remain Muslims after their encounters. They do not become Christians. Nor does anyone need to. Indeed, he asserts that evangelizing Muslim nations is equivalent to The Crusades. (pg. 149) It is the amorphous mystical god who is love and nothing else each needs to make their connection to.

So he will write on page 140:

“When we are young, God is building into us identity. You don’t have to be a Christian; it’s what God does for all people because God knit together each of us in our mother’s womb. God built identity into each of us. God wants us to understand our identity, but the enemy, the world, and the flesh work to crush it out of us. That’s the way this fallen world works—replacing truth with falsehood.”

Please note that I am camping on Winship because he is building upon the foundation that Paul Young laid in *The Shack*, but is gaining more mainstream acceptance due to his subtleties. He is far more finessed than Young, who, in an address I heard and have since heard repeated by him – said “who wants to believe in a God who beats the hell out of one son in order to be able love the other one?” That is the shared view of Young, Kruger, Jersak – and Winship when it comes to the Cross and substitutionary atonement. And at the base of it for all of them is their subjective experience of God. No wonder John Owen said that “as they had feigned unto themselves an imaginary Christ, so they should have an imaginary salvation only.”^{5 6}

⁵ Owen, John. [The Works of John Owen](#). Edited by William H. Goold, vol. 1, T&T Clark, p. 329.

⁶ For a full schema of the underlying theology see William Paul Young’s “Lies We Believe About God” – which “lies” include: God is in Control; God is good, I am not; God wants to be a priority; You need to get saved; The Cross was God’s idea; Not everyone is a child of God; Sin Separates us from God; etc.

Thus it is, all of Scripture is then interpreted, and applied via this lens. So Winship can use Scripture extensively, and in many places convincingly, but almost always errantly because of the underlying presupposition that everyone is already in right standing with God, and just needs to make the Jesus connection and hear Him speak. No one needs justified from their sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. They only need to wake up to their pre-existing God connection in a very Shirley McClain/Buddhist way.

The problem is, that Winship's book is published by a well known (and for the most part reliable) Christian publisher like Baker; is endorsed by Christianity Today; finds platforms in Evangelical Churches all across the country and is growing in popularity. This, in an atmosphere where more and more of those we would consider solidly Evangelical increasingly refer to "God said; God told me; I felt; God led me"...etc. Scripture then is used to reinforce ideas, but what Scripture actually teaches is undermined everywhere.

And I do have to wonder, if in all honesty, we, as self-confessed orthodox Evangelicals do not bear some of the blame for people's susceptibility here. For do we not find ourselves using that subjective language rather freely – without qualification and without speaking of how genuine motions of the indwelling Spirit may be discerned and MUST BE Biblically tested?

At times, we too have cherry picked passages to prove a point rather than expounding them carefully in their context and using sound hermeneutical principles. And when we do so, we give tacit permission to our hearers to do the same. Perhaps the biggest culprit in this regard is in the realm of apologetics, where decontextualized proof texts are tossed about at times with little or no regard to their place in the Scriptures as a whole. Not everything the Bible says, is what it teaches. It is true that Mark 15:31 reads: "He saved others; He cannot save Himself." But that statement is not true.

I recently sat under a sermon which had the stated theme of impressing on us all the importance, indeed the necessity of Scripture. The problem? The preacher never expounded a

single Biblical text. He said lots of good and true things, while completely undermining his own assertion. His ideas – good as they were - actually superseded the text in demonstration.

So, are we consistently reinforcing and modeling for our people both the singular authority and sufficiency of Scripture in the way we talk and act? If not, then is there little wonder if they are easy prey for tendencies toward spiritual subjectivism right and left? If impulses, impressions and feelings guide us apart from the Word uncritically, why not them?

When I referred to Gospel assumptions in the title – what I mean is this: I would have assumed that the 2 couples Sky and I were with had walked with the Lord, and had been in Bible preaching churches for so long, that they would have picked up on the issues without a moment's hesitation. But they did not. And neither will so many sitting under our teaching we would assume are inoculated against such errors. I was wrong. Assumed Biblical foundations are crumbling Biblical foundations if they are not regularly attended to directly and openly.

II. God: He is not renamed, but re-cast. Just as the Israelites did in the wilderness making the golden calf.

So it is Biblical language is used all over the place, but apart from Biblical definitions.

So Winship writes:

“Isn’t it beautiful that God is affirming to you that he has always approved of you? It’s not about works or comparison or competition. God made you enough, and that is how he has always seen you.” ⁷

And, (as already cited above):

⁷ Winship, Jamie. Living Fearless (p. 55). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

“You will know it’s God speaking because whatever it is you sense from the Holy Spirit will be encouraging, it will align with Scripture, and it won’t involve accusation or condemnation. And, whatever you hear, think, or sense from the Holy Spirit should resonate with you.”⁸

You see, the Holy Spirit never convicts of sin – He only affirms. God is re-cast into the cosmic cheerleader. Always telling you how worthy you are, how good you are, and (as he’ll say on page 127) **“God will only call you a name he would call himself.”**

Here, the line between God as Creator and we as Creatures becomes grotesquely blurred. Once again, we can bear some responsibility here. When we take any of God’s attributes and assign them an artificial hierarchy, we recast God to our liking. In our Reformed, Calvinistic and conservative circles, we like to major on God’s sovereignty and holiness as premier attributes, sometimes to the neglect of His grace, mercy and love – even as others distort Him by viewing all through the lens of love at the expense of His justice. One *seems* more pious, but errs in precisely the same way. All of His attributes must be seen in perfect, collective harmony – just as all the shades of the spectrum when seen as a whole appear as pure white light.

Are we helping our people to have a healthy regard for the whole of God as He is presented in the pages of Scripture? Or do we too tend to emphasize the parts we like best, and neglect, if not even apologize for, the parts we find less than appealing?

Do we too, re-cast God? Are we careful to preach the revealed, triune God of the Scriptures in all of His ineffable glory? Or are we too guilty of domesticating Him? It was Mark Twain who said “God created man in his own image, and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”

III. Experience: Experience defines truth, rather than Scripture examining our experience. Once again, in the movement I am examining here, one is invited to

⁸ Winship, Jamie. Living Fearless (p. 125). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

stop, and hear the voice of Jesus within. And this method is advanced as effective whether one is a Believer or not.

Make no mistake, the gateway drug, the point of entry to all these kinds of theological errors, and New Age mysticism, is subjectivity. Hearing God extra-Biblically, so as to be uncritical in accepting truth claims. Winship even cites a Hindu swami in advancing his notion of prayer separating between the heart and the mind. (Though he does so surreptitiously, referring to the swami as an expert in neurocardiology in a footnote, never acknowledging him as a swami.)

Having grown up myself in a very heavily Pentecostal background – extra-Biblical revelation was common. But it tended to be invested in named prophets and leaders. In the newest iteration, everyone is a prophet. Everyone hears God for themselves, and everyone interprets what they hear from a wholly personal perspective. Then, Scripture is marshaled NOT to evaluate the truth claims, but only to substantiate them. Yes, everyone *can* indeed hear God speak, right on the pages of Scripture. And we ought to read it as Him speaking. If not, we will fabricate hearing Him some other way. To our soul's grave danger.

In Winship's own testimony he details how he was awakened to his identity at the age of 14 watching the Al Pachino movie "Serpico." And it was at a time - he says - that hated God and religion. But God spoke to him and showed him this life-defining identity. He later defines that as "militant peacemaker."⁹

I beg you to pay close attention to the way your people are talking about their Christian walk, and how often the terms "God told me", "God put it in my heart", "I felt", "The Spirit impressed upon me", and this when it comes to life decisions, and even responses to Biblical truth claims where what a passage means to me, or what the Spirit says to me about a passage is more important than what the passage actually says. My subjective experience of the passage interprets it, irrespective of authorial intent or contextual constraints.

⁹ (Pg. 148)

John Newton writes cogently here:

“Texts of Scripture brought powerfully to the heart are very desirable and pleasant, if their tendency is to humble us, to give us a more feeling sense of the preciousness of Christ, or of the doctrines of grace; if they make sin more hateful, enliven our regard to the means, or increase our confidence in the power and faithfulness of God. But if they are understood as intimating our path of duty in particular circumstances, or confirming us in purposes we may have already formed, not otherwise clearly warranted by the general strain of the word, or by the leadings of Providence, they are for the most part insnaring, and always to be suspected. Nor does their coming into the mind at the time of prayer give them more authority in this respect. When the mind is intent upon any subject, the imagination is often watchful to catch at any thing which may seem to countenance the favourite pursuit. It is too common to ask counsel of the Lord when we have already secretly determined for ourselves: and in this disposition we may easily be deceived by the sound of a text of Scripture, which, detached from the passage in which it stands, may seem remarkably to tally with our wishes. Many have been deceived this way; and sometimes, when the event has shewn them they were mistaken, it has opened a door for great distress, and Satan has found occasion to make them doubt even of their most solid experiences.

¹⁰

Please note, none of this is to deny genuine life in the Spirit. He is always within us, prompting us toward love and good works – sometimes with amazing specificity toward an individual or situation, illuminating the Scriptures, bringing Biblical concepts and passages to mind at critical junctures, “speaking” to us in inward communion in accord with the Scripture and Scriptural themes, drawing us to holiness and away from sin, etc. Who among us as preachers have not known in the very act of preaching how some idea comes to mind apart from what we’ve planned, only to find out later that was the precise thing needed for some individual’s soul? And it is true that as we grow in the knowledge of the Word and in communion with Him, that a sort of spiritual intuition makes itself evident in our lives. But the caution is that we are never to take inward impulses and impressions uncritically. We examine them in prayer and the Word. What coincides with Scripture teaching, what we can verify in sound exegesis, we embrace. And what seems extraneous, we receive with healthy skepticism all along the way.

¹⁰ Newton, John, and Richard Cecil. [*The Works of John Newton*](#). Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1824, pp. 116–17.

Gary Friesen in “Decision Making and The Will of God” insightfully writes:

“[I]mpressions could be produced by any number of sources: God, Satan, an angel, a demon, human emotions (such as fear or ecstasy), hormonal imbalance, insomnia, medication, or an upset stomach. Sinful impressions (temptations) may be exposed for what they are by the Spirit-sensitized conscience and the Word of God. But beyond that, we encounter a subjective quagmire of uncertainty... Inner impressions are not a form of revelation. So the Bible does not invest inner impressions with authority to function as indicators of divine guidance. Impressions are real; believers experience them. But impressions are not authoritative. They may be useful in pointing the way to wisdom, but on the issue of their authority, impressions are just impressions. They may be “spiritual” or reflect the influence of the Spirit, but they fall short of direct revelation and thus fall short of authoritative guidance. Impressions by any other name confuse the issue and confound the believer in decision making. Impressions are still just impressions.”¹¹

Once again, I would highly recommend Packer’s book cited above, the letters of John Newton and Gary Friesen’s excellent work – Decision Making and The Will of God.

In doing some other research in another field, I was fascinated to find how many from all stripes wrote pamphlets in the same era as Joseph Smith, detailing their own encounters with angelic beings, God the Father and the Son – and each putting their own spin on restoring the lost Church and claiming to have special insight and revelations. And right now, that same phenomenon is proliferating at lightening speed in Evangelicalism. Just watch the plethora of new prophets and those sharing their divine and mystical encounters in the NAR (New Apostolic Reformation) – or the likes of Beth Moore and countless others.

It is one thing for Biblical truth to impact us so that we experience its impact powerfully and emotionally; but it is quite another to have some sort of experience, and then use that as the means to make truth claims.

¹¹ Cited from Bennett, Michael. Do you feel called by God?: Rethinking the call to ministry . Matthias Media. Kindle Edition.

IV. Vocabulary: 2 Timothy 1:13 (ESV): Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is where what I've termed "Gospel assumptions" really comes into play. Years ago I heard an interview with a massively successful film maker. In that interview he said that every truly successful film always contains the following 3 elements: Make them laugh, make them cry, and say God. Even if the use of God is only negative or to note His absence, the use of god language baptizes the entire project because people innately long to think of god in some fashion.

So we must be clear to the people who hear us.

The Gospel itself. What is it? How do we define it?

According to Winship, the Gospel is the good news that God has always accepted you, always approved of you, and just wants to speak to you personally so you can know your true identity – Scripture not needed.

Vocab examples from Winship:

Confession: **"Confession is telling God the truth about what you really believe about him, yourself, and others. It's the greatest act, a sacrament. God loves honest confession. Confession is the beginning of genuine transformation."**¹² It NEVER has to do with confessing our sins, to God or anyone else. Though at times, we confess our wrong ideas about ourselves. In one video I watched, Winship asserts that Jesus NEVER asks anyone to be sorry for their sin.

Repentance: **"Repentance is asking God to tell you his truth about the situation, his interpretation of a difficult memory when negative beliefs about yourself and life first formed."** ¹³No hint of reference

¹² (Pg. 48)

¹³ (Pg. 152)

to passages like 2 Cor. 7:10-11 and godly grief over sin. No place for the Spirit convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment.

We simply MUST spend time helping our people understand Biblical vocabulary with Biblical definitions – for the deception is rife with Biblical words but all bent out of their God-given shape.

Several years ago I had 2 experiences with a move of God among the youth in 2 different contexts. One was at a camp in the Berkshires where God was pleased to bless our efforts with a number of what appeared to be solid professions of faith. The other in Texas where once again we saw numerous teen-agers profess Christ and declare an intention to pursue missions.

The TX group were kids raised in solid, Biblically faithful Churches. The MA group were in loosely Evangelical Churches. Those in TX had an immediate identification with Biblical truth and vocabulary. It was as though Biblical preaching had been putting up street signs for the day when the blind would receive their sight, and have immediate orientation. The lights had come on, and all they had heard and been taught now blazed with light. The group in MA, had been so poorly taught, that they had no way to think about their own conversion in Biblical terms, no way to tie it to the Bible. Bible language had never been taught them. They had to learn from the Scriptures what these things were and what they meant. The TX group had a full grasp and could make faster and more solid progress. I wept for those going back to Churches where they would not be schooled in their faith, but left to their own devices to even speak of their conversions.

V. Identity: A unique identity that God placed in every human being (regardless of being in Christ or not) and that we find when we ask Jesus to announce it to us personally, mystically.

Have we failed to build a true, Biblical identity for our people? As is evident all around us, especially displayed in the gender-identity crisis of American society today – people *do* desperately need a solid, Biblical identity. One the present time calls us to reinforce regularly.

And Scripture *does* speak clearly and forcibly regarding the condition and identity of both the Believer and the unbeliever. As I wrote to my friend: “Now nowhere in anything Jamie says will you ever read the descriptions given in Ephesians 2:1–22 of what we once were, and unbelievers are even now – outside of Christ. This is the “identity” the Bible gives the unbeliever: Dead in trespasses and sins; Following the course of this world; Following the prince of the power of the air – the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience; Lived in the passions of our flesh; Carrying out the desires of the body and the mind; By nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind; Separated from Christ; Alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. (I.e. not among God’s people); Strangers to the covenants of promise; Having no hope; Without God in the world; Far off from God; Strangers and aliens.

Those are drastic and descriptive terms. They accord with Paul in Romans when he says that because of Adam’s sin “one trespass led to condemnation for all men.” It is this condemnation Jesus saves us from. And it hardly fits with Jamie’s assertion of how God *always* saw us and approved of us. And this is where his thinking strikes so wickedly at the heart of the Gospel. We don’t need to be saved from this condition, but simply to wake up to how God has always seen us. This, dear friends, is a truly damnable lie. And it is at the very bottom of his entire paradigm.

But let me not stop at what our former identity was – look at what this this passage (among MANY others) says about the Believer’s true identity is in Christ: Made alive in Christ; Saved from the just wrath of God; Raised up with Christ; Seated with Him in the heavenly places; Destined to be the objects of His making us experience the immeasurable riches of His kindness toward us in Christ – for all the coming ages; His workmanship – His divinely crafted treasure; Created for good works, that we might walk in them; Brought near to God by the blood of Christ; Reconciled to God through the cross; At peace with God; Fellow citizens with the saints

of the household of God. His FAMILY!; Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets;
And being built together with all the saints into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Now THAT, is an identity. That is who God says you are. And it is not dependent upon whether or not you feel it, or have it whispered in some experience. It is the abiding truth to be believed. It is ours by faith. And there are dozens of passages more to fill this identity out in the most amazing and transcendent of terms.”

My friend – converted decades ago and attending some very good (and some not so good) Evangelical churches, said that he took Winship’s teaching to heart – and was so blessed now that Jesus had told him his identity was as a warrior. Treading carefully, I told him I could affirm that and wouldn’t try to argue him out of it for an instant, but then pointed him to numerous passages regarding the Christian’s warfare, ending with this from J. C. Ryle:

“True Christianity is a fight. True Christianity! Let us mind that word “true.” There is a vast quantity of religion current in the world which is not true, genuine Christianity. It passes muster; it satisfies sleepy consciences; but it is not good money. It is not the real thing which was called Christianity eighteen hundred years ago. There are thousands of men and women who go to churches and chapels every Sunday, and call themselves Christians. Their names are in the baptismal register. They are reckoned Christians while they live. They are married with a Christian marriage-service. They mean to be buried as Christians when they die. But you never see any “fight” about their religion! Of spiritual strife, and exertion, and conflict, and self-denial, and watching, and warring, they know literally nothing at all. Such Christianity may satisfy man, and those who say anything against it may be thought very hard and uncharitable; but it certainly is not the Christianity of the Bible. It is not the religion which the Lord Jesus founded, and His Apostles preached. It is not the religion which produces real holiness. True Christianity is “a fight.” ¹⁴

¹⁴ Ryle, J. C. [*Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots*](#). William Hunt and Company, 1889, pp. 75–76.

The issue of a true Biblical identity is important. The question is – where do we get that from where we can be absolutely sure it is sound and in concert with God’s revealed plans and purposes? Once again, I believe the answer must be – in His Word.

What is our way forward?

I humbly submit the following.

1 - Where this paper began – Being ever vigilant to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

But that implies that WE see the faith as having been once delivered to the saints, and are confirmed in it ourselves. And that the reiteration of the fundamentals (if I’m allowed to use that term correctly) play a major role in shepherding Christ’s Sheep. It is to take up Peter’s example and mantle thoughtfully and carefully:

“Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. ¹³ I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, ¹⁴ since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. ¹⁵ And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.” ¹⁵

2 – Be faithful expositors of the Scriptures. Teach what the passages teach, and guard against using them to teach our ideas, or using it as a mere means to advance our own thoughts, opinions, ideas or even convictions.

¹⁵ **ESV 2 Pe 1:12–15.**

The temptation to move outside of this paradigm is powerful and constant. We sense people want something else at times. And we cannot give an inch. Can we teach and preach both topically AND expositionally at the same time? Of course! But it takes much thoughtful and prayerful care and labor. My pastor Matt Fletcher is doing an exemplary job of that right now in a series on the life of David. I personally find Alistair Begg's S.C.E.O.T.S. the safest course: the Systematic, Consecutive, Exposition Of The Scriptures.

3 - Define Biblical terms Biblically over and over, and press our people to do the same. Assumed truths are the ones where our people are most vulnerable to attack.

Justification, Regeneration, Sanctification, Election, Predestination, Atonement, Born-again, even terms like Prayer and Faith: These not only need to be used, but used Biblically and their Biblical definitions reinforced often.

We cannot assume any know what we mean by them if we do not tell them. And teach our people to ask what others mean by them when they use them.

4 - Alert our people that others will use the Bible and Christianese, while meaning very different things than what the Bible (or we) mean by using them. And sometimes, by name.

I understand that most of us eschew polemics, and understandably so. It can be very dangerous to get used to preaching more against, than for. But sometimes, we need to say that "Alexander the coppersmith has done me much harm." Or that "Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first" is a problem. Paul in Rom. 16:17 and 2 Tim. 3:5 warns to avoid certain people. Or Jude mentioning "certain men" – not just certain ideas have crept into the Church. I personally have found my own reticence in this regard to have been a disservice to my people. While I tried to address only false concepts, I failed to identify those with specific people or ministries. Where Jesus could warn to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod!

5 - Eschew innovation. Be as convinced as Jude was that “the faith” has indeed been once and for all – since his days – delivered to the Church. The Church does not need to be reinvented. It simply needs to be lived out faithfully in our present context.

This is not a plea to try to be 1st Century Christians. We are not. Nor was the early Church without its very real issues. Hence 1 & 2 Corinthians, and 5 of the 7 letters of Jesus to the Churches in Asia. Attempts to be a 1st Century Church is a fool’s errand. It’s like saying “let’s go back to being babies”. We are the 21st Century Church, living out eternal and immutable truths in our very own unique contexts of place and time. We do not need to be clever, innovative or original – GOD SAVE US FROM ORIGINALITY! - we need to be FAITHFUL. Not stodgy and anachronistic, but bringing the force of eternal truth to bear in our generation. Not mystical, but proclaimers of the divine mysteries committed into our hands.