

**“Let the Children Come to Me”**  
**Mark 10:13-16**  
**March 23, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark, as we turn to Mark 10:13-16.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

<sup>10:13</sup> And they were bringing children to him [that is, to Jesus] that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>15</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” <sup>16</sup> And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, we gather this morning because we love your Word.  
We want it to be our meditation day and night.  
We know that your revelation to us  
offers more wisdom than the wise of the world,  
it gives us more understanding than the great thinkers of the world,  
it gives us deeper understanding than the old and experienced of the world.  
Teach us now from your word, we ask.  
In Jesus’s name. Amen  
[Based on Psalm 119:97-104]

**Introduction**

We have here a story of Jesus’s interaction with children and his instruction to his disciples regarding children.

And while Jesus does here use children as an example for adults to consider in verse 15, the main thrust of the passage in verses 13, 14, and 16 is about the children themselves, as children. And so that will be our main focus as well.

Parents and other adults – both men and women judging by the Greek grammar – were bringing their little ones to Jesus. [Ferguson, 160] These little ones, we learn in Luke’s account, included babies and infants. [Luke 18:15] And the adults presumably brought these children because they – the adults – believed in Jesus, and they believed that Jesus could and would bless their children, just as he had blessed them.

And so these children of believers are brought to Jesus.

But the disciples rebuke the believers and perhaps even their children for this. [Edwards, 306] They see this as beneath Jesus, or as a distraction from what they assume is Jesus’s more important work of ministering to and instructing adults.

But then for this rebuke the disciples themselves are rebuked. Jesus, we’re told in verse 14, was indignant with his disciples and demanded that such children and little ones be brought to him. “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” And then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

We see here that Jesus desires a full relationship with our own children and with the children of our congregation. And he calls his people – he calls us – to facilitate that relationship, and not to hinder it. That’s his point in verse 14.

And that desire of Jesus, and his call on us to act as his servants in that process, plays out in a number of ways.

We’ll consider just a few of them this morning.

### **The Lord Calls Our Children, and We Are to Be His Servants in That**

The first thing we see is that the Lord calls our children, and we are to be his servants as he does.

Jesus is a King. He calls these little ones into his Kingdom.

And that the Lord would call little ones – even infants – to himself is not at all new.

From the beginning, in Genesis, as he called Abraham, God was clear that even little ones – even infant children of his people – would be full members of his Kingdom, marked with the sign of his covenant from eight days old.

And God’s call of such little ones was not merely formal and external. But he also called them internally, and he desired a real, intimate, and heart-level relationship with them.

We get a picture of this in Psalm 22. There, David says to God:

“Yet you are he who took me from the womb;  
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.  
On you was I cast from my birth,  
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.”

Similarly, in Psalm 71, the psalmist could say:  
“For you, O Yahweh, are my hope,  
my trust, O Yahweh, from my youth.  
Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;  
you are he who took me from my mother's womb.  
My praise is continually of you.”

It's also why, in Luke 1, we're told that the unborn baby of Zechariah and Elizabeth would be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.” [1:15] and could respond to the presence of Christ by leaping for joy, even before his birth. [1:41-44]

These passages describe infants with real, saving, covenantal relationships with the Lord. And while we have a role as the Lord's servants in this, these passages also make it clear that it is ultimately the Lord, not us, who initiates such relationships.

The Lord himself calls covenant children into relationship with him – and he often calls them as children (even unborn children). And for the kids who are here this morning, that's important for you to know. Church isn't just a grown-up thing you tag along for, but Jesus calls you here as well – Jesus wants you to know him.

And as the Lord does that work, the rest of us are to be his servants in that.

As servants of the King, the Apostles should have ushered in and encouraged into Jesus's presence those that he wanted to see and held those back that he didn't want to see. But in our text this morning, they get it exactly backwards, holding back the very children that Jesus wants to call into his special presence. And for that, they're sternly rebuked.

But the Apostles would learn better.

Later, in Acts 2, when the Apostle Peter called people to the Lord, he would know to be clear that the call was not just for adults, but for children as well. He says to the crowds: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” [2:38]

Peter had learned to become a more faithful servant to Jesus his King by being clear to call both adults and children into the presence of Christ.

And, when taken in context, it seems clear that Peter was calling such children of all ages to the Lord that very day.

This was the lesson that Peter had learned from Jesus in our passage this morning.

It was also the lesson he learned from Scripture as a whole, as Peter makes clear by choosing words in his call that seem allude to Deuteronomy 29:8, which was rooted in Genesis 17, where God makes it clear that his covenant call included not just adults, but also their children, even as newborns. [Collins, Part 2, 94]

And the concrete reality of that call would have had implications that very day, as Peter spoke to the crowds. After all, when Peter spoke those words in Acts 2 – “The promise is for you and for

your children” – he wasn’t speaking to a room full of adults but to a crowd of three thousand that must have included both adults and children of all ages – all of whom would be there in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Such feasts were often a family affair, and surely a crowd that large would have contained many children of all ages. Peter was talking about them. [Lane, 111]

Jesus calls little children – even infants – to himself. And from the days of Abraham, through Pentecost, to today, what that has meant for us, is that as servants of Christ, we, the Church, are to call little children to the Lord as well.

And that has several implications.

For one thing, it means that we are to take the spiritual lives of such little ones seriously. By which I mean that we are to take seriously the fact that, not as little adults but as children and infants, they are spiritual beings – truly capable of a real and deep relationship with the Lord, for good or for ill.

And with that, it means that we are also to affirm and remind them that, as covenant children, they are already called into a covenant relationship with God. We don’t teach them that they’re outsiders who need to convert, but rather that they are rightful heirs of the covenant who are already part of God’s people, and so they must embrace and live out that given identity from the heart.

In other words, we tell them that the Lord has already extended his call to them specifically: They were born into the covenant, and they have had his triune name placed on them in baptism because the Lord has called them to be his children. He wants them specifically to come to him. And so, we are to remind them and teach them that he sought them before they ever sought him. They are already part of God’s people.

And so, we are to welcome and usher them into God’s presence, and into the midst of God’s people. That is our role as servants of Jesus.

Which means that we all welcome them into worship, even when they may still be a bit wiggly or noisy, because Jesus wants them there, even if it means we may have to work a little harder to not be distracted.

It means that we’re called to warmly welcome them ourselves when we see them on Sundays, greeting and encouraging them, even in the hallways.

It means that many of you need to consider seriously whether the Lord is calling you to serve them more directly, in one of our children’s ministries, like Sunday school.

And it means, of course, that parents and grandparents of such covenant children are to regularly remind them of the Lord’s call on them and love for them.

The details may vary, but as servants of Christ, we are all to usher such little ones into Christ’s presence because he calls them to himself.

That’s one thing we see.



## **The Lord Cleanses Our Children, and We Are to Be His Servants in That**

But another important thing is that as the Lord calls our children to himself, so he also cleanses them, and we are to be his instruments and servants in that as well.

The Lord does call our children to himself. But our children are sinful.

Psalm 58 tells us:

“The wicked are estranged from the womb;  
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.”

There’s an important concept in such a statement. It’s true that an infant cannot carry out sins the same way an adult can. But what keeps them from it is not their lack of a sinful nature, but their lack of capacity to act out their desires.

It’s true, they can’t speak lies at two days old. But that inability is not because they lack the sinful bent to tell lies – after all, David tells us that they are estranged from God even from the womb. No, their inability to tell lies comes from a lack of cognitive and physical abilities – not a lack of a sinful heart.

And that inherent sinfulness from the womb is true of covenant children as well. In Psalm 51, King David, very much a covenant child himself, confesses:

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

David acknowledges that he had a heart of iniquity from birth, and a sinful nature from conception.

The Bible tells us that all children are made in the image of God, and so they bear God’s image, and so should be treated by us with love and dignity. But the Bible also tells us that that image has been marred by sin in them, just as it has in us. And so, like us, every child is sinful from the moment of their conception.

Which means that Jesus’s welcome of little children is not because of their innocence. The little ones Jesus calls are, in fact, sinners.

But still he calls them. And he calls them not to condemn them but to embrace them, and bless them, and to bring them into his Kingdom.

But such a relationship with the Lord – such entrance into the Kingdom of God – is not possible without cleansing from their sin. And so, if the Lord calls our sinful children, then he must also offer them his cleansing, just as he does with us.

In fact, there is no stage of life that is excluded from the redemption and cleansing work of Jesus Christ.

As the second-century church father Irenaeus put it, Jesus passed through every stage of human development, so that he himself might “sanctify every age” of human life, thus making his cleansing redemption available to people of every age and stage of life. [Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.22.4]

Now, the faith by which such infants or young children know the Lord and receive his cleansing may be mysterious to us ... but the fact that we don't understand it doesn't mean it's not real. However much the idea of infant faith might baffle us, the Scriptures tell us it's real, and we cannot exclude such little ones from the cleansing power of Jesus's blood. [If you want to try to dig a bit deeper into the topic of infant faith, see Pastor Rayburn's excellent sermon on the topic here: <http://faithtacoma.org/vision-nicoletti/%EF%BF%BCourtheological-vision-core-valuesinfant-faith-luke-139-45> ]

For you children here this morning, Jesus's blood – Jesus's forgiveness – is for you.

And as the Lord offers his cleansing work even to our little ones, we are to be his servants in that process.

That means that we, too, must emphasize and reiterate that reality to our children. We must repeatedly point them to the forgiveness of their sins. We must assure them, over and over (just as the Lord assures us), that as they trust in Jesus, he really does forgive them. We must direct them, again and again, to go to Jesus, confessing and seeking his cleansing when they sin.

And so we may need to ask ourselves: as parents of covenant children, or as grandparents of covenant children, or as church volunteers working with covenant children, or just as fellow church-members of covenant children: are we leading with the grace of the gospel as we seek to disciple them? Are we leading with the cleansing promised in the covenant – the forgiveness of sins Jesus offers them – as we interact with them?

That is where the gospel begins. That is where the blessings of the covenant begin. And so that is where we must begin with them as well.

The Lord cleanses our children, and we are to be his servants in that. That's a second dimension of Jesus's desire for a real relationship with our children that we see here.

### **The Lord Converses with Our Children, and We Are to Be His Servants in That**

A third dimension is that the Lord converses with our children, and we are to be his servants in that, too.

God speaks to his people in his Word, and he hears their response as they pray. And that is a covenant blessing not just for us, but also for our children.

Jesus didn't want the children off at a distance until they were older. Rather, he wanted them close, where he could speak his blessing to them, and instruct them in his love through both word and deed.

Children, Jesus himself – through the Bible and through those who teach you the Bible – Jesus wants to speak to you. And he wants to hear your response as you speak to him in prayer.

We see that in our text this morning, and we find that God has the same expectation of conversing with our children throughout the Scriptures.

In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 6, God tells his people the importance of the instruction of his Word, and he emphasizes that that importance is not just for them, but also for their children, He says of his commandments: “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” He adds that God’s truth is also to shape how we answer the many questions our children ask us.

Which is an important reminder for you who are parents to ask yourself: Are you actively instructing your children in God’s Word? Are you yourself telling them the Biblical story in a way appropriate for their age so that they will know it, and they will see themselves as a part of it? Are you actively instructing them in how they should live – in what is good and what is evil – not from your own opinions, or the most recent cultural trends, but from God’s unchanging Word, which he wrote for their sake as well as yours? As God’s people, God calls us to meet our children where they’re at, to communicate God’s truth to them in ways that they can grasp it, and then to help them respond to what God has said to them, through instruction, encouragement, and discipline.

We are to be Christ’s servants as he converses with our children.

And that responsibility is not limited to parents ... but God places it on us as a congregation as well.

That’s why our children’s ministries, like children’s Sunday School, VBS, and choristers, as well as our investment in Christian education are all so important and have been an emphasis for us for years.

It’s why for decades our church has invested in our youth ministry so that it’s the primary focus of one of our pastors here. It’s also why we chose to call a minister to that role now who has years of ministry experience, who’s especially gifted at connecting with those whose culture is a bit different from his own, and who plans to stay in the role for a number of years, to build a youth program over the long-haul that will instruct and disciple our youth in deep and meaningful ways.

These ministries to our children and our youth are important to us because they’re important to Jesus. The Lord really does want to converse with our children. And we are to be his servants in that process.

### **The Lord Communes with Our Children, and We Are to Be His Servants in That**

Fourth, the Lord communes with our children, and we are to be his servants in that, too.

As the people brought children – including infants – to him, Jesus wanted to take them in his arms, and bless them, and be with them.

Children, that’s how the Lord feels about you. He wants you to be with him. He delights in you. He wants to commune with you.

And the rest of us need to make that clear to our children. We need them to know that in the gospel – in the covenant of grace – the Lord delights in them. He wants to be with them and bless them. He doesn't begrudge their presence, but he happily welcomes it.

And if we say or imply something different, then the Lord will be indignant with us, just as he was with his disciples. "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

As a church, we must make the heart of Jesus towards our covenant children clear as we teach them. We must reflect that heart in how we welcome children in our worship service: not begrudging them for being children, but knowing (and expressing the fact) that God himself wants them here, and so we'd better not respond to their needs or their noises in ways that would imply that we don't want them here. We must be hospitable to them in our worship service, and not like the disciples who drove them away.

And as they grow and are able, we encourage them to participate in the worship service in whatever ways they can: to sing, to stand, to raise their hands. And once they're able to profess their faith in an age-appropriate way, our elders welcome them to the Lord's table, because the Lord wants them there. [I, personally, along with Pastor Rayburn and many of our elders, would invite them even earlier, based on our own convictions about the Lord's Supper. But in a spirit of Reformed catholicity and in humble submission to our denomination, we wait until they can have an informal meeting with a couple of elders and express their sincere faith to them. And then we happily welcome them to the Table. For more on the topic of infants receiving the Lord's Supper, see the "Minority Report" section of the PCS's report on paedocommunion by Pastor Rayburn, beginning on page 503 here: <https://pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/2-498.pdf> ]

In our life as a church, and in our individual families, we want our children to know that the Lord delights to have them in his presence.

In fact, our goal, in many ways, as a church and as Christian parents, is to give our covenant children enough of a taste of the joy of God's welcoming presence that they would long to be in his presence forever – not just now, but for all eternity, in the new heavens and the new earth.

The Lord delights to commune with our children, and we are to be his servants, encouraging and welcoming them into his special presence, just as Jesus had wanted his disciples to do.

### **The Lord Commissions Our Children, and We Are to Be His Servants in That**

Fifth and finally, the Lord commissions our children. And we are to be his servants in that as well.

The Lord commissions our covenant children for his battles in this world. That may not be overt in our text this morning, but we see it in other places. For example, in Psalm 8, David writes:

"O Yahweh, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouth of babies and infants,  
you have established strength because of your foes,  
to still the enemy and the avenger."

The Lord, in some mysterious way, intends to use our covenant children in his work and conquest in this world – even to defeat the enemies of his Kingdom.

Kids, that means that God has a plan for you in what he is doing in the world.

And that means at least two things for the rest of us.

First, it means we must work to equip our covenant children for the Lord’s calling in their future.

Our goal in raising our children in the faith, as disciples of Jesus Christ, is not to raise them to be people who just know how to live inside a spiritual fortress, but rather to train them to be soldiers who know both how to build their home-base in the Church, and also how to daily venture out into a spiritually hostile world to carry out the mission and the battles of the Lord there.

As children, right now, they may need more guarding, given their immaturity and age. But they’re not to remain that way forever. And that truth must shape how we disciple them now.

Because we want to equip them to think God’s truth in the midst of scoffers, to walk in God’s ways in the midst of temptations, and to apply God’s Word to every area of life in God’s world. That’s one reason why we so value Christian education here.

In how we train and disciple and educate Christian children, we must be mindful that we are called to equip them for the commission the Lord will place on them in this world as they grow and mature.

But then second, along with that, we must have eyes to see that the Lord has already commissioned them, even now ... and he is already using our covenant children to do his work in us and around us.

And often the Lord works through covenant children in the church by working through their weaknesses and needs.

Mark Searle reflects on this fact. He writes: “Children will test the sacrificial self-commitment, the self-delusions, and the spurious faith of those with whom they come in contact for any length of time. They summon parents particularly to a deeper understanding of the mystery of grace and of the limitations of human abilities. ... All this is merely to suggest that in their own way children in fact play an extremely active, even prophetic, role in the household of faith.” [Searle, quoted in Leithart, *Priesthood*, 153]

The Lord has already commissioned, and is already working through our covenant children, in our lives, and in the life of his Church.

We may not reflect on that often theologically, but many of us have experienced it. We have often felt our selfishness be exposed, and we have found ourselves called to greater acts of love –and sacrifice – and faith, not by the wise and inspiring words of someone stronger than us, but by the needs of a covenant child who was so obviously weaker than us.

It's in how we respond to them that we often see our hearts most clearly. And often that is indeed the Lord's intent.

The Lord has commissioned our children to be his instruments in the covenant community. Which is one more reason why Jesus calls children into his presence and into the midst of his other disciples as we gather before him.

### **When Covenant Children Don't Continue in the Faith**

Jesus calls, cleanses, converses with, communes with, and commissions our covenant children.

But, of course, we know from experience and from Scripture that this doesn't mean that every covenant child goes on to live the rest of their life as a faithful disciple of Jesus.

There are a few reasons why that might happen.

Sometimes it's because of us. We, as God's people, don't always fulfill our calling to act as God's servants in forming covenant children as disciples of Christ. We have a role in all this, which the Lord calls us to. But God's people don't always pass on the essentials of the gospel or the Christian life to covenant children, as we're called to.

But other times this happens not because of us but because our covenant children are, in fact, individuals, and they must make choices in all this as well. While they have a special place in the covenant, and while they do receive the benefits of that formal covenant membership, and while Christ's invitation to draw close to him in a deep and rich relationship is real, our covenant children must still, themselves, with the help of God, *embrace* the covenant from the heart. Kids, your role in all this is real – especially as you get older. And you need to be sure that you're responding to Jesus by giving yourself to him; he gave himself for you.

Third, this outcome may occur because God himself is sometimes very mysterious in his providence in all this. We might call this the "Ecclesiastes factor." Sometimes all the most important external factors would seem to point to a particular outcome – such as the heartfelt faith of a covenant child – but then it doesn't happen. And we are reminded that God has his own purposes, beyond what we know and understand.

All these things may play out in the life of a covenant child. Some of you have seen it very close to home. [For more on this, see Rayburn & Nicoletti, "An Elder Must Have Believing Children": [https://www.academia.edu/35440413/An\\_Elder\\_Must\\_Have\\_Believing\\_Children\\_Titus\\_1\\_6\\_and\\_a\\_Neglected\\_Case\\_of\\_Conscience](https://www.academia.edu/35440413/An_Elder_Must_Have_Believing_Children_Titus_1_6_and_a_Neglected_Case_of_Conscience)] And in many of those cases, the story is not yet over. The final outcome of that covenant child's heart and life is not yet known. And so, we continue to pray for them, and we continue to seek to be Christ's servants, inviting them to hear and respond to Jesus's call to them.

Because Jesus calls them to come to him, to be cleansed by him, to converse with him, to commune with him, and to be commissioned by him. He calls them to a full relationship with him.

## **Conclusion**

If you are a covenant child, whether young or old, be reminded again this morning that these things are true – that Jesus’s desire for a deep and true relationship with you is real.

And if you’re an adult, then remember that ministry to such children is important because it’s important to Jesus. Even if the world – even if other Christians – see such ministry as of little value, remember again this morning that to Jesus such ministry to his beloved children is of great value.

And whatever stage of life you may be in, remember as well this morning that such little children – in their weakness, in their utter dependence, in their inability to do anything for themselves – such children, Jesus says, are to be a model of Christian spirituality for you. [Edwards, 307]

So, imitate them as you seek to serve them and faithfully welcome and usher them into the loving presence of Jesus.

Because Jesus says to us all: “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Amen.

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## **Some Relevant Sources & Resources**

### **Further Reading on Covenant Nurture:**

If you are looking for further reading on covenant nurture, you might consider:

- *The Duties of Parents* by J.C. Ryle
- *Parenting is Heart Work* by Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller
- “Passing on the Covenant to Our Children – Deuteronomy 4:9-14” Steven Nicoletti. November 21, 2021. Faith Presbyterian Church. <https://www.faithtacoma.org/deuteronomy-nicoletti/passing-on-the-covenant-to-our-children-deuteronomy-49-14>
- Belz, Joel. “A Father’s Perspective: Covenant Succession by Grace through Faith.” In *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*. Edited by Benjamin K. Wikner. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005.

### **On infant baptism:**

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**On paedocommunion:**

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Nicoletti, Steven S. “A History of Credocommunion: From the Early Church Until 1500.” In *The Bantam Review: Journal of the Covenant Seminary Theological Society*. 2012. Pages 19-39.

**On infant faith:**

Rayburn, Robert S. “Infant Faith” Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, WA. February 6, 2022. <http://faithtacoma.org/vision-nicoletti/%EF%BF%BCourtheological-vision-core-valuesinfant-faith-luke-139-45>

**On the reality that some covenant children reject the covenant:**

Rayburn, Robert S. and Steven A Nicoletti. “An Elder Must Have believing Children: Titus 1:6 and a Neglected Case of Conscience.” *Presbyterion* 43.2. Fall 2017. Pages 69-80.  
[https://www.academia.edu/35440413/An\\_Elder\\_Must\\_Have\\_Believing\\_Children\\_Titus\\_1\\_6\\_and\\_a\\_Neglected\\_Case\\_of\\_Conscience](https://www.academia.edu/35440413/An_Elder_Must_Have_Believing_Children_Titus_1_6_and_a_Neglected_Case_of_Conscience)

**Some of Pastor Rayburn’s writings on covenant succession:**

Rayburn, Robert S. “The Presbyterian Doctrine of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession.” *Presbyterion* 22/2, 1996, p.76-112.

Rayburn, Robert S. “An Emphasis on the Christian Family, Part 1.” Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, WA. May 7, 2017.

<https://www.faithtacoma.org/characteristicsoffaith/an-emphasis-on-the-christian-family-part-1>

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***This sermon draws heavily on my April 3, 2022 morning sermon.***

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing

with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.