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LAST WORDS OF CHRIST

A CALL TO UNDERSTANDING

WALLACE R. CLAUSEN

Caught in the confusion of how Scripture can express

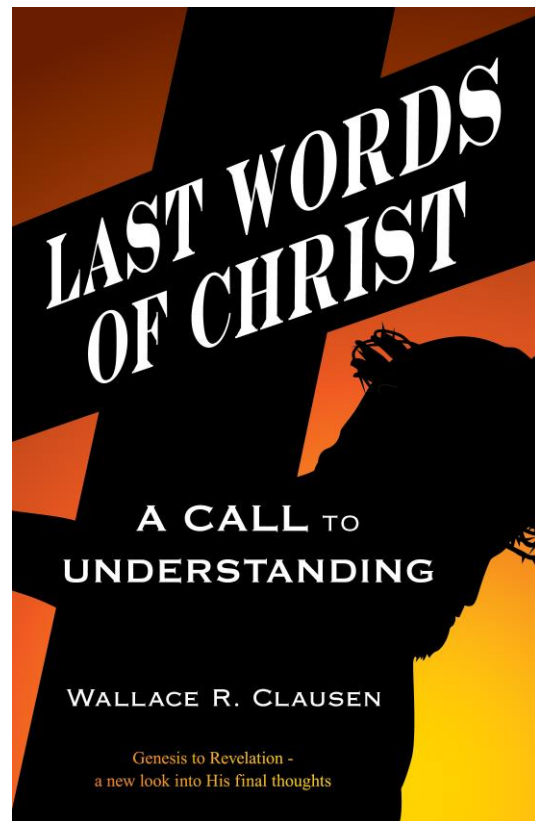
truth, yet be a literary work, are two audiences: those who read the Bible literally, and those unsure of its metaphorical language. *Last Words of Christ: A Call to Understanding* is written to complement the current movement to read the Bible as literature as a response to this confusion.

Asking the question, “What is the theological meaning of Christ’s final thoughts?” *Last Words of Christ* focuses on the descriptions of light and darkness in Mark’s crucifixion narrative as an interpretive key. This interpretive key not only unlocks the theological interpretation of the last words of the crucified messiah, but also reveals the literary construction of the whole Bible.

Last Words of Christ is composed of seven sections divided into two major parts. This structural model for the book serves to reflect the literary contour of the cross where his seven words are spoken in two time periods: the daylight, and the darkness.

By locating Jesus’ final thoughts in biblical history—not just isolating them upon the cross—they are heard as fulfillment of Old Testament portraits. Further, the wisdom of reading the Bible as inspired literature is illuminated. **In traversing this biblical history-to-crucifixion interplay, the epic story of Scripture emerges, revealing the wonder and grandeur of the cross.**

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About the Author

WALLACE R. CLAUSEN

Wallace Clausen grew up in Seattle and resides in the Pacific Northwest. Its jeweled landscape, resplendent with Mt. Rainier as its crowning glory, drew him to an abiding respect for nature. He and his wife enjoy traveling the nation's parks and scenic areas.

A graduate of Seattle Pacific University, Wallace completed a master's program at Western Oregon University. His 39-year career as an educator spanned Oregon and Washington, with the last 26 years consisting of serving as principal in three school districts. He is a recipient of the ESPAW Distinguished Principal Award.

Wallace has served in various church leadership positions, most recently serving as chair in outreach and service. He enjoys supporting his wife's coordinator role of providing lunches for homeless women. When not writing, the couple treasures time with their four grandchildren, two each from their son and daughter.

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What Others Are Saying About **Last Words of Christ**

If you are one who values the powerful duality of God's Word as both truth and literature, *Last Words of Christ* was written for you. Wallace Clausen does a masterful job of unpacking the theological implications of Christ's final words, seven in all, which encapsulate Jesus' final thoughts during his inexorable march towards death and victory. In doing so, Clausen brings to life the most magnificent story of Scripture, illuminating the marvelous majesty of the cross.

— **Rob Seims, Young Life Associate Regional Director**

In his enlightening book, *Last Words of Christ: A Call to Understanding*, Clausen presents a wide-ranging perspective on God's salvation plan as viewed through the lens of Christ's spoken words on the cross. The scope of this exploration is immense and well-researched, opening with the creation narrative in Genesis and continuing through the New Testament, supported by input from a wide range of Christian thinkers. Seldom has the age-old struggle of good vs. evil, light against darkness, been so evident as when these crucifixion statements are seen as a cohesive summation of God's saving work overcoming evil in the world, rather than the disjointed, dying utterances of the Son of God on the cross. It is a biblical tour de force, and I was both blessed and educated, as will all be who read this important book.

— **Tim Teusink, M.D., M.A. in Bioethics**

Wallace Clausen offers a stimulating look at Christ's Seven Last Words that is rich with theological meaning and contextual insight. His work is careful, well-researched, and the theory he offers in uniting these iconic words is completely plausible. I read it with fascination and found his conclusions to be inspirational.

— **Dr. Keith Carpenter, Senior Pastor of Kent Covenant Church**

Clausen raises a fascinating question for us to consider: were Jesus' final utterances from the cross only responses to his horrific predicament, or might he also have been offering an intentional, final evaluation—a "capstone"—to his rapidly-fleeting life? With a high regard for Scripture as God-breathed, Clausen at the same time reminds us to read it also as literature, affirming that the authors of the gospels selected the stories—and their words—to convey deeper, symbolic meaning as well.

— **Mr. Lynn C. Conver, Linguist/Translator and Editor for Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International**

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Suggested Interview Questions

For Wallace R. Clausen, author of

Last Words of Christ

A Call to Understanding

Q: There are hundreds of books on Christ’s last words. How does your book contribute to this already overcrowded market?

A: That crowded bookshelf is largely composed of two types of books. One is written by clergy, often expressing collections of Lenten sermons, while the other is written as mediational devotionals. The homilies often teach about God and his forgiveness; while the devotionals point in the direction of how believers are to live their lives. What they have in common is a tradition of treating each of Christ’s seven statements as if they have no connection with one another. In other words, his statements are largely seen as fragmentary thoughts or isolated statements. My book doesn’t subscribe to that tradition. In *Last Words of Christ*, I find that Christ’s utterances cohere rather than fragment; that by coming together they form a grand message, a kind of capstone thesis to his life and ministry. It is in the unveiling of that life message in which my book’s contribution is discovered.

Q: Your book’s subtitle – “A new look into his final thoughts” – begs the question: What is so new about your book?

A: What is new about this book is the lens from which it is written. I have already mentioned the traditional approach – which is to view Jesus’ words as fragmentary statements. In other words, there is little connection between them. The lens I use sees Christ’s statements as being interconnected, that is, joined together. Further, I use a literary framework to discover meaning. After all, the Bible is a written document; that means the Bible’s primary environment, its overall context, is literature-based. That understanding brings great significance to interpretation.

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Q: How is it that a career public school educator ends up writing a theological book? Are you a theologian?

A: To answer your question there is both a yes and a no to it. I am a retired public school teacher and principal. In that regard, I am not a certified theologian. But I am a theologian in the same sense they every lay person is. After all, the word theology is defined by its two parts: theo –referring to divinity; and ology meaning to study about or learn about. So, whenever a believer reads the Bible in a meaningful way that person engages in theology.

Q: At the outset of *Last Words* you state, “Throughout this book, this tension about how a believer is to read the Bible will be constantly in view.” What is that tension? How does your book address it?

A: This is a very significant question. It goes to heart of how we read and understand the Bible. On the one hand is what has been referred to as literal reading. That is, what the text says is what it means. This yields a very concrete understanding, a kind of absolute thinking. On the other side of the ledger is figurative reading. This view holds that often what the Bible says is merely a way to present meaning through images and symbols. Surprisingly, when we look at it, we find the latter to be a primary way Jesus taught. For example, he often spoke in parables – which, of course, is a form of symbolic communication. So, when I speak of tension, this is what I hold in mind. It is based on the question, Is the Bible to be understood by the surface level meaning of what it says, or rather should we examine the actual words for their symbolic intent? The purpose of my book is to examine Christ’s final saying from this symbolic plane.

Q: In your book you talk about two ways of approaching Christ’s words. One is to hear them as historical statements while the other considers them as biblical words. What is the distinction between these two and how is that important for your readers?

A: When Jesus was crucified, we know he spoke seven statements. Those words were heard by a large crowd that gathered to watch him die. That audience heard him speak historically; that is, they were present in that place and at that time. But

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Jesus' statements are known to us today because they are recorded in the Bible. Historians of that era did not make a record of them. If they had, we could learn about them as historical words spoken in a historical context. But reading them in the Bible makes the Lord's words theological statements, since the Bible is a collection of theological notes. What that means is we must learn to read Christ's final statements as if they are theological thoughts rather than historical recordings. We must set aside history as an interpretative guide and take up a theological viewpoint when we seek their meaning. After all, we weren't there, we didn't hear those historically spoken statements. But we can hear them authentically when we read them in their theological context, which is on the pages of inspired Scripture.

Q: Throughout the book you speak of interpretative tools. What are those tools and why are they important?

A: By tools I refer to a strategy a believer uses when she reads Scripture. Unfortunately, most believers are hard pressed to answer what is their reading strategy. For example, I once asked a Bible study group that question. When I said strategy, they just gave me this blank stare. In that discussion what emerged was how often they sought help by reading from informed sources, such as editorial comments found in their Bibles, or sometimes they used a Bible handbook, even sometimes they asked a pastor or a respected lay person. Basically, their strategy was to be guided by a more informed authority. That is unfortunate since it assumes they don't have the tools to form sound interpretations on their own. More so, it ignores the one strategy that is readily available to almost all laity: which is the literary training they received in school.

In most believer's background there is some formal educational training in literature. In that past they were taught to how to use literary tools to extract meaning. The tools I refer to in *Last Words* are literary tools, such as setting, character and plot. I refer to metaphor, foreshadowing, and symbolism among many other. As these tools are used the reader comes to a clearer understanding of what the originating authors were thinking. At the close of my book, I have an appendix where all the tools I use to develop and construct meaning of Christ's

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final thoughts are listed. What is important about these tools, compared say to a clergy's tools, is that a laity's tools are built on the training provided through a K-12 education. Few congregants have access to the more esoteric theological tools of the credential pastorate, such as a capacity to read Scripture in its original languages. What we need to do, rather than refer questions to 'experts' or 'authorities,' is make use of our life-long tools, which are the same tools we use when we read technical journals, or magazine articles, non-fiction or fiction books, or even cookbooks.

Q: When I picked up your book, I was surprised to find that you began not with the cross where Christ's life ends, but at the start of his ministry with what is termed the Cana wedding. Why start there?

A: The Cana wedding, which is told in John's Gospel, is an ideal way to approach the Bible's tension of literal language verses symbolic meaning. On the one hand, the wedding at Cana was a real event in which Jesus performed his first miracle, that of changing water into wine. Yet that realness, much like his many parables, teaches a more metaphoric understanding. By starting there, I have a perfect opportunity to introduce the topic of reading and constructing meaning. This immediately alters my book from a historical venue to a theological platform.

Q: On the back-cover a free study guide is described. How does that contribute to understanding your work?

A: My book is written out of my background, which is teaching. We know that adults often learn best when they have opportunity to discuss and talk about new ideas. One of the hopes I have for this book is that it will be used by Bible study groups. That guide is a means by which small groups of believers can safely discuss ideas presented in my work.

Q: You constantly bring up Genesis, even though the subject of your book is the last words of Christ. Is there a connection between Genesis and Christ's last words?

A: One of the values of reading and studying the Bible from a literary view is opportunity to see the interconnectedness of Scripture. This picture, namely that

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the Bible is one, large grand story, emerges with wonderful clarity when we begin to read Scripture as a holistic writing. In that regard, what the Bible says in its opening pages is foundational for understanding the entire story of the Bible. Too often Christians say they don't understand the Old Testament; they say it is too long and too confusing. While this is partly true, that confusion, to a large degree, dissipates when we truly understand the Genesis story. And, when we do, we see a remarkable relationship between it and the cross.

Q: As you wrote this book, what audience did you have in mind and why?

A: I have three audiences; two of which are primary. One is college and career students. Often this group struggles to reconcile claims made by those who read the Bible literally. Our western culture, particularly today, is dominated by STEM thinking – that is science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Often this age group is really torn by their Sunday school background of literal Bible stories compared to the hard reality of science they discover when they arrive on college campuses. For some, this apparent gap is too much and they fade away from the great truths of the Bible and worship. In *Last Words*, this is part of the literary tension I describe and write about. I believe for this audience they will find that reading the Bible is not an either/or proposition but rather there is another alternative, one that is not at all bothered by this modern-day controversy over literal verses evolutionary and scientific ideas and values.

A second audience is the biblically literate adult. This is the person who truly enjoys reading and discovering new meaning in the Bible. For this person, he often feels the best way to gain new meaning is to “go deep” in the Scriptures. What I present in my work is the alternate idea of going wide and broad, rather than deep and narrow. In that approach the true dynamic of Scripture is found.

Finally, there is the skeptic. This is the person who scoffs at the sometimes wildly imaginative stories in the Bible. He laughs when he hears of a world-wide flood, or a great tower being built to the heavens, or in Revelation where the streets of heaven are paved in gold and adorned with jewels. Too often this person has only a vague familiarity with Scripture and has no desire to engage in such fantastic fantasies. In *Last Words of Christ*, the view I offer will challenge the skeptic

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because it is not based on a literal comprehension, rather it approaches understanding by first insisting that those wild stories be read exactly as they are written, but then rapidly moves through symbolism, image, and metaphor to consider how those fantastic stories yield incredible and rationale pictures of an invisible sphere where God exists.

Q: In closing, why should I pick-up this book and read it?

A: This is a serious book, full of serious ideas, ideas that are built on a foundation that insists that the actual language of the Bible holds the essence of God revealing himself to human kind. If you want to engage this God of biblical truth, this book will better equip you for that engagement.

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