



Jeremy Lundgren  
Foreword by Marc Cortez

# THE PURSUIT of SAFETY

*A Theology of Danger, Risk, and Security*



STUDIES IN  
CHRISTIAN  
DOCTRINE  
AND  
SCRIPTURE



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

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# Series Introduction

## Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (SCDS)

DANIEL J. TREIER AND KEVIN VANHOOZER

**T**HE STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE and Scripture (SCDS) series attempts to reconcile two disciplines that should never have been divided: the study of Christian Scripture and the study of Christian doctrine. Old walls of disciplinary hostility are beginning to come down, a development that we hope will better serve the church. To that end, books in this series affirm the supreme authority of Scripture, seeking to read it faithfully and creatively as they develop fresh articulations of Christian doctrine. This agenda can be spelled out further in five claims.

1. We aim to publish constructive **contributions to systematic theology** rather than merely descriptive rehearsals of biblical theology, historical retrievals of classic or contemporary theologians, or hermeneutical reflections on theological method—volumes that are plentifully and expertly published elsewhere.

The initial impetus for the SCDS series came from supervising evangelical graduate students and seeking to encourage their pursuit of constructive theological projects shaped by the supremacy of Scripture. Existing publication venues demonstrate how rarely biblical scholars and systematic theologians trespass into each other's fields. Synthetic treatments of biblical theology garner publication in monograph series for biblical studies or evangelical biblical theology. A notable example is a companion series from IVP Academic, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*. Many of its volumes have theological significance, yet most are written by biblical

scholars. Meanwhile, historical retrievals of theological figures garner publication in monograph series for historical and systematic theology. For instance, there have been entire series devoted to figures such as Karl Barth or the patristic era, and even series named for systematic theology tend to contain figure-oriented monographs.

The reason for providing an alternative publication venue is not to denigrate these valuable enterprises. Instead, the rationale for encouraging constructively evangelical projects is twofold and practical: The church needs such projects, and they form the theologians undertaking them. The church needs such projects, both addressing new challenges for her life in the world (such as contemporary political theology) and retrieving neglected concepts (such as the classic doctrine of God) in fresh ways. The church also needs her theologians not merely to develop detailed intellectual skills but also ultimately to wrestle with the whole counsel of God in the Scriptures.

2. We aim to promote **evangelical** contributions, neither retreating from broader dialogue into a narrow version of this identity on the one hand, nor running away from the biblical preoccupation of our heritage on the other hand.

In our initial volume, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*, we articulate this pursuit of evangelical renewal. We take up the well-known metaphor of mere Christianity as a hallway, with particular church traditions as the rooms in a house. Many people believe that the evangelical hallway is crumbling, an impression that current events only exacerbate. Our inspection highlights a few fragmenting factors such as more robust academic engagement, increased awareness of the Great Christian Tradition and the variety of evangelical subtraditions, interest in global Christianity, and interfaces with emergent Christianity and culture. Looking more deeply, we find historical-theological debates about the very definition of *evangelical* and whether it reflects—still, or ever—a shared gospel, a shared doctrine of God, and a theological method that can operationalize our shared commitment to Scripture's authority.

In response, prompted by James 1:22-25, our proposal develops the metaphor of a mirror for clarifying evangelical theology's relation to Scripture. The reality behind the mirror is the gospel of God and the God

of the gospel: what is revealed in Christ. In disputes about whether to focus on a center or boundaries, it may seem as if evangelicalism has no doctrinal core. But we propose treating what is revealed in Christ—the triune God and the cross of Christ, viewed in the mirror of Scripture—as an evangelical anchor, a center with a certain range of motion. Still, it may seem as if evangelicalism has no hermeneutical coherence, as if interpretive anarchy nullifies biblical authority. But we propose treating Scripture as *canonical testimony*, a God-given mirror of truth that enables the church to reflect the wisdom that is in Christ. The holistic and contextual character of such wisdom gives theology a dialogic character, which requires an evangelical account of the church’s catholicity. We need the wisdom to know the difference between church-destroying heresy, church-dividing disagreements that still permit evangelical fellowship, and intrachurch differences that require mutual admonition as well as forbearance.

Volumes in the SCDS series will not necessarily reflect the views of any particular editor, advisory board member, or the publisher—not even concerning “evangelical” boundaries. Volumes may approach perceived boundaries if their excellent engagement with Scripture deserves a hearing. But we are not seeking reform for reform’s sake; we are more likely to publish volumes containing new explorations or presentations of traditional positions than radically revisionist proposals. Valuing the historic evangelical commitment to a deeply scriptural theology, we often find that perceived boundaries are appropriate—reflecting positions’ biblical plausibility or lack thereof.

3. We seek fresh understanding of Christian doctrine **through creatively faithful engagement with Scripture**. To some fellow evangelicals and interested others today, we commend the classic evangelical commitment of *engaging Scripture*. To other fellow evangelicals today, we commend a contemporary aim to engage Scripture with *creative fidelity*. The church is to be always reforming—but always reforming according to the Word of God.

It is possible to acknowledge *sola Scriptura* in principle—Scripture as the final authority, the norming norm—without treating Scripture as theology’s

projects shaped primarily by (1) hermeneutics, (2) integrative biblical theology, (3) stewardship of the Great Tradition, (4) church dogmatics, (5) intellectual history, (6) analytic theism, (7) living witness, and (8) healing resistance. While some of these scholarly shapes probably fit the present series better than others, all of them reflect practices that can help evangelical theologians to make more faithfully biblical judgments and to generate more creatively constructive scholarship.

The volumes in the SCDS series will therefore reflect quite varied approaches. They will be similar in engaging one or more biblical texts as a key aspect of their contributions while going beyond exegetical recital or descriptive biblical theology, yet those biblical contributions themselves will be manifold.

5. We promote scriptural engagement **in dialogue with catholic tradition(s)**. A periodic evangelical weakness is relative lack of interest in the church's shared creedal heritage, in churches' particular confessions, and more generally in the history of dogmatic reflection. Beyond existing efforts to enhance understanding of themes and corpora in biblical theology, then, we hope to foster engagement with Scripture that bears on and learns from loci, themes, or crucial questions in classic dogmatics and contemporary systematic theology.

Series authors and editors will reflect several church affiliations and doctrinal backgrounds. Our goal is that such commitments would play a productive but not decisive hermeneutical role. Series volumes may focus on more generically evangelical approaches, or they may operate from within a particular tradition while engaging internal challenges or external objections.

We hope that both the diversity of our contributor list and the catholic engagement of our projects will continually expand. As important as those contextual factors are, though, these are most fundamentally studies in Christian *doctrine* and *Scripture*. Our goal is to promote and to publish constructive evangelical projects that study Scripture with creative fidelity and thereby offer fresh understanding of Christian doctrine. Various contexts and perspectives can help us study Scripture in that lively way, but they must remain secondary to theology's primary source and soul.

We do not study the mirror of Scripture for its own sake. Finding all the treasures of wisdom in Christ to be reflected there with the help of Christian doctrine, we come to know God and ourselves more truly. Thus encountering God's perfect instruction, we find the true freedom that is ours in the gospel, and we joyfully commend it to others through our own ministry of Scripture's teaching.



## Tokens of Safety

*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”?*

COLOSSIANS 2:20-21

**O**N A TRIP SEVERAL years ago, my wife, Kaci, and I shuffled our three small children out to the front porch of a restaurant to find a table and wait for our food. Once the children were settled, I ran a quick errand a couple blocks away and returned to find them sitting just where I left them. Something was wrong, though. The kids were subdued, and Kaci looked like she had something she needed to say.

After I had left, our oldest son, Samuel—a preschooler at the time—said he needed to go to the bathroom. Kaci could not haul all three children and our bags to the bathroom by herself, so she told him to wait until I got back. Soon he needed to go “really bad,” though, so she told him to go inside and ask to use the bathroom. He returned and said it was around back on the outside of the building. They waited for me again, but the situation only got worse. After some deliberation with herself, she finally told him to go use the bathroom and then come right back. He ran off in search of relief, and she sat waiting with the younger two. The seconds ticked by. A minute or two ticked by. She wondered how long it had been. She told herself not to worry. At any moment he would come back, or I would pull up. More time passed. He did not come. I still did not come. Suddenly, a sense of urgency came over her. It had been too long. She picked up the toddler, grabbed the

stroller, abandoned the belongings, and made her way to the back of the building. As she got closer, she thought she could hear noises. Her pace quickened. When she rounded the corner, the noises became louder and distinct. He was yelling, pounding, and crying for help from inside the bathroom. Horrible thoughts flooded her mind as she raced to the door.

To her great relief he was unharmed and alone in the bathroom. He was yelling and pounding because the door was stuck, and he could not get out. He was sitting safely next to me as she recounted the story, but horrible thoughts flooded my mind as well when I heard that he had been calling for help from inside the bathroom. My fists clenched. For my wife in the moment and for me as I heard about it, we were briefly but powerfully seized by the fear of what our child's cries might have meant. The event was troubling, not so much because of what happened, but because of what could have been happening during those tense moments of separation.

Humanity is affected by the harm that befalls it. That is obvious. Humanity is also affected by the harm that could befall it, and that is fascinating. When harm comes—when a child has a complicated birth or falls off a bike, when a woman is assaulted or diagnosed with cancer, when a worker loses a finger or crashes heavy equipment—life is disrupted. Things no longer fit together as they should. Damaged bodies need healing, damaged belongings need fixing, and damaged hearts need mending. Areas of life once navigated with ease are now avoided or tiptoed through. Perhaps there is a hole where there used to be wholeness, fear where there used to be innocence, or regret where there used to be contentment. Conversely, perhaps there is strength where there used to be weakness, hope where there used to be fear, or courage where there used to be cowardice.

When harm could come—when parents imagine a complicated birth or a child almost falls off a bike, when a woman hears of an assault or a worker narrowly avoids an accident, when students learn of another school shooting or citizens look at the likelihood of war—life is also disrupted. Anxieties and suspicions rise. Dangerous people and places are avoided. Risks are assessed and managed. Warnings are given. Precautions are taken. Fates are cursed, and guardian angels are invoked. We try to anticipate all the various ways that harm could come, and we look back at all the ways that it could have come, but we do not know with certainty when or how it will in fact befall

us. In the face of such uncertainty, it is not harm itself but the possibility and proximity of harm that affect our lives.

### **SIGNS AND SYMBOLS**

The world we inhabit is scattered with tokens of safety. These tokens—the warnings, notices, slogans, and labels that have been so thoroughly incorporated into the modern landscape—exert authority over our lives, mediating our interactions with each other and the world around us. The tokens of safety function as signs. They point to dangers and give instruction on how to avoid them. They remind pedestrians to watch out for traffic, alert consumers to the dangers of devices, and tell children how play equipment is to be used. When you start your car, little lights and bells remind you to buckle up. When you plug in a new appliance, a small tag advises you on the dangers of electrocution. The plastic that the appliance was wrapped in advises you that it can suffocate children and pets. When passengers check in at airports, kindly voices prohibit them from leaving their baggage unattended and direct their hands to the railings on escalators. Signs at jobsite entrances show workers what protective equipment to wear. When you board a train, grab a cart at the grocery store, or engage in any number of everyday activities, you are encountered by such tokens of safety. They fill the spaces, surfaces, and silences of our world with a steady stream of reminders that while we may want summers to be fun, journeys to be successful, and encounters with strangers to be enjoyable, we also want them to be safe.

The tokens of safety also function as symbols. Beyond their explicit messages, they carry implicit meanings. They connect their observers to fundamental ideas and beliefs about the very nature of safety. As symbols, the tokens of safety are echoes of a deeper power, reminders of an underlying authority on which a morality of safety has been built. The importance of these tokens lies not merely in what they claim or demand regarding the practicalities of safety but in their very presence, what they assume and imply concerning humanity and its relationship to the dangers of this world. They point to the concerns and habits of safety, but also to the beliefs that legitimize those concerns and the powers supposed to make those habits effectual.

The tokens of safety draw attention to the enigmatic relationship we have with danger, and then offer ways out. They shape the way we think about safety. They set the terms of the discussion, the rules of engagement, and the boundaries of the field in advance. They tell us what safety is, where it is located, and how to pursue it. These tokens are not alien to the modern world, though, as if they were being imposed from elsewhere. They are themselves fruits of our age, and while they are typically produced and plastered about by authorities, institutions, and bureaucracies, each of us bears responsibility for the ways that we interact with them.

There are probably many people who do not give much thought to the tokens of safety. Such people just look past them or through them. The tokens are part of the scenery, nothing more than background noise in a busy world, little annoyances to ignore, get around, or placate in order to get on to better things. Such an attitude would have been difficult to maintain during the Covid-19 related mandates and restrictions of 2020 and 2021. Signs, barriers, masks, and enforcements sprung up everywhere. Participation was not optional. The tokens related to that virus reduced significantly in the years since, but the events surrounding them brought to light an enduring feature of the modern tokens of safety: they are intended, by those who post them, to be given their proper due. Safety is meant to be the business of everyone.

When people do give thought to the tokens of safety, they often acknowledge and submit to them simply as signs. They do so without much deliberation or critical reflection, being motivated by a basic desire for safety, a basic fear of danger. The announcement says to stay clear of the closing train doors, so they take a step. The arrows indicate a sharp curve in the road ahead, so they slow down. The sign says masks are required to slow the spread of the disease, so they put them on.

There are times, though, when people engage with the tokens of safety as more than signs, more than basic sources of information or instruction for navigating dangers in this world. The tokens, and people's responses to them, take on symbolic significance. Sometimes, when the warning comes on about the train doors, a commuter who is already clear can be seen taking an additional and emphatic step. Sometimes a safety officer has more regard for his authority than the well-being of his workers. Sometimes violating the

demands of these tokens is an act of selfish obstinance. At other times, it is a triumph of sanity and wisdom. Sometimes submission to the tokens of safety is an exercise in superstition. At other times, it is a calculated means of self-justification.

A utility worker parked his truck, half on the shoulder, half in the lane, of a rural highway, in order to perform repairs during an ice storm. On his side of the road were a ditch, utility poles, and a field. On the other side, a row of houses. He had stopped his truck in a blind spot, at the crest of a hill. Video footage showed the chaos that followed. Cars were sliding one way, hitting the ditch. They were sliding the other way, through front yards. Still more were spinning, skidding, and crashing into each other. He was in the wrong place. He was being dangerous. But when motorists pleaded with him to move, he coldly explained that he was acting in accordance with policy. His yellow warning lights were on, and he had put up hazard signals at the required distances. He insisted that if other people were harmed, it was their fault, not his.

I was at a campground with family and friends once, and on the morning of our departure, a park ranger came by and reminded me that the fire needed to be put out. I thanked him and he started to leave, but then hesitated, returned with a shovel, and started putting the dying embers out himself. After the fire was extinguished, after all the embers had been repeatedly dug up and smothered, he continued stabbing and stirring the ash and dirt for an astonishingly long time. People often think a fire is out when the embers are still hot underneath. One small spark can set an entire forest ablaze. The signs say to put fires out—dead out. It is better to go beyond that point than to stop short of it. I thought about all these things as he stirred and talked. The fire was far past death, but he continued on. As he did, his actions changed from the focused movements of a man accomplishing a task to the exaggerated gestures of a man proving a point. His fire-safety speech had become repetitive and tired, and his attitude toward us had become rude and condescending. When he finally gave his shovel a rest, he had long since stopped putting out a fire.

My daughter Annie spent the first half of one of her school years sitting in classrooms and walking down hallways with crowds of other middle schoolers who were all required to wear masks in order to “stop the spread

of Covid.” The masks came off frequently. They regularly sat below the nose or sagged beneath the chin. Students spent maskless hours together after school. If there was any chance that those masks could have reduced the spread of a respiratory virus, the behaviors of the children ensured they would do no such thing. Once the school district could no longer compel masks, Annie stopped wearing one. She showed up to one of her classes. It was deep winter. The teacher opened the windows, made any maskless students sit under them, and told the class to start bringing winter coats if they got cold. The actual spread of the virus in that teacher’s classroom over the previous months, the question of how much harm it may have caused, the level of effectiveness of masks in that school, as well as the goodness of being kind to others—all those things were overwhelmed by this teacher’s zeal for one particular token of safety.

Perhaps you disagree with my characterizations of these different scenarios. An interesting feature of conversations about safety is the ease with which they can turn in one direction or another, take on one mood or another. You may find yourself in a conversation in which safety is looked on as an enemy. It is a hindrance, a nuisance, an object of ridicule and contempt. The long procession through airport security checkpoints is intrusive, demeaning, and overwrought, an elaborate inconvenience for millions of travelers that should be replaced with focused, investigative security work. There is so much concern about the safety of children that they grow up not knowing the adventure of exploring the world around them, never allowed to take risks, never growing through pain and failure, never learning how to get out of a tough situation or find their way home after getting lost. The long-winded script read by passionless attendants while handing rental equipment over to customers is infantile and clearly given to satisfy the wishes of lawyers, not to aid in the use of the equipment. When a mother, who is recognized and well-known, comes to pick up her child from the church nursery, but is not allowed to because she cannot find the voucher given at check-in, the whole situation feels just a bit ridiculous. These types of conversations draw attention to the numerous ways that our efforts to keep ourselves alive suck the life out of us, the ways that safety measures often turn out to be unnecessary, ineffective, and even harmful.

Other conversations focus on the preciousness and value of what is at stake, the magnitude of the tragedy if a worst-case-scenario became a reality, the small price of safety in contrast to the great cost of its neglect, and the regularity with which it is effective. Most car trips end well, without a crash or the need for seatbelts, but it is good to buckle them every time because you never know when one of those trips will be cut short by an accident. Children naturally like to run around and explore, but safeguards need to be in place because they are unaware of the dangers they may face and because of how devastating it would be if something horrible, no matter how small the chance, happened to one of them. The procedures in the church nursery may seem redundant and may cause inconveniences at times, but how would a church body recover if a child was somehow taken? Modern industrial jobsites are complex and dangerous. Employers have a responsibility to adequately train their employees on the dangers and protocols of the jobsite and to make sure they are aware of the hazards that surround them.

I was talking recently with another father about safety, and the conversation went in both of these directions. He was involved with safety compliance at nuclear power plants, so he was familiar with both the devastation that could come if things went wrong and the aggravations that can accompany bureaucratic redundancies. We talked about our desires for our children to be strong, skillful, and competent. We talked about the various ways that our society, supposedly for the welfare of children, sabotages their attainment of these virtues. As we discussed the benefits that could come with giving children additional freedoms, he told me about a news story he had just heard in which a little girl disappeared from a park while her parents and friends were nearby. Her bike was found on the path, but she was gone. What if you gave your child some additional freedom, the chance to ride off a little ways by herself, and then something like this happened? Our conversation faltered. She was thankfully found a couple days later, but we did not know that at the time. It could have turned out differently. Perhaps he and I had been too cavalier in our earlier pronouncements. Perhaps it is just not worth it to allow your child to be alone in a park. But then we remembered all of the children in all of the parks, and all of the times that they safely play and roam and explore. The tokens of safety point

to mundane matters of life, yet those matters evoke potent reactions and confound simplistic reasoning.

### **WHY A THEOLOGY OF SAFETY**

Safety has a prominent place in our lives, but we often accept its influence uncritically. This is so in everyday activities—travel, business, industry, education—but also in the life and mission of the church. Christ calls his followers to die to themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. He calls his church to walk in submission to his Word, make disciples of all nations, care for the least of these, and demonstrate love among its members and toward outsiders. The church has many dangers to navigate as it does these things. In fact, navigating the dangers of this world in a way that is faithful, hopeful, and honoring to God is itself one of the things the church is called to do.

The church has long known that it would face danger and harm as it fulfilled its mission. Jesus said so. Persecutions, tribulations, and martyrdom come from without; attacks, compromises, and betrayals from within. Amid such threats, though, there are missionaries to be sent to foreign lands, churches to be planted in new cities, and aid to be brought to areas of poverty and disaster. There are the vulnerable, sick, and weak to be cared for. There is malice and exploitation to be rooted out, times when those who ought to keep others safe are themselves dangerous, manipulative, and abusive. There are also youth events that need supervision, congregants with food allergies who need to be served the Lord's Supper, and church vans that need maintenance. All for the sake of Christ.

When I was a youth pastor in Arizona, I canceled a week-long mission trip to Mexico because of concerns within the church about travel warnings related to drug violence in Mexico. The small town where we were planning to serve was peaceful and calm, but we still decided not to go. Instead, I put together a last-minute trip to Los Angeles. While we were there, we served at a rescue mission surrounded by drug use, theft, drunkenness, and prostitution. We walked through neighborhoods rife with drug distribution and violence. We were much closer to a variety of dangers than we would have been in Mexico. The trip to Los Angeles turned out very well, and I still chuckle at the irony of it all, but as I look back, I wish I had been better



prepared to work through that decision and the concerns involved. When Covid-19 hit, many churches were similarly ill-equipped, and as anyone involved in the life and mission of the church knows, other scenarios like these will arise and demand responses from us.

This world is filled with manmade rules and regulations that have “an appearance of wisdom” but offer no help in “stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23). A person’s efforts to procure safety are not necessarily indulgences of the flesh, but the tokens of safety, with their strong warnings and clear imperatives, are often invitations for the flesh to indulge itself, while also justifying the indulgence. They appear to be the opposite. They appear to offer opportunities for caution, discipline, and self-control: “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (Col 2:21). But the flesh, that residue of corruption, pride, and godlessness that abides in each of us, feeds on acute fears and vague worries, ascetic rigors and easy promises. It does not want to be bound to Christ or nourished by him, so it is held captive by “the elemental spirits of the world” (Col 2:20)—those dark powers that leverage the basic human desire for safety against the weakness of the flesh. The flesh is unsound and treacherous. The flesh compromises. It sells its birthright for a bowl of fleeting comfort. It does not wait. It does not trust. It does not hope. It is not a reliable guide to follow. Yet, we repeatedly listen to it and feed it in our pursuits of safety.

Therefore, the church would benefit from a clear understanding of what Scripture teaches about safety, danger, risk, and security and from firm convictions about how to live, worship, gather, and serve while facing possibilities of harm with hope, joy, and thankfulness. There is a pressing need for clear theological reflection and courageous moral deliberation on safety. Toward those ends, I will seek to develop a Christian theology of safety. I want to look at the dangers that the tokens of safety signify, but more importantly, the ideas that they symbolize. I want to follow these tokens to the fundamental conceptions of safety that lie behind them and consider what is found in light of the lordship of Christ and the fatherly care of God. Our conversations about safety, as well as our thoughts, affections, decisions, and actions, are too often guided by fleshly insecurity and worldly boastfulness. They need to be tethered to the Word of God.

Safety has to do with humanity's condition in this world, its capacities, limitations, strengths, and frailties in a world of splendor and danger, a world that both sustains and destroys life. God has endowed humanity with creaturely capacities effective in the avoidance of harm. Humankind is given dominion over creation. It can anticipate the future and shape the surrounding world. But there are limitations. The future is neither entirely clear nor entirely opaque. The world is neither entirely controllable nor entirely chaotic. Sin strains humanity's relationship with the world. Creation is a means of God's blessings but also of his judgments. Sin also distorts humanity's perception of its condition and standing in this world. John Calvin has famously said that true wisdom "consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."<sup>1</sup> To this may be added the hope that true wisdom, as bestowed through God's redemptive work in Christ, would also lead to the knowledge of creation not only as the theater of God's glory, but also as the arena of human life. For it is here, in this world, between the anticipated and actual future, between intention and result, that attempts are made to navigate a favorable path through the dangers that confront us.

Safety is a legitimate desire, but it is pursued on ground that has been cursed by God. Sometimes we can avoid harm. Sometimes it overwhelms us. Sometimes small dangers are greatly feared while great dangers are carelessly ignored. Sometimes complex dangers are easily avoided while simple dangers cause confusion and harm. The legitimate desire for safety as a creational good often becomes an idolatrous desire for safety as an ultimate good. Therefore, safety's relative worth must be viewed in comparison to the supreme value of walking with Christ, and humanity's sinful tendency to misjudge its relationship with danger must be acknowledged. Safety in this world must be considered in its proper place, in right relation to other good things, as well as to dangers that are of a spiritual and eternal nature.

Our world is filled with tokens of safety. It is also filled with reminders of all that could go wrong, all the areas of life where threats press in on us and fears rise up within us. By far, the most common question other Christians have asked me regarding safety has been whether we should be safe or trust God: "Should I keep walking my daughter to school or let her walk alone

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), I.1.1, p. 35.

and trust God to protect her?"; "Do we really need all these provisions before we begin? Shouldn't we move forward and trust God to supply?"; "I know I should trust God to take care of my husband when he's away, but is it ok that I feel better when I can see where he is?"; "When should I just have faith, and when should I be wise?"

The problem with these questions is that having faith and being wise are not opposites. Neither are being safe and trusting God, nor being in danger and trusting God. You can trust God when you walk your daughter to school, and you can trust him when you send her out the door on her own. You can trust God when he protects you, and you can trust him when he does not. You can trust him when he gives, and when he takes away. Seeking for safety in conformance to the pattern of this world, as a means of indulging the flesh, or as an exercise in worry—those are the opposite of trusting God. But if we trust him whole-heartedly, if we place our lives in his hands, come what may, if we remember that he has seated us with Christ in the heavenly places, then we would find much clarity, simplicity, and freedom in our use of the things he provides for our protection and security. We will not see each situation with perfect clarity, and there may be more than one acceptable way to handle any given situation. There may also be times when danger and harm are unavoidable. Roughly speaking, though, there are instances in which we ought to make use of the means of safety that God provides, other instances in which we are free to use or not use means of safety, and some instances in which we ought to let go of the means of safety for the sake of Christ and the work he calls us to do. However we handle the dangers that we face, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom 14:5), and whatever we do as we encounter danger in this world should be done with thankfulness to God.

As I develop a theological account of safety, I will look into some historical questions: How did safety become so pervasive in the late-modern world? Why is it pursued in the ways that it is pursued? I will also look into some ethical questions: How should the church engage with the world's pursuit of safety? To what extent should the church affirm, encourage, and participate in this pursuit? To what extent does Christ reshape the church's understanding of safety and how it is pursued?

The above questions are raised, and their answers will be developed against the backdrop of the industrialized, modernized world. Yet, this theology of safety is further motivated and shaped by Christianity's answers to questions concerning the nature of human existence in God's creation. Life in this world is shaped by God's initial work of creation and humanity's subsequent fall, as well as God's work of redemption in Christ and its coming consummation. Theological reflection on humanity's relationship to the dangers of this world harkens back to the lost safety of Eden and points forward to the unshakable safety of the new creation, but it also draws attention to safety's present tenuousness.

Questions about why safety has become so important and why it is pursued in particular ways are answered, in part, by paying attention to the reasons, arguments, and justifications given by those involved in the pursuit. Therefore, I will interact with works on safety, risk, and related topics from various fields of study. Some of these sources offer perceptive critiques of late-modern humanity's pursuit of safety. Their overall arguments are inadequate, though, inasmuch as they attempt to understand humanity and its condition in this world apart from any acknowledgment of God, apart from any recognition that this world is his creation or that Christ is its Lord.

In recent years, a number of theologians have used risk as a central idea in their understanding of God.<sup>2</sup> These theologians typically reject the teachings that God fully knows the future or that he established a definite course for the world to follow. Instead, they say that God took a risk in creating the world, opening himself up to both intimacy and suffering. A risk-taking view of God then serves as a basis for understanding human risk. The future is not certain for God, so it is not certain for us either. We should be hopeful, though, and open ourselves up to risk because of the blessings that may come, even through suffering and wounds. A theology of safety is located at the intersection of the doctrines of humanity, creation, and God.

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<sup>2</sup>Representative works include Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking," *Zygon* 38 (2003): 355-76; John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); and Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994). See Mikkel Gabriel Christoffersen, "Living with Risk and Danger: Studies in Interdisciplinary Systematic Theology" (PhD diss., Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2017), 15, who lists Niels Gregersen, John Sanders, William Vanstone, Günter Thomas, Sharon Welch, and Karen Baker Fletcher among these "theologians of risk."

Why are human bodies so vulnerable to external forces? To what extent can humanity anticipate and shape the future? Why has God placed humanity, as such creatures, in such a world? Does he care about the dangers we face? Will he keep us safe? Answers to these types of questions will be sought, not by following the idea that God take risks, but with the confession that he rules supremely over all things. I will approach these doctrines from a broadly Reformed perspective, grounded in classical doctrines of God and divine providence, along with the affirmation that he is not vulnerable to but sovereign over the dangers of this world: “Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? ‘It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save’” (Is 63:1).

When reading the Bible in order to develop a theology of safety, a number of passages stand out because they address practical matters of safety. There are laws about ox goings, infectious diseases, accidental deaths, and fall protection (Ex 21:28-32; Lev 13; Deut 19:4-6, 22:8). There are numerous admonitions to care for others in dangerous situations (e.g., Deut 24:21, Eph 4:28, Jas 1:27). Scripture has much more to say about safety, though, because it addresses fundamental themes regarding humanity and its standing before God in this world. Therefore, I will engage with passages that address matters of safety directly, as well as many that address these key theological themes. The dogmatic content of the Christian faith should shape the church’s understanding of safety. Throughout this work, then, I appeal to Scripture as the authoritative revelation of humanity’s condition in this world before God and of Christ’s headship over all things. In other words, the Bible speaks to the matter today, and what it says is relevant and authoritative to all who desire safety in this world.

### **SIGNPOSTS OF SAFETY IN THE MODERN LANDSCAPE**

The tokens of safety are signposts. They point to a way forward in the pursuit of safety, and they point to the ideas and assumptions at the heart of that pursuit. Throughout this work, I will draw out those ideas and assumptions in order to consider how Christians should relate to the world’s pursuit of safety. Two prominent features of safety today are its modernized form and elevated status. I will describe these features in the next chapter, the second

half of part one. The concepts of risk and safety have become quite prevalent in our world today. They are used in all sorts of situations and for thinking about all sorts of things. As I describe the current form and status of safety, I will set the focus of this study on physical safety, while affirming its relevance for wider conceptions of safety, risk, security, and danger.

### **SOURCES OF DANGER THROUGH THE AGES**

Safety is everywhere in our world. That is easy to see. But since safety is so prevalent, it is difficult to evaluate. It is hard to see the unique characteristics of safety today. In part two, in order to gain a fresh perspective on something that surrounds us every day, I will trace the historical development of the concept of risk through its premodern, early modern, and late-modern phases. The trajectory of this development begins with premodern humanity viewing the gods or other spiritual powers as the primary sources of danger, then moves to early modern humanity viewing nature as the primary source of danger, and concludes with late-modern humanity viewing itself as the primary source of danger. I will follow this story about the sources of danger through the ages, offering historical and theological criticisms along the way. The overall shape of this story is helpful in understanding how people today conceive of safety, but its fundamental flaw is that it takes itself to be a story of progress, getting closer and closer to the true essence of risk, instead of recognizing that throughout all of history humankind is in danger because of its estrangement from God and therefore from all three of these sources—*itself*, natural powers, and spiritual forces.

### **AVOIDING HARM IN A FALLEN WORLD**

A basic image used in Scripture to describe human existence in this world, especially in its inescapably ethical quality, is that of a path traveled: “You shall walk after the LORD your God” (Deut 13:4); “Walk in the way of insight” (Prov 9:6); “Follow me” (Mt 9:9). When life is conceived in this way, time, the world, and the mobility of the one traveling present themselves as its three essential ingredients. Time provides a *when* for human existence. Life moves forward as the future opens up and the past closes in. The world provides a *where* for human existence. Life moves through creation, in dynamic relation to other people, creatures, and things. The *who* of human

existence is given in the action and agency of the one traveling. Life moves forward in conjunction with the movements of the one who is walking.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these three ingredients—time, creation, and action—provide a helpful recipe for theological engagement with safety. In the modern world, safety is pursued probabilistically in relation to time, technologically in relation to creation, and procedurally in relation to action.

Therefore, in part three, I will engage with the probabilistic, technological, and procedural tools of contemporary safety. These tools reflect humanity's God-given capacities to anticipate the future, shape the material world, and act purposefully, but those capacities, when not submitted to the lordship of Christ, become presumptuous overextensions of humanity's proper place in this world. Humanity relies on probabilistic predictions, but the future is seen rightly in light of the promises of God. As the ant in Proverbs 6:6-11 and the ravens and lilies in Luke 12:22-31 show, Christ calls his church to engage with the uncertainties of the future through faithful preparation apart from fruitless anxiety.

Technology is a form of power, a way to order the world. Dangers are anticipated probabilistically and then controlled technologically. A canonical study of the biblical phrase "work of one's hands" will contrast creation as the work of God's hands with technological devices and idols as the works of human hands. In the late-modern world, humanity's engagement with the material world is rarely explicit idolatry but it is frequently idolatrous. Humanity orders creation technologically in pursuit of safety, but it often does so without acknowledging that this world, in both its original creation and coming renewal, is ordered by Christ.

Probabilistic predictions and technological manipulations work best when related human behaviors are controlled and consistent.<sup>4</sup> Proceduralism seeks to guide human action down predetermined paths by anticipating problems and making decisions beforehand. Such an approach to

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<sup>3</sup>These components are featured in the title and content of Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology, Volume 1, An Induction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013). O'Donovan begins by asking what "practical reasoning" can tell us "of God, who stands behind and before our agency, and of our position in his world and time" (1). He later says that practical reasoning answers these questions as it "looks for a word that makes attention to the world intelligible, a word that will maintain the coherence and intelligence of the world as it finds its way through it, a word of God" (12).

<sup>4</sup>Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 72.

human action, as employed in the contemporary pursuit of safety, is limited by its inability to anticipate all dangers, its own susceptibility to accidents, and its reluctance to extend forgiveness. In contrast, the Mosaic law contains both instruction to avoid inadvertent harm and means of forgiveness when it happens, while Ecclesiastes 10:8-11 points to the advantage that wisdom affords in humanity's engagement with dangerous activities.

### **LIVING AND DYING UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST**

The arguments developed in part three on how God's people should engage with the world's pursuit of safety are based implicitly on the theme of discipleship. I will develop that theme in part four. Into a world where safety holds such an elevated status, the words of Christ echo loudly: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mk 8:35). These words follow his call to discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34). The path that Christ calls us to navigate through this world full of dangers is the one that follows him to the cross, but with the hope of life on the other side.

I will explore what it means to subject the demands of safety to the lordship of Christ. His teachings on discipleship provide a lens on the Christian life that highlights how all Christians should face today in light of his present and coming reign. When the seemingly radical commands of Christ are contrasted with the seemingly reasonable demands of safety, it turns out that Christ, not safety, guides us on a path of prudence and wisdom. The contemporary pursuit of safety is more of a defensive attempt to avoid harm than an active effort to pursue life. Discipleship is a pursuit of life by way of the cross. Christ calls his disciples to follow him in "delivering up" their lives, a key concept in the New Testament that will be explored in detail. Christ then gives wholeness, freedom, and life through fellowship with himself.

I will conclude by considering the proper place that safety should have in our lives. After the symbols of safety have been demystified, after the light of the Word of God has shone on the deeper powers behind the tokens of safety, the weaknesses of the world's pursuit of safety are laid bare. It lacks the conceptual capacity to acknowledge the spiritual realities of our world,



it fails to recognize the constancy of humanity's vulnerabilities in this age, and it is thwarted by its own inherent limitations. Jesus is a more trustworthy guide through the dangers of this world.

Discipleship is a fitting theme for theological engagement with the pursuit of safety. Christ's juxtaposition of those who lose their lives with those who save them brings into sharp focus the ultimate futility of safety apart from him, while also presenting a clear path to life. He speaks of saving or losing one's life in relation to the physical condition of the body. He talks about suffering and death, denying oneself, and bearing one's cross. He speaks of rejection and shame. He speaks of gaining the whole world, whatever good things we may want in life. In so doing, he includes other aspects of safety along with the physical—social, relational, emotional, etc.—in the saving of one's life. But Christ contrasts all of this, all that can be gained or lost regarding the "things of man" with what can be gained regarding the "things of God": one's life and the vision of the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

Discipleship is also a fitting theme because of its comprehensiveness. The demands of contemporary safety lack any pretense of modesty. They meet us in our inward thoughts and desires. They meet us in our hopes and anxieties, in our plans, memories, and intentions. They meet us in our outward behaviors, conversations, and interactions with others, in the structures, traditions, systems, and powers of this world. The pursuit of safety is a total pursuit, a way of life, a state of mind. But however extensive the pursuit of safety may be, however far its demands may reach, the call of Jesus is deeper and wider. Discipleship encompasses all those areas of life. Christ claims lordship over each of them. His voice is present, confronting the demands of safety wherever they may be found, even to the point of death and beyond. Death sets a hard limit on the pursuit of safety. Death is the very thing that safety promises to help us avoid, but when it comes—and it does come—safety's weaknesses and limitations are exposed. Christ's call of discipleship extends unashamedly through the doorway of death. He promises victory over it, not merely its avoidance or delay.

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<sup>5</sup>The observations in this paragraph are based on Mk 8:31–9:1.

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