



Now That I'm a Christian

WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS

C. Michael Patton

“I wish this book was out when I first became a Christian! What we believe really matters, and this book covers many basic and necessary beliefs of the Christian faith in an easy-to-read format. It’s like sitting in a theology class, but one that brings life and you can understand what the teacher is teaching. There has been no more urgent time in history for us to be reading and learning the basic beliefs of the Christian faith. I encourage all Christians, especially those new to the faith, to not miss the joy and wonder of learning what is written in this book.”

Dan Kimball, Pastor, Vintage Faith Church; author,
They Like Jesus but Not the Church

“As a pastor I’m often confronted by new Christians with questions such as: “How do I get started? What should I read? How do I grow spiritually? Although I haven’t had good answers in the past, I do now. I’m sending them to Michael Patton’s excellent book. This is a gem! Eminently readable and experientially relevant, this is a book that addresses with brutal but always loving honesty the most pressing theological issues a new believer faces. In fact, you who are a bit older in the faith can also benefit from Michael’s insights. Highly recommended for Christians of all ages!”

Sam Storms, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“If you want to grow in your faith as a new Christian, or if you just need to get back to the long-neglected basics, Michael Patton will prove to be a wise guide. *Now That I’m a Christian* is not only practical and easy to follow; it is biblically balanced and theologically informed. What a ready resource to help churches, campus ministries, and individual spiritual mentors to train new believers in the faith!”

Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics,
Palm Beach Atlantic University; author, *Loving Wisdom: Christian
Philosophy of Religion*

“Rolled into this one volume is a guide to both right belief and right practice. Believers need a solid foundation that maps out the essentials for the Christian faith, as well as how to grow stronger and deeper in that faith. This work addresses both. Written in an introductory manner that is well-informed, witty, and fast-paced, readers will feel at home in the text even if they have not studied these things before. I recommend it with pleasure.”

Gary R. Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor & Chair,
Philosophy Dept, Liberty University

Now That I'm a Christian: What It Means to Follow Jesus

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Introduction

I can't wait to tell you about your new faith. I can't wait to tell you about Jesus, the Bible, prayer, and all the wonderful things we are going to cover in this book. You are a disciple of Christ, and I intend to give you a solid start that will ground you in the most important issues that have defined Christianity for the last two thousand years. You are a Christian. Welcome to the family.

What does it mean to be a *disciple*? That term may be foreign to you. But don't worry. You don't have to grow a beard or put on a robe. You may have heard of the twelve disciples of Christ. Well, being a disciple of Christ—being a Christian—is like that. To be a disciple means being a student of someone. But it is much more than that. In the time of Christ, when people were disciples of someone else, they placed themselves completely under that person's authority in both education and lifestyle. Their goal was to become exactly like their mentor. This is how the disciples were with Christ. They left everything and followed him. They went everywhere he went, did everything he did, and believed everything he believed (at least, they tried!). And, over two thousand years later, we have this same privilege. We, too, become disciples of Christ the moment we trust in him. I can't wait to take your hand on this journey.

You might be thinking, *can a book make me a disciple of Jesus?*

It would be naive to believe such a thought. Discipleship cannot be carried to completion through a book. Is it a waste of my time, therefore, to write a book such as this? No. You *should* read this book. I think you will soon find out why.

Jesus commanded all who would follow him to take up their cross and follow him. Discipleship is not something you do on the side. It is not a part-time job. It affects and infects every part of your being, everything that you do, and everything that you are. It is really difficult to be a Christian without being a disciple. Why would you want to be? When you bow the knee to Christ, you declare him to be God and Lord of the universe. This does not mean that you are always a *good* disciple or that you do everything right. This does not mean that we don't fall on our face over and over. I certainly do. It means that we are on a path following the eternal God. And this path beckons us to pick ourselves up every time we fall.

Christ told his disciples to “go therefore and make disciples . . . teaching them to observe” everything he had commanded (Matt. 28:19–20). This command has become so famous, it is better known today as “The Great Commission.” We will talk a lot about the Great Commission in the last chapter. But know this: Christ's command to follow him is more than a command; it is a wonderful privilege. It is a *great* privilege.

My aim is to point you in the right direction for a lifetime of following Christ. My prayer is for you to spend the rest of your life growing in your discipleship of Christ. When you attempt to do this on your own, however, Christ-following can be a dangerous and often confusing road. You can easily get sidetracked and lost. I will give you a basic road map that you can look back to time and time again to help find your way and reinvigorate your faith when it wanes.

NEED FOR DISCIPLESHIP

It's popular today to think that learning about God will stifle our passion for God. I've even heard people say, "I'd rather be led instead of read." While I understand what such people are concerned about, we need to be careful. Anyone passionate in any subject will seek to learn more and more about the subject. People who are passionate about wine become students of wine. They learn about the art of wine making, differing varieties in differing climates, soil nutrients, fermentation, barreling, pairing, and proper tasting techniques. They love the taste, but the taste is greatly enhanced by their knowledge. People who are passionate about NASCAR become students of NASCAR. They learn the history of certain racetracks, they will tell you about some of the great drivers from the past, and they'll gain knowledge about fuel conservation during a race, driver and fan safety, getting the most out of the tires, and driver g-forces. And don't get me started on football fans. You get the picture.

If you have trusted in Christ, your eternal destiny has been altered by a Savior who lived, died, and rose in your place. He invites you to trade your heavy burden in exchange for his light yoke. Your God is with you every day and is leading you safely to your eternal home. Yet so many people will go months, years, or even a lifetime without taking the initiative to grow as a learner.

LAYOUT OF THE BOOK

This book provides you with the foundations for discipleship. The first half of the book will focus on *orthodoxy*. The second half will cover *orthopraxy*.

For those who might suffer from terminology anxiety, *orthodoxy* simply means "straight teaching" or "worship." People

go to the *orthodontist* to get their teeth straightened. *Orthodoxy* is meant to straighten your doctrine! You can't act upon what you don't know. All of our obedience is based on a correct understanding of who God is and what he has done for us. Getting this foundation down will drive you, with great excitement, to the path of discipleship. You will say to yourself, "If Jesus has really done all of this for me, I can't wait to join him and become a colaborer for the truth he has revealed." It's like if you were to discover the cure for cancer. Wouldn't you tell everyone you know? The knowledge is foundational. But the response is what changes the world. You have discovered the cure for souls. You have discovered the love of God. It is much greater than the cure for cancer, and the disease that people are infected with, as we will see, is much more dangerous than cancer. Orthodoxy provides a foundation and a motivation for all that we do for God.

If you have been around churches, Christians, or religious conversations, the word *orthodoxy* might scare you. After all, which Christian orthodoxy are we talking about? Yours? Baptist's? Catholic's? Presbyterian's? Eastern Orthodox's? When I say *orthodoxy*, I am talking about "that which has been believed always, everywhere, and by all." This is called the Vincentian Canon, named for fifth-century writer St. Vincent of Lérins. It expresses the need for unity in doctrine. While there have indeed been many issues that Christians have disagreed about over the years, there are many more that have united us. For example, in chapter 3 we will talk about the need to believe in the Trinity, as expressed in this book. Christians of all times and of all places have agreed about the doctrine of the Trinity. It is an essential of orthodoxy. We will examine five such essential beliefs about which there is virtually no debate among

Protestants. However, when you get to the chapters on authority, man, and faith, you will see that there are a few issues that distinguish Protestants from Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. However, even with these topics, there is significant general agreement. For example, Protestants argue that justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*). Roman Catholics, on the other hand, do not believe that justification is by faith alone. Nevertheless, they would emphasize the absolute essentiality of faith and agree with my definition of what Christian faith is (more on this in chap. 5).

While *orthodoxy* refers to having correct thought or right beliefs, *orthopraxy* refers to right practice. In the second half of the book, we are going to discuss five practices that all Christians of all time have agreed about. From prayer to outreach, Christianity has been united in believing that these disciplines are essential for Christian discipleship.

Here are the topics that will be covered in each chapter:

Orthodoxy

- Bible
- Man
- God
- Christ
- Faith

Orthopraxy

- Prayer
- Study
- Church
- Suffering
- Mission

Introduction

Lord, I pray that these next ten chapters will deepen your servants' love and knowledge of you. You beckon us to grow in you as we live this life in the world you've created. May we be teachable and delight in the process of learning more about you so we can live more passionately and accurately for you.

Bible

When I was a kid, I would manipulate my parents. I would ask my mom if I could go over to my friend Wayne's house, only to be told that it was too late at night or that the family had other plans. Upon receiving the answer I did not want from Mom, I would seek the authority of Dad. "Dad, can I go over to Wayne's house?" "Sure," would come the response. Now my desire was covered. I could go over to Wayne's house with a clear conscience. Though two major authorities (Mom and Dad) clashed in my life, I felt free to obey the one whose answer I liked best.

As you can imagine, that kind of result did not happen often. In fact, the manipulation eventually came to a screeching halt. Problem: Mom and Dad talked! After a while, my dad's answers to such questions became depressingly rote: "Go ask your mom," or "What does your mom say?" Dad would not play the game. He would always punt to Mom. The authority became united with no conflicts. In essence, with this type of stuff, Mom was the final and only infallible authority!

Your Christian life is not so different. When we first become Christians, the biggest question is, now what? What

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should I expect? Where should I go? Who do I ask? What should I believe? What do I do? Who do I trust? Who has the final say? We look for sources of authority to guide and direct our lives, and we have all kinds of options (Moms and Dads, if you will). And you know what? These options will not always agree. So where do you go for authority in your Christian walk?

THE BIBLE

The first authority in our lives is the Bible. In Protestant circles we use the fancy Latin phrase *sola Scriptura*. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is the final and only infallible source of authority for our faith. We might say the Bible is the “ultimate authority” or the “eternal trump card” (for those who like to play cards). We will talk more about *sola Scriptura* shortly, but hang with me as I tell you a bit about the Bible.

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six ancient books. I am not sure that “books” is the best way to put it, but it will do for now. The Bible is made up of history, poetry, personal letters, community letters, genealogies (that sometimes seem endless!), short pithy statements of good advice, eternal laws, temporal laws, and biography. The oldest books of the Bible date from around 1,500 years before Christ. The last book dates to the end of the first century. No books have been added to the Bible since its completion, and Christians don't expect to ever have anything else added to it.

The books that make up the Christian Bible are called the *canon* of Scripture. (*Scripture* and *Bible* are often used interchangeably. They mean the same thing.) Protestant Christians hold to a sixty-six book canon (Catholics add a few to the Old Testament, called the *Deuterocanonical* books or the *Apocrypha*).

The Bible is divided into two *testaments* or *covenants*. The first testament is called the Old Testament. It deals with the general history of man, his creation by God, his fall into sin, and God's promise to fix what man, through sin, broke (we will talk more about that in the next chapter). The primary focus of the Old Testament is the nation of Israel. God gave the nation of Israel a promise through the father of the nation, Abraham. God said that, in his old age, Abraham would have a son, and one of his descendants would become a great blessing to the whole world. We later come to know this great blessing as the *Messiah* or *Redeemer* (i.e., the one who will fix everything). Though the Israelites did not know exactly what to look for, they waited anxiously for this Messiah. The second testament is called the New Testament. While the Old Testament covers thousands of years, the New Testament puts on the brakes and covers about seventy-five to one hundred years. Its primary focus is on the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. This Messiah is Jesus Christ, the very Son of God. How did God fix everything? Through sending his Son, God in the flesh, to take the punishment for the sins of God's people on a wooden cross. The New Testament is an account of this sacrifice and the implications that it should have on our lives.

Deep breath.

While the Bible is a story about what we are to believe concerning God, the fall, and the salvation of man, it is also a kind of instruction book on how to live. By both direct command and example, it teaches us what God's will is for our lives. The Bible is called "God's Word." This means that when it speaks, God speaks. We call this *inspiration*. While God is very involved in all of history (as we will see) and we should expect his movements through experiences in our lives, we should *not*

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expect to actually hear his literal voice or see his literal face. He speaks to us through his Word, the Bible.

Notice what Paul says concerning the Bible:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

The Bible equips us for *every* good work, not just some good works. It is given to make you a competent disciple. The Greek word for *inspired* literally means “God breathed.” Can you believe that? The Bible is the breath of God! Every word in the Scriptures is exactly what God wanted to write. However, God used over forty men from all walks of life—from fishermen to kings—to write his Word, and he did not sacrifice their personality or circumstances in the least. This is one of the great mysteries of Scripture.

Peter puts it this way: “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). In other words, as these men wrote the Scriptures, they were carried along by the Spirit as a boat is carried along by the wind. God used man by moving through their thoughts and words.

We will return to the authority of Scripture in a moment. But before we do, we need to look at four other sources that God uses to communicate truth.

REASON

God wants us to use our minds—and to use them well.

Let me get a little technical: Reason is the human capacity and inclination toward rational, logical, and analyti-

cal thought. For example, if I met a gentleman walking on crutches and wearing a hat that said “Ski Aspen,” I would probably draw the following conclusions. First, I would think that his leg was broken. Second, I would think he broke his leg while skiing. I would not need to have read a book to draw such conclusions. And I would not need to be really smart to do so. I would simply employ the rational way of thinking that we are all born with. If someone has a cast on his leg, this normally means his leg is broken. If his leg is broken, there is a cause for its breaking (i.e., it did not break on its own). This is not rocket science.

In the Christian life, God has given you the ability to think, reason, and draw conclusions. Your abilities in this area are by no means perfect, but they are abilities nonetheless. God created you with a mind to think for a reason. He wants you to be reasonable! Reason or rationality is another authority in your life and a valid source for information about God. It is not a Christian virtue to go around believing things that don’t make sense. You are not supposed to check your brains at the door once you become a Christian. God expects you to think and to think well.

Here’s another illustration. When the Israelites were worshipping gods that they made out of the wood from trees, using half the wood for idols and the other half for their fire, God chastises them for their irrationality. Translation: *they were not thinking well.*

No one considers [stops to think], nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” (Isa. 44:19)

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It was irrational for the Israelites to worship blocks of wood, and God calls them on this. God wants and expects you to use your brain.

But reason is not perfect. It can go bad. We can misuse it or misinterpret the data. More often than not, we lack data because we don't have access to all the information and make assumptions. For example, I think I could reasonably conclude that the gentleman in the cast broke his leg while skiing. But what if I was missing some information or misinterpreting what I saw? What if the leg was not broken? What if it was a torn ACL from a car accident? What if the hat was the man's brother's, and he had not been to Aspen at all? All of these things are possible and demonstrate the limits of reason. Only those with all the information are able to draw perfectly sound conclusions. And people, being limited, don't normally have all the information.

The Bible, on the other hand, being the Word of God, is never lacking in perspective. Everything it speaks about, it does so with complete truthfulness and accuracy.

EXPERIENCE

God wants to meet you in your experience. As a disciple, you can see God's hand in the agency of life. But be careful!

The best way to explain experience is to describe it as information that comes through direct encounter, participation, or observation. As a Christian, you should expect to encounter God in your life. While the Bible plainly says that you will not see him with your eyes (1 Pet. 1:8), this does not mean that he is not active. Every day you are to pray for direction and guidance. You might pray for "open doors" and "closed doors." For example, the Bible may tell you nothing beyond general

stewardship principles about whether to take this job or that, or to buy this house or that, but you don't want to discount God's desire to guide you through such endeavors. God will open doors through your experience, and he will close doors through your experience.

I am married with four kids. Before my wife and I met many years ago, I was not looking through the Bible to find out what the name of Michael Patton's wife would be. Nevertheless, I did pray that God would prepare a wife for me and that he would guide me to her through the mundane travels of life. Now that I am married, I am fully confident that God did guide me. Through subtle but definite movements, God will often guide and direct your life through experience.

Remember, God is a God of history. He did not finish writing the Bible and go AWOL. When the last book of the Bible was complete, God did not turn into a cheerleader on the sidelines of history. He is still involved. You should expect that he hears your prayers and moves in time, accomplishing his will through you.

But experience, like reason, can be misinterpreted and abused. Experience can be dangerous. Sometimes we can try to manipulate the will of God by making our experience say something that may be at odds with God's will. Allow me to use an extreme example. I could have prayed to God while thinking about whether I should marry Kristie, "Dear God, if Kristie is the one I should marry, make a car come down the street next. If she is not the one, make it a truck." Don't go there. God cannot be manipulated in such a way. You are to always be looking for his movements in your life, but don't force them.

Again, the Bible is in authority over our experience. If

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our experience says one thing and the Bible says another, the Bible wins.

EMOTIONS

God wants to speak to your heart. He loves emotions. After all, he created them. Look for God in the depths of your heart.

Emotions are subjectively experienced psychological feelings. We often look down on emotions as a second-rate form of guidance. We talk about not being “too emotional” when we make decisions. It is good to be cautious, but we don't want to dismiss emotions too quickly. God will move through them. For example, the Bible tells us that one of the primary functions of the Holy Spirit is to *convict* us of sin (John 16:7–8). Conviction is an emotion from God that we dare not ignore. The Bible also talks about the *peace* of God that comes into our lives that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). Emotions are powerful, and I encourage you to invite God to comfort and guide you through them.

But emotions can be misleading. I have a Christian friend who just fell in love with his “soul mate.” However, his so-called soul mate is not a Christian. The Bible is clear that Christians are not to marry unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). My friend's emotions are conflicting with the Bible. He thinks the love he has for this woman is from God and is guiding him to marry her. But Scripture says something different. The Bible should always win.

I have another friend who does not “feel” God's presence in his life. He does not “feel” as if God loves him. His depression and inability to be happy, for him, are proof of God's absence. Again, emotions are telling him something that is not true. They can do that. They do it all the time with me. We must be careful.

I want you to welcome God to talk to you through your emotions, but your emotions are not the final arbiter of truth. The Bible is the final arbiter of truth and has authority over your emotions. If your emotions go left (i.e., God does not love me) and the Bible goes right (i.e., God does love me), always go right.

TRADITION

Finally, we need to look at tradition. We should look to the past to find wisdom for the present.

The best way to describe tradition is “those who have gone before us.” In the Christian faith, we have a heritage. The church is made up of more than your local assembly meeting in the building on the corner. It is more than all the Christians who are living around the world. The church is made up of all of those who have trusted in Christ, both living *and dead*. God the Holy Spirit has led and guided a multitude of saints that have gone before us. Their common confession through their deeds and beliefs forms an authority for the Christian life. Their witness builds a foundation of truth and beckons us to follow them.

A man once came to me and pointed to a particular portion of Scripture. He told me that he believed that the Holy Spirit had given him an understanding of this particular passage the night before. As he told me about his interpretation, I realized one problem: no Christian before him had ever interpreted the passage that way. His interpretation was completely outside the great Christian tradition that has been held for the last two thousand years. If his belief was true, then multitudes of Christians who had come before him had missed it, even though they were being led by the same Spirit as he suppos-

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edly was. This should give us pause. In fact, it should scare us a bit. Look into tradition. Become a student of the great believers of the past. Read biographies on them. Read their works (we have lots of them). Let them become close friends.

However, tradition is not perfect. People who have gone before us have misread and manipulated the Scriptures. While tradition stands guard beside the Scriptures, it is always judged ultimately *by* the Scriptures. In other words, rightly interpreted Scripture affirms or corrects all traditions. You must look to the community of God, both living and dead, for guidance. You must stand in fear of coming up with something “new.” However, you must never place tradition above Scripture.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

We have many sources of authority in our lives. In addition to emotions, experience, reason, and tradition, we also have pastors, governments, and parents. These are all from God. All of them carry varying degrees of authority. However, none of them are as authoritative as Scripture. Scripture is your final authority in all things. When it speaks clearly, it does not matter what your emotions say, it does not matter what your reason says, and it does not matter what the government says. God's Word is final.

In the book of Acts, shortly after Christ ascended into heaven, the apostles were taken into custody by the governing authority in their land. They were told to quit preaching about Christ or suffer the legal consequences. Here is what they said:

But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God,

you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19–20)

We also know that the Christians in Berea fact-checked the apostle Paul against the Scriptures, and they were commended for it!

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, *examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.* (Acts 17:10–11)

CONCLUSION

When I went to my dad for permission to go to my friend’s house, I was trying to circumvent the word of my mother. I was attempting to manipulate authorities in order to get *my* way. If you allow yourself this liberty in the Christian life, you will consistently fall on your face, outside of the will of God. Most importantly, you will be a fish out of water. As a believer in Christ, the best place you can be is under the authority of the One who loves you and made you. He knows what is best. Why would we seek anything else?

As a Christian disciple, you must build a respect for all the authorities that God has given. Yes, God is the ultimate authority in your life, but the ultimate way in which God has chosen to communicate this authority is through the Scriptures. This is why as a Christian you must read, meditate on, and study the Bible as often as you are able (more on this later). It is indispensable for Christian discipleship.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has your understanding of Christian authority grown?
2. In what ways do you think emotions could conflict or support the Bible? Give examples.
3. Why should we trust Scripture over experience? Give examples of where experience might *support* the Bible.
4. Why is tradition dangerous *and* wonderful? Give examples outside of Christianity, too.
5. If Scripture seems to come in conflict with modern scientific opinion, what should we do? Give examples.

ADDITIONAL DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING

The Discipleship Program, Credo House Ministries

A General Introduction to the Bible, Norman L. Geisler and
William E. Nix

Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible, Joel R. Beeke et. al.

You've become a Christian.

Now what?

Michael Patton unpacks the basics of the Christian faith, helping you think carefully *about* God and live fully *for* God as you begin your new life in Christ. In ten easy-to-read chapters, this book will introduce you to the foundational teachings and life-giving practices of Christianity—from the doctrine of the Trinity to reading and understanding the Bible.

Designed as a handbook for the Christian life, this go-to guide will help you answer a crucial question: What does it mean to follow Jesus?

"I wish this book was out when I first became a Christian! What we believe really matters, and this book covers many basic and necessary beliefs of the Christian faith in an easy-to-read format."

DAN KIMBALL, Pastor, Vintage Faith Church; author, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*

"As a pastor I'm often confronted by new Christians with questions such as: How do I get started? What should I read? How do I grow spiritually? Although I haven't had good answers in the past, I do now. I'm sending them to Michael Patton's excellent book. This is a gem!"

SAM STORMS, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

"*Now That I'm a Christian* is not only practical and easy to follow, it is biblically balanced and theologically informed. What a ready resource to help churches, campus ministries, and individual spiritual mentors to train new believers in the faith!"

PAUL COPAN, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University

"Rolled into this one volume is a guide to both right belief and right practice. Written in an introductory manner that is well-informed, witty, and fast-paced, readers will feel at home in the text even if they have not studied these things before. I recommend it with pleasure."

GARY R. HABERMAS, Distinguished Research Professor and Chair, Philosophy Department, Liberty University and Theological Seminary

C. MICHAEL PATTON (ThM, Dallas Theological Seminary) is president of Reclaiming the Mind Ministries. He is also a fellow at the Credo House of Theology in Edmond, Oklahoma, developer of the Theology Program, and host of the popular podcast *Theology Unplugged*.

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