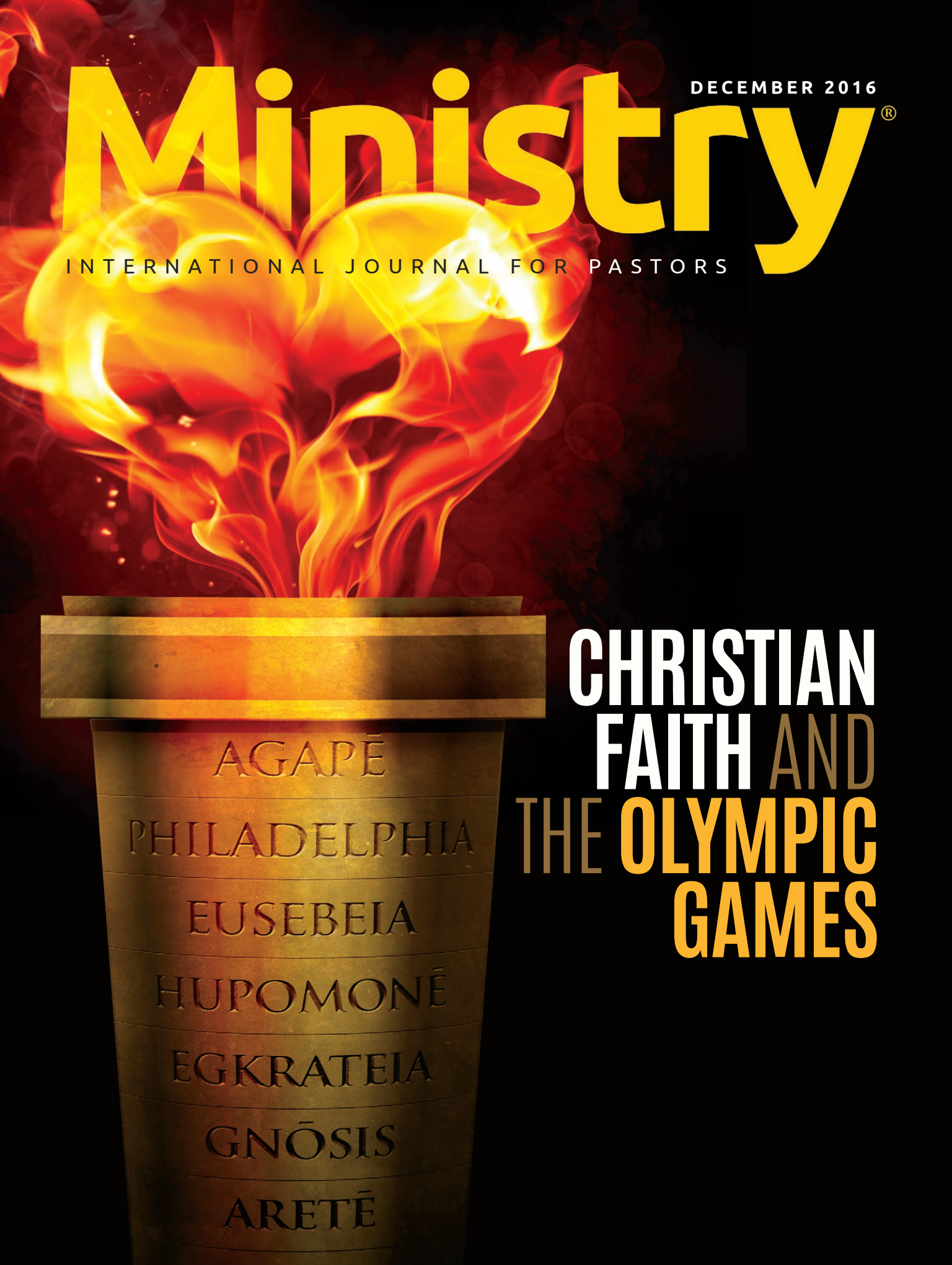
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CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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Christian faith and the Olympic games

Olympic Game years provide pastoral opportunities to highlight aspects of Christian living, which are illustrated in the lives and efforts of Olympic contestants. Canada's governor-general, the Right Honorable David Johnston, pointed the way when he declared that Canada's Olympic team members "personify excellence, fair play and sportsmanship . . . [and] remarkable determination."[1] What follows illustrates how Olympic Games, ancient and modern, can enrich pastoral explanations of what is, really, the most basic Christian question: "What do I have to *do* in order to be saved?"

This question first appeared on the lips of an alarmed jailer in the city of Philippi, who asked the apostles Paul and Silas, "What do I have to *do* in order to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).[2] Their answer, condensed in the briefest possible manner, sums up the Christian message: "*Believe* on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (v. 31).

You will find in what follows a summary of how one early Christian leader, Peter, unpacked that terse directive. In his second New Testament epistle, he answered the "what must I *do*" question in practical terms that drew on his readers' common knowledge of the ancient Olympic Games.[3]

The Gift of Faith

"Simeon Peter, servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those *receiving* a faith *as precious as ours* through the *righteousness* of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1).

Here Peter noted that believers *receive* faith from God, the source of genuine faith. Peter then assured readers that their belief is "as precious as ours," using the Greek *isotimos*. Their faith is of equal validity to that of the apostles. Believers who have never encountered Jesus in the flesh do not receive a second-class faith. Peter ended this verse by taking a clear stand for the New-Testament doctrine of righteousness by faith, when he declared that his readers' faith came through the *righteousness* of their "God and Savior Jesus Christ." Thus from the epistle's opening verse, Peter established the central importance of faith. "*Grace to you* and peace! May both keep increasing in response to the *saving knowledge of God and of Jesus*, Lord of us all," (v. 2)

The expression *grace to you* immediately declares this epistle to be Christian. Early Christians modified the standard Greek epistolary introduction, changing Greek *chairein* "greetings" into what was to become a key "Christian" word, *charis,* "grace." *Jesus, Lord of us all,* also clearly marks the epistle as Christian. Sandwiched between these, we find *epignōsis*, translated here as "saving knowledge." It appears three additional times in this epistle (2 Pet. 1:3, 8; 2:20) to name that sense of certainty that Christians served the only real, true, and living God, "whose *divine power* has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the saving knowledge of the One who called us by his own *glory* and *excellence*" (2 Pet. 1:3).

Divine power (Greek *theia dunamis*) was an established Greek expression for the power of God, or the gods, which entered into and empowered humans. The philosopher Plato (427–347 B.C.) used *theia dunamis* in describing the legendary strong man and founder of the Spartan nation, Lacedaemon, "a man whose human nature had become joined to divine power" (Plato, *Laws* 691E). Elsewhere he illustrates the working of divine power by comparing it to the ability of a magnet to transmit its magnetism to and even through a piece of iron: "the god who . . . draws the souls of people wherever he pleases" (Plato, *Ion* 536E). According to the Jewish author Philo, a contemporary of the apostles, it was divine power, not a wind, that dried the waters of Noah's Flood (Philo, *Questions in Genesis* 3.28) and that enables barren women to give birth (Philo, *Questions in Genesis* 3.18). The church historian Eusebius, writing about 300 A.D., declared that this same divine power entered Christians

threatened with martyrdom, enabling them to declare their belief in the presence of hostile Roman judges (*Church History* 8.9).

Aretē excellence and the Olympic games

The final Greek word of 2 Peter 1:3, *aretē*, refers to God's excellence, while in verse 5 it refers to human excellence. This word becomes important to the argument of this epistle, where it occurs three times. The best window into the meaning of *aretē* is provided by the ancient Olympic Games, where *aretē* expressed the crucial quality of excellence—first as a quality of the patron god of the games; then as a quality that the patron god extended to the winning competitors. From the opening sacrifices and religious rituals, through the displays of the contestants' dedication, determination, skill, and single-mindedness, to the closing ceremony, the ancient Olympic Games foregrounded and backgrounded a single, overarching quality—*aretē*! For Greeks *aretē* "includes the concepts of excellence, goodness, manliness, valor, nobility, and virtue."[4] According to the next verse, God's *aretē* backed up His calling of believers in the same way that pagan Greeks believed Zeus backed up his calling of Olympic contestants to victory with his *aretē*. "Through these things [God's glory and *aretē*], we have received God's great and valuable promises" (v. 4a).

But *aretē* was not simply handed down to athletes as they waited passively for this. Only by personal effort would *aretē* enter them and empower their efforts. This is clear from one of the oldest and best-known Greek descriptions of *aretē*, by the eighth-century B.C. author Hesiod: "in front of *aretē* the immortal gods have set sweat, and the path to her is long and steep, and rough at first."[5] Even the natural scientist Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) expressed awe in the presence of the spiritual quality of *aretē*, when he wrote "*aretē*, for human beings hardest-earned, most coveted prize of a life-time's hunt . . . for your sake [O *aretē*] . . . even dying is considered in Greece a desirable fate, and also putting up with crushing, endless tasks."[6] Even a struggle to the death could provide evidence that one had received *aretē*. One ancient Greek



That longer reach began with God, who "loved the world so much" (John 3:16) that He gave His Son, thus bridging the greatest "distance" in the universe—that which separated a holy God and this unholy and rebellious world.

athlete who died in a demonstration of *aretē* was the wrestling contestant Arrhachion, whom the judges declared winner even though he died during the contest. They decided that "he won . . . partly because of his own *aretē*."[7] In the next verse Peter, like an Olympic trainer, urged his "trainee" Christians on to spiritual victory, empowered by God's gift of *aretē*. Wrote Peter "This is why, by really exerting yourselves, you must support your faith with *aretē*!" (v. 5a)

However, *aretē* on its own is inadequate to fully support faith, so Peter added a second support: "to your *aretē* add *gnōsis* practical wisdom" (v. 5b).

Faith's second support is *gnōsis*, best translated here "practical wisdom," that differed from the *epignōsis*, "saving knowledge," of verse 2. Practical wisdom supports the faith of believers by helping them negotiate practical challenges of daily living, and it accumulates through life. We see it, for example, in the strategies put in place by Nehemiah when he left employment as cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes and returned to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. He approached this delicate task using diplomacy, tact, and persuasion. But, when necessary, he could employ direct confrontation (Neh. 2:6).

Faith's third support is *egkrateia*, "self-control," avoiding self-indulgence while keeping eye and mind on the goal. The word is rare in the New Testament but would have been familiar to every Greek schoolboy because of the maxim *egkrateia askei*, "Practice self-control!" attributed to one of the legendary Seven Sages of ancient Greece.[8] But *egkrateia*, even when joined to practical wisdom and excellence, seems inadequate to fully support faith: "to your *egkrateia* add *hupomonē* patient endurance" (2 Pet. 1:6b)

Faith's fourth support, midpoint in Peter's list of seven, is *hupomonē*, "patient endurance." It evokes that determination that sustains contestants on the long stretch to the finish line. Every Christian is called to support faith with *hupomonē*. Its importance for end-time believers is highlighted in the book of Revelation, where it occurs seven times, the final one at the conclusion of the three angels' messages: "Here is the *hupomonē* of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). Peter wrote: "to your *hupomonē* add *eusebeia* proper conduct" (2 Pet. 1:6c).

What entered the mind of Greeks when they heard the word *eusebeia*?

First, it was the standard word calling for appropriate conduct in their relationship to their gods, covering behavior during worship, proper performance of religious rituals, and bringing correct sacrifices and offerings. In the secular realm, it called for proper behavior in relation to significant persons such as emperors and governors. This was its meaning in a thank-you note the emperor Claudius wrote in 46 A.D. to an athletic club, acknowledging their display of *eusebeia* toward him when they sent him a golden crown to honor his successful military campaign in Britain.[9]

Second, Peter's intention, when including *eusebeia* among the seven supports of faith, was made more clear in 2 Peter 3:11, where *eusebeia* occurs alongside *anastrophē*, which means "conduct expressed according to certain principles."[10] Most New Testament occurrences of *eusebeia* are in epistles addressed to the pastors Timothy and Titus, encouraging them to conduct themselves according to principle rather than impulse, so as not to bring reproach on themselves, on fellow believers, or on the gospel.

From individual to community: Faith's supports six and seven

Peter's first five faith supports focus on individual, internal qualities: excellence, practical wisdom, self-control, patient endurance, and proper conduct. These supports could, at least in theory, be practiced by persons isolated from community. But supports six and seven focus directly on how individuals live their faith within community or what, in the spirit of the Olympics might be labeled "teamwork." He wrote: "to your *eusebeia* add *philadelphia* family loyalty" (2 Pet. 1:7a).

Philadelphia, a word frequent in Jewish Greek documents but surprisingly rare in pagan Greek literature, it expressed loyalty within one's family of origin. The Jewish historian Josephus (37–c. 100 A.D.) used *philadelphia* to describe how Joseph, as viceroy of Egypt, treated his brothers and their families. The best-known pagan Greek model for *philadelphia* was the legend of Castor and Pollux, human sons of the god Zeus. As Castor lay dying after an attack, Zeus offered immortality to his brother Pollux who, out of deep *philadelphia,* refused to abandon his dying brother in order to accept the offer. Zeus then modified his offer into an arrangement by which the brothers could take turns being alive and dead. While one spent a day alive in the company of the gods on Mount Olympus, the other would spend that day dead and buried. They would switch roles the next day. Pollux accepted the offer, sharing alternating daily life and death with Castor through eternity. This exemplary display of *philadelphia* served as a pagan Greek template for family loyalty.

Philadelphia extended beyond biological families to govern members of organizations and societies. Plutarch (c. 50–120 A.D.), in a widely known essay titled "*Peri Philadelphias*" ("On Brotherly Love"), urged "We should next pattern ourselves after the Pythagoreans who, though related not at all by birth, yet sharing a common discipline, if ever they were led by anger into recrimination, never let the sun go down before they joined right hands, embraced each other, and were reconciled" ("On Brotherly Love," 488C).[11] How would our faith family be strengthened if, at the close of every board meeting, we parted with an embrace of genuine *philadelphia*![12]

Peter continues: "to your *philadelphia* add *agapē* love" (v. 7b).

Peter used *agapē*, probably the best-known Greek word among contemporary Christians, to name faith's seventh and final support. *Agapē* is that

love for others that moves believers to make others' well-being a priority. We find the word rare in pagan literature but frequent in Jewish documents, from where it transitioned into the New Testament. How does *agapē* differ from *philadelphia*? In a word, *agapē* has a much longer reach, extending well beyond family, church, and local community. That longer reach began with God, who "loved the world so much" (John 3:16) that He gave His Son, thus bridging the greatest "distance" in the universe—that which separated a holy God and this unholy and rebellious world. Peter, on the mount of transfiguration, had firsthand evidence that Jesus was God's ultimate demonstration of *agapē*. He recalled hearing God's voice on that mountain declare, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am fully pleased" (2 Pet. 1:17). God's *agapē* for His Son, and for this world, will ignite in believers an *agapē* motivating them to share, in word and deed, the good news of God's saving love.

Conclusion: "Getting real" with faith's seven supports

Wrote Peter, "So, if you take possession of these [seven supports of faith] and develop them, you will never be ineffective or unproductive in your relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 8). According to Peter, Christian faith becomes "real" only when grounded upon these seven supports. Ellen White declared "These words are full of instruction, and strike the keynote of victory."[13] Every time Peter wrote *you* in these verses, he used the Greek plural form—"all of you!" Only in community can faith rest on all seven supports, as believers strive to live as Christian "Olympians" in their homes, congregations, local communities, and the wider world.

This is Peter's answer to the question "What must I *do* to be saved?" Fellow pastors, we can strengthen our own proclamation of the gospel and point the way to victory in Christian living as we draw more widely from the full range of New Testament imagery, and link it with current events such as the Olympic Games.[14]

1 "Rio 2016 Olympic Games," The Governor General of Canada, August 2, 2016, www.gg.ca/document.aspx?id=16515&lan=eng.
2 All New Testament quotations are the author's own translations.
3 This study does not enter the debate about authorship of the epistles but adopts ancient Christian attributions of authorship.
4 Stephen Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 209.
5 Hesiod, "Works and Days," lines 289–291, *Hesiod*, vol. 1, trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 111.
6 Aristotle's "Hymn to *Aretē*," trans. William D. Furley and Jan Maarten Bremer, *Greek Hymns: Selected Cult Songs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 262, 263.
7 Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 8.40.2, in Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports*, 36.
8 Greek text from F. W. A. Mullach, *Fragmenta philosophorum Graecorum*, vol. 1 (Paris: Didot, 1860), 215, 216, quoted in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, "*Septem Sapientes*," "*Sententiae*."
9 P. Lond 1178, quoted in J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1930; reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), s.v. "*eusebeia*."
10 Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "*eusebeia*."
11 Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. W. C. Helmbold, Loeb Classical Library 337 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 303.
12 Paul's appeal "do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26) comes immediately to mind and will be developed in the next installment of this study.
13 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 530.
14 For suggestions on applying Olympic games imagery to Christian living, see S. E. Gregg, *The Christian Olympics: Going for the Gold Crowns* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2006) and Richard A. Holder, *The Olympic Christian* (London, UK: Richard A. Holder, 2012).

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LETTERS

Continued from page 4



through recollection of history, of which the prophets may have been hinting through usage of the prophetic perfect in predictive prophecies.

Secondly, Dr. Paulien highlights God's doings as a basis for worship of God. However, inasmuch as Dr. Paulien's first text, Revelation 4:9-11, indicates that the "twenty-four elders . . . worship the One who lives forever and ever," this is evidently an emphasis, rather than an absolute, since the being of God is herein also highlighted as a basis for worshipping God. Indeed, in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, as in contemporary languages, being is as much a verbal concept as doing, and verbs typically denote action. This subtlety is further demonstrated in the divine name, the Tetragrammaton, YHWH/YHVH, which is usually translated, "I am." This reverent reticence on the part of the Hebrews to pronounce the name of God indicates an equal worshipful response to God's being as to God's being expressed and manifested in redemptive and relational actions. A parallel attitude on the human level is the deep respect springing forth in regard to childbirth, nurture, and the miracle of life.

While the above supports Dr. Paulien's intuition that worship does indeed center on the creatorship and creativeness of God, and God's mighty doings as the Creator, one question remains. Would Dr. Paulien consider utilizing his scholarly finesse to pen a follow-up article on worship, centering on the being of God, including God's latent but all-sufficient doings before they are manifested or expressed in saving actions?

—John Tumpkin, South Africa