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West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Do Christians and Muslims Worship the same God?

A statement made by a professor at a leading evangelical college has become a flashpoint in a controversy that really matters. In explaining why she intended to wear a traditional Muslim hijab over the holiday season in order to symbolize solidarity with her Muslim neighbors, the professor asserted that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Is this true?

The answer to that question depends upon a distinctly Christian and clearly biblical answer to yet another question: Can anyone truly worship the Father while rejecting the Son?

The Christian's answer to that question must follow the example of Christ. Jesus himself settled the question when he responded to Jewish leaders who confronted him after he had said “I am the light of the world.” When they denied him, Jesus said, “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (John 8:19). Later in that same chapter, Jesus used some of the strongest language of his earthly ministry in stating clearly that to deny him is to deny the Father.

Christians and Muslims do **not** worship the same God. Christians worship the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and no other god. We know the Father through the Son, and it is solely through Christ's atonement for sin that salvation has come. Salvation comes to those who confess with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). The New Testament leaves no margin for misunderstanding. To deny the Son is to deny the Father.

To affirm this truth is not to argue that non-Christians, our Muslim neighbors included, know nothing true about God or to deny that the three major monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — share some major theological beliefs. All three religions affirm that there is only one God and that he has spoken to us by divine revelation. All three religions point to what each claims to be revealed scriptures. Historically, Jews and Christians and Muslims have affirmed many points of agreement on moral teachings. All three theological worldviews hold to a linear view of history, unlike many Asian worldviews that believe in a circular view of history.

And yet, when we look more closely, even these points of agreement begin to break down. Christian trinitarianism is rejected by both Judaism and Islam. Muslims deny that Jesus Christ is the incarnate and eternal Son of God and go further to deny that God has a son. Any reader of the New Testament knows that this was the major point of division between Christianity and Judaism. The central Christian claim that Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah and the divine Son become flesh led to the separation of the church and the synagogue as is revealed in the Book of Acts.



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Do Christians and Muslims Worship the same God? - Continued

There is historical truth in the claim of “three Abrahamic religions” because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all look to Abraham as a principal figure and model of faith. But this historical truth is far surpassed in importance by the fact that Jesus explicitly denied that salvation comes merely by being merely one of “Abraham’s children” (John 8:39-59). He told the Jewish leaders who rejected him that their rejection revealed that they were not Abraham’s true sons and that they did not truly know God.

Christians do not deny that Muslims know some true things about God. As a matter of fact, in Romans 1:19-20 Paul explains that all people have some real knowledge of God by general revelation, so that they are without excuse. Speaking at Mars Hill in Athens in Acts 17, Paul argued that even some of the Greeks’ own philosophers and poets gave evidence of a rudimentary knowledge of God — but this was not a saving knowledge, and the Apostle was brokenhearted when he saw the Athenians at worship.

In making her claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the professor claimed the authority of Pope Francis, and since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has become ever more explicit in its teaching that salvation can come without a conscious and explicit faith in Christ. This is simply not an option for evangelical Christians committed to the authority of Scripture alone and to the Gospel as defined in the New Testament.

Francis J. Beckwith, a leading Catholic apologist and philosopher, defended the claim that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. At one point, Beckwith argued that two people could have differing knowledge of Thomas Jefferson while knowing the same Thomas Jefferson as the third President of the United States. He continued: “In the same way, Abraham and Moses did not believe that God is a Trinity, but St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Billy Graham do. Does that mean that Augustine, Aquinas, and Graham do not worship the same God as Abraham and Moses? Again, of course not.”

But this line of argument evades the entire structure of promise and fulfillment that links the Old Testament and the New Testament. Abraham and Moses could not have defined the doctrine of the Trinity while they were on earth, but they believed that God would be faithful to all of his promises, and those promises were fulfilled only and fulfilled perfectly in Christ. And, going back to John 8:56-58, Jesus said: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad ... Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

Evangelical Christians understand that, theologically, there is a genetic link between Judaism and Christianity. That is why Christians must always be humbled by the fact that we have been grafted onto the promises first made to Israel. In terms of both history and theology, there is no genetic link between Christianity and Islam. The Qur’an claims that to confess Jesus Christ as the divine Son and the second person of the Trinity is to commit blasphemy against Allah.



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Do Christians and Muslims Worship the same God? - Continued

Hard times come with hard questions, and our cultural context exerts enormous pressure on Christians to affirm common ground at the expense of theological differences. But the cost of getting this question wrong is the loss of the Gospel. Christians affirm the image of God in every single human being and we must obey Christ as we love all people everywhere as our neighbor. Love of neighbor also demands that we tell our neighbor the truth concerning Christ as the only way to truly know the Father.

We must also understand that the most basic issue is the one Jesus answered with absolute clarity. One cannot deny the Son and truly worship the Father. There is no question that the Muslim is our neighbor, but there is no way to remain faithful to Scripture and the gospel and then claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. - President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

What does God care What We call Him?

A retiring Roman Catholic bishop in the Netherlands has been making headlines around the world in recent days with his suggestion that Dutch Christians should pray to Allah.

Bishop Tiny Muskens of Breda, a former missionary to Indonesia, suggested that conflict between Christians and Muslims could be lessened if Dutch Catholics followed the lead of some Christians in Muslim-dominated lands and adopted Allah as the preferred name for God..

From Catholic News:

Speaking on the Dutch TV programme Network on Monday evening, Bishop Muskens says it could take another 100 years but eventually the name Allah will be used by Dutch churches. And that will promote rapprochement (**to bring together**) between the two religions. Muskens doesn't expect his idea to be greeted with much enthusiasm. The 71-year-old bishop, who will soon be retiring due to ill health, says God doesn't mind what he is called. God is above such "discussion and bickering". Human beings invented this discussion themselves, he believes, in order to argue about it.

Is there a valid linguistic basis for his argument? It is certainly true that the word Allah is the Arabic word for deity. Those supporting an argument like that of Bishop Muskens suggest that the Arabic word can be used as a generic term for deity.

In common English we use the word God as both a proper name and a noun. We differentiate between the two usages by capitalizing the word when we mean to refer to the specific personal God of the Bible, and by not capitalizing generic uses of the word.



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What does God care What We call Him? - Continued

Thus, we might paraphrase the First Commandment like this: “God commanded His people to have no other gods before Him.” The correct interpretation of this sentence requires the use and understanding of the habits of capitalization.

Those making the case for a Christian appropriation of Allah must take their argument in one of two trajectories. The **first** trajectory is to argue that Allah can be used in a generic way to refer to any (presumably monotheistic) deity. This case will be very difficult to make. Language, theology, and worship are so closely intertwined that it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue for a generic use of Allah. Further evidence against this trajectory is the fact that non-Arabic speaking Muslims also use Allah when referring to their god.

The **second** trajectory presents even more of a problem. Those following this line of argument must make the case that Allah and God refer to the same deity. This represents a huge problem for both Muslims and Christians. Allah is not a personal deity in the sense that the God of the Bible is. Furthermore, the Qur’an explicitly denies that Allah has a son, and Islam considers the notion of a triune God to be blasphemy.

Thus, from its very starting point Islam denies what Christianity takes as its central truth claim — the fact that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of the Father. If Allah has no Son by definition, Allah is not the God who revealed himself in the Son. How then can the use of Allah by Christians lead to anything but confusion . . . and worse?

The most dangerous (and theologically dishonest) part of Bishop Muskens’ argument is found in these words:

The 71-year-old bishop, who will soon be retiring due to ill health, says God doesn’t mind what he is called. God is above such “discussion and bickering”. Human beings invented this discussion themselves, he believes, in order to argue about it.

According to *The Herald Sun* [Melbourne, Australia], Bishop Muskens commented: “Allah is a very beautiful word for God What does God care what we call him?” *What does God care what we call him?*

Has the bishop read the Bible? God takes his name with great seriousness indeed. Moses discovered this when he heard God speak from the burning bush [Exodus 3:13-22]. God did not leave himself nameless, nor did He invite Moses to devise a name for him. Jesus used this name [I AM] to refer to himself.

The Christian faith is essentially and irreducibly Trinitarian. The Bible reveals that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is not merely a prophet; He is God in human flesh. This is precisely what Islam rejects. If Allah has no Son, he is not the Father.

This is the most significant theological obstacle in the way of the Christian use of Allah as a name for God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray to “our Father, who is in heaven” [Matthew 6:9] — thus disallowing any confusion concerning God’s name.



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What does God care What We call Him? - Continued

The most important names for God for Christians are “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” In the four New Testament gospels, Jesus uses the word “Father” more than sixty times. No Muslim would refer to Allah in this same way. This is not what will come to mind when a Muslim hears a Christian pray to Allah.

So Bishop Muskens is disingenuous at best when he suggests that God does not care about His name. This is not a matter of mere “discussion and bickering.” If the Bible is the Word of God, we can be assured that human beings did *not* invent this discussion.

There is one final and insurmountable problem with Bishop Muskens’ proposal. Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize believers “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [Matthew 28:19]. When this command is taken seriously and obeyed, the whole issue is greatly clarified — a Christian cannot baptize in the name of Allah.

If Allah has no son, Allah is not the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even if the case is made that Allah could be used in a generic sense to refer to God (and I am not persuaded that it can), the word cannot be used to mean the Father in a Trinitarian affirmation. This is not mere “discussion and bickering.” This is where the Gospel stands or falls.

ADDENDUM: The particular question raised by Bishop Muskens was the use of the word “Allah” by Christians in the West as a means of lessening Christian-Muslim tensions. The question of using “Allah” to refer to god in a clearly missiological setting will raise other issues. If the word is understood as a generic term for God (and not exclusively as a proper name), the question would then be how a Christian must make clear that the God of the Bible—revealed as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ—is not the deity as described in the Qur’an (who explicitly has no son). The linguistic root of Allah may well be connected to Elohim (a name for God found in the Old Testament). This fact may help to clarify the possible use of the word in a missiological setting. The clarity comes in understanding that, even in the Old Testament, the name Elohim is, in itself, quickly accompanied by other names and words to make clear that the God of the Bible is the personal, monotheistic, covenant-making God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. The New Testament makes clear that this God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ — indeed the God who in these latter days has spoken definitively through the Son [Hebrews 1].

In other words, it would seem best to think of Allah in this setting as a place to begin a conversation about God in a Muslim setting. The challenge from that point onward will be to make certain that there is no misunderstanding about the fact that the only true and living God is the Father of Jesus Christ the Savior.

The crucial questions here are these: **First**, can we assume that the deity central to Islam and known as Allah is, in fact, the same God worshipped by Christians and revealed in the Bible? The answer to that question must be negative. In that sense, Allah is certainly not the God of the Bible.



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What does God care What We call Him? - Continued

The **second** question is whether the word “Allah” can be understood, in Arabic and Muslim settings, as both a generic noun and a proper noun. Some credible Christian scholars and missionaries are certain that it can. The issue then becomes how contemporary Christians remain faithful to the Gospel in this setting even as the Apostle Paul remained faithful in Acts 17 when he visited Athens. Paul, we must remember, had to tell the religious Athenians that they had misunderstood the very nature and character of the true God. “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” [Acts 17:23]. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. - President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary**

Perfectly Human

Over the past two centuries, much has been written in evangelical circles on the deity of Christ. This has been good and necessary, for many people deny that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate. Sometimes I fear, however, that this emphasis on Christ’s deity has led to an imbalance in our doctrine of Christ. It’s proper to highlight our Lord’s deity, but Scripture also emphasizes His humanity. If Jesus were only God and not truly man, He could not save us. His humanity is inseparable from His being the second Adam, fulfilling all righteousness, and taking upon Himself all the obligations of God’s law that must be fulfilled for us to receive life eternal (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 2:13).

The New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ as vera homo, truly human, as well as vera Deus, truly God. References to Jesus’ true humanity abound. John numbers those who deny a real incarnation with the antichrist (2 John 1:7). Paul speaks of Christ as “born of a woman” (1 Corinthians 11:12; Galatians 4:4). The Gospels reveal Christ as having the basic characteristics of humanity. He walks, He talks, He becomes tired, He eats, He drinks, He cries, He manifests every human emotion and every dimension of the physical aspect of mankind (see, for example, Matthew 8:24; Luke 7:34; John 11:35). There’s a full identification of Jesus with humanity—except with respect to one vital distinction: the moral distinction. Christ perfectly obeys the Father; we don’t.

Christ’s sinlessness is vital to the biblical understanding of redemption. If Jesus is to be our mediator, if He is to be our redeemer, it’s essential that He be sinless. How could His atoning life have any significance if He committed even one sin? He’s called the lamb without blemish because His perfection is integral to His redemptive role as the mediator who offers up a perfect sacrifice to the Father to fulfill the old covenant and satisfy the wrath of God. The sinlessness of Jesus is critical to the full biblical understanding of His sacrificial death. Not only does Christ take what should be ours—namely, punishment for sin—but through imputation He gives to those who are in Him by faith alone the inheritance He receives for His perfect obedience (Romans 3:21–26).

Some have denied the sinlessness of Christ in the name of protecting His humanity. If there’s anything that binds us together in common humanity, if there’s anything true of all men of all races and creeds, it’s that we fall short of our standards. We transgress our own laws, not to mention the laws of God. I don’t know anything more common to humanity than sin.



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Perfectly Human - Continued

If one man in this world today lived ten minutes in perfect obedience to God, that would be nothing less than astonishing. But Christ's entire life was marked by sinlessness (1 Peter 2:22). So, how could a sinless Christ be truly human if sinlessness violates what is so common to human behavior?

What we're really asking is this: Is sinfulness intrinsic to true humanity? We can answer only in the negative. To say that sinfulness is intrinsic to authentic humanity requires two conclusions: **first**, that Adam before the fall was not a human being; **second**, and more seriously, that Christians in a state of perfected glory in heaven will no longer be human.

Everything Scripture says about human beings and sin suggests that men and women, as originally created, were without sin but were nevertheless truly human. Moreover, the Bible teaches that when we are glorified, we will be without sin but yet truly human. Sin isn't a necessary attribute of true humanity; it's a foreign intrusion into humanity as created by God. To affirm that sin is intrinsic to our humanity denies the true humanity both of our origins and of our destiny.

Christ's sinlessness is vindicated most powerfully in His resurrection. The penalty of sin, biblically speaking, is death (Genesis 2:15–17; Romans 6:23). But it was impossible for death to hold Him (Acts 2:24). Why? Since Jesus was guilty of no personal sin, death had no rightful claim over Him. He bore our sin and guilt, and that is why He died; but once our debt of sin was canceled, there was nothing left to keep Him buried (Colossians 2:13–15). Jesus, being perfectly righteous, had to be raised, for it would have been unjust for God to allow a sinless man to rot in the grave. Christ was raised for our justification, resurrected to prove that He fully satisfied God's demands on behalf of His people (Romans 4:25).

When we confess the sinlessness of Jesus, we are not confessing merely that Jesus is a good man, nor a very good man, nor the best man who has ever lived. We are confessing that Jesus is the perfect man. There's a significant difference between the good, the better, the best, and the perfect. It amazes me that many people will say that Jesus is a good man but not that He is the perfect man. But how can Jesus be a good man if He has falsely claimed to be a perfect man? Only a bad man would claim to be perfect if he was not perfect. To be equal with the Father, to be sent from God, to be the Savior of the world—a good man would not claim such things of himself if they were not true. Jesus can't be merely a good man. He is either the perfect man or He's not a good man.

Christ is not only truly human—He is perfectly human. Only He has fulfilled the vocation of human beings to love the Lord above all else. That makes Him the most human person who has ever lived, because only He has done what human beings were made to do. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



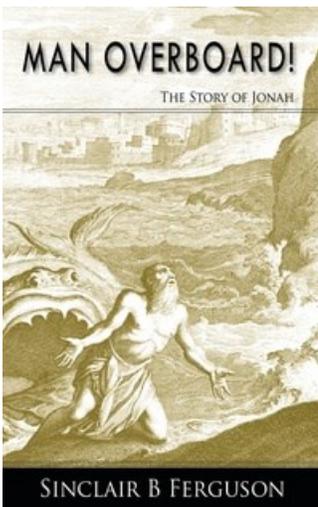
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Book Reviews

Man Overboard! (Paperback)

Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

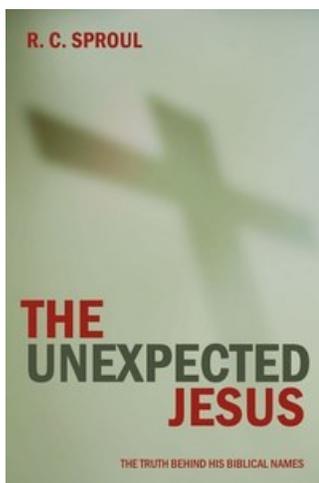


Jonah is not a book about a great fish! It is really a book about God, and how one man came, through painful experience, to discover the true character of the God whom he had already served in the earlier years of his life. He was to find the doctrine about God come alive in his experience. It is this combination of doctrine and experience that makes Jonah such a fascinating, instructive and practical book.

The teaching of Jonah searches our hearts and consciences in a special way because it is the story of a man who was on the run from God. It traces not only the path of his journey, but unravels the inner workings of his heart, his fears, motivations, and passing moods. Christians today still experience these 'Jonah syndromes'.

The Unexpected Jesus (Paperback)

Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.



Christ is the most significant person who ever lived. His work on the cross is the most important event in all of history. The person and work of Christ is the subject of this book by R.C. Sproul. Using material taken from two of Dr. Sproul's finest teaching series, *The Majesty of Christ* and *The Cross of Christ*, this very readable book can help you or your group better understand who Christ is and what He did. A great resource on biblical Christology and recommended reading for new Christians as well as lay teachers. Formerly titled *Mighty Christ*.



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The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

Worship and the Lord's Day - Chapter 22

1. The light of nature shows that there is a God who has lordship and sovereignty over all. He is just and good and does good to all. Therefore he is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart and soul and strength.

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God has been instituted by himself and delimited by his own revealed will. He may not be worshipped according to human imagination or methods, nor according to the suggestions of Satan, nor by way of any visible representation, nor by any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

2. Worship is to be given to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to him alone, not to angels, saints, or any other creatures. Since the fall worship is not to be given without a mediator, nor by any mediation other than that of Christ alone.
3. Prayer with thanksgiving, being one part of natural worship, is required by God of all people. But to be acceptable, it must be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, and according to his will. It must also be made with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance, and when with others in a known language.
4. Prayer is to be made for lawful things, and for all kinds of people who are alive now or shall live in the future. Prayer is not to be made for the dead, nor for those who are known to have sinned the sin leading to death.
5. The reading of the Scriptures, the preaching and hearing of the Word of God, the teaching and admonishing of one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with gratitude in our hearts to the Lord, as well as the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, are all parts of the worship of God. These are to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence and godly fear. Also to be used on special occasions in a holy and reverent manner, are times of solemn humiliation, with fasting and thanksgiving.
6. Under the Gospel, neither prayer nor any other aspect of religious worship is tied to, or made more acceptable by, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed. God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth, whether daily in private families, or individually in secret, or solemnly in public assemblies. The latter are not to be carelessly neglected nor wilfully forsaken, because God calls us to them by his Word and providence.



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The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

Worship and the Lord's Day - Chapter 22

-Continued-

7. As it is the law of nature that a portion of time by God's appointment should be set apart for the worship of God, so in his Word he has given a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all people in all ages. In particular he has appointed one day in seven as a Sabbath to be kept holy to him. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ this was the last day of the week, but from the resurrection of Christ it was changed to the first day of the week which is called the Lord's Day. This is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath, the observation of the last day of the week being abolished.
8. People keep the Sabbath holy to the Lord when (after appropriate preparation of their hearts and prior arrangement of their everyday affairs) they observe all day a holy rest from their own works, words, and thoughts about their secular employment and recreations, but also devote the whole time to public and private acts of worship, and to carrying out duties of necessity and mercy.

Receiving the Revelation

Does nature reveal God? This question indicates a concern about a foundational issue to Christianity. The issue is, can God be known outside of the church or a religious environment? The secularist of today answers this question with the negative. The world of nature is frequently said to be antithetical to a belief in God, presenting us with so many anomalies as to render the existence of God untenable.

Because of these claims either from the corner of the militant atheist or from the queries of the troubled agnostic, many Christians have retreated into a sphere of "religious faith" as the only framework within which God can be known. Here nature is negotiated in order to protect the arena of space. The nature Psalms of the Old Testament indicate that the majesty of the Creator shines through the creation. God not only reveals Himself clearly in creation, but the revelation gets through. It is perceived by men. The judgment of God is not withheld because men refuse to receive the revelation (Romans 1:18).

The problem is that not only does God reveal Himself, but that men perceive that revelation and refuse to acknowledge it. Paul says, "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful" (Romans 1:21, KJV). Here man is said to know God. His sin is that he will not glorify or thank the God he knows exists. Paul contends that God so clearly manifests Himself in creation that all men know He exists. God's revelation in nature makes honest atheism an intellectual impossibility. The knowledge of God manifest in nature is by no means comprehensive. Natural revelation will never provide us with redemptive knowledge. It is one thing to know that God exists. It is quite another to have a personal, intimate knowledge of the God who exists. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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Redemptively Relevant”*



Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Birthday and Anniversary Corner - January 2016

Birthdays

Marcie Skora - January 9
Stephen Hurst - January 26

Anniversaries

None to Report

When Children Can Choose Gender but Not Ice Cream for Lunch

One of the more prominent arguments in the recent push for embracing the homosexual lifestyle among Christians is the claim that most homosexual individuals were born with these desires and inclinations. Okay, setting aside the highly speculative and anecdotal nature of the “science” involved, let’s assume that there is some merit to this. Are all natural-born desires acceptable and good? Are the natures we are born with the standard by which we define what it means to be men and women created in the image of God? Does our obedience to God flow out of our natural desires? As parents, is our job to simply guide and encourage our children toward their natural inclinations or to teach them what is true and good and beautiful that they may grow to govern their desires based upon these standards? Did Jesus sacrifice himself to free us from religious and cultural tyranny or the tyranny of our own sinful hearts? What is my greatest obstacle to truly bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control) in my daily life? Is it myself or other people? Do I accept every choice my friends and loved-ones make in how they live their lives? If not, by what standard do I choose the good choices versus the bad ones? How do I choose what the most loving thing to do in a particular situation? Do I intervene or encourage? Do I seek to rescue or applaud? ~ *Anon-ymous*

Disclaimer

The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it’s leadership.



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Office: 1001 Kenyon Court, Suffolk, VA 23435; **E-Mail:** pastorscofield@gmail.com
Website: www.westsuffolkbc.com **Phone/Fax:** 757-539-0363
Teaching Pastor: Ben Scofield, pastorscofield@gmail.com
Editor: Walt Lawrence, gwlcf0415@gmail.com

Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of the month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.