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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

The Practice of Mortification

The aftermath of a conversation can change the way we later think of its significance.

My friend — a younger minister — sat down with me at the end of a conference in his church and said: *“Before we retire tonight, just take me through the steps that are involved in helping someone mortify sin.”* We sat talking about this for a little longer and then went to bed, hopefully he was feeling as blessed as I did by our conversation. I still wonder whether he was asking his question as a pastor or simply for himself — or both.

How would you best answer his question? The first thing to do is: Turn to the Scriptures. Yes, turn to John Owen (never a bad idea!), or to some other counselor dead or alive. But remember that we have not been left only to good human resources in this area. We need to be taught from *“the mouth of God”* so that the principles we are learning to apply carry with them both the authority of God and the promise of God to make them work.

Several passages come to mind for study: Romans 8:13; Romans 13:8–14 (Augustine’s text); 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1; Ephesians 4:17–5:21; Colossians 3:1–17; 1 Peter 4:1–11; 1 John 2:28–3:11. Significantly, only two of these passages contain the verb “mortify” (“put to death”). Equally significantly, the context of each of these passages is broader than the single exhortation to put sin to death. As we shall see, this is an observation that turns out to be of considerable importance.

Of these passages, Colossians 3:1–17 is probably the best place for us to begin.

Here were relatively young Christians. They have had a wonderful experience of conversion to Christ from paganism. They had entered a gloriously new and liberating world of grace. Perhaps — if we may read between the lines — they had felt for a while as if they had been delivered, not only from sin’s penalty but almost from its influence — so marvelous was their new freedom. But then, of course, sin reared its ugly head again. Having experienced the *“already”* of grace they were now discovering the painful *“not yet”* of ongoing sanctification. Sounds familiar!

But as in our evangelical sub-culture of quick fixes for long-term problems, unless the Colossians had a firm grasp of Gospel principles, they were now at risk! For just at this point young Christians can be relatively easy prey to false teachers with new promises of a higher spiritual life. That was what Paul feared (Colossians 2:8, 16). Holiness-producing methods were now in vogue (Colossians 2:21–22) — and they seemed to be deeply spiritual, just the thing for earnest young believers. But, in fact, *“they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh”* (Colossians 2:23). Not new methods, but only an understanding of how the Gospel works, can provide an adequate foundation and pattern for dealing with sin. This is the theme of Colossians 3:1–17.



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Paul gives us the pattern and rhythm we need. Like Olympic long jumpers, we will not succeed unless we go back from the point of action to a point from which we can gain energy for the strenuous effort of dealing with sin. How, then, does Paul teach us to do this?

First of all, Paul underlines how important it is for us to be familiar with our new identity in Christ (3:1–4). How often when we fail spiritually we lament that we forgot who we really are — Christ's. We have a new identity. We are no longer “*in Adam*,” but “*in Christ*”; no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit; no longer dominated by the old creation but living in the new (Romans 5:12–21; 8:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul takes time to expound this. We have died with Christ (Colossians 3:3; we have even been buried with Christ, 2:12); we have been raised with Him (3:1), and our life is hidden with Him (3:3). Indeed, so united to Christ are we that Christ will not appear in glory without us (3:4).

Failure to deal with the presence of sin can often be traced back to spiritual amnesia, forgetfulness of our new, true, real identity. As a believer I am someone who has been delivered from the dominion of sin and who therefore is free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin's army in my heart.

Principle number *one*, then, is: Know, rest in, think through, and act upon your new identity — you are in Christ.

Second, Paul goes on to expose the workings of sin in every area of our lives (Colossians 3:5–11). If we are to deal with sin biblically, we must not make the mistake of thinking that we can limit our attack to only one area of failure in our lives. All sin must be dealt with. Thus Paul ranges through the manifestation of sin in private life (v. 5), everyday public life (v. 8), and church life (vv. 9–11; “*one another*,” “*here*,” that is, in the church fellowship). The challenge in mortification is akin to the challenge in dieting (itself a form of mortification!): once we begin we discover that there are all kinds of reasons we are overweight. We are really dealing with ourselves, not simply with calorie control. I am the problem, not the potato chips! Mortifying sin is a whole-of-life change.

Third, Paul's exposition provides us with practical guidance for mortifying sin. Sometimes it seems as if Paul gives exhortations (“Put to death...,” 3:5) without giving “*practical*” help to answer our “*how to?*” questions. Often today, Christians go to Paul to tell them what to do and then to the local Christian bookstore to discover how to do it! Why this *bifurcation* (divide in two)? Probably because we do not linger long enough over what Paul is saying. We do not sink our thinking deeply into the Scriptures. For, characteristically, whenever Paul issues an exhortation he surrounds it with hints as to how we are to put it into practice.

This is certainly true here. Notice how this passage helps to answer our “*how to?*” questions.

1. Learn to admit sin for what it really is. Call a spade a spade — call it “*sexual immorality*,” not “*I'm being tempted a little*”; call it “*impurity*,” not “*I'm struggling with my thought life*”; call it “*evil de sire, which is idolatry*,” not “*I think I need to order my priorities a bit better*.” This pattern runs right through this whole section. How powerfully this unmasks self-deceit — and helps us to unmask sin lurking in the hidden corners of our hearts!



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2. See sin for what your sin really is in God's presence. "*On account of these the wrath of God is coming*" (3:6). The masters of the spiritual life spoke of dragging our lusts (kicking and screaming, though they be) to the cross, to a wrath-bearing Christ. My sin leads to — not lasting pleasure — but holy divine displeasure. See the true nature of your sin in the light of its punishment. Too easily do we think that sin is less serious in Christians than it is in non-believers: "*It's forgiven, isn't it?*" Not if we continue in it (1 John 3:9)! Take a heaven's-eye view of sin and feel the shame of that in which you once walked (Colossians 3:7; see also Romans 6:21).
3. Recognize the inconsistency of your sin. You put off the "*old man*," and have put on the "*new man*" (3:9–10). You are no longer the "*old man*." The identity you had "*in Adam*" is gone. The old man was "*crucified with him [Christ] in order that the body of sin [probably "life in the body dominated by sin"] might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin*" (Romans 6:6). New men live new lives. Anything less than this is a contradiction of who I am "*in Christ*."
4. Put sin to death (Colossians 3:5). It is as "*simple*" as that. Refuse it, starve it, and reject it. You can not "*mortify*" sin without the pain of the kill. There is no other way!

But notice that Paul sets this in a very important, broader context. The negative task of putting sin to death will not be accomplished in isolation from the positive call of the Gospel to "*put on*" the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14). Paul spells this out in Colossians 3:12–17. Sweeping the house clean simply leaves us open to a further invasion of sin. But when we understand the "*glorious exchange*" principle of the Gospel of grace, then we will begin to make some real advance in holiness. As sinful desires and habits are not only rejected, but exchanged for Christ-like graces (3:12) and actions (3:13); as we are clothed in Christ's character and His graces are held together by love (v. 14), not only in our private life but also in the church fellowship (vv. 12–16), Christ's name and glory are manifested and exalted in and among us (3:17).

These are some of the things my friend and I talked about that memorable evening. We did not have an opportunity later to ask each other, "*How are you going?*" for it was our last conversation. He died some months later. I have often wondered how the months in between went in his life. But the earnest personal and pastoral concern in his question still echoes in my mind. They have a similar effect to the one Charles Simeon said he felt from the eyes of his much-loved portrait of the great Henry Martyn: "*Don't trifle!*" ~ **Dr. Sinclair Ferguson**

Which Laws Apply?

To this day, the question of the role of the law of God in the Christian life provokes much debate and discussion. This is one of those points where we can learn much from our forebears, and John Calvin's classic treatment of the law in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is particularly helpful. Calvin's instruction comes down to us in what he calls the **threefold** use of the law with respect to its relevance to the new covenant.

The law, in its **first** use, reveals the character of God, and that's valuable to any believer at any time. But as the law reveals the character of God, it provides a mirror to reflect to us our unholiness against the ultimate standard of righteousness. In that regard, the law serves as a schoolmaster to drive us to Christ.



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Which Laws Apply? - Cont'd

And one of the reasons that the Reformers and the Westminster divines thought that the law remained valuable to the Christian was because the law constantly drives us to the gospel. This also was one of the uses of the law that Martin Luther most strongly emphasized.

Second, the law functions as a restraint against sin. Now, on the one hand, the Reformers understood what Paul says in Romans 7 that in a sense the law prompts people to sin—the more of the law unregenerate people see, the more inclined they are to want to break it. Yet despite that tendency of the law, there still is a general salutary benefit for the world to have the restraints upon us that the law gives. Its warnings and threats restrain people from being as bad as they could be, and so civil order is preserved.

Third, and most important from Calvin's perspective, is that the law reveals to us what is pleasing to God. Technically speaking, Christians are not under the old covenant and its stipulations. Yet, at the same time, we are called to imitate Christ and to live as people who seek to please the living God (Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 1:9–12). So, although in one sense I'm not covenantally obligated to the law or under the curse of the law, I put that out the front door and I go around the back door and I say, "Oh Lord, I want to live a life that is pleasing to You, and like the Old Testament psalmist, I can say, 'Oh how I love Thy law.'" I can meditate on the law day and night because it reveals to me what is pleasing to God.

Let me give you a personal example. Several years ago, I was speaking in Rye, N.Y., at a conference on the holiness of God. After one of the sessions, the sponsors of the conference invited me to someone's house afterward for prayer and refreshments. When I arrived at the house, there were about twenty-five people in the parlor praying to their dead relatives. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I said, "Wait a minute. What is this? We're not allowed to do this. Don't you know that God prohibits this, and that it's an abomination in His sight and it pollutes the whole land and provokes His judgment?" And what was their immediate response? "That's the Old Testament." I said, "Yes, but what has changed to make a practice that God regarded as a capital offense during one economy of redemptive history now something He delights in?" And they didn't have a whole lot to say because from the New Testament it is evident that God is as against idolatry now as He was then.

Of course, as we read Scripture, we see that there are some parts of the law that no longer apply to new covenant believers, at least not in the same way that they did to old covenant believers. We make a distinction between moral laws, civil laws, and ceremonial laws such as the dietary laws and physical circumcision. That's helpful because there's a certain sense in which practicing some of the laws from the Old Testament as Christians would actually be blasphemy. Paul stresses in Galatians, for example, that if we were to require circumcision, we would be sinning.

Now, the distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws is helpful, but for the old covenant Jew, it was somewhat artificial. That's because it was a matter of the utmost moral consequences whether they kept the ceremonial laws. It was a moral issue for Daniel and his friends not to eat as the Babylonians did (Daniel 1). But the distinction between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws means that there's a bedrock body of righteous laws that God gives to His covenant people that have abiding significance and relevance before and after the coming of Christ.



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Which Laws Apply? - Cont'd

During the period of Reformed scholasticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Reformed theologians said that God legislates to Israel and to the new covenant church on *two* distinct bases: on the basis of divine natural law and on the basis of divine purpose. In this case, the theologians did not mean the *lex naturalis*, the law that is revealed in nature and in the conscience. By “natural law,” they meant those laws that are rooted and grounded in God’s own character. For God to abrogate these laws would be to do violence to His own person. For example, if God in the old covenant said, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” but now He says, “It’s OK for you to have other gods and to be involved in idolatry,” God would be doing violence to His own holy character. Statutes legislated on the basis of this natural law will be enforced at all times.

On the other hand, there is legislation made on the basis of the divine purpose in redemption, such as the dietary laws, that when their purpose is fulfilled, God can abrogate without doing violence to His own character. I think that’s a helpful distinction. It doesn’t answer every question, but it helps us discern which laws continue so that we can know what is pleasing to God. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Passing Down the Truth of God

I learned a vital spiritual lesson while participating in a track meet during my college years. I was running in the 4x400-meter relay at the Orange County Invitational. As a baseball player moonlighting in track and field, I wasn’t the fastest runner on our team. So, I ran the second leg.

Our strategy was simple. The first runner, a speedy sprinter, would get as big a lead as possible right out of the starting blocks. My job was merely to run a clean lap without dropping the baton. Our third man was strong and fast, and our fourth man was a blur. They could make up the whatever ground I might lose.

Several prestigious teams were competing that day, and our team managed to get into the finals. We were convinced we had a good shot at winning.

Our first man ran a great leg and made a perfect baton pass. I managed to finish my lap in a tight battle for first place. The third man went around the curve, came halfway down the back stretch, stopped, walked off, and sat down in the grass. The race kept going.

We thought he had pulled a hamstring or twisted an ankle. We all ran across the infield, expecting to find him writhing on the grass or at least wincing in pain. He wasn’t. He was sitting passively. We anxiously asked, “What happened? Are you hurt?” He said, “No, I’m OK. I just didn’t feel like running.”

I confess that all my thoughts in that moment were carnal. My teammates and I spontaneously responded with an outpouring of frustration, all three of us basically saying the same thing: “You can’t do that! You’re not in this by yourself! Do you realize the effort we have all put into training for this? Too much has been invested in you!”



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Passing Down the Truth of God - Cont'd

I've thought often about that moment in relation to our duty as believers. We are supposed to take the truth that was handed to us by our ancestors in the Christian faith and run with it—not aimlessly (1 Corinthians 9:26), but always pressing on toward the goal (Philippians 3:14)—so we can hand off the faith, intact and uncorrupted, to the next generation.

The Apostle Paul gave this charge to Timothy in his final epistle: *“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”* (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul was facing imminent martyrdom (4:6), and he was, of course, concerned with the question of who would continue his missionary work and who would lead the church after his departure. He therefore outlined for Timothy this simple pattern of succession and stability.

The command itself looks beyond Timothy to younger men whom he would train. It lays out a perpetual strategy for raising up generation after generation of church leaders. The baton that was passed from Paul to Timothy would ultimately be handed off to faithful men, who in turn would pass it to a fourth generation—and so on.

Although Paul's primary concern here is leadership development, the principle he gives Timothy has clear implications for every Christian in the every era. We are all part of a living chain. Each of us has been taught by someone who learned the truth from someone else. If you follow that chain backward, link by link, it goes back to the original Apostles—and beyond them to Christ Himself.

In order to be faithful stewards of what we have received, each of us needs to pass on to others what we have been taught. In other words, every Christian ought to be a teacher. No matter who you are, you can find someone who knows less than you and teach them. That responsibility is inherent in our Lord's Great Commission: *“Make disciples”* (Matthew 28:19).

The writer to the Hebrews scolded believers who were derelict in this duty: *“Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God”* (5:12). Because of their failure to become teachers, they needed to start learning from the beginning again. No wonder. What you teach you retain, and what you don't teach you tend to forget. Passing on what you have learned not only helps the person who is being discipled; it also strengthens the teacher.

Paul's charge to Timothy is carefully focused. He doesn't tell Timothy to be innovative. He doesn't encourage him to adapt his style to the fads and fashions of secular culture. He doesn't employ words like fresh, original, or imaginative, the verbal glue that binds so many twenty-first-century church-growth strategies together.

In fact, Paul gives Timothy practically the opposite mandate. It is a clear, narrowly defined directive. Timothy is to guard the deposit of truth he has received (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14) and pass it on, unmodified and unadulterated, to the next generation.



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Passing Down the Truth of God - Cont'd

Being an effective disciple-maker is not about being chic or creative. It's about faithfully guarding "*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3) and accurately transmitting it to an other generation.

It sounds paradoxical, but each Christian has a personal responsibility to keep the faith and to pass it on to others. That's what is required of those who would win the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7).

Anyone who breaks that centuries-old chain is like a relay runner who abandons the race before finishing. And what's at stake in this race is infinitely more important than any earthly trophy. Failure to run well and with endurance would be an inexcusable insult to our Lord, an offense against those who have taught us, a disappointment to those who have trained alongside us, and a grievous sin against those to whom we must hand the baton. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**

The Courage to be Reformed

When we come to grasp Reformed theology, it's not only our understanding of salvation that changes, but our understanding of everything. It's for this reason that when people wrestle through the rudimentary doctrines of Reformed theology and come to comprehend them, they often feel like they have been converted a second time. In fact, as many have admitted to me, the reality is that some have been converted for the very first time. It was through their examination of Reformed theology that they came face-to-face with the stark reality of their radical corruption and deadness in sin, God's unconditional election of His own and condemnation of others, Christ's actual accomplishment of redemption for His people, the Holy Spirit's effectual grace, the reason they persevere by God's preserving grace, and God's covenantal way of working in all of history for His glory. When people realize that ultimately, they didn't choose God, but He chose them, they naturally come to a point of humble admission of the amazing grace of God toward them. It's only then, when we recognize what wretches we really are, that we can truly sing "*Amazing Grace*." And that is precisely what Reformed theology does: it transforms us from the inside out and leads us to sing—it leads us to worship our sovereign and triune, gracious, and loving God in all of life, not just on Sundays but every day and in all of life. Reformed theology isn't just a badge we wear when being Reformed is popular and cool, it's a theology that we live and breathe, confess, and defend even when it's under attack.

The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, along with their fifteenth-century forerunners and their seventeenth-century descendants, did not teach and defend their doctrine because it was cool or popular, but because it was biblical, and they put their lives on the line for it. They were not only willing to die for the theology of Scripture, they were willing to live for it, to suffer for it, and to be considered fools for it. Make no mistake: the Reformers were bold and courageous not on account of their self-confidence and self-reliance but on account of the fact that they had been humbled by the gospel. They were courageous because they had been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and equipped to proclaim the light of truth in a dark age of lies. The truth they preached was not new; it was ancient. It was the doctrine of the martyrs, the fathers, the Apostles, and the patriarchs—it was the doctrine of God set forth in sacred Scripture.

The Reformers didn't make up their theology; rather, their theology made them who they were. The theology of Scripture made them Reformers. For they did not set out to be Reformers, per se—they set out to be faithful to God and faithful to Scripture.



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The Courage to be Reformed - Cont'd

Neither the *solas* of the Reformation nor the doctrines of grace (the five points of Calvinism) were invented by the Reformers, nor were they by any means the sum total of Reformation doctrine. Rather, they became underlying doctrinal premises that served to help the church of subsequent eras confess and defend what she believes. Even today there are many who think they embrace Reformed theology, but their Reformed theology only runs as deep as the *solas* of the Reformation and the doctrines of grace. What's more, there are many who say they adhere to Reformed theology but do so without anyone knowing they are Reformed. Such "closet Calvinists" neither confess any of the historic Reformed confessions of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries nor employ any distinctly Reformed theological language.

However, if we truly adhere to Reformed theology according to the historic Reformed confessions, we cannot help but be identified as Reformed. In truth, it's impossible to remain a "closet Calvinist," and it's impossible to remain Reformed without anyone knowing it—it will inevitably come out. To be historically Reformed, one must adhere to a Reformed confession, and not only adhere to it but confess it, proclaim it, and defend it. Reformed theology is fundamentally a confessional theology.

Reformed theology is also an all-encompassing theology. It changes not only what we know, it changes how we know what we know. It not only changes our understanding of God, it changes our understanding of ourselves. Indeed, it not only changes our view of salvation, it changes how we worship, how we evangelize, how we raise our children, how we treat the church, how we pray, how we study Scripture—it changes how we live, move, and have our being. Reformed theology is not a theology that we can hide, and it is not a theology to which we can merely pay lip service. For that has been the habit of heretics and theological progressives throughout history. They claim to adhere to their Reformed confessions, but they never actually confess them. They claim to be Reformed only when they are on the defensive—when their progressive (albeit popular) theology is called into question, and, if they are pastors, only when their jobs are on the line. While theological liberals might be in churches and denominations that identify as "Reformed," they are ashamed of such an identity and have come to believe that being known as "Reformed" is a stumbling block to some and an offense to others. Moreover, according to the historic, ordinary marks of the church—the pure preaching of the Word of God, prayer according to the Word of God, the right use of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the consistent practice of church discipline—such "Reformed" churches are often not even true churches. Today, there are many laypeople and pastors who are in traditionally Reformed and Protestant churches and denominations who, along with their churches and denominations, left their Reformed moorings and rejected their confessions years ago.

Contrary to this trend, what we most need are men in the pulpit who have the courage to be Reformed—men who aren't ashamed of the faith once delivered to the saints but who are ready to contend for it, not with lip service but with all their life and all their might. We need men in the pulpit who are bold and unwavering in their proclamation of the truth and who are at the same time gracious and compassionate. We need men who will preach the unvarnished truth of Reformed theology in season and out of season, not with a finger pointing in the face but with an arm around the shoulder.

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The Courage to be Reformed - Cont'd

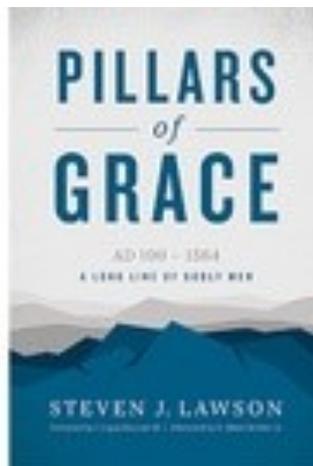
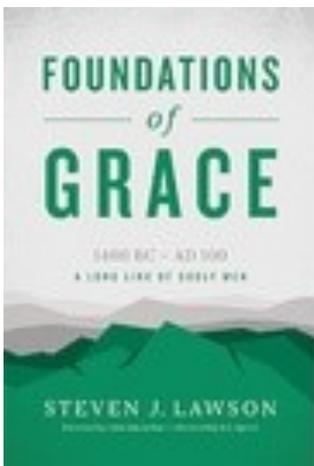
Even today there are many who think they embrace Reformed theology, but their Reformed theology only runs as deep as the *solas* of the Reformation and the doctrines of grace. What's more, there are many who say they adhere to Reformed theology but do so without anyone knowing they are Reformed. Such "closet Calvinists" neither confess any of the historic Reformed confessions of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries nor employ any distinctly Reformed theological language.

We need men who love the Reformed confessions precisely because they love the Lord our God and His unchanging, inspired, and authoritative Word. It's only when we have men in the pulpit who have the courage to be Reformed that we will have people in the pew who grasp Reformed theology and its effects in all of life, so that we might love God more with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the theology that reformed the church in the sixteenth century, and that is the only theology that will bring reformation and revival in the twenty-first century. For in our day of radical progressive theological liberalism, the most radical thing we can be is orthodox according to our Reformed confessions, yet not with arrogance but with courage and compassion for the church and for the lost, all for the glory of God, and His glory alone. ~ *Reverend Burk Parsons - Co-Pastor Saint Andrews Chapel - Sanford, FL.*

Book Reviews

Foundations of Grace and Pillars of Grace

Dr. Steven J. Lawson



The doctrines of grace are not a sixteenth-century invention. The Scriptures and the greatest men of church history have all celebrated God's free grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Moses, the prophets and the apostles, the early church fathers, and the Reformers together form a long line of godly men who have upheld these truths. In *Foundations of Grace* and *Pillars of Grace*, Dr. Steven J. Lawson walks readers through history showing that, far from being a new innovation, the doctrines of grace are the clear teaching of Scripture and Christians through the ages. They are a tremendous gift to Christians today.



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Birthdays and Anniversary Corner - May 2017

Birthdays

Elyse T. (1) Mike M. (22)
Francis C. (2) Jackson T. (22)
Patrick D. (2) Brian R. (26)
Sarah H. (22) John H. (30)

Anniversaries

Tom and Marcie S. (22)
Ben and Charlene S. (25)

Rejecting Kingdoms of This World

Augustine stood by the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. He had heard of the hordes of barbarians that were moving as a juggernaut against Rome and the empire. The reports were ominous and foreboding, lending little reason for hope of the survival of the Roman culture.

Augustine said a prayer in three parts. In the *first* part, he implored God to save the empire. In the *second* part, he asked for grace to accept the destruction of civilization as he knew it, if that should be the will of Providence. In the *third* part, he asked that in either case he might be permitted soon to die and enter his eternal rest.

Permanence and security cannot be found in the structures of man. Concrete crumbles. Glass shatters. Steel melts. When God says “No!” the cities and kingdoms of men come to ruin. God simply will not tolerate man’s quest for autonomy—his lust for idols of his own making. No city, no nation, no culture can survive the judgment of God. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

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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