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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 Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Reality of the Gospel

The pattern of the Christian year is an exercise of the Church’s discipline. The annual celebrations of Christmas and Resurrection Day force the Church to ponder again the truths of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. Christians understand that every Lord’s Day is Resurrection Day, but this Sunday is the festival which draws all Christians face to face with the empty tomb and the truth of the resurrected Lord.

Resurrection Sunday is the central event in the church year—the climax of worship, expectation, and celebration. This celebration is also an acid test of the Church’s faithfulness and conviction.

The secular world has done its best to make a mess of Christmas, but it has largely ignored our celebration of the Resurrection. Where commercialism intrudes, it comes in the forms of eggs and chicks and rabbits—none of which claim any connection with the Resurrection. The fact is, the secular world will attempt to domesticate, commercialize, and tame the babe in the manger—but it will run at breakneck speed from the cross and the empty tomb.

That cross stands as condemnation on all human attempts at self-righteousness, and the fallen world will do all within its power to hide the cross from sight. The empty tomb is the seal and confirmation of the cross, and the world will shield its eyes.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead separates Christianity from all mere religion—whatever its form. Christianity without the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is merely one religion among many. “And if Christ is not risen,” said the Apostle Paul, “then our preaching is empty and your faith is in vain” [1 Corinthians 15:14]. Furthermore, “You are still in your sins!” [v. 17b]. Paul could not have chosen stronger language. “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” [v. 19].

Yet, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has been under persistent attacks since the Apostolic age. Why? Because it is the central confirmation of Jesus’ identity as the incarnate Son of God, and the ultimate sign of Christ’s completed work of atonement, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation. Those who oppose Christ, whether first century religious leaders or twentieth century secularists, recognize the Resurrection as the vindication of Christ against His enemies.

Those who would attack the Church and reject its gospel must direct their arrows at the most crucial truth claim of the New Testament and the disciples: That Jesus Christ, having suffered death on a cross, though sinless, having borne the sins of those He came to save, having been buried in a sealed and guarded grave, was raised by the power of God on the third day.



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The Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Reality of the Gospel - Continued

As Paul well understood, Christianity stands or falls with the empty grave. If Christ is not raised, we are to be pitied, for our faith is in vain. Those who would preach a resurrectionless Christianity have exchanged the truth of the gospel for a lie. But, asserted Paul, Christ is risen from the dead. Our faith is not in vain, but is in the risen Lord. He willingly faced death on a cross and defeated death from the grave. The Resurrection is the ultimate sign of God's vindication of His Son.

As John A. Broadus preached over a century ago: "It was the signed manual of the Deity, it was the seal of the Sovereign of the Universe affixed to His claim, it declared Him to be all that He had ever professed to be, and so it establishes the truth of all His teachings and the truth of the whole Christian society. The great fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the central fact of the evidence of Christianity."

Believers have no reason to be defensive concerning the Resurrection. To the contrary, any denial of the Resurrection is a denial of the Savior. The biblical evidence is overwhelming.

As the disciples preached in the earliest Christian sermons, "This Jesus God has raised up, of whom we are all witnesses Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" [Acts 2:32,36].

The Resurrection was not a dawning awareness of Christ's continuing presence among the disciples, it was the literal, physical raising of Jesus' body from the dead. The Church is founded upon the resurrected Lord, who appeared among His disciples and was seen by hundreds of others.

The Church does not have mere permission to celebrate the Resurrection, it has a mandate to proclaim the truth that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrected Lord gave the Church a sacred commission to take the gospel throughout the world. As Paul made clear, the resurrection of Christ also comes as a comfort to the believer, for His defeat of death is a foretaste and promise of our own resurrection by His power. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" [1 Corinthians 15:53].

So, as the Church gathers to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should look backward in thankfulness to that empty tomb and forward to the fulfillment of Christ's promises in us. For Resurrection Day is not merely a celebration—it is truly preparation as well. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of our resurrection from the dead, and of Christ's total victory over sin and death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the very center of the Christian gospel. The empty tomb is full of power. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

Six Great Threats to the Christian Family

The Christian family is under constant assault. Western hemisphere Christians have awakened to this reality in recent years as Western nations embrace everything from homosexual union as marriage, to legally forbidding parents from disciplining their own children, to restricted parental rights regarding health care. As serious as these issues remain, some of the deadliest enemies of the Christian family come from within rather than from without.



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Six Great Threats to the Christian Family - Continued

Consider the following:

1. **Luke-warmness**—“I know your works,” said the Lord, “you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). May our Christian homes never be accused of such a state. We dare not limp along. We will not rest with consistently attending church, children enrolled in the youth group, and volunteering on Sunday mornings. We desire a family centered upon Christ. We labor to see the Word of God dominate our home, shape our common living together, and inform our conversations. We seek to be a beacon of light in our neighborhood, an encouragement to our friends, and a faithfully serving family in the church. We will not rest on what our family has done, but will seek to live more and more in light of God’s grace and goodness.
2. **Moralism**—Morality matters to our family, but we treat moralism as an enemy. We are not laboring to simply do good, but to do good to the glory of God. As we live our lives, we seek to live in a manner that reflects the heart change we experienced in Christ. “Every healthy tree bears good fruit” (Matthew 7:17). Our fruit speaks of our root. As we parent, we are on-guard against raising mere moralists. We long to see fruit in keeping with true repentance and faith.
3. **Legalism**—Salvation is by grace alone (Ephesians 2) and we aim at a home filled with that grace. As we live life together, our family attempts to operate in grace. Grace established the banner of Christ’s rule over our home and continues to hang by that same grace. “Having begun by the Spirit,” we are not seeking to be “perfected by the flesh” (Galatians 3: 3). As a family, we seek the Lord in prayer and Bible reading. We call down His grace and influence and are quick to extend grace to one another. We are quick to forgive and grant forgiveness. When sin takes its toll, we respond with love and not guilt. Our children know discipline and rules are founded upon and exercised in parental love that will not disappear. They are reassured daily of that strong foundation.
4. **Busyness**—Our family-life is safeguarded. The trappings of this world possess little allure. The desire for more, success, and accomplishments does not drive our family. We choose our outside engagements carefully, so that we are not so busy that we miss the singular most important thing—pursuing Christ and serving His Church. The “rat race” of this world is not our race. We seek to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).
5. **Isolation**—We live in community and our family does not define that community. The Lord sovereignly placed us in the Body. As members of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5), we know we belong to others. Therefore, our family engages others in the church. We exercise hospitality, sacrificially love, and willingly allow others to minister to us. Furthermore, we recognize He placed us in our neighborhood, city, and county. Our neighbors are our neighbors. We live in a mission field which we dare not neglect.
6. **Idolatry**—Though we love our families, we seek not to love them inordinately. We endeavor to be worshipping families, not worshippers of our families. Therefore, though our family is precious to us, we sacrifice for the sake of others, Christ, and His Church. As we see all of life, so we see our family—it exists for Christ’s glory and purposes. This means we abandon some things our family would enjoy, desire, and pursue for the sake of serving Him. We give, because of all He gave for us.

The Christian family is a battleground. The attacks come from without and from within. May the Lord grant us grace as we seek to live as a family for His glory and our very good. ~ *The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals*



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Muslims Need Christ

Just before I sat down to write this article, the terrorist group known as ISIS claimed responsibility for another attack in the Middle East. In this latest incident, Muslim terrorists reportedly killed more than twelve people, injured more than twenty-five people, and took as many as fifty hostages. Sadly, we have grown accustomed to such horrendous news—so accustomed that we have almost come to expect such news every day. If we have not become desensitized to these sinful and shameful acts of terrorism, we feel a range of emotions, from anger to sadness, vengeance to helplessness, defensiveness to aggression.

ISIS is a Muslim jihadist organization striving to establish a caliphate to rule over the entire Muslim civilization and, eventually, over the entire world. A caliphate is an Islamic body ruled by a single political and religious leader, called a caliph. The caliph is regarded as successor to Muhammad and the supreme leader of all Muslims. ISIS is, without question, a Muslim group striving to be faithful to its interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and to be faithful to Sharia, the moral code and religious law of Islam. However, not all who claim to be Muslims have the same interpretation of the Qur'an. Many Muslims throughout the world only follow certain aspects of the Qur'an and Sharia law. Some Muslims, particularly in the West, have denounced the actions of ISIS.

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, but it is also one of the most divided religions in the world. Islam's varied socio-religious expressions and Quranic interpretations can give the appearance of numerous Islamic religions. In fact, most of those who claim to be Muslims whom I have met over the years in Africa, Iran, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Central Florida (home to about thirty thousand Muslims) have never read the Qur'an and do not faithfully follow the Five Pillars of Islam. Most Muslims I have met are Muslims in name—cultural, familial, national Muslims—but they are not practicing, faithful Muslims. Nevertheless, all Muslims—whether they are nominal Muslims or fundamentalist Muslims, whether they are our next door neighbors or members of ISIS—need to hear the gospel and need to repent and trust Jesus Christ alone, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Although we do not worship the same God, we are all made in the image of the one and only triune God, Yahweh, who calls us to love Muslims and be ready to give an answer with gentleness and respect to those Muslims who ask us about the hope that is in us. ~ **Burk Parsons - Editor of *Tabletalk Magazine* and serves as Co-Pastor of *Saint Andrew's Chapel - Sanford, Florida***

Explaining Anomalies

Unbelievers often allege that the Bible is “full of contradictions.” I've noted in many places over the years, however, that most of the contradictions people suggest really do not qualify as contradictions but merely reflect the difference in perspective we get when several eyewitnesses describe the same event but give different details. In such cases, the accounts do not contradict one another; rather, each account may emphasize different aspects of the same event, such that we get a fuller picture when we see how the details can be harmonized. Variations in perspective are exactly what we should expect even in a divinely inspired text, for the Holy Spirit did not override the personalities and styles of the individual authors when they wrote. Instead, the Spirit worked through their concerns to give us an inerrant record of what happened even as each writer focuses on some details and not others.



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Explaining Anomalies - Continued

The vast majority of supposed “contradictions” in Scripture are relatively easy to reconcile. However, for the sake of honesty, I must acknowledge that there are a handful of problems in Scripture that are exceedingly difficult. For instance, it’s hard at times to square 1 and 2 Chronicles with 1 and 2 Kings, particularly with respect to when certain kings reigned, how long they ruled, and when they took the throne. Some have done the yeoman’s work of figuring out how these accounts fit together, which requires detailed knowledge of how ancient Near Eastern peoples recorded dates, periods of co-regency when two kings ruled at the same time, and other such things. No universally accepted solution has yet been found for every problem, but the work continues, and there’s every reason to believe we will have better answers as we learn more about how ancient Near Eastern writers, including the authors of Kings and Chronicles, did their work.

I’m confident such problems will eventually be solved because we serve a God who speaks truthfully and consistently, and because archaeological discoveries continue to confirm the biblical account. As an example, for many years all we knew about Pontius Pilate came from the Bible and a few other extrabiblical documents, so some people questioned whether Pilate ever existed. But in 1961, an ancient inscription mentioning Pilate was found in what was once the city Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, thereby confirming that Pilate was indeed procurator of Judea during Jesus’ time. Another formerly “assured result of higher criticism” that “disproved” the Bible relates to the story of Abraham. For a long time, there was no archaeological evidence that camels had been domesticated in the patriarchal period, and many people said that proved the Genesis account to be fictional because the Abraham story includes domesticated camels. But eventually, archaeological discoveries pushed back the domestication of camels hundreds of years—well into the patriarchal period.

Other discrepancies in the biblical account have yet to be resolved, but that doesn’t mean we should doubt Scripture’s truthfulness. Here, I’m simply following the course of ordinary science. Every so often, we see massive changes in scientific theory, paradigm shifts in which there is a change in the overarching model adopted to make sense of the data. Scientific paradigms are structural theories that explain reality, but every scientific paradigm has had to deal with anomalies, for every paradigm suffers from the presence of details that it cannot neatly explain. But you don’t throw out the paradigm the first time you find an anomaly the paradigm cannot explain. You wait, you study, you get more data, and so on.

The paradigm doesn’t shift until you get enough of these anomalies challenging the system. Copernican astronomy did not replace Ptolemaic astronomy because there were only a few details Ptolemy’s system couldn’t explain. The Ptolemaic system worked for many centuries until too many anomalies were discovered. The Copernican model was then adopted because it better explains the data and has fewer anomalies.

Overall, the trend with respect to apparent biblical discrepancies is that the number of them is decreasing. If maybe there were once a hundred such difficulties, that list has been pared down to a handful. At this point, we don’t throw the Bible out based on a handful of unresolved difficulties when everything indicates a greater confidence in Scripture’s truthfulness than we had before.

We tend to be too quick in accusing normal people, let alone the Bible, of contradictions. Now, we’re all capable of inconsistency, incoherency, and contradiction. But common courtesy requires at least that we give others the benefit of a second glance. We should strive to figure out how someone can consistently affirm two seemingly contradictory positions.



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Explaining Anomalies - Continued

In giving that second glance, we often find that what others are saying is not as contradictory as it first seemed. If we extend this courtesy to others, how much more do we owe it to the Apostles? Before we accuse Paul of a contradiction, we ought to have enough respect for his importance to see if what he says in Ephesians really contradicts what he says in Galatians.

One of the most satisfying and faith-increasing exercises in my own lifetime has involved giving focused attention to alleged biblical difficulties. That's because the more I study them and see their resolutions, the more I back away from the text in utter amazement that the Bible can be so coherent and so consistent and so unified at the tiniest level of the fine details. Its symmetry, its complexity, and its harmony are astonishing. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Difference or Contradiction?

We live in a day when consistency of thought is demeaned by many people, and individuals maintain that contradiction is the hallmark of truth, particularly in religious matters. Yet, in practice, human beings seek consistency. Consider liberal Protestantism. Decades ago, most of the mainline denominations abandoned the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. Originally, these denominations thought they could continue affirming the other core tenets of Christianity. As the years passed, however, it became clear that the rejection of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scriptures leads to the denial of Christian orthodoxy on other matters. Most churches that abandoned biblical inerrancy and infallibility eventually rejected the atonement, biblical sexual ethics, and other teachings. Those denominations had to do that for consistency's sake. To deny that God's Word is without error is to deny that we have a trustworthy revelation from Him. Thus, it doesn't ultimately matter what the Bible says about anything.

When it comes to studying the actual consistency of Scripture, it's not long before we have to deal with allegations that the Bible is full of contradictions. This can be devastating to the Christian faith, because we know that if the Bible has real contradictions, it's not a consistent account, and if it's not a consistent account, it can't be divinely inspired.

The main thing I want to say about this issue is that most alleged contradictions turn out not to be contradictions at all. When I was a seminary student, my professors frequently taught the theories of "higher" critics who refused to affirm the infallibility of Scripture. One of my fellow seminarians, a brilliant fellow, struggled with these theories. He had come to seminary believing in Scripture's consistency, but by the time he was a senior, he was one of the casualties of the exposure to this relentless skepticism about the Bible. I remember one discussion in the hallway of the seminary where he said: "R.C., how can you still believe in the inerrancy of Scripture after all we've gone through here? Don't you see that the Bible is full of contradictions?"

At the time, he couldn't list even ten examples of contradictions in the Bible. So I suggested he go home and come up with thirty contradictions that we could look at together. When we met the next day, he brought a list of about twenty. He gave me the first "contradiction," and we looked at the apparently contradictory passages together, and we found that there was variation between the two accounts. But variation and contradiction aren't the same thing. We're familiar with how two eyewitnesses might see the same crime but report it differently.



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Difference or Contradiction? - Continued

They remember different things about the event because of their different perspectives, but the details of the two accounts don't conflict. In fact, the authorities like to have many witnesses to a crime because comparing the stories gives a fuller view of what happened. The same thing happens when historians research an event and read eyewitness accounts of it.

As my friend and I looked at the first alleged biblical problem, we found it was possible for the two accounts to agree. Then, we looked at the rest of the "contradictions." Some examples were more challenging than others, but what happened was this: in every example, we concluded together that there was no real contradiction.

Read the Bible carefully, and you'll find variations of perspective. Consider the Gospels' presentation of the resurrection. For example, Matthew 28:1–10 and Mark 16:1–8 say there was one angel at the empty tomb, while Luke 24:1–12 mentions the presence of two angels at Jesus' grave. That was one of the "contradictions" my friend brought to me. So I said we should assume for the sake of argument that two angels were present. If so, would it not be possible for one eyewitness to be more concerned about who wasn't there—Jesus—than he was about the number of angels present, especially if one of them did not speak? The disciple could have said, "I went there, and I saw an angel, who said x, y, and z," without mentioning the second angel because the presence of two angels wasn't that significant to the disciple who was writing. I asked my friend, "What word is conspicuously absent from this disciple's report that must be there to have a true contradiction?" The answer was clear: the word *only*. If there were two angels, we know there had to be at least one; thus, since Mark and Matthew don't say there was only one angel there, there's no contradiction between them and Luke. Instead, there's variation in perspectives because they're relying on different eyewitness reports of the same event. Such variation is exactly what we should expect from independent accounts.

It took many centuries and many different writers to give us the Bible. It didn't drop from heaven on a parachute. The doctrine of inspiration doesn't mean we won't find difficult-to-reconcile texts in Scripture. The Bible is a divine book—but it's also a very human book, not in that it is filled with human errors but in that it reflects how human beings tell stories. No two people write in exactly the same way, and no two human beings report their perspectives on the same event identically. Two people can accurately represent the same event without covering all the same details. That's the kind of thing we find in Scripture. Difference does not mean contradiction. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr*

Contentment Through Pain

If God has given His Son to die for us, let us beware of doubting His kindness and love in any painful providence of our daily life. Let us never suppose that He can give us anything that is not really for our good. Let us remember the words of Paul, "He who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all—how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things." (Romans 8:32). Let us see in every sorrow and trouble of our earthly pilgrimage, the hand of Him who gave Christ to die for our sins. That hand can never smite us except in love. He who gave us His only begotten Son, will never withhold anything from us that is really for our good. Let us lean back on this thought and be content. Let us say to ourselves in the darkest hour of trial, "This also is ordered by Him who gave Christ to die for my sins. It cannot be wrong. It is done in love. It must be well." ~ *J.C. Ryle*

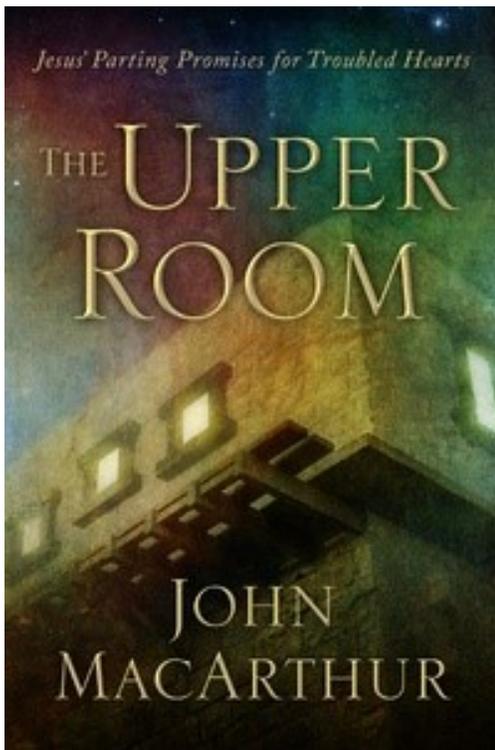


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Book Review

The Upper Room *Dr. John MacArthur*



In a borrowed or rented banqueting room atop some shop or large family dwelling in Jerusalem, the drama unfolded. The events and teaching recorded in John 13-16, commonly known as the Upper Room Discourse, reveal some of the most poignant and powerful promises for believers in all of Scripture.

Jesus and His disciples were standing on the precipice of the darkest night in the history of the world. The Lord of glory was about to be betrayed and murdered. The disciples would be scattered, and the boldest of them would deny even knowing Him.

The Lord knew full well that He Himself would soon undergo an unimaginable deluge of woe. He would be spit on and mocked by evil men. He would bear the sins of the world. He would be cursed with the wrath of God for others' sins. He would feel as if His Father had utterly abandoned Him. Any other man in that situation would have been in such a state of uncontrollable agitation that He would never have been able to focus His attention on the needs of others—but Jesus was different. He wanted His followers to know the peace of the One who has overcome the world.

During those final hours before Jesus' betrayal, He gave His disciples—and consequently, all believers throughout history—His parting promises, His last will and testament. It is the inheritance of every believer in Christ.

In *The Upper Room*, pastor John MacArthur takes us back to that night and the glorious hope we have in Christ. This is vintage MacArthur—an exposition of the text that resonates with devotion to the Lord and love for God's people, calling us to know and love the One who loved us to the end.



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The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

Marriage - Chapter 25

1. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman. It is not lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time.
2. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of the human race with legitimate children, and for preventing immorality.
3. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able to give their rational consent, yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. Therefore those who profess the true faith should not marry unbelievers or idolaters. Nor should the godly be unequally yoked by marrying those who lead evil lives, or who maintain heresy.
4. Marriage must not to be contracted within the degrees of blood relationship or kinship forbidden in the Word, nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any human law or consent of parties so that such people may live together as man and wife.

Making Jesus in Our Own Image

Many years ago now there was a scholarly movement that became known as “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” Scholars said “Let’s try to get behind the Gospels to find out who Jesus really was, and what he was really like.” So they took bits and pieces of the Gospel testimony and made a picture of Christ. One of the shrewdest things that was said about this movement was that these scholars were like people looking down a well to find Jesus, but didn’t realize that the “Jesus” they saw was really just a reflection of themselves from the water at the bottom of the well!

Sometimes I feel this is actually what has happened in popular evangelicalism. Our “Jesus” is actually a reflection of ourselves. This is the constant danger when we don’t simply open the Scriptures and listen to their testimony about Jesus: we make a Jesus in our own image, usually domesticated. Sadly, much that dominates the Christian media seems to fall foul here. Any Jesus who isn’t both Savior and Lord, Sacrificial Lamb of God and Reigning King, cannot be the Jesus of the Gospels. And any Jesus who does not call us to radical, sacrificial, and yes, painful, discipleship, cannot be the real Jesus.

I sometimes think that our danger as evangelicals is that we use what I sometimes tongue-in-cheek call the “Find Waldo Method” of reading the Gospels. Remember Waldo—the little fellow in the red and white sweater in the midst of the vast crowds? The whole point of the Waldo books was to try to find him. Many people read the Gospels that way, always asking “What does this have to say about me?” But that means that at the end of the day we’re looking for what they have to say about me, and my life, and my improvement. Yes, the Gospels have much to say to me. But they aren’t about me... they’re about Christ. And we need to listen to them and master them, or better be mastered by them and by the Christ they describe. ~ *Dr. Sinclair Ferguson*



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - April 2016

Birthdays

*Carol Lawrence - April 7
David Allesandro - April 8
Doug Hall - April 27
Sarah Lootens - April 27*

Anniversaries

Walt and Carol Lawrence - April 15

Good Things Come to Those Who Pray

“...to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of Him, and still not go to Him and not ask of Him—this would be of us little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him...”

“Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable. Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is calling upon His name [cf. Joel 2:32]. By so doing we invoke the presence both of His providence, through which He watches over and guards our affairs, and of His power, through which He sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of His goodness, through which He receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and in short, it is by prayer that we call Him to reveal Himself as wholly present to us.” ~ *John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)*

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/Elder: Ben Scofield, pastorscofield@gmail.com
Teaching Elders: Mike Myers and Mike Prince
Editor: Walt Lawrence, gwlcf10415@gmail.com

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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.