



Volume 2, Issue 6

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

The Heresy of Indifference

Doctrine matters—it matters in life and in death. Our doctrine determines our destiny. It not only affects our view about God but our view about everything. We are doctrinal beings by nature. Everyone holds to some sort of doctrine; the question is whether or not our doctrine is biblical. Consequently, we dare not be indifferent about doctrine. Indeed, there is a reason we've never heard of a Christian martyr who was indifferent about doctrine. Indifference about doctrine is the mother of every heresy in all of history, and in our day indifference about doctrine is spreading like wildfire in the pulpits and pews of our churches. Ironically, the assertion that doctrine doesn't matter is in fact a doctrine in itself.

When people tell me they are into Jesus but not into doctrine, I tell them that if they are not into doctrine, they are, in fact, not into Jesus. We cannot know Jesus without knowing doctrine, and we cannot love God without knowing God, and the way we know God is by studying His Word. Doctrine comes from God, it teaches us about God, and by faith it leads us back to God in worship, service, and love. Indifference to doctrine is indifference to God, and indifference to God is indifference to our own eternity. Pastors who think it is relevant and cool to be indifferent about doctrine—who play down the necessity and importance of doctrine and who fail to preach and explain doctrine in their sermons—are in fact failing to give their people that which will save their souls. For us to downplay doctrine or to be intentionally fuzzy in preaching doctrine isn't cool or humble or relevant, it's outright arrogant. There is nothing more relevant than doctrine, there is nothing more humbling than doctrine, and there is nothing that more quickly gets our eyes off ourselves and fixes them on our loving and gracious God than doctrine that proceeds from God.

Doctrine, however, is not an end in itself. Doctrine exists to help us know, love, worship, and glorify the God who is. There are few things the devil wants more than to have churches full of people who think they are as straight as a rifle barrel in their doctrine—but just as empty as one—in their application of that doctrine. Doctrine rightly understood is doctrine rightly applied. If we separate our doctrine from our life, our doctrine will lead to our death. Doctrine is a gift from God, and it flows from the inspired pages of the Word of God that we might love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. This is why we must be dogmatic in our doctrine—not dogmatically harsh, but dogmatically humble as we seek to know, proclaim, and defend the doctrine that teaches us about our loving and holy Lord who gave Himself for us. We must be dogmatic in our doctrine and dogmatic in living it out for the glory of God. As Matthew Henry wrote, “Those who teach by their doctrine must teach by their life, or else they pull down with one hand what they build up with the other.”

~ Burk Parsons - Editor of Tabletalk Magazine and co-Pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla.



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False Teachers Accursed

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (v. 8). Galatians 1:8–9

Galatians is unique among the Pauline epistles in that a commendation of the original audience does not follow the salutation. In his other letters Paul voices his thanks for his readers’ faith and other similar fruits of their spirituality (for example, Romans 1:8; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3), but the body of Galatians begins with him castigating the churches of Galatia for following another gospel (Galatians 1:6). It is clear that Paul believes this “different gospel” cannot provide salvation as its content differs from the gospel he received from Christ. Instead, this other “gospel” is no gospel at all (v. 7). If, as the New Testament declares, the gospel is the good news that God’s kingdom has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:14–41; Romans 1:1–6), then works of the Law cannot be added as a requirement for salvation. Jesus has done all that is needed to redeem His people; therefore, the only way to enjoy redemption is to trust Him and what He has done, without resting on our good deeds at all.

To make the works of the Law a prerequisite for salvation denies the sufficiency of Jesus’ righteousness and atonement. This different gospel contradicts Scripture’s uniform testimony that God alone graciously rescues His people (Exodus 20:2; Ephesians 1:7), substituting human ability to earn the Almighty’s favor for our utter inability to obey Him perfectly. It downplays the gravity of sin and the holiness of God, replacing Yahweh, the sovereign Creator who cannot tolerate even a hint of transgression, with a god who cares so little about evil that he declares men righteous based on their imperfect, sin-stained deeds. Such idolatry is the sin that births all others, and so Paul is led to pronounce a curse on anyone who teaches a gospel other than the gospel of grace (Galatians 1:8–9). This is serious business indeed, as Martin Luther teaches us in his commentary that to be accursed is to have “nothing to do, no participation, or communion with God.”

The apostle will curse even himself should he deviate from the gospel of grace (v. 8). Even he has no right to change the message, for his gospel’s truth and authority is grounded in God Himself. Paul, John Calvin comments, “demands from all, equally with himself, subjection to the word of God.” ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**

Five Evangelical Myths or Half Truths

It can happen even in careful systematic theology. How much more so in popular parlance? We take what the Bible actually teaches, rephrase it so we can understand it, and end up believing our own phrasing, rather than the actual biblical truth. It’s not malicious, but it is dangerous. What follows are five common thoughts, common expressions, within the evangelical church that just aren’t so.

1. “All sins are equal in the sight of God.”

Well, no. It is true enough that every sin is worthy of God’s eternal wrath. It is true enough that if we have broken part of the law we have broken the law (James actually says this.)



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Five Evangelical Myths or Half Truths - Continued

It is true enough that unjust anger is a violation of the commandment against murder (Jesus actually says this.) None of this, however, means all sins are equal in the sight of God. To say that because all sins deserve eternal wrath means they are all equal is like saying that all numbers over 100 are equal. The truth is that Jesus said of the Pharisees that while they rightly tithed their mint and their cumin, they neglected the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23). No sin is weightless, but some weigh more than others.

2. “Hell is the absence of God.”

Well, no. If God is omnipresent, and He is, is there anywhere He can not be? David understood this, and thus affirmed, “If I make my bed in Sheol, Thou art there” (Psalm 139:8). Hell isn’t the absence of God, but the presence of His wrath. God is there, but His grace, His kindness, His peace are not. God is the great horror of hell.

3. “Jesus saves us from our sins.”

Well, no. It is absolutely true that Jesus saves us. When we face trouble, He is the one we should be crying out to for deliverance. But the great problem with our sins isn’t our sins, but the wrath of God. The trouble I need to be delivered from is the wrath of God. Hell is not my sins, but the wrath of God. We don’t need to be saved from our sins. We need to be saved from the wrath due for our sins.

4. “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”

Well, not if your name is Esau. Okay, there certainly is a kind of universal love that God has for all mankind. And certainly all those who repent and believe will be blessed. And certainly God calls all men everywhere to repent. But it is also true that God has prepared vessels for destruction (Romans 9:22). Being prepared for destruction likely wouldn’t be considered “wonderful” by anyone. We don’t know God’s hidden plans, and thus should preach the gospel to all the world. But we shouldn’t, in so preaching, promise what He has not promised.

5. “Money is the root of all evil.”

Well, no. Actually this one is wrong on two counts. First, the text (I Timothy 6:10) tells us that it is the love of money, not money, and that it is all sorts of evil, not all evil. If money were the root of all evil, all we would need to do to bring paradise on earth would be to have no more money. If money were the root of all evil, the problem would be out there, rather than in our hearts. Sin is not an it problem, but an us problem.

The devil isn’t lazy. He will take the breaks we give him. Myths and half-truths are perfect opportunities for us to miss who we are, who God is, and how He reconciles His own to Himself. Perhaps were we more faithful to His Word, we might just be more faithful. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.**



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Above Reproach

A small item I read in the news twenty years ago has stuck in my mind ever since. The Rockdale County High School Bulldogs basketball team of Conyers, Georgia, won their first-ever state championship in March of 1987, rolling over all their opponents. After eighteen years of coaching the team without a championship, coach Cleveland Stroud was ecstatic.

But a few weeks after the championship game, Coach Stroud was doing a routine review of his players' grades when he discovered that one of his third-string players had failed some courses, rendering the player academically ineligible for the basketball team.

The struggling student was by no means a factor in the team's victory. He was an underclassman who suited up for games but hadn't actually seen any playing time all season. During one of the semifinal matches, however, with the team leading by more than 20 points, Coach Stroud wanted to give every player an opportunity to participate. He had put that player in the game for less than 45 seconds. The ineligible man had scored no points. His participation had in no way affected the outcome of the game. But it was, technically, a violation of state eligibility standards.

Coach Stroud was in a distressing predicament. If he revealed the infraction, his team would be disqualified and stripped of their championship. If he kept quiet, it was highly unlikely anyone outside the school would ever discover the offense.

Yet the coach realized that at the very least, the player involved was aware of the breach of rules. It was also possible that other students on the team knew and thought their coach had purposely ignored the eligibility guidelines. But more important still, Coach Stroud himself knew, and if he deliberately tried to keep the facts from coming to light, his greatest coaching victory would be forever tainted with an ugly secret.

Coach Stroud said from the moment he discovered the violation, he knew what he had to do. He never even pondered any alternatives. His priorities had been set long before this. He realized that his team's championship was not as important as their character. "People forget the scores of basketball games," he said. "They don't ever forget what you're made of."

He reported the infraction and forfeited the only state championship his team had ever won.

But both coach and team won a far more important kind of honor than they forfeited. They kept their integrity intact and gained an immeasurable amount of trust and respect. The coach was recognized with numerous teacher-of-the-year, coach-of-the-year, and citizen-of-the-year awards, as well as a formal commendation from the Georgia State Legislature. A few years later he was elected to Conyers City council, where he still serves. He was right. People who would have long ago forgotten about the Bulldogs' victory in the state championship have never forgotten about this coach's integrity.



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Above Reproach - Continued

Ethical integrity is one of the indispensable attributes of Christlike character. As vital as it is to be sound in doctrine and faithful in teaching the truth of Scripture, it is by no means less crucial for Christians to be upright in heart and consistent in our obedience to the moral and ethical principles of God's law.

That is no simple duty, by the way. The moral standard God's people are supposed to live by far surpasses even the highest principles of normal human ethics.

This was one of the main points of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The whole sermon was an exposition of the Law's moral meaning. The heart of Jesus' message was an extended discourse against the notion that the Law's moral principles apply only to behavior that others can see.

Jesus taught, for example, that the sixth commandment forbids not only acts of killing, but a murderous heart as well (vv. 21–22). The seventh commandment, which forbids adultery, also implicitly condemns even adulterous desires (vv. 27–28). And the command to love our neighbors applies even to those who are our enemies (vv. 43–44).

How high is the moral and ethical standard set by God's law? Unimaginably high. Jesus equates it with God's own perfection: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48).

That sets an unattainable standard, of course. But it is our duty to pursue integrity relentlessly nonetheless. Perfect ethical consistency is a vital aspect of that consummate goal — absolute Christlikeness — toward which every Christian should continually be striving (Phil. 3:12–14). No believer, therefore, should ever knowingly sacrifice his or her ethical integrity.

Here are **three** powerful reasons why:

First, for the sake of our reputation. Of course, Christians should not be concerned with issues like status, class, caste, or economic prestige. In that sense, we need to be like Christ, who made Himself of no reputation and took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7).

There is a true sense, however, in which we do need to be concerned about maintaining a good reputation — and that is especially true in the matter of ethical integrity. One of the basic requirements for an elder is this: "He must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7 nasb).

Nothing will ruin a good reputation faster or more permanently than a deliberate breach of ethical integrity. People will forgive practically any other kind of error, negligence, or failure — but ethical bankruptcy carries a stigma that is almost impossible to rise above.



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Above Reproach - Continued

Several years ago, a parishioner told me something no pastor ever wants to hear. He had invited a business acquaintance to our church. The man replied, "You go to that church? I wouldn't go to that church. The most corrupt lawyer in town goes to that church."

I didn't — and still don't — have any idea whom he was talking about. There are dozens of attorneys in our church. My hope is that it was a case of mistaken identity and that the person he had in mind was not a member of our church. But the following Sunday I recounted the incident from the pulpit and said, "If the lawyer that man described is here this morning, please take a lesson from Zaccheus: repent and do whatever you can to restore your reputation in the community. In the meantime, stop representing yourself as a Christian. You're destroying the whole church's reputation."

According to Proverbs 22:1, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." You don't have a good name at all unless your ethical integrity is intact and above reproach.

Second, for the sake of our character. More important still is the issue of personal character. There's a good reason why Jesus' exposition of the moral law in Matthew 5 focused so much on uprightness of heart as opposed to external behavior. That's because the real barometer of who we are is reflected in what we do when no one else is looking, how we think in the privacy of our own thoughts, and how we respond to the promptings of our own consciences. Those things are the true measure of your moral and ethical fiber.

As important as it is to keep a good reputation in the community, it is a thousand times more important to safeguard our own personal character. That is why Jesus dealt with the issues of morality and ethics beginning with the innermost thoughts of our hearts. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19).

It's probably not overstating the case at all to say that the single most important battlefield in the struggle for integrity is your own mind. That's where everything will actually be won or lost. And if you lose there, you have already ruined your character. A corrupt character inevitably spoils the reputation, too, because a bad tree can't bring forth good fruit (Matthew 7:18).

That brings to mind a **third** reason why it is so vital to guard our moral and ethical integrity: for the sake of our testimony. Your reputation reflects what people say about you. Your testimony is what your character, your behavior, and your words say about God.

Consider what is being communicated when a Christian lacks ethical integrity. That person is saying he doesn't truly believe what Scripture plainly says is true of God: That "to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3). That "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him" (15:8). And that God "delight[s] in truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6).



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Above Reproach - Continued

In other words, the person who neglects ethical integrity is telling a lie about God with his life and his attitude. If he calls himself a Christian and professes to be a child of God, he is in fact taking God's name in vain at the most fundamental level. That puts the issue of ethical integrity in perspective, doesn't it?

That's what we need to call to mind whenever we are tempted to adapt our ethical principles for convenience' sake. It isn't worth the high cost to our reputation, our character, or our testimony. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**

What is Grace?

A number of decades ago at the Ligonier Valley Study Center, we sent out a Thanksgiving card with this simple statement: "The essence of theology is grace; the essence of Christian ethics is gratitude." In all the debates about our role versus God's role in sanctification—our growth in holiness—we'd stay on the right track if we'd remember this grace-gratitude dynamic. The more we understand how kind God has been to us and the more we are overcome by His mercy, the more we are inclined to love Him and to serve Him.

Yet we can't get the grace-gratitude dynamic right if we aren't clear on what grace means. What is grace? The catechisms many of us learned as children give us the answer: "*Grace is the unmerited favor of God.*" The first thing that we understand about grace is what it's not—it's not something we merit. In fact, if that is all we ever understand about grace, I'm sure God will rejoice that we know His grace is unmerited. So, here's our working definition of grace—it is unmerit.

Paul's epistle to the Romans sheds light on what we mean when we say that grace is unmerit. In Romans 1:18–3:20, the Apostle explains that on the final day, for the first time in our lives, we will be judged in total perfection, in total fairness, in absolute righteousness. Thus, every mouth will be stopped when we stand before the tribunal of God. This should provoke fear in the hearts of fallen people, as condemnation is the only possible sentence for sinful men and women: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23).

But those who trust in Christ Jesus have hope, for if we are in Him by faith, we have been "justified freely by His grace." Note that justification is accomplished not by obligation, but freely through grace on account of the redemption purchased by Jesus alone. There's no room for boasting, for we are justified not by our works but by grace alone through faith alone. Paul goes on to cite Abraham as the preeminent example of one who was justified by faith alone and therefore free from God's sentence of condemnation. If the basis for Abraham's salvation, his justification, was something that Abraham did—some good deed, some meritorious service that he performed, some obligation that he performed—if it were on the basis of works, Paul says, he would have had something about which to boast. But Abraham had no such merit. All he had was faith, and that faith itself was a gift: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (4:3; see Ephesians 2:8–10).



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What is Grace? - Continued

Romans 4:4–8 is a key passage here:

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

That's grace. Paul couldn't say it any other way. To him who works, it's debt; if you merit something, it means that someone is obligated to pay you. If I hire you as an employee and promise to pay you one hundred dollars if you work eight hours, I must pay you for working the eight hours. I'm not doing you a favor or giving you grace. You've earned your pay. You've fulfilled the contract, and I'm morally obliged to give you your wages.

With respect to the Lord, we are debtors who cannot pay. That's why the Bible speaks of redemption in economic language—we were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20). Only someone else—Christ—can pay our debt. That's grace. It's not our good works that secure our rescue but only the works of Christ. It's His merit, not ours. We don't merit anything. He grants us His merit by grace, and we receive it only by faith. The essence of grace is its voluntary free bestowal. As soon as it's a requirement, it's no longer grace.

Grace should never cease to amaze us. God has an absolute, pure, holy standard of justice. That's why we cling with all our might to the merit of Jesus Christ. He alone has the merit to satisfy the demands of God's justice, and He gives it freely to us. We haven't merited it. There's nothing in us that elicits the Lord's favor that leads to our justification. It's pure grace.

And the more we understand what God has done for us as sinners, the more willing we are to do whatever He requires. The great teachers of the church say the first point of genuine sanctification is an increasing awareness of our own sinfulness. With that comes, at the same time, an increasing awareness of God's grace. And with that, again, increasing love and increasing willingness to obey Him.

When we truly understand grace—when we see that God only owes us wrath but has provided Christ's merit to cover our demerit—then everything changes. The Christian motivation for ethics is not merely to obey some abstract law or a list of rules; rather, our response is provoked by gratitude. Jesus understood that when He said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” If I may have the liberty to paraphrase: “Keep My commandments not because you want to be just, but because you love Me.” A true understanding of grace—of God's unmerited favor—always provokes a life of gratitude and obedience. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



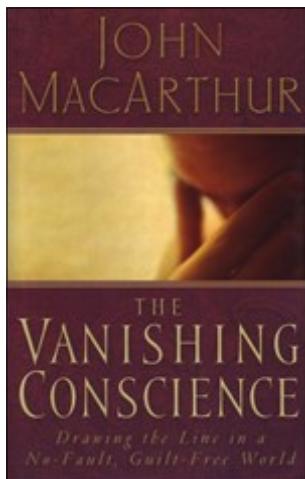
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Book Reviews

The Vanishing Conscience (Softcover) ***Drawing the Line in a No-Fault - Guilt Free World*** ***Dr. John MacArthur***



In this challenging and compelling book, Dr. John MacArthur encourages you to confront the culture's flight from moral responsibility.

With sound biblical truth, this book shows how and why sin must be dealt with if you are to live in a way that pleases God.

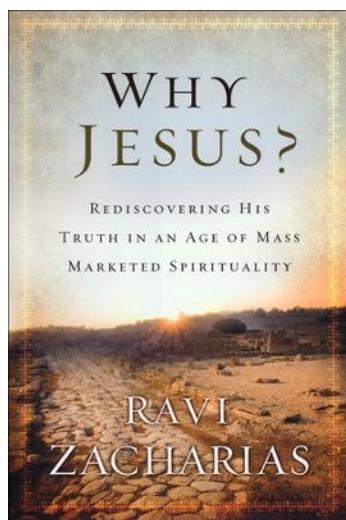
With clarity and insight, Dr. John MacArthur provides you with solutions for attaining a personal holiness that can take you from living a life of blame and denial to one of peace and freedom.

Why Jesus? ***Rediscovering His Truth in an Age of Mass Marketed Spirituality*** ***Dr. Ravi Zacharias***

We see it everywhere. From musicians and movie stars, to neighbors and friends at work, people are interested in having a spiritual life, but treat faith more like an à la carte menu at a restaurant, choosing what they like and dismissing the rest. epitomized by popular figures like Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra, Western culture has embraced a spirituality devoid of the Biblical Christ.

In Why Jesus? Rediscovering His Truth in an Age of Mass Market Spirituality, Dr. Zacharias explores how this "New Spirituality" emerged. Looking at popular culture and contemporary writers and philosophers in this dialogue, Dr. Zacharias evaluates their claims through the lens of four key elements--Truth, Relevance, Faith, and Reason, to show how relativism cannot answer the spiritual hunger in our hearts.

Rediscover the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and how His resurrection is the most important argument for the exclusive claims of Christianity.





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The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 Repentance to Life and Salvation - Chapter 15

1. Some of the elect are converted in later years, having lived for some time in their natural state in which they have served various lusts and pleasures. Then God gives them repentance to life by effectually calling them.
2. There is no one who does good and does not sin, and the best of people may fall into great sins and provocations [against God] through the power and deceitfulness of their indwelling corruption and the strength of temptation. Therefore God has mercifully provided in the covenant of grace that when believers sin and fall they shall be restored to salvation through repentance.
3. Saving repentance is a gospel grace by which we are made aware of the many evils of our sin by the Holy Spirit. By faith in Christ we humble ourselves over our sin with godly sorrow, hatred of it, and self-loathing. We pray for pardon and strength of grace, and determine and endeavour, by [the power] supplied by the Spirit, to walk before God and to please him in all things.
4. Repentance is to continue through the whole course of our lives because of our 'body of death' and its activities. So it is everyone's duty to repent of particular known sins with particular care.
5. In the covenant of grace God has made full provision through Christ for the preservation of believers in their salvation, so, although even the smallest sin deserves damnation, yet there is no sin great enough to bring damnation on those who repent. This makes the constant preaching of repentance essential.

First Fear Then Trust

"The knowledge of God set forth for us in Scripture is destined for the very same goal as the knowledge whose imprint shines in His creatures, in that it invites us first to fear God, then to trust in Him." ~ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559)

Baptizing Them in the Name

"I cannot think on the One without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the Three; nor can I discern the Three without being straightway carried back to the One." ~ Gregory of Nazianzus, On Holy Baptism (as quoted by Calvin in his Institutes).

Puritan Quote

"They that know God will be humble. And they that know themselves cannot be proud." ~ John Flavel



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - June 2015

Birthdays

Gene Arthur - June 6
Mike Prince - June 27

Anniversaries

Ben and Carrie Purser - June 23
Scott and Ruth Thomas - June 25

Faith

Saving faith is not just believing that Jesus lived and died. Faith that saves is the confident, continuous confession of total dependence on, and trust in Jesus Christ to meet the requirements on your behalf to give you entrance into God's Eternal Kingdom. It's the surrender of your life in complete trust to Him to do what you cannot do. ~ ***Dr. John MacArthur***

One often sees a call only in retrospect. This too is God's design. God often reinforces our faith after we trust him, not before. ~ ***Dr. Ravi Zacharias***

It matters little what form of prayer we adopt or how many words we use. What matters is the faith which lays hold on God, knowing that He knows our needs before we even ask Him. That is what gives Christian prayer its boundless confidence and its joyous certainty. ~ ***Dietrich Bonhoeffer***

Disclaimer

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



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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.