



Volume 4 Issue 3

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



March 2017

Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Caring for Widows

In biblical terms, to be religious does not necessarily mean you are godly. To be religious can mean simply that you're involved in the trappings of religion, that you may be a member of a false religion. Yet, the Scriptures sometimes speak of religion in a positive sense, in the sense of practice that is the fruit of true faith in Christ and commitment to His Word.

The Apostle James focuses on religion as the practice of those who have true faith in Jesus, and he says that true religion demonstrates the presence of saving trust in the Lord (James 2:14–26). What true godliness looks like, he tells us, is not a matter of merely holding to right doctrine with our minds, though that is essential. No, true godliness means that doctrine shapes our lives to such a degree that we manifest the kind of life God wants us to live. And James gives us a succinct definition of true religion, of true godliness: *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world”*. (James 1:27). James elevates the activity of caring for widows and orphans as the very essence of pure and undefiled religion. That strikes me as being very significant, and it's an idea that is neglected in the church today.

In this article, I want to focus particularly on widows. Widows and their care figure prominently in the agenda that God has set for His church. One of the earliest problems that arose in the Apostolic church was that the widows were being neglected. And if that was a problem in the first-century church, how much more likely is it that we, twenty centuries later, would be guilty of neglecting the widows in our midst?

After my grandfather died, my grandmother moved into our home and lived with us for many years as I was growing up. On several occasions, she would talk to me late at night and weep, telling me of the burden of pain she had in feeling like she had not only lost her husband but that she had also lost her place in the community. Once her husband passed, she suddenly felt excluded from the things she was intimately involved with alongside him while he was alive. When a person loses her lifelong mate, it's like losing an integral, intimate part of one's self because husband and wife, we are told, in the mystery of marriage are one flesh. So, the pain of widowhood brings a unique dimension of loneliness. It's jarring to suddenly be alone when one has been accustomed to the constant companionship with one's spouse over a long period of time. Since God is the great Comforter of His people, it makes sense that He would have such concern for widows given the pain they experience.

Now, why does James not mention the widowers? After all, the widower also experiences that same pang of suffering that goes with losing a lifelong mate. Well, every man that I've ever talked to always says they want to go first because they can't imagine living life without their wives. I can't prove it, but I think that's one of the reasons why the normal life expectancy of the man is shorter than the life expectancy of the woman, because God is gracious to us men, and He knows that we're not as strong as women.



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Caring for Widows - Continued

But what I do know for sure is that widows have always experienced particular difficulties in every age and culture. They faced particular problems in the ancient world. There weren't insurance programs, annuities, or other sorts of things, and without a husband, the widow was usually the most vulnerable and helpless person in the community. Widows had little or no means of support in ancient societies. Thus, the care of the widows was given to the church both in the Old Testament and in the New.

Jesus frequently pays attention to widows in His teaching. Just consider the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12:41–45. Who is it that normally gets the attention in the church? The people who are the big donors, the ones whose donations are so important to the ongoing funding of the church's budget. Few pay attention to the poverty-stricken person who makes a tiny donation that's insignificant to the budget's bottom line. But Jesus noticed what everyone else overlooked. He told His hearers to look at the poor widow. Even though the woman gave only the equivalent of two pennies to the temple, she put in more than all the rest of the people who donated heavily to the treasury because in giving out of her own poverty, she gave out of her devotion to God.

One of the most tender moments recorded in the New Testament is found in John 19:16b–27. While Christ was on the cross, He looked in the direction of His mother, who was an eyewitness to His passion, and He said to her, "*Woman, behold your son!*" He was not asking His mother to look at Him. Obviously, she already was looking at Him. Then, Jesus said to John, "*Behold your mother!*" In His dying moments, Jesus was commending the care of His widowed mother to His beloved disciple, John. On the cross, Jesus said to John, "John, you take care of My mother. She's a widow, so let her be to you as your own mother." To Mary, He said, "Mother, let John be to you as your own son."

What are sons for? To look after their mothers. What are mothers for but to look after their children? When you think of all of the years and the opportunities where mothers have looked after their children when they enter into their loneliness, the first line of care is to be the surviving family. But it by no means stops there, because the larger family is the church. James, the brother of Jesus, sees this mandate to care for widows as so important that he uses it to describe the crystallized essence of true religion. Do you think you're religious, but you don't care about the widows? Your religion is an exercise in futility, because James says pure and undefiled religion is the care of widows and of orphans in times of trouble. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

The Church and Israel: The Issue

Throughout the history of the Christian church, the question of Israel's place within God's redemptive purposes has been of special importance. In modern history, with the emergence of dispensationalism as a popular eschatological viewpoint and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the theological question of God's intention for Israel has become even more pressing. After the Holocaust, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews throughout Europe during World War II, the issue of the relation between the church and Israel has also been affected anew by the sad reality of anti-Semitism, which some allege belongs to any Christian theology that insists upon one way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, whether for Jews or Gentiles.

In order to orient the discussion of this critical issue, we need to begin with a clear understanding of the major views on this question that are represented today within the church. These views illustrate not only the importance of the question, but the wide diversity of positions.



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The Church and Israel: The Issue - Continued

Premillennial Dispensationalism: God's Special Purpose for Israel

Although premillennial dispensationalism is a relatively new viewpoint in the history of Christian theology, its position on God's special purpose for Israel has shaped, even dominated, recent debates among evangelical Christians on the relationship between the church and Israel.

In classic dispensationalism, God has two distinct peoples: an earthly people, Israel, and a heavenly people, the church. According to dispensationalism, God administers the course of the history of redemption by means of *seven* successive dispensations or redemptive economies. During each dispensation, God tests human beings by a distinct revelation of His will. Among these *seven* dispensations, the *three* most important are the dispensation of law, the dispensation of the gospel, and the dispensation of the kingdom. While it is not possible in a short essay like this to describe all the distinctives of these dispensations, what is important is dispensationalism's insistence that God has a separate purpose and a distinct manner of dealing with His earthly people, Israel. During the present era, the dispensation of the church, God has "suspended" His special purposes for Israel and turned His attention, in a manner of speaking, to the gathering of the Gentile peoples through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations. However, when Christ returns at any moment to "rapture" the church prior to a seven-year period of great tribulation, He will resume God's special program for Israel. This tribulation period will be a prelude to the commencement of the future dispensation of a one thousand-year kingdom upon the earth. For dispensationalism, the millennium marks the period during which God's promises to Israel, His earthly people, will receive a distinct, literal fulfillment. Only at the end of the dispensation of the millennial kingdom will Christ finally vanquish all of His enemies and introduce the final state.

Though dispensationalism acknowledges that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are saved by faith in the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, it maintains a clear and permanent distinction between Israel and the church within the purposes of God. The promises of the Old Testament are not fulfilled through the gathering of the church of Jesus Christ from among all the peoples of the earth. These promises are given to an earthly, ethnically distinct people, Israel, and they will be fulfilled in a literal manner only during the dispensation of the kingdom that follows the present dispensation of the gospel.

The Traditional Reformed View: One People of God

Contrary to dispensationalism's sharp demarcation between God's two peoples, Israel and the church, historic Reformed theology insists on the unity of God's redemptive program throughout history. When Adam, the covenant head and representative of the human race, fell into sin, all human beings as his posterity became liable to condemnation and death (Rom. 5:12–21). By virtue of Adam's sin and its implications for the entire human race, all people became subject to the curse of the law and heirs of a sinfully corrupt nature.

According to the traditional Reformed interpretation of Scripture, God initiated the covenant of grace after the fall in order to restore His chosen people to communion and fellowship with Himself. While the covenant of grace is administered diversely throughout the course of the history of redemption, it remains one in substance from the time of its formal ratification with Abraham until the coming of Christ in the fullness of time.



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The Church and Israel: The Issue - Continued

In all of the various administrations of the covenant of grace, God redeems His people through faith in Jesus Christ, the one Mediator of the covenant of grace, through whom believers receive the gift of eternal life and restored communion with the living God (see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 293–5).

In the Reformed understanding of the history of redemption, therefore, there is no ultimate separation between Israel and the church. The promise God made to Abraham in the formal ratification of the covenant of grace (Genesis 12; 15; 17), namely, that he would be the father of many nations and that in his “seed” all the families of the earth would be blessed, finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The seed promised to Abraham in the covenant of grace is Jesus Christ, the true Israel, and all who through faith are united to Him and, thus, heirs of the covenant promises (Galatians 3:16, 29). In the Reformed view, the gospel of Jesus Christ directly fulfills the promises of the covenant of grace for all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles. Israel and the church are not two distinct peoples; rather, the church is the true Israel of God, “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*” (1 Peter 2:9).

“Two-Covenant” Theology

In the recent history of reflection upon the issue of Israel and the church, a new and more radical position has emerged. Often linked with the name of Franz Rosenzweig, a Jewish author of a work written shortly after World War I entitled *The Star of Redemption*, two-covenant theology teaches that there are two separate covenants, one between God and Israel and the other between God and the church of Jesus Christ. Rather than there being one way of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ for Jew and Gentile believers alike, God’s original covenant relationship with His ancestral people, Israel, remains separate from His new covenant relationship with the Gentile nations through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Within the setting of a post-World War II concern over the legacy of anti-Semitism in the Christian church, the two-covenant-theology position has become increasingly popular among many mainline Protestant churches. Even within the Roman Catholic Church, some theologians have appealed to the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Mission* (1991), which advocate dialogue between Christians and Jews, in order to oppose continued efforts to evangelize Jews. In the two-covenant viewpoint, the Christian confession regarding the person and work of Christ as the only Mediator or Redeemer holds true within the framework of God’s covenant with the church. However, since God’s covenant with Israel is a separate covenant, which is not fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time, Christians may not impose upon Israel the terms of God’s covenant with the church.

Extreme Replacement Theology

The final position on the issue of Israel and the church that requires comment is what we might term “extreme replacement theology.” While dispensationalists often insist that the traditional Reformed affirmation of one people of God comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ is a form of “replacement” theology, the Reformed view does not regard the gospel as “replacing” the older covenant economy with Israel but “fulfilling” it. Extreme replacement theology is the teaching that, because many of the Jews did not acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the Messiah of promise, God replaced Israel with the Gentile church.



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The Church and Israel: The Issue - Continued

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls all nations and peoples to faith and repentance, but it leaves no room for any particular focus upon God's redemptive purpose for His ancestral people, Israel. Because the church is the true, spiritual Israel, any peculiar focus upon the question of God's saving intention for Israel is no longer permitted.

Extreme replacement theology represents the opposite end of the spectrum from the two-covenant position. Rather than speaking of a distinct covenant relationship between God and Israel that continues even after the coming of Christ and the proclamation of the gospel to the nations, replacement theology maintains that God's program for and interest in Israel has ended.

Conclusion

The diversity among these various positions on the issue of Israel and the church testifies to the importance of this issue. Does God have a separate purpose and redemptive program for Israel and the church? Or, does the gospel of Jesus Christ fulfill God's purpose to gather a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, Jews and Gentiles alike, into one worldwide family? When the Apostle Paul declares in Romans 1 that the gospel is the "*power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile*" (Romans 1:16), he declares that there is one way of salvation for all who believe in Jesus Christ. Yet he simultaneously affirms that this salvation does not displace or supersede God's redemptive purpose for the Jews but, rather, fulfills it. The ongoing debate about Israel and the church needs to maintain the Apostle's balance, neither separating Israel and the church nor displacing Israel with the church. ~ **Dr. Cornelis P. Venema / President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary and Associate Pastor of Redeemer URC in Dyer, Indiana**

God's High Call for Women

Although women have traditionally fulfilled supportive roles in serving the church and gained their greatest joy and sense of accomplishment from being wives and mothers, the feminist movement has successfully influenced many women to abandon these divinely ordained roles.

Unfortunately, this movement has made headway even in the church, creating chaos and confusion regarding the role of women both in ministry and in the home. Only in Scripture can God's intended design for women be found.

The Old Testament and Women

In the creation account of Genesis 1, God's first word on the subject of men and women is that they were equally created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Neither received more of the image of God than the other. So the Bible begins with the equality of the sexes. As persons, as spiritual beings standing before God, men and women are absolutely equal.

In Genesis 2, there is a more detailed account of the creation of the two equal human beings that reveals differences in their God-given functions and responsibilities.



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God's High Call for Women - Continued

God did not create the man and the woman at the same time, but rather He created Adam first and Eve later for the specific purpose of being Adam's helper. Eve was equal to Adam, but she was given the role and duty of submitting to him. Although the word "helper" carries very positive connotations - even being used of God Himself as the helper of Israel (Deuteronomy 33:7; Psalm 33:20) - it still describes someone in a relationship of service to another. The responsibility of wives to submit to their husbands, then, was part of the plan from creation, even before the curse. The first books of the Bible establish both the equality of men and women and also the support role of the wife (see Exodus 21:15, 17, 28-31; Numbers 5:19-20, 29; 6:2; 30:1-16).

Throughout the Old Testament, women were active in the religious life of Israel, but generally they were not leaders. Women like Deborah (Judges 4) were clearly the exception and not the rule. There was no woman with an ongoing prophetic ministry. No woman was a priest. No queen ever ruled Israel. No woman wrote an Old Testament (or New Testament) book. Isaiah 3:12 indicates that God allowed women to rule as part of His judgment on the sinning nation.

Jesus and Women

In the midst of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures, which viewed women almost on the level of possessions, Jesus showed love and respect for women. Though Jewish rabbis did not teach women and the Jewish Talmud said it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman, Jesus never took the position that women, by their very nature, could not understand spiritual or theological truth. He not only included them in His audiences but also used illustrations and images that would be familiar to them (Matthew 13:33; 22:1-2; 24:41; Luke 15:8-10) and specifically applied His teaching to them (Matthew 10:34ff.). To the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), He revealed that He was the Messiah and discussed with her topics such as eternal life and the nature of true worship. He also taught Mary and, when admonished by Martha, pointed out the priority of learning spiritual truth even over "womanly" responsibilities like serving guests in one's home (Luke 10:38).

Although men in Jesus' day normally would not allow women to count change into their hands for fear of physical contact, Jesus touched women to heal them and allowed women to touch Him (Luke 13:10ff.; Mark 5:25ff.). Jesus even allowed a small group of women to travel with Him and His disciples (Luke 8:1-3), an unprecedented happening at that time. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and sent her to announce His resurrection to the disciples (John 20:1-18), despite the fact that women were not allowed to be witnesses in Jewish courts because they were considered liars.

In Jesus' treatment of women, He raised their station of life and He showed them compassion and respect in a way they had never known. This demonstrated their equality. At the same time, however, Jesus still did not exalt women to a place of leadership over men.

The Epistles and Women

In the Epistles, the two principles of equality and submission for women exist side by side. Galatians 3:28 points to the equality, indicating that the way of salvation is the same for both men and women and that they are members of equal standing in the body of Christ.



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God's High Call for Women - Continued

It does not, however, eradicate all differences in responsibilities for men and women, for this passage does not cover every aspect of God's design for male and female. In addition, there are many other passages that make distinctions between what God desires of men and what He desires of women, especially within family and within the church.

The Family

While Christian marriage is to involve mutual love and submission between two believers (Ephesians 5:21), four passages in the New Testament expressly give to wives the responsibility to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1). This voluntary submission of one equal to another is an expression of love for God and a desire to follow His design as revealed in His Word. It is never pictured as demeaning or in any way diminishing the wife's equality. Rather the husband is called to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25) and to serve as the leader in a relationship of two equals.

While husbands and fathers have been given the primary responsibility for the leadership of their children (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21; 1 Timothy 3:4-5), wives and mothers are urged to be "workers at home" (Titus 2:5), meaning managers of the household. Their home and their children are to be their priority, in contrast to the world's emphasis today on careers and fulltime jobs for women outside the home.

The Church

From the very beginning, women fulfilled a vital role in the Christian church (Acts 1:12-14; 9:36-42; 16:13-15; 17:1-4, 10-12; 18:1-2, 18, 24-28; Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 1:5; 4:19), but not one of leadership. The apostles were all men; the chief missionary activity was done by men; the writing of the New Testament was the work of men; and leadership in the churches was entrusted to men.

Although the Apostle Paul respected women and worked side by side with them for the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 4:3), he appointed no female elders or pastors. In his letters, he urged that men were to be the leaders in the church and that women were not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12). Therefore, although women are spiritual equals with men and the ministry of women is essential to the body of Christ, women are excluded from leadership over men in the church.

Men and women stand as equals before God, both bearing the image of God Himself. However, without making one inferior to the other, God calls upon both men and women to fulfill the roles and responsibilities specifically designed for them, a pattern that can be seen even in the Godhead (1 Cor. 11:3). In fulfilling the divinely given roles taught in the New Testament, women are able to realize their full potential because they are following the plan of their own Creator and Designer. Only in obedience to Him and His design will women truly be able, in the fullest sense, to give glory to God. ~ *Adapted from the Grace Church elders' distinctive on "The Role of Women."* - Dr. John MacArthur



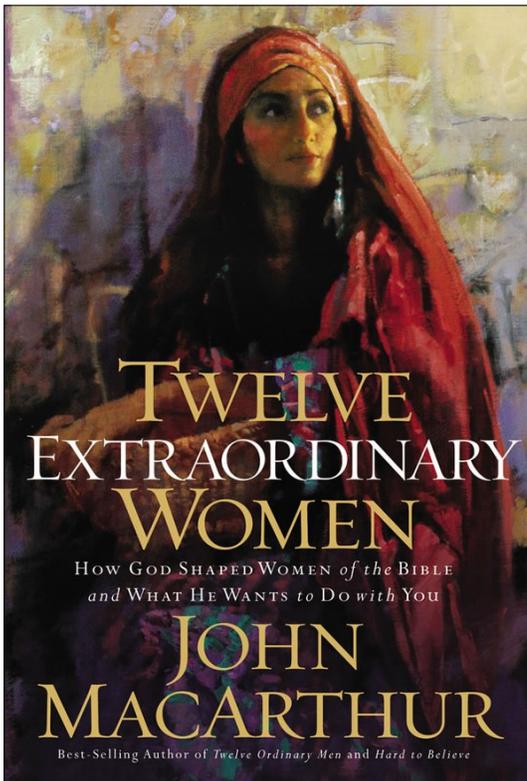
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Book Review

Twelve Extraordinary Women *Dr. John MacArthur*



Celebrated for their courage, vision, hospitality, and spiritual giftedness, it's no wonder women were so important to God's plan revealed in the Old and New Testaments. It wasn't their natural qualities that made these women extraordinary but the power of the one true God whom they worshipped and served.

In *Twelve Extraordinary Women*, you'll learn more than fascinating information about these women, you'll discover—perhaps for the first time—the unmistakable chronology of God's redemptive work in history through their lives. These women were not ancillary to His plan, they were at the very heart of it. And this book includes their amazing stories.

Some of the women you'll come to know include:

- Ruth (Ruth 1-4)
- Anna (Luke 2:36-38)
- Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42)
- Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27:56-61)
- Sarah (Genesis 11-25)
- Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2)
- The Samaritan woman (John 4)
- Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1-2)

You will be challenged and motivated by this poignant and personal look into the lives of some of the Bible's most faithful women. Their struggles and temptations are the same trials faced by all believers in all ages. And the God to whom they were so committed is the same God who continues to mold and use ordinary people today.



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Birthdays and Anniversary Corner - March 2017

Birthdays

*Rose M (15)
Les T (19)
James D (22)
Lydia H (22)*

*Daniel K (23)
Jonathan F (26)
Tom S (29)*

Anniversaries

None to Report

Comprehending the Pattern of Evil

After the flood, Noah and his family began to repopulate the earth. Noah’s descendants became hunters and builders. A new technology emerged to provide more stable and suitable shelter. Brick and mortar became the means by which whole cities could be built: *“They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves””* (Genesis 1:3b-4).

Immediately after the flood, Noah erected an altar, a structure on which to offer the sacrifice of praise and worship. The building project at Babel was something else. Again, it was a reach of pretended autonomy, a stretch for heaven, an attempt to rip God down from His throne that man might make for himself a name. The result of this effort? This primitive scientific undertaking was chaos. The language of man was confused and communication gave way to babbling.

This pattern has not changed. The greater the technology, the greater the chaos. The more sophisticated the tools, the more sophisticated the violence. ~ *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.



West Suffolk 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.