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West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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The Empty Tomb and the Resurrected Lord

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 Sunday (April 1st) 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.

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.



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The Empty Tomb and the Resurrected Lord - Cont'd

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.**

Are the Bible and Science Compatible?

Many of those who reject the Christian faith do so because they believe that the Bible contradicts science. But, whether there is actual conflict and contradiction depends on how one defines the Bible and science. If the Bible is defined as "a book of fairy tales and superstitions" and science is defined as "proven facts," well then, obviously we are going to have conflict and the two will be incompatible as sources of truth. If the Bible is understood to be the Word of God and science is understood as a necessarily materialistic methodology that rules out the very possibility of God, then yes, there will be a conflict. I submit, however, that these are not the best starting definitions and that if we think more carefully about both the Bible and science, we will see that they are not necessarily in conflict.

Christians understand God to be the Creator of all things in heaven and earth. Christians also believe that God has revealed certain truths about Himself through His created works (Romans 1:20).



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Are the Bible and Science Compatible? - Cont'd

Theologians speak of this as general revelation. God has also revealed Himself in His Word. We speak of this as special revelation. An important point to keep in mind is that with both general revelation and special revelation, God is the Revealer. Because God is infallible, there is no possibility of conflict or contradiction between His general revelation and His special revelation. God is the one infallible source of both.

Believers have nothing to fear from science understood as the study of God's created works.

There is also no conflict between what He has revealed in the Bible (special revelation) and what is actually true regarding His created works. If God created something in a certain way, and if God is self-consistent and always truthful, His special revelation will not say anything that contradicts the actual truth about His created works. If it is true, for example, that God created the earth as a sphere, then His special revelation will not and cannot contradict that. Therefore, if there is language in the Bible that seems to describe the earth as a flat disc, the problem is in our interpretation.

When a conflict arises, it is always the result of human misinterpretation of God's created works, of that which He has revealed through His created works, of that which He has revealed through His Word, or some combination of these. In other words, a conflict might be the result of an incorrect scientific theory about some aspect of God's created works. A conflict might also be the result of an incorrect interpretation of God's special revelation. A conflict might be the result of misinterpretations of both. The problem always rests with the fallen and fallible human interpreters (scientists and theologians), not with God.

Human beings are fallible. Various factors, including ignorance and sin, mean that we can and do make mistakes. Those who observe and try to understand the created world can and have made mistakes. Scientific hypotheses and theories are fallible. They can be mistaken. Those who study and seek to understand the Bible also can and have made mistakes. There are conflicting interpretations of many biblical texts and conflicting theological systems because the interpreters of Scripture are fallible. Exegetical and theological interpretations and theories can be mistaken.

Science and Scripture are completely compatible as long as science is understood to be the careful study of God's works of creation. Science is at risk of being incompatible with Scripture only when naturalistic and materialistic metaphysical philosophies are imported into the definition of science. The perceived conflict that exists today is largely due to such philosophical assumptions on the part of many unbelievers. Ironically, these philosophical assumptions cannot be proven through any means of empirical observation.

Because the created world is the way God has created it, both believers and unbelievers can and have made true observations about it. Of course, unbelievers couch any true observations they make within an unbiblical philosophical framework, but the observations, as far as they go, may be true. As John Calvin observed, unbelievers can know truths about "earthly things," although with regard to "heavenly things," they are "blind as moles" (Institutes 2.2.12–21). Believers have nothing to fear from science understood as the study of God's created works. The works of God's hands are astounding and amazing, and Christians can rejoice and praise their Creator every time something true about these works is discovered regardless of who made the discovery. It is not science as such that is the problem. It is only false philosophies masquerading as science that must be rejected. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College**



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Consider the Glory of God

John Newton (1725–1807) is best known today for his great hymns (including “Amazing Grace” and “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”). But in his own day, he was perhaps more highly prized as a letter writer — “the great director of souls through the post,” as someone described him. Such was the value of his correspondence that he published several volumes of his letters (including one of his letters to his wife, which called forth the comment by one reviewer, his friend Richard Cecil, that wives would be in raptures reading such love letters while “we [husbands] may suffer loss of esteem for not writing them such gallant letters”).

In several of his letters, he comments on the subject of controversy. He had a distaste for it. (It would be an unhappy thing to have a “taste” for it, would it not?) He also had a sense of being unfitted for it. He remarked that it was “not only unpleasing to my taste, but really above my reach.” But lack of experience is not necessarily an obstacle to one’s ability to give biblical counsel. Newton constantly sought to give such counsel. (Did he not encourage William Wilberforce in the great public controversy of slave trading?) In a day when only a paltry number of Anglican ministers were evangelical, he was particularly conscious that Calvinists, being much in the minority, might feel pressed into controversy too frequently.

It is surely for this reason that one of his chief concerns was that if we are to engage in controversy, our perspective needs to be dominated by the issue of the glory of God. “If we act in a wrong spirit,” he writes, “we shall bring little glory to God.” The first question of The Westminster Shorter Catechism is relevant here as everywhere: How do I speak, write, or act in situations of controversy so that God may be most glorified?

This is the principle. But it needs to be particularized. Newton realized that sometimes we engage in controversy professedly “for the glory of God” but are blind to the ways in which our own motives impact and play out in our speech and actions. The rubric “for the glory of God” must transform how Christians respond to controversy.

“For the glory of God” does not call for a monolithic response to every controversy. Circumstances alter cases. We do not cast pearls before swine.

Here are three illustrations of controversy. In the *first*, silence is the appropriate God-glorifying reaction; in the *second*, confrontation; and in the *third*, patience. Why such different responses?

KEEP SILENCE

Isaiah 36 vividly describes how Sennacherib of Assyria attacked Judah. The Rabshakeh (an Assyrian officer) sought to stir up controversy. He spoke, as Hezekiah recognized, “to mock the living God” (Isaiah 37:17). But the leaders followed their king’s counsel: “They were silent and answered him not a word” (36:21). The end of the story? God vindicated their response. The angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrians. Sennacherib retreated.



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Consider the Glory of God - Cont'd

Would it not have been bolder, more “faithful,” to engage in verbal controversy in defense of the Lord? Why silence? For *three* reasons:

1. **FIGHTING WORDS** would not have defended the Lord’s glory here. At such times, we look to the Lord to defend His own glory and not give it to another.
2. **WE BEST DEFEND** the Lord’s glory by speaking first to Him about unbelieving men rather than speaking first about Him to unbelieving men. Hence Hezekiah’s prayer: “O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord” (37:20). Alas, not all strong controversialists are strong intercessors.
3. **WE CAN MAR** the Lord’s glory — as Newton hints — by how we respond to controversy. Man’s insulting God is not reversed by our insulting man.

SPEAK DIRECTLY

A less public, but no less breathtaking, incident took place in the early church.

Imagine the electric atmosphere: Simon Peter had table fellowship with Gentiles. Then “certain men came from James” (Galatians 2:12). Peter separated himself, as did other Jewish Christians, “even Barnabas” (vv. 11–14). How did Paul respond? He “opposed [Peter] to his face” (v. 11).

Paul was surely right. But why was this a God-glorifying response, rather than silence in deference to Peter and Barnabas, avoiding embarrassment and potential division?

1. **THE PROTAGONISTS** were present and believed the same gospel. Paul did not wait and later “bad mouth” Peter. He did the hard thing. He spoke personally and directly to him. That glorifies God because it follows a biblical pattern (Matthew 18:15; James 4:17).
2. **THE VERY HEART** of the gospel was at stake here (as Paul notes in Galatians 2:15–21).
3. **“ORDAINED” MINISTERS** of the gospel were involved, not a single, ordinary individual. The deviation of both Peter and Barnabas would lead to the deviation of others and a disastrous disruption of the whole church. God’s glory in the church required direct speech.

RESPOND PATIENTLY

Some years later, Paul encountered a situation that, at first sight, seems similar. There was an ongoing controversy about “diets and days” in the Roman church(es). Some observed special days and refrained from certain foods. It was presumably a controversy between Jewish and Gentile believers (the latter being the majority in the churches after the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome, see Acts 18:1–2). Paul had an eye to God’s glory. How could the two groups in this controversy “with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:6)?



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Consider the Glory of God - Cont'd

1. **STRIKINGLY, THE “STRONG,”** those on “the right side” of the controversy (14:14), are the ones who should refrain from insisting that others adopt their “right” position and practice. The glory of God is best seen when “the strong” welcome “the weak” — because this is what God has done in Christ: “For while we were still weak . . . Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6).
2. **FELLOW BELIEVERS** are Christ’s servants, not ours. To demean or despise the weak is to despise the Lord of glory. (Remember Matthew 25:40?)
3. **TO INSIST ON** exercising one’s “liberty” on a controversial matter (to eat meat, to ignore days, and so on) compromises that very liberty itself. It means we are driven by inner “need” rather than by love. We are focused on self-glory rather than God’s glory. Since “Christ did not please himself” (Romans 15:3), should we?

These examples are by no means comprehensive. But they illustrate Newton’s point. In all things seek God’s glory — and guard your heart. Christians are always in need of that wise counsel.~ *Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson - Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary*

The Word-less “Church”

Many American churches are in a mess. Theologically they are indifferent, confused, or dangerously wrong. Liturgically they are the captives of superficial fads. Morally they live lives indistinguishable from the world. They often have a lot of people, money, and activities. But are they really churches, or have they degenerated into peculiar clubs?

What has gone wrong? At the heart of the mess is a simple phenomenon: *the churches seem to have lost a love for and confidence in the Word of God.* They still carry Bibles and declare the authority of the Scriptures. They still have sermons based on Bible verses and still have Bible study classes. But not much of the Bible is actually read in their services. Their sermons and studies usually do not examine the Bible to see what it thinks is important for the people of God. Increasingly they treat the Bible as tidbits of poetic inspiration, of pop psychology, and of self-help advice. Congregations where the Bible is ignored or abused are in the gravest peril. Churches that depart from the Word will soon find that God has departed from them.

What solution does the Bible teach for this sad situation? The short but profound answer is given by Paul in Colossians 3:16: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”* We need the Word to dwell in us richly so that we will know the truths that God thinks are most important and so that we will know His purposes and priorities. We need to be concerned less about “felt-needs” and more about the real needs of lost sinners as taught in the Bible.

Paul not only calls us here to have the Word dwell in us richly, but shows us what that rich experience of the Word looks like. He shows us that in three points. (Paul was a preacher, after all.)



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The Word-less “Church”- Cont’d

First, he calls us to be educated by the Word, which will lead us on to ever-richer wisdom by “teaching and admonishing one another.” Paul is reminding us that the Word must be taught and applied to us as a part of it dwelling richly in us. The church must encourage and facilitate such teaching whether in preaching, Bible studies, reading, or conversations. We must be growing in the Word.

It is not just information, however, that we are to be gathering from the Word. We must be growing in a knowledge of the will of God for us: *“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”* (Colossians 1:9). Knowing the will of God will make us wise and in that wisdom we will be renewed in the image of our Creator, an image so damaged by sin: *“Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”* (3:10).

This wisdom will also reorder our priorities and purposes, from that which is worldly to that which is heavenly: *“The hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel”* (1:5). When that Word dwells in us richly we can be confident that we know the full will of God: *“I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known”* (1:25). From the Bible we know all that we need for salvation and godliness.

Second, Paul calls us to expressing the Word from ever-renewed hearts in our “singing.” Interestingly, Paul connects the Word dwelling in us richly with singing. He reminds us that singing is an invaluable means of placing the truth of God deep in our minds and hearts. I have known of elderly Christians far gone with Alzheimer’s disease who can still sing songs of praise to God. Singing also helps connect truth to our emotions. It helps us experience the encouragement and assurance of our faith: *“That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (2:2–3).

The importance of singing, of course, makes the content of our songs vital. If we sing shallow, repetitive songs, we will not be hiding much of the Word in our hearts. But if we sing the Word itself in its fullness and richness, we will be making ourselves rich indeed. We need to remember that God has given us a book of songs, the Psalter, to help us in our singing.

Third, Paul calls us to remember the effect of the Word to make us a people with ever-ready “thanksgiving.” Three times in Colossians 3:15–17 Paul calls us to thankfulness. When the “word of Christ” dwells in us richly, we will be led on to lives of gratitude. As we learn and contemplate all that God has done for us in creation, providence, and redemption, we will be filled with thanksgiving. As we recall His promises of forgiveness, renewal, preservation, and glory, we will live as a truly thankful people.

We need the word of Christ to dwell in us richly today more than ever. Then churches may escape being a mess and become the radiant body of Christ as God intended. ~ ***Dr. W. Robert Godfrey - minister in the United Reformed Church and the third President of Westminster Seminary California, where he is also Professor of Church History.***



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - April 2018

Birthdays

*Carol L. (7)
David A. (8)*

Anniversaries

Walt and Carol L. (15)

Getting to the Root of the Problem

The Bible has much to say about the heart. In Scripture, the heart refers not so much to an organ that pumps blood throughout the body as it does to the core of the soul, the deepest seat of human affections. It is out of the heart that the issues of life flow. Jesus saw a close connection between the location of our treasures and the drive of our hearts. Find a man’s treasure map and you have found the highway of his heart.

In this fallen condition, the heart is seen as the root of our problem. We are said to have “a heart of stone.” I remember two songs from my teenage years that lamented this fact of human nature. One was called “Hearts of Stone” and the other, a Dixieland jazz piece, was titled “Hard-Hearted Hannah, the Vamp of Savannah.”

Hardened hearts, of course, are not limited to vamps, nor are they found only in Georgia. They are found in the breasts of fallen creatures everywhere who have no affection for God. The stony heart is calcified. It is like an inert rock. It has no passion for God, no affection for Christ, no love for His Word. The hardened heart knows nothing of a longing for the things of God.

When Jesus told Nicodemus that it was necessary for him to be reborn in order to enter the kingdom of God, He was telling him that he had heart trouble. Nicodemus had a congenital heart defect—a condition of sclerosis of the heart with which he was born. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of each 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.

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