



Volume 6 Issue 2

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Asking, Seeking and Knocking

There must be few pastors who have not repeated the words of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:7, with a wistfulness equal to his: *“You were running well. Who hindered you?”* The Apostolic finger had touched upon the timeless tragedy of a life that showed early spiritual promise yet was blighted by a lack of perseverance. It is, of course, the same sad story as Jesus told in the parable of the sower, when He describes the one who *“hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while”* (Matthew 13:20).

Perseverance is a word applied in the Bible in two ways. *First* is the ultimate perseverance that depends on God’s preserving us, His people, which is the ground of our assurance of eternal glory. The Westminster Confession of Faith devotes a whole chapter to this subject, assuring us that true believers *“can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end”* (17.1). This depends on God’s election of a people for Himself.

But there is also a use of perseverance to describe a quality in the believer, an example of which is in Ephesians 6:18: *“Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.”* That is a quality of Christian character, and a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. This latter use of the word is most frequently applied to perseverance in the face of opposition or trials, or to perseverance in prayer. It is the *second application* that will be our theme here.

There is no doubt that Jesus is focusing on the subject of perseverance in prayer toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:7–11. Literally translated, it would read, *“Keep on asking and it will be given to you; keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking and it will be opened to you”* (v. 7). All three verbs are present imperatives, and it is likely that they are much more than just a repetition of the same idea. Rather, I think the three commands *“ask,” “seek,”* and *“knock”* are a progressive intensification. Repeatedly asking requires perseverance, and still more so does continuous seeking. Persistent knocking suggests an intense desire for entry.

It is interesting that Luke in his gospel places at this point in Jesus’ teaching the parable of the persistent friend who comes to the door at midnight and refuses to be put off in his request for bread. *“Because of his persistence”* is Jesus’ explanation of why the man obtains a response. But look more closely at each of Jesus’ key words in this paragraph: they are *“ask,” “seek,”* and *“knock”* (Luke 11:5–13).

Asking is the most common idea in supplicating before God’s throne. It is the language of one who is bereft of what he most needs, but knows who can supply his need. In this case, it is the language of the child who has a need that his Father can satisfy.

In the explanatory verse at Matthew 7:9, Jesus draws a parallel with the experience of an earthly father-son relationship: *“Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?”* The father delights to give good gifts to his son—not just any gifts, but good gifts. The son is exercising filial faith in asking, and the father is exhibiting grace in giving.



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Asking, Seeking and Knocking - Cont'd

Grace and faith are key elements in prayer. In the case of our heavenly Father's gifts, there is a perfection about the giving that takes us into a new realm. The Father's gifts are perfect; that is why we should be so eager to come to Him.

If you wonder why God needs us to ask before He gives, there are two things to remember: *one* is that He daily gives us good things we have not even thought about, much less asked for; *the other* is that in Psalm 2, we have a remarkable excerpt of a conversation between God the Father and God the Son regarding how the Son will have the nations for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His possession, and the Father says, "Ask of me, and I will give you" (Psalm 2:8). If the only begotten Son is told to ask, the children of God adopted by grace into His family should not be surprised that they must ask also.

Seeking reveals something more of God's character to us. I am not entirely sure why it should be so, but there is no doubt that God responds to those who seek Him (*remembering, of course, that no one can truly seek God unless God draws him*).

We need to listen to the emphasis on this in the Bible. In Jeremiah 29:13, God says, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart" (see also 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Isaiah 55:6).

Knocking is another intensification of the idea of asking and seeking. I think the thought behind this word is seriousness. The man in Jesus' story who came to his friend at midnight displayed his seriousness in persistent knocking. God responds to seriousness. Superficial devotees and spiritual jesters will not engage His heart and mind.

So, when you pray, be a suppliant, be a seeker, and be serious. True prayer demands all three. ~ *Reverend Eric J. Alexander is a retired minister in the Church of Scotland, most recently serving as senior minister of St. George's-Tron Church in Glasgow*

Tota Scriptura

In centuries past, the church was faced with the important task of recognizing which books belong in the Bible. The Bible itself is not a single book but a collection of many individual books. What the church sought to establish was what we call the canon of sacred Scripture. The word *canon* comes from a Greek word that means "standard or measuring rod." So the canon of sacred Scripture delineates the standard that the church used in receiving the Word of God. As is often the case, it is the work of heretics that forces the church to define her doctrines with greater and greater precision.

We saw the Nicene Creed as a response to the heresy of Arius in the fourth century, and we saw the Council of Chalcedon as a response to the fifth-century heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius, with respect to the church's understanding of the person of Christ. In like manner, the first list of canonical books of the New Testament that we have was produced by a heretic named Marcion.

Marcion's New Testament was an expurgated version of the original biblical documents. Marcion was convinced that the God of the Old Testament was at best a demiurge (a creator god who is the originator of evil) who in many respects is defective in being and character.



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Tota Scriptura - Cont'd

Thus, any reference to that god in the New Testament in a positive relationship to Jesus had to be edited out. And so we receive from Marcion a bare-bones profile of Jesus and His teaching, divorced from the Old Testament. Over against this heresy, the church had to define the full measure of the apostolic writings, which they did in establishing the New Testament and Old Testament canon.

Another crisis emerged much later in the sixteenth century, in the midst of the Protestant Reformation. Though the central debate, what historians call the material cause of the Reformation, focused on the doctrine of justification, the underlying dispute was the secondary issue of authority. In Luther's defense of *sola fide* or *faith alone*, he was reminded by the Roman Catholic Church that she had already made judgments in her papal encyclicals and in her historical documents in ways that ran counter to Luther's theses. And in the middle of that controversy, Luther affirmed the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, namely that the conscience is bound by sacred Scripture alone, that is, the Bible is the only source of divine, special revelation that we have. In response, the Roman Catholic Church at the fourth session of the Council of Trent declared that God's special revelation is contained both in sacred Scripture and in the tradition of the church. This position, called a dual-source view of revelation, was reaffirmed by subsequent papal encyclicals. And so we see the dispute between Scripture alone versus Scripture plus tradition. In that controversy, the issue had to do with something that was an addition to the Bible, namely, the church's tradition.

Since that time, the opposite problem has emerged, and that is not so much the question of what is added to Scripture, but rather what has been subtracted from it. We face now an issue not of Scripture addition but of Scripture reduction. The issue that we face in our day is not merely the question of *sola Scriptura* but also the question of *tota Scriptura*, which has to do with embracing the whole counsel of God as it is revealed in the entirety of sacred Scripture. There have been many attempts in the last century to seek a canon within the canon. That is to say, restricted portions of Scripture are deemed as God's revelation, not the whole of Scripture. In this case, we have seen movements that have been described by historians as neo-Marcionite. That is, the activity of canon reduction sought by the heretic Marcion in the early church has now been replicated in our day.

Perhaps most famous for this in the twentieth century was the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, who made a significant distinction between what he called kerygma and myth. He taught that the Scriptures contained truths of historical value and of theological value that were salvific in their content, but that those truths were hidden and contained within a husk of mythology. For the Bible to be relevant to modern man, it must be demythologized. The husks must be broken in order that the kernel of truth buried under the mythological husk can be brought to the surface.

Beyond the radical reductionism of Bultmann, we have seen more recently attempts among professing evangelicals, and even within the Reformed community, to seek a different type of reduction of Scripture. We have seen views of so-called "*limited inspiration*" or "*limited inerrancy*." That is to say, the Spirit's inspiration of the Bible is not holistic, but rather is limited to matters of faith and doctrine. In this scenario, proponents suggest we can distinguish between doctrinal matters that are of divine origin and what the Bible teaches in matters of science and history, and, in some cases, ethics. Therefore, there are portions within the Bible that are not equally inspired by God. In this case, we see the reappearance of a canon within a canon. The problem that arises is a serious one. Perhaps most severe is the question, who is it who decides what part of the Bible really belongs to the canon?



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Tota Scriptura - Cont'd

Once we remove ourselves from a view of *tota Scriptura*, we are free then to pick and choose what portions of Scripture are normative for Christian faith and life, just like picking cherries from a tree.

To do this we would have to revisit the teaching of Jesus, wherein He said that *man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*. We would have to change it, to have our Lord say that we do not live by bread alone but by only some of the words that come to us from God. In this case, the Bible is reduced to the status where the whole is less than the sum of its parts. This is an issue that the church has to face in every generation, and it has reappeared today in some of the most surprising places. We're finding, in seminaries that call themselves Reformed, professors advocating this type of canon within the canon. The church must say an emphatic "**no**" to these departures from orthodox Christianity, and she must reaffirm her faith not only in *sola Scriptura*, but in *tota Scriptura* as well. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**

Higher Criticism

About ten years ago I had the opportunity to study under the late Dr. Harold O. J. Brown (1933–2007) at the Evangelical Preacher's Seminary in Wittenberg, Germany. Dr. Brown was known by his students for his oral examinations, wherein he generously and humorously interrogated us on a variety of doctrinal questions that we were expected to answer on the spot. During one of his oral examinations I recall one of my fellow students speaking somewhat flippantly about the Bible. Without hesitation, looking intently at the student, Dr. Brown said, "*The Bible is not just some book. It is the Word of God. You would do well to regard it as such.*"

To this day Dr. Brown's words are ingrained in my mind. The Bible is not a cleverly contrived collection of fanciful tales of mythical gods and prophets, sorcerers and goblins, hobbits and elves. It is not a Judeo-Christian anthology of sixty-six ancient books that were deemed politically and ecclesiastically correct by influential Christians of the early church who coveted worldly acceptance and prestige. On the contrary, the Bible is the book of the Lord God Almighty. It is the authoritative, inerrant, and infallible Word of God, and, as Jesus taught us in His prayer to the Father: His "*Word is truth.*" It doesn't merely contain truth or speak about truth; *it is truth* — it defines truth (John 17:17). We must, therefore, regard it as such.

Nevertheless, contrary to the popular saying, "*God said it, I believe it, that settles it,*" it is inconsequential whether or not we believe it. Our believing the Bible to be true, our regarding it as the Word of God, has no bearing on its veracity. It stands alone as the veritable Word of God, never returning void, always going forth to accomplish precisely what the Lord intends. The Word of God is never to be the object of our scrutiny. Rather, the Word of God is that by which the Holy Spirit scrutinizes us. By His Word, the Lord employs His own version of higher criticism as He inspects our lives, interrogates our proud hearts, and reveals our sins. His Word alone is inspired (2 Timothy 3:16), literally "*exhaled*" by God Almighty so that we might inhale it, allowing it to dwell within our hearts richly. In this way, we will know it, love it, proclaim it, and breathe it as we speak His Word back to Him in prayer and as we bow before Him *coram Deo*, before His face and for His glory. ~ **Dr. Burk Parsons**



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John Knox

It might be difficult for a visitor to Scotland in 2014 to believe that the nation was a backwater country five hundred years ago. In fact, however, one sixteenth-century writer could, without fear of contradiction, describe it as “a corner of the world separate from the society of men . . . almost beyond the limits of the human race.”

However, in the early 1500s, Scotland had one thing in common with the rest of Europe: a deeply corrupt and spiritually impoverished church, with morally moribund leadership. To cite one notorious example, David Beaton, cardinal and archbishop, legitimated at least fourteen children as his own. So much for celibacy in action. Such was the spiritual ignorance that George Buchanan could claim that some priests thought the New Testament was a book recently published by Martin Luther.

Nor was this spiritual penury confined to the lower orders. During the course of the trial of Thomas Forret in 1539, his prosecutor pulled a book out of Forret’s glove and shouted, “*Behold, he has the book of heresy in his sleeve, which makes all the confusion in the kirk.*” This prime exhibit for the prosecution was, in fact, Forret’s copy of the New Testament. When one discovers that the presiding bishop in the trial confessed, “*I thank God that I never knew what the Old and New Testament was,*” it comes as no surprise to learn that the brave Forret was burned at the stake.

Enter John Knox, and the Reformation was under way.

But Scotland was by no means transformed overnight. Nor was Knox the first Scottish Reformer. He was preceded by a roll call of heroes of the faith, men such as Forret, some of whom had given their lives for the recovery of biblical truth and the reformation of the church. Patrick Hamilton had been burned in 1528, and George Wishart (whom Knox had served as a bodyguard) was executed in 1546. So Knox came to reap what others had sown. His calling was to secure this embryonic work of God’s Spirit.

Born in Haddington, East Lothian, sometime between 1513 and 1515, Knox received his schooling locally and then at the University of St. Andrews, according to Buchanan’s testimony. He became a priest and returned to his home region as notary and tutor. We know as little about his conversion as we do about Calvin’s. His life as a Reformer can be divided basically into four segments.

Capture and Enslavement

After Wishart’s martyrdom, Knox came to St. Andrews with some of his young students and, in 1547, joined the group of Reformers living in the castle there after Cardinal Beaton’s murder. When he was appointed to preach, he refused, but he was virtually manhandled into accepting a call from the castle congregation to become their minister. Within a matter of months, however, the castle was under siege from French ships in St. Andrews Bay. Knox and others were captured, and he became a galley slave for the next year and a half.

Career in England

In 1549, Knox was released and made his way to England. He pastored a congregation at Berwick, but soon he moved to Newcastle. He then became a royal chaplain during the days of the young King Edward VI. Moving farther south, his influence grew, not least in his insistence on what came to be known as the “Puritan” principle for regulating public worship: only what is commanded in Scripture is mandated in the life of the church.



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John Knox - Cont'd

Paradoxically, it was the Presbyterian Knox who was influential in having the so-called Black Rubric included in the Book of Common Prayer, stating that kneeling to receive Communion was not a sign of devotion but merely a convenient form of administration.

The death of Edward in 1553 was a body blow to the reforming party in England, leading as it did to the enthronement of Mary Tudor. (“That idolatrous Jezebel” were Knox’s carefully chosen words to describe her.) Knox sought refuge on the Continent.

Life on the Continent

Between 1553 and 1559, Knox lived a somewhat nomadic existence. But He spent some time with Calvin in Geneva, calling it “the most perfect school of Christ . . . since the days of the apostles.” Thereafter, he accepted a call to pastor the English-speaking congregation at Frankfurt am Main. But there, trouble arose over his vision for a church that would conform absolutely to the New Testament pattern.

In 1555, after a further period in Geneva, Knox returned to Scotland to strengthen the work of reformation. He particularly sought to encourage members of the Scottish nobility who he feared were in danger of easy compromise with Rome.

Knox married Marjory Bowes and, in 1556, returned to Geneva, where he pastored a congregation of some two hundred refugees. The following year, he received an urgent invitation to return to Scotland—1558 was the scheduled time for the marriage of the young Mary, Queen of Scots, to the dauphin of France, an event that seemed to destine Scotland for permanent Roman Catholic rule.

Urged on by Calvin, Knox made a difficult and dangerous journey through war zones to Dieppe, France, only to receive word that some of the nobility no longer felt the urgency of the situation. (Some of them were actually in Paris at that time making preparations for the much-feared marriage of Mary.) Knox’s response was to urge upon these “Lords of the Congregation” the taking of a common band (bond or covenant), thus setting a precedent of covenant-making in Scottish piety.

A taste of Knox’s vigor can be savored in a letter he wrote that same year to the people of Scotland, urging them not to compromise the gospel. He reminded them that they must answer for their actions before the judgment seat of God:

[Some make excuses:] “We were but simple subjects, we would not redress the faults and crimes of our rulers, bishops, and clergy; we called for reformation, and wished for the same, but the Lords’ brethren were bishops, their sons were abbots, and the friends of great men had possession of the church, and so we were compelled to give obedience to all that they demanded.” These vain excuses, I say, will nothing avail you in the presence of God.



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John Knox - Cont'd

Return to Scotland

In 1558, England's "Bloody" Mary died and was succeeded by Elizabeth I. Knox sought a safe passage home through England. By this time, however, he was known as the author of the infamous polemic against female monarchs: *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which had been published anonymously at first in Geneva and had gone on sale without Calvin's knowledge. The safe passage was refused, and so it was by boat to Leith, the harbor for Edinburgh, that Knox finally returned home to begin his most important phase of public ministry.

Despite his lengthy absences from his native land, several things equipped Knox to lead the Reformation there: his name was associated with the heroes of the recent past, his sufferings authenticated his commitment, his broad experience had prepared him for leadership, and his sense of call made him "*fear the face of no man.*"

Knox gives a vivid account of these days in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*. His famous interviews with Mary, Queen of Scots, often misrepresented, indicate his total commitment to the principles of Scripture. It was probably that total commitment that led to a dwindling of support among those from whom he had hoped so much. In earlier days, his radical vision had provided an opportunity for the nobility to lead Scotland into the future, but many were too little concerned for the radical transformation of the spiritual life of the church and nation. As one modern scholar put it, "*The language of the covenant had been replaced by a more seductive image—the common weal [well-being].*"

This change in Knox's influence was illustrated at the coronation of the young James VI, where Knox preached the sermon but the ex-Roman Catholic bishop of Orkney performed the anointing of the king in accordance with the ancient rites. The return of bishops to the Kirk already had appeared over the horizon.

By the summer of 1572, Knox was a shadow of his former self. Weakened by a stroke, it was beyond his powers to preach in the Church of St. Giles, although he managed to do so occasionally at the nearby Tolbooth. By November, it was clear he was not long for this world. On the morning of November 24, he asked his wife to read 1 Corinthians 15 to him, and around five o'clock came his final request: "Read where I cast my first anchor," presumably in faith; she read John 17. By the end of the evening, he was gone.

Knox himself wrote with deep gratitude to God of the work that he had seen accomplished:

As touching the doctrine taught by our ministers and . . . the administration of sacraments used in our Churches, we are bold to affirm that there is no realm this day upon the face of the earth that hath them in greater purity; yea (we must speak the truth, whomsoever we offend), there is none . . . that hath them in the like purity.

Many explanations have been forthcoming for Knox's influence and that of the Scottish Reformation. No doubt there were many factors at work in the providence of God that brought about such spiritual renewal. But Knox's own conviction was this: "*God gave His Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance.*" Therein lies the greatest lesson of his life. ~ **Dr. Sinclair Ferguson**



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Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - February 2019

Birthdays

*Savanna W. (4)
Jacob David K. (24)*

Anniversary

*Jonathan and April F. (5)
Daniel and Diana K. (11)
Mike and Rose M. (17)*

Accepting Nurturing from the Church

“Holy mother church” - historians are not certain who first said it. The statement has been attributed by some to Cyprian, by others to Augustine. The assertion has survived since the early centuries of Christian history—*“Who does not have the church as his mother does not have God as his Father.”* From its earliest days, the church was given the appellation *“mother.”*

The use of paternal and maternal language is an intriguing phenomenon in religion. We cannot deny the virtual universal tendency to seek ultimate consolation in some sort of divine maternity. We have all experienced the piercing poignancy that attends the plaintive cry of a child who, in the midst of sobs, says, *“I want my mommy.”* Who of us, when we were children, did not utter these words? Among those who are parents, which of us has not heard these words?

The nurturing function of the church most clearly links it to the maternal image. It is in the church that we are given our spiritual food. We gain strength from the sacraments ministered to us. Through the Word we receive our consolation and the tears of broken hearts are wiped clean. When we are wounded, we go to the church for healing. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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