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West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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The Bible Is Authoritative Truth

When it comes to views of Scripture we live in a skeptical age. While there have always been those who questioned the authority and authenticity of God’s Word, the church itself was not home to doubters and skeptics. The staunch anti-authority trend we see among professing believers today began in the eighteenth century and the post-Reformation Enlightenment—during the ascendancy of human reason—when skeptics and critics brought the legitimacy of God’s Word under widespread attack. Today, we’re dealing with the devastating destruction that has accumulated in just a few centuries due to viewing the Bible as something less than the inerrant, authoritative Word of God.

The authority and inerrancy of Scripture are fundamental doctrines, yet we have an entire generation of professing Christians who are neither committed to those dogmas nor able to fight to defend them. Most could not articulate a case for biblical authority or defend why every word of God is true—whether internally from the text of Scripture, or externally from the validations of fulfilled prophecy and reason. Many cannot give a clear defense of why it is necessary to have an inerrant, authoritative Scripture in order for the Holy Spirit to do His work of saving and sanctifying. Though these are foundational realities, too many Christians seem indifferent to these essentials.

Congregations sit listening to sermons from pastors who have been conditioned to elevate methodology, cultural cues, and entertainment in order to attract a crowd rather than to serve an assembly of true worshipers who are able to understand, articulate, and defend the truth of God revealed in Scripture. While a focus on methodology does not necessarily deny the authority of Scripture, there is a de facto denial of Scripture’s supremacy when it is set aside for other means and methods. The Bible is regularly treated superficially and routinely taken out of context, resulting in a generation that has no expectation that the preacher would handle the Word of God accurately. Rather, people are trained to treat the Bible like a book that they are free to manipulate for their own ends, which ultimately both exposes and perpetuates their low view of Scripture.

But the Bible isn’t a book full of ideas, opinions, and principles awaiting our consideration. Everything God’s Word says carries authority because of Who authored it. That is why all believers must embrace and submit to the authority of Scripture. God’s Word is the final authority in His church—no pastor or pope sits in judgment of it. Peter refers to Scripture as the “*utterances of God*” (1 Peter 4:11), meaning it is the very words from the mouth of God. Paul says that believers “*have the mind of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 2:16). That isn’t some kind of gnostic higher knowledge, attained through mystical or subjective means. It means the mind of Christ is displayed for us in the pages of God’s Word. If anyone wants to know what the Lord thinks about anything, he simply needs to open the Bible. All the insight we need has been delivered to us in the authoritative Word of God. As Charles Spurgeon rightly explained, there is no other reliable source of truth to which we can cling.



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“Thus saith the Lord” is the only authority in God’s Church. When the tabernacle was pitched in the wilderness, what was the authority for its length and breadth? Why was the altar of incense to be placed here, and the brazen laver there? Why so many lambs or bullocks to be offered on a certain day? Why must the passover be roasted whole and not sodden? Simply and only because God had shown all these things to Moses in the holy mount; and thus had Jehovah spoken, “*Look that thou make them after their pattern, which was showed thee in the mount.*” It is even so in the Church at the present day; true servants of God demand to see for all Church ordinances and doctrines the express authority of the Church’s only Teacher and Lord. They remember that the Lord Jesus bade the apostles to teach believers to observe all things whatsoever he had commanded them, but he neither gave to them nor to any men power to alter his own commands. The Holy Ghost revealed much of precious truth and holy precept by the apostles, and to his teaching we would give earnest heed; but when men cite the authority of fathers, and councils, and bishops, we give place for subjection, no, not for an hour. They may quote Irenaeus or Cyprian, Augustine or Chrysostom; they may remind us of the dogmas of Luther or Calvin; they may find authority in Simeon, or Wesley, or Gill—we will listen to the opinions of these great men with the respect which they deserve as men, but having so done, we deny that we have anything to do with these men as authorities in the Church of God, for there nothing has any authority, but “*Thus saith the Lord of hosts.*” Yea, if you shall bring us the concurrent consent of all tradition—if you shall quote precedents venerable with fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen centuries of antiquity, we burn the whole as so much worthless lumber, unless you put your finger upon the passage of Holy Writ which warrants the matter to be of God. You may further plead, in addition to all this venerable authority, the beauty of the ceremony and its usefulness to those who partake therein, but this is all foreign to the point, for to the true Church of God the only question is this, is there a “*Thus saith the Lord*” for it? And if divine authority be not forthcoming, faithful men thrust forth the intruder as the cunning craftiness of men. ***Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Thus Saith the Lord”, Sermon 591 in the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. 10 (London, UK: Passmore and Alabaster, 1864) 535-36.***

The only one who has the right to speak to His people with authority is God. The Father called sinners out of the darkness of sin and fitted them for the work of His kingdom. Christ purchased the church with His own blood. He is the head of the church, and the head of the church mediates His authority through His Word. And through the Word, the Holy Spirit does His work of sanctification in every believer’s life. God’s people need to faithfully submit to the final authority of His written Word. ~ ***Dr. John MacArthur***



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What Is Thanksgiving Day?

Thanksgiving is an American holiday that stretches all the way back to a time long before America became a nation. The Pilgrims landed in 1620. They faced brutal conditions and were woefully unprepared. Roughly half of them died in that first year. Then they had a successful harvest of corn. In November of 1621 they decided to celebrate a feast of thanksgiving.

Edward Winslow was among those who ate that first thanksgiving meal in 1621. He noted:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we gathered the fruit of our labors. ...And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want.”

In addition to the fowl eaten that first Thanksgiving, the Indians also brought along five deer as their contribution to the feast. Presumably they also ate corn.

Over the centuries, Americans continued to celebrate feasts of thanksgiving in the fall. Some presidents issued proclamations. Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation for a perpetual national holiday set aside for thanksgiving. In 1863, with the nation torn apart by the Civil War, he declared:

“I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

So we have a holiday of thanksgiving born in and further nurtured during times of great adversity and struggle. We might think that times of adversity and challenge would spawn ingratitude, while times of prosperity would spawn gratitude. Sadly, the reverse is true. A chilling scene from the animated television show *The Simpsons* demonstrates this. Bart Simpson was called upon to pray for a meal, to which he promptly prayed, *“Dear God, We paid for all of this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”*

Prosperity breeds ingratitude. The writers of the Heidelberg Catechism knew this. Question 28 asks what it benefits us to know that God creates and sustains all things. The answer is it gives patience in adversity and gratitude in prosperity. Moses also knew this. In Deuteronomy, he looks ahead to times of material prosperity for Israel, then sternly warns, inspired by the Holy Spirit, not to forget God. *“Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’”* (Deuteronomy 8:17). We did this all ourselves. Thanks for nothing. Human nature trends toward ingratitude.

Another culprit breeding ingratitude is our entitlement culture. Simply put, why should we be grateful for what we deserve and what we have a right to? I was owed this, goes the culture, therefore why would I say thank you?

A third culprit concerns what UC Davis professor of psychology Dr. Robert Emmons calls the *“to whom”* question. In his scientific study of gratitude, Emmons came to the realization that gratitude raises a singular and significant question: When we say thank you, to whom are we grateful?



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The interesting thing here is that if we trace this “*to whom*” line of questioning back, like pulling on the threads of some tapestry, we find a singular answer at the end of each and every thread. The answer is God. To whom are we grateful? We are grateful in an ultimate sense to God.

Our Benefactor does “*good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness*” (Acts 14:17). Theologians call this common grace. God as creator cares for all His creation and provides for our needs. He gives us our very lives and our very breath.

Our Benefactor also does good by giving His most precious gift, the gift of His Beloved Son. Theologians call this saving grace. Gifts often cost the giver. What a costly gift the Father has given us in sending the Son. So Paul exclaims, “*Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift*” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

When we consider God as the “*to whom*” we are thankful, we may well be seeing both the necessity of thanksgiving and the eclipse of thanksgiving. As culture veers more and more towards a secular state it shrinks back from gratitude. So vainly we think we did this all ourselves. So wrongly we think we deserve, or even have a fundamental right to, all of this. We also know what is at the end of the string if we pull on it long enough. We know that we will be confronted with a Creator. We know we will be accountable to a Creator. Saying thank you means we are dependent, not independent. We would rather be ungrateful. Paul says we know God from all the evidence He has left of Himself, but we don’t want to “*honor him or give thanks to him*” (Romans 1:21). Then the downward spiral begins. A culture of ingratitude careens ever downward into decline.

We should not be counted among those who see the fourth Thursday in November as nothing more than a day of football and over-indulgence. We should be thankful for one day set apart to consider all that we have and realize that all that we have has been given to us. Of course, such gratitude should in no wise be limited to one day out of 365.

Having been imprisoned for one year, four months, and eighteen days in a Nazi cell measuring 6 ft. x 9 ft, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what is certainly a reminder of the meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday:

“You must never doubt that I’m traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I’m so thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of and thankful for God’s mercy and forgiveness.”

This article was authored by **Dr. Stephen J. Nichols - President of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer for Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow.**



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Grace and Gratitude

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 unmerited.

Paul’s epistle to the Romans sheds light on what we mean when we say that grace is unmerited. In 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).

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.



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Grace and Gratitude - Cont'd

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 Corinthians 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.*

Living in Evil Days

The days we live in are certainly full of evil. Read any newspaper, and you'll know what I mean. Can you imagine how it breaks God's heart to create a perfect world, filled with every good thing, and then see it become as corrupt, debauched, and vile as it is today? Can you imagine how it must be for God to watch Christians who, in the midst of this evil world, are given opportunities to do good, yet bypass them without notice? The days are evil, and God gives us these opportunities to make things happen that matter—to fill up at least one moment of every day with something good, something righteous, something for Him.

"Because the days are evil," the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:16, it's important to walk wisely and make the most of our time. When opportunities for goodness do come, we should seize them. When God gives us an occasion to glorify Him (which in turn will bring a blessing on us), we must take the opportunity for His name's sake. We must seize it in the midst of an evil day.

When I think of how God's heart is broken over the evil of a world that He made for His own glory, I say to myself, If God gives me one small opportunity in the midst of an evil day to do something good, something to honor Him, or something to glorify Him, I'm going to grab that opportunity. Since the days are evil and it seems as though goodness is so scarce, you and I need to take every opportunity we can for manifesting goodness. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*



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Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - December 2019

Birthdays

*Terrye B. (4)
Katie D. (9)
Jennifer A. (13)
Wilma S. (16)
Scott T. (19)
John M. (21)
Cheryl P. (22)
Jessica T. (23)*

Anniversary

*John and Teresa H. (1)
Russ and Terrye B. (5)
Malcolm and Amber H. (14)
John and LeAnn M. (22)*

Because we have received the undeserved gift of God’s grace in Christ, we who believe in Jesus ought to be the most grateful of all people. This means that we should thank our Creator regularly, both as private individuals and as a body during worship. Thanking God for who He is and what He has done expresses our awareness of who the Lord is—our sovereign, gracious Maker—and who we are—undeserving creatures who have been brought into a saving relationship with Him.

Most of our regular worship services include expressions of thanksgiving to God for His redemption. We should participate in these wholeheartedly and also thank God during any periods of silent prayer that occur before, during, or after worship. Cultivating thankful hearts will help us remember who God is and why He is worthy of our praise.



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Please submit information to the editor 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.

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