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# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*

*“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”*



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### *Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

## **Last Things First**

Do you ever have difficulty understanding how Scripture fits together as a coherent whole? I have a suggestion. The next time you read through the Bible, s t a r t with Revelation 20–22, and then go back to Genesis 1. Just as knowing the conclusion of a whodunit helps you see things you missed, the final chapters of Revelation can help you identify the major themes of Scripture that are introduced in Genesis and developed throughout the entire Bible.

In Genesis, we learn that God intends to establish His kingdom on earth with man as a subordinate king under Him. Adam and Eve are also given priestly duties insofar as they are to guard the sanctity of the garden. God establishes a covenant with them and manifests His presence in the garden. When Satan successfully tempts man, he usurps authority, and death is introduced into the world. Creation is cursed, man is barred from the tree of life, and God declares war on the Serpent.

In the final chapters of Revelation, we see the final resolution. The Devil is finally defeated, and mankind is restored to its intended role serving as priests and reigning under God (20:6). God reestablishes His presence with man, and the purpose of the covenants is fulfilled as they are now His people and He is their God (21:3). The effects of the curse are removed, and there is no longer any sin or death (21:4, 27). God fully establishes His kingdom, and access is again allowed to the tree of life (22:1–2). All of this is possible because of the work of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Read the Bible looking for these themes. Look for the ongoing conflict between the people of the Serpent and the people of God. Watch as God reestablishes His kingdom and His presence with His people. Observe God’s work of redemption. Observe how the resolution of all these themes comes together in the person and work of Jesus Christ, our King, our High Priest, our Redeemer, and Immanuel. ~ *Dr. Keith Mathison*

## **Who Is Lord: Christ or Caesar?**

Someday, we will be like Him. That’s our hope. But it’s not a hope that we put on the shelf, and it’s not a hope that sends us into a cave. It’s a hope that sends us into the world with confidence. We can be confident in God, confident in His Word, confident in Christ, confident in the gospel, and confident in hope. In the AD 90s, Domitian ruled as emperor over Rome. His cruelty rivaled that of Nero. He insisted that he be worshiped as a god. Christians, of course, could not participate in the rituals of this emperor cult. That left them vulnerable, and that vulnerability led to persecution. It is likely that John’s exile to the island of Patmos directly resulted from Domitian’s edicts. John refused to bow.

John wrote Revelation during this time, many scholars believe. Also around this time, an early church figure named Clement, serving as bishop at Rome, sent a letter to the church at Corinth. Clement opens his letter by referring to “the sudden and successive calamitous events.” Persecution rolled over the church like wave after relentless wave. Clement wrote to comfort them and to exhort them to stand firm. Near the middle of his letter, he simply reminds the believers at Corinth that Christ is our leader and we are His soldiers.



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## **Who Is Lord: Christ or Caesar? - Cont'd**

Domitian's edict and the persecution that followed served to press an urgent question to the church. This question was there at the very beginning. It was there at the events surrounding the incarnation when Herod ruled. It was there when the soldier drew his sword in the garden of Gethsemane, and it was there all along the excruciating and agonizing road to the cross. The question never left the early decades of the church or even the early centuries of the church. The question was this: Caesar or Christ?

Domitian's edict made that question palpable, even visceral. Statues of him were sent all over the empire. On appointed days, feasts were held, and all of the populace had to pass before the cast image of Domitian and bow before him as god. It was very clear: Caesar or Christ?

The truth is that question is always there. It is always before us, before the church in every age of the past. The question is before us in our time today, and it will be in front of the church in the ages to come. Who is Lord? When the Apostles and the believers in the pages of the New Testament answered that Christ is Lord and Caesar is not, ramifications followed. That decision had consequences. They did not let the temporal consequences overshadow the eternal ones. The author of Hebrews reminds the believers that they had "endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated" (Hebrews 10:32-33).

Then he declares in 10:35: "Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward."

When the question is put to us, Caesar or Christ, may we be among those who don't shrink back. May we take our stand alongside the first-century church and the church through the centuries. May we not throw away our confidence.

From this singular point of the lordship of Christ came the church's confidence. And also from this point came the church's convictions. Chris Larson, my colleague at Ligonier Ministries, recently made the statement, "The future belongs to Christians of conviction."

This is a time for conviction. This is a time for confidence. ~ *Dr. Stephen J. Nichols - President of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer for Ligonier Ministries*

## ***The Holy Love of God***

Long ago, Augustine of Hippo pointed out that the desire of every human heart is to experience a love that is transcendent. Regrettably for us today, however, I don't think there's any word in the English language that's been more stripped of the depth of its meaning than the word love. Due to the shallow romanticism of secular culture, we tend to view the love of God in the same way popular music, art, and literature view love. Yet the Bible says God's love is far different—and greater.

First John 4:7-11 gives us this classic statement with respect to the love of God:

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.... In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his only Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*



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### *The Holy Love of God - Cont'd*

Here the Apostle grounds his admonition for Christians to love one another in the very character of God. “Love is from God,” he tells us. What he means is that Christian love comes from God Himself. This love is not natural to fallen humanity. It originates in God and is a divine gift to His people. When we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given a capacity for this supernatural love that has God as its source and foundation. When John says that “*whoever loves has been born of God and knows God,*” he is not teaching that every human being who loves another is therefore born of God. The kind of love of which he speaks comes only from regeneration. Without the Holy Spirit’s transformation of the human heart, no one has this capacity for love. No unregenerate person has this kind of love, and no regenerate person lacks such love. Therefore, a person who does not have the ability to love in the way John describes has not been born again. “*Anyone who does not love [in this manner] does not know God.*”

John does not stop there. Not only is love from God but God is love. Note that John does not use the word *is* as an equals sign. We cannot reverse the subject and the predicate in God is love and say love is God. John is not making a crass identification between love and God so that anyone who has a romantic feeling in his heart or any affection for another person has thereby encountered God. When he says God is love, he’s using a bit of hyperbole. In other words, love is such an intimate aspect or attribute of the character of God, that you can, in a manner of speaking, say that He is love. Any view of Him that neglects to include within it this profound sense of divine love is a distortion of who God is.

Of course, the normal problem we face is not that people ignore God’s love; rather, people separate His love from His other attributes. I don’t know how many times I’ve taught on God’s sovereignty, holiness, or justice, only to hear the objection, “But my God is love”—as if God’s love is incompatible with justice, sovereignty, or holiness.

Our most fundamental inclination as fallen human creatures is to exchange the truth that God reveals about Himself for a lie, and to serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-32). We commit idolatry every time we substitute a lesser concept for His glory, whether that substitution takes the crass form of stone gods or the more sophisticated form of redefining God’s character to suit our tastes. A god stripped of justice, of holiness, of sovereignty, and the rest is as much an idol as a statue of wood or stone. We must be careful not to substitute for the biblical God a god who is exhausted in his character by the one attribute of love, especially as popular culture defines it.

As Christians we believe in a God who is simple and not made up of parts. God is not one part sovereign, one part just, one part immutable, one part omniscient, one part eternal, and one part loving. Rather, He is all of His attributes at all times. To understand any single attribute, we must understand it in relation to all His other attributes. The love of God is eternal and sovereign. The love of God is immutable and holy. We treat all of His other attributes in the same way. God’s justice is loving and eternal. His holiness is loving and omniscient.

Our concept of the love of God will stay on track only as we understand His love in relationship to His other attributes.

Whatever else God’s love is, it is holy. His love is therefore characterized by the qualities that define holiness—transcendence and purity. First, God’s love is transcendent. It is set apart and different from everything we experience in creation. Second, God’s love is pure. His love is absolutely flawless, having no selfishness, wickedness, or sin mixed in with it. God’s love is not ordinary or profane. It is a majestic, sacred love that goes far beyond anything creatures can manifest. No shadow of evil covers the brightness of the pure glory of the love of God. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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### *Salvation Is of the Lord*

The central truth of God's saving grace is succinctly stated in the assertion, "Salvation is of the Lord." This strong declaration means that every aspect of man's salvation is from God and is entirely dependent upon God. The only contribution that we make is the sin that was laid upon Jesus Christ at the cross. The Apostle Paul affirmed this when he wrote, "*From Him and through Him and to Him are all things*" (Romans 11:36). This is to say, salvation is God determined, God purchased, God applied, and God secured. From start to finish, salvation is of the Lord alone.

This truth is best summarized in the doctrines of grace, which are total depravity, unconditional election, definite atonement, effectual calling, and preserving grace. These truths present the triune God as the author of our salvation from beginning to end. Each member of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit—has a part to play in redemption, and they work together as one God to rescue those perishing under divine wrath. In perfect unity, the three divine persons do the work that hellbound sinners, utterly unable to save themselves, cannot do.

#### **TOTAL DEPRAVITY**

The first man, Adam, sinned, and his transgression and guilt were immediately imputed to all mankind (Christ excepted). By this one act of disobedience, he became morally polluted in every part of his being—mind, affections, body, and will. By this sin, death entered the world, and Adam's fellowship with God was broken.

Adam's guilt and corruption were transmitted to his natural offspring at the moment of conception. In turn, each of his children's children inherited this same radical fallenness. Subsequently, it has been passed down to each generation to the present day. Adam's perverse nature has spread to the whole of every person. Apart from grace, our minds are darkened by sin, unable to understand the truth. Our hearts are defiled, unable to love the truth. Our bodies are dying, progressing to physical death. Our wills are dead, unable to choose the good. Moral inability to please God plagues every person from their entrance into the world. In their unregenerate state, no one seeks after God. No one is capable of doing good. All are under the curse of the law, which is eternal death.

#### **UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION**

Long before Adam sinned, God had already decreed and determined salvation for sinners. In eternity past, the Father chose a people in Christ who would be saved. Before time began, God elected many from among mankind whom He purposed to save from His wrath. This selection was not based upon any foreseen faith in those whom He chose. Nor was it prompted by their inherent goodness. Instead, according to His infinite love and inscrutable wisdom, God set His affection upon His elect.

The Father gave the elect to His Son to be His bride. Each one chosen was predestined by the Father to be conformed to the image of His Son and to sing His praises forever. The Father commissioned His Son to enter this world and lay down His life to save these same chosen ones. Likewise, the Father commissioned the Spirit to bring these same elect ones to faith in Christ. The Son and the Spirit freely concurred in all these decisions, making salvation the undivided work of the triune God.



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### *Salvation Is of the Lord - Cont'd*

#### **DEFINITE ATONEMENT**

In the fullness of time, God the Father sent His Son to enter this fallen world on a mission to redeem His people. He was born of a virgin, without a sin nature, to live a sinless life. Jesus was born under the divine law so that He would fully obey it on behalf of disobedient sinners who have repeatedly broken it. This active obedience of Christ fulfilled all the righteous demands of the law. By keeping the law, the Son of God achieved a perfect righteousness, which is reckoned to believing sinners so that they are declared righteous, or justified, before God.

This sinless life of Jesus further qualified Him to go to the cross and die in the place of guilty, hellbound sinners. On the cross, Jesus bore the unmitigated wrath of the Father for the sins of His people. In this vicarious death, the Father transferred to His Son all the sins of all those who would ever believe in Him. As a sin-bearing sacrifice, Jesus died a substitutionary death in the place of God's elect. On the cross, He propitiated the righteous anger of God toward the elect. By the blood of the cross, Jesus reconciled the holy God to sinful man, establishing peace between the two parties. In His redeeming death, He purchased His bride—His elect people—out of bondage to sin and set her free.

Jesus' death did not merely make all mankind potentially savable. Nor did His death simply achieve a hypothetical benefit that may or may not be accepted. Neither did His death merely make all mankind redeemable. Instead, Jesus actually redeemed a specific people through His death, securing and guaranteeing their salvation. Not a drop of Jesus' blood was shed in vain. He truly saved all for whom He died. This doctrine of definite atonement is sometimes called limited atonement.

#### **EFFECTUAL CALLING**

With oneness of purpose, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into the world to apply this salvation to those chosen and redeemed. The Spirit came to convict the elect of sin, righteousness, and judgment and to turn to the Son all whom the Father gave to Him. At the divinely appointed time, the Spirit removes from each elect person his unbelieving heart of stone, hardened and dead in sin, and replaces it with a believing heart of flesh, responsive and alive unto God. The Spirit implants eternal life within the spiritually dead soul. He grants the chosen men and women the gifts of repentance and faith, enabling them to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Suddenly, all things are made new. New life from the Spirit produces new love for God. New desires to obey the Word of God produce a new pursuit of holiness. There is a new life direction, lived with new passion for God. These born-again ones give evidence of their election with the fruit of righteousness. This call from the Spirit is effectual, meaning the elect will certainly respond when it is given. They will not finally resist it. Thus, the doctrine of effectual calling is sometimes called the doctrine of irresistible grace.

#### **PRESERVING GRACE**

Once converted, every believer is kept eternally secure by all three persons of the Trinity. All whom God foreknew and predestined in eternity past, He will glorify in eternity future. No believer will drop out or fall away. Every believer is firmly held by the sovereign hands of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, never to be lost.



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### *Salvation Is of the Lord - Cont'd*

None of Jesus' sheep for whom He laid down His life will perish. The Holy Spirit permanently seals in Christ all whom He draws to faith. Once born again, none can ever be unborn. Once a believer, none can ever become an unbeliever. Once saved, none will ever be- come unsaved. God will preserve them in faith forever, and they will persevere until the end. Thus, the doctrine of preserving grace is often called the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord. In reality, these *five* doctrines of grace form one comprehensive body of truth concerning salvation. They are inseparably connected and therefore stand or fall together. To embrace any one of the *five* necessitates embracing all *five*. To deny one is to deny the others and fracture the Trinity, setting the three persons at odds with one another. These doctrines speak together with one voice in giving the greatest glory to God. Such high theology produces high doxology. When it is rightly understood that God alone—Father, Son, and Spirit—saves sinners, then all glory goes to Him. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson - Founder and President of OnePassion Ministries**

### *Two Kingdoms*

What is the kingdom of God? It's a simple question, yet if I were to ask that same question to a hundred theologians I would likely get a hundred different answers. The kingdom of God is not some sort of ancient or obsolete doctrine that no one has ever heard of. Rather, it is something we hear about all the time as a fundamental component of Jesus' teaching and a primary theme throughout sacred Scripture. Although few would admit it, when most Christians think about the kingdom of God, their minds are strained to conceive of anything beyond some ethereal notion of mustard seeds, lost coins, different soils, and undefined future bliss.

However, when it comes right down to it, the kingdom of God should be more simple to define than just about any other theological term. It's quite plain really: God reigns. Or, to say it another way: The kingdom of God is the omnipotent rule and sovereign reign of Almighty God over all things, the inauguration of which came with the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus and the fullness of which is yet to come.

Nevertheless, while it is important to have a good, biblical answer to the question, what is the kingdom of God? it is just as important to have an honest answer to the question, whose kingdom do you serve? These are the questions that are at the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount: Are you the king of your own kingdom? Are you the self-appointed potentate of your own, private little empire? You may answer with a hearty no, but does your life demonstrate that you are a servant of God or a servant of self? We all certainly want to be part of the kingdom, but most Christians want to serve the kingdom on their own terms.

As divinely appointed citizens of the kingdom of God we are foreigners in the kingdom of this world. We are real characters in the real story of redemptive history in real space and real time who have been summoned to follow the King of kings as servants, saints, and soldiers – *coram Deo*, before His face, in life and in death. Augustine understood this well: "We want to reach the kingdom of God, but we don't want to travel by way of death. And yet there stands necessity saying: 'This way, please.' Do not hesitate, man, to go this way, when this is the way that God came to you." ~ **Dr. Burk Parsons - Editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, Senior Pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow**



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## *Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - October 2019*

### *Birthdays*

*Charlene S. (3)  
Ephraim W. (20)*

### *Anniversary*

*None to Report*

## *Longing for Fellowship*

We speak of God as the immortal, invisible, all-wise God. This string of attributes gives some comfort and no small amount of dismay.

That God is immortal makes me glad. It means simply that He cannot and therefore will never die. I need not worry that He will ever wear out or be replaced. His throne is established forever. He reigns eternally in His omnipotence. That is good news for a perishing humanity.

I rejoice also that He is all-wise. This sets Him apart from every man. It was Aristotle who taught that in the brain of every wise man could be found the corner of the fool. There is no foolish corner in the mind of God. I find solace in the certain truth that the One who rules the affairs of the universe is not given to blunders or lapses into incompetency. I rejoice in God’s wisdom and in His everlasting power.

It is His persistent invisibility that saddens me. It is difficult for sensual creatures to enjoy fellowship with One who cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled. God remains beyond my senses. How then, can I ever relate to Him with intimacy? My heart longs for fellowship with Him. I long to hear His voice as the sound of many waters and to catch one glimpse of His refulgent glory. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



## **West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership**

The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.

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