



Volume 9 Issue 3

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



March 2022

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Apologetics in the Early Church

The church fathers knew this task all too well, for the early Christian community was accused of participating in many devious acts. Leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70, Christianity had been viewed by the Roman Empire as a subset or sect of Judaism. But upon the holy city's destruction and the ensuing Diaspora (scattering of the Jews), the separation of Christianity from Judaism became evident. The problem for Christianity was this: Judaism was a legally sanctioned religion in the Roman Empire; Christianity had no such luxury. The practice of the Christian faith was illegal and subject to prosecution. The Christian intellectuals of the time rose up to answer the charges that were leveled against Christianity.

In many apologetic writings of the period (for example, Justin Martyr's Apology and Athenagoras's Plea), we can see four common accusations against Christians. **First**, the Christian community was charged with sedition—Christians were regarded as traitors undermining the authority of the empire. As early as 29 B.C., emperor worship had emerged, most notably in the Asian city of Pergamum, and it continued well into the second century A.D. Reciting the phrase *Kaisar kurios* (Caesar is lord), burning incense to the emperor's image, or swearing by his name was required in order to prove loyalty to the state. The Christians refused to grant worship to the emperor and so were seen as disloyal and as being involved in political conspiracies. While believing that governments were to be respected (Romans 3:1–7), apologists like Justin Martyr argued that Christians were exemplary models of civic virtue, paid their taxes, and submitted to the civil laws, but were unable to confess Caesar as lord because Jesus was the one and only Lord worthy of worship. Justin therefore challenged the authorities to not convict Christians on the basis of invalidated rumors.

Second, the charge of atheism was leveled against the early church, because of the Christians refusal to worship the pantheon of Roman gods. Consider the story of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who, in his late eighties, was brought before the emperor Marcus Aurelius on charges of atheism. The emperor, not wanting to make a martyr out of the venerable bishop, sought to provide an avenue of escape for him. As Polycarp stood in the middle of an arena teeming with Roman citizens, Marcus Aurelius promised to spare his life on one condition: that he deny Christianity by declaring, "Away with the atheists!" The aged bishop, no doubt grinning, pointed up to stands filled with pagans and cried, "Away with the atheists!" The emperor was not amused by Polycarp's gesture and executed him that day as the crowds looked on. Justin Martyr, who was also murdered during Marcus Aurelius's reign, argued in his Apology that Christians were not atheists but totally committed theists, who, while affirming the reality of a single, supreme God, denied the polytheism of the Roman pantheon.

The **third** and **fourth** charges brought against early Christianity came as a result of rumors concerning their secret meetings in places like the catacombs. From the practice of "love feasts" (where early Christians partook in a common meal—including Holy Communion—attesting to their unity with Christ and each other) came rumors of incest and sexual perversion. The final accusation came from the practice of the Eucharist itself. Early Christians were charged with cannibalism. Word spread that during the secret meetings, these Christians were engaged in the eating and drinking of human flesh and blood. The apologists answered this allegation by explaining the sacrament and calling on the authorities to validate such allegations before persecuting anyone.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Apologetics in the Early Church *Continued from Page 1*

In conjunction with these common accusations leveled against the early church, Christians were also regarded as intellectually inferior—often because the doctrine of the Trinity seemed a contradiction to the Greek philosophers. Platonism and Stoicism ruled the day, and most philosophers charged Christians with myth-making. An early glimpse of this collision between the Christian faith and pagan philosophy can be seen in Acts 17, the famed account of the apostle Paul on Mars’ hill. Such was the state of defending the faith for the first three centuries of the Christian church. Advocates of Greek philosophy accused Christians of contradiction or challenged the consistency of such doctrines as the Incarnation or the Resurrection. The first defenders of the faith responded ably to these challenges.

In every age the church faces the task of clarifying its truth claims from distortions against these claims. The discipline of apologetics did not die in the second century; rather, it lives on, because with each passing generation, wherever Christianity flourishes, so too do distortion, misrepresentation, overemphasis, and outright malicious deceit. The church’s opponents will continue to accuse her of doing evil (this is assumed in 1 Peter 3:16), and so the Christian apologist assumes a defensive posture in order to repel false accusations whenever they come. ~ *Defending your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics – Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Exposing the Heresies of the Catholic Church: Grace vs. Works

The New Testament is clear about the nature of saving faith. “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law*” (Romans 3:28). “*A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus . . . since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified*” (Galatians 2:16). “*But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:4-5).

According to Scripture, salvation is by faith in Christ alone through God’s grace alone. When you put your trust in Jesus Christ He declares you righteous—not because you are, but because He imputes His righteousness to you, and because He paid the penalty for your sin. Christ bears our sin and we receive His righteousness. That is the indescribable glory of the doctrine of justification (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church stands in stark opposition to that biblical understanding. Rather than salvation by grace through faith, they preach a false gospel of works.

The words of the Council of Trent—convened to affirm and codify the teaching of the Catholic Church in response to the Reformation—clearly spell out the Catholic version of justification that still stands today. “*Hence, to those who work well unto the end and trust in God, eternal life is to be offered, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and as a reward promised by God himself, to be faithfully given to their good works and merits.*” Salvation in the Catholic system is something you earn “*by those very works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life and to have truly merited eternal life.*”



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Exposing the Heresies of the Catholic Church: Grace vs. Works

Continued from Page 2

That is an absolute and total contradiction of the Word of God. It's a completely foreign gospel, manufactured by the Catholic Church and able only to condemn, not save. No amount of repetitious prayers, veneration of the saints and other church relics, or masses attended can redeem a sinner's soul. No priest has the power to forgive sins, and no indulgence bought and paid for can hold back the due punishment of those sins.

At the heart of the merit-based Catholic system is the unbiblical concept of purgatory. In fact, it's the invention of purgatory that makes Catholic dogma attractive at all—without it, Catholicism would be a very hard sell. Catholics are never really on solid spiritual ground. They can't know for certain if they're saved or whether they will ever make it into heaven. And even confident, pious Catholics live in perpetual fear of committing a mortal sin that will throw them out of favor with God and the church.

It's the false doctrine of purgatory that provides Catholics their spiritual safety net, bringing false hope to people trapped in a hopeless system. It's the one relief in their entire guilt-ridden, fear-ridden system of works righteousness. And it is complete fiction—a tragic farce that's led countless souls to hell.

The apostle Paul could not have been clearer about the true nature of justification: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9). That gracious, glorious gospel has been rejected by the Catholic Church, and they have replaced it with a corrupt, unbiblical system of works righteousness and merit-based salvation. Presiding over that twisted system of satanic lies is the pope. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**

The Church and Israel in the New Testament

One of the most common questions asked by students of the Bible concerns the relationship between Israel and the church. We read the Old Testament, and it is evident that most of it concerns the story of Israel. From Jacob to the exile, the people of God is Israel, and Israel is the people of God. Despite the constant sin of king and people leading to the judgment of exile, the prophets look beyond this judgment with hope to a time of restoration for Israel. When we turn to the New Testament, the same story continues, and Israel is still in the picture. Jesus is described as the one who will be given *“the throne of his father David”* and the one who *“will reign over the house of Jacob [Israel] forever”* (Luke 1:32–33). He is presented as the One the prophets foresaw.

The first to believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah are Israelites— Andrew, Peter, James, John. But in the Gospels, we also hear Jesus speak of building His church, and we see growing hostility between the leaders of Israel and Jesus. We hear Jesus speak of destroying the tenants of the vineyard and giving it to others (Luke 20:9–18). In the book of Acts, the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans and Gentiles leads to even more conflict with the religious leaders of Israel. So, is Israel cast aside and replaced by this new entity known as the “church”?



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Continued from Page 3

There are those who would say yes, but the answer is not that simple, for we also run across hints that God is not finished with the nation of Israel. At the end of His declaration of woes on the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says, *“You will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’”* (Matthew 23:39). In the Olivet Discourse, He speaks of Jerusalem being trampled underfoot *“until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”* (Luke 21:24). In Acts, Peter says to a Jewish audience: *“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago”* (Acts 3:19—21). Finally, Paul says things about Israel that seem to preclude total rejection. Speaking of Israel, he writes, *“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!”* (Romans 11:1a).

In order to understand the relationship between Israel and the church as described in the New Testament, we will need to look at the question in the context of the different answers Christians have given over the years. The traditional dispensationalist view maintains that God has not replaced Israel with the church but that God has two programs in history, one for the church and one for Israel. Traditional dispensationalism also maintains that the church consists only of believers saved between Pentecost and the rapture. The church as the body of Christ does not include Old Testament believers. Progressive dispensationalism has modified some of these views, but the traditional dispensationalist view remains very popular. Some covenant theologians have adopted a view that many dispensationalists describe as “replacement theology.” This is the idea that the church has completely replaced Israel. Jews may still be saved on an individual basis by coming to Christ, but the nation of Israel and the Jews as a people no longer have any part to play in redemptive history.

A careful study of the New Testament reveals that both of these interpretations of the relationship between Israel and the church are wanting. The relationship between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament is better described in terms of an organic development rather than either separation or replacement. During most of the Old Testament era, there were essentially three groups of people: the Gentile nations, national Israel, and true Israel (the faithful remnant). Although the nation of Israel was often involved in idolatry, apostasy, and rebellion, God always kept for Himself a faithful remnant—those who trusted in Him and who would not bow the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). This remnant, this true Israel, included men such as David, Joash, Isaiah, and Daniel, as well as women such as Sarah, Deborah, and Hannah. There were those who were circumcised in the flesh and a smaller number who had their hearts circumcised as well. So, even in the Old Testament, not all were Israel who were descended from Israel (Romans 9:6).

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the faithful remnant (true Israel) included believers such as Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25–38). During Jesus’ adult ministry, true Israel was most visible in those Jewish disciples who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Those who rejected Jesus were not true Israel, regardless of their race. This included many of the scribes and Pharisees. Though they were physically Jews, they were not true Israel (Romans 2:28–29). True Israel became defined by union with the true Israelite—Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16, 29).

On the day of Pentecost, the true Israel, Jewish believers in Jesus, was taken by the Holy Spirit and formed into the nucleus of the New Testament church (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit was poured out on the true Israel, and the same men and women who were part of this true Israel were now the true new covenant church. Soon after, Gentiles began to become a part of this small group.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Continued from Page 4

This is an extremely important point to grasp because it explains why there is so much confusion regarding the relationship between the church and Israel. The answer depends on whether we are talking about national Israel or true Israel. The church is distinct from national Israel, just as the true Israel in the Old Testament was distinct from national Israel even while being part of national Israel. The remnant group was part of the whole but could also be distinguished from the whole by its faith.

However, if we are talking about true Israel, there really is no distinction. The true Israel of the Old Testament became the nucleus of the true church on the day of Pentecost. Here the analogy of the olive tree that Paul uses in Romans 11 is instructive. The tree represents the covenant people of God—Israel. Paul compares unbelieving Israel to branches that have been broken off from the olive tree (v. 17a). Believing Gentiles are compared to branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted in to the cultivated olive tree (vv. 17b–19). The important point to notice is that God does not cut the old tree down and plant a new one (replacement theology). Neither does God plant a second new tree alongside the old tree and then graft branches from the old tree into the new tree (traditional dispensationalism). Instead, the same tree exists across the divide between Old and New Testaments. That which remains after the dead branches are removed is the true Israel. Gentile believers are now grafted into this already existing old tree (true Israel/the true church). There is only one good olive tree, and the same olive tree exists across the covenantal divide.

What does this mean for our understanding of the relationship between the church and Israel? It means that when true Israel was baptized by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, true Israel became the New Testament church. Thus, there is continuity between true Israel and the church. This is why the Reformed confessions can speak of the church as existing from the beginning of the world (for example, Belgic Confession, Art. 27). Yet there is discontinuity between the church and national Israel as well, just as there was discontinuity between the faithful remnant and apostate Israel in the Old Testament.

Romans 11 and the Future of Israel

So, what does this mean for national Israel, the branches that have been broken off from the true Israel because of unbelief? Is God finished with this people as a covenantal entity? In order to answer this question, we must turn to Paul's argument in Romans 9–11.

In Romans 1–8, Paul denied that Jews were guaranteed salvation on the basis of their distinctive privileges as Jews. Faith was the key, not ethnicity or any kind of works. Paul argued that all who believe in Jesus are children of Abraham. He also argued that none of God's promises would fail. All of this would raise serious questions in the minds of his readers. What about Israel? What has become of God's promises to her in light of her rejection of the Messiah? Has the faithlessness of Israel negated God's promises? Has Israel been disinherited? Has the plan of God revealed throughout the Old Testament been derailed or set aside? Paul answers these questions in Romans 9–11.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Continued from Page 5

Paul begins Romans 9 with a lament for Israel—his *“kinsmen according to the flesh”* (v. 3). He then recounts all the privileges that still belong to Israel—including the adoption, the covenants, and the promises (vv. 4–5). In verses 6–29, Paul defends the proposition he states in verse 6a, namely, that the promise of God has not failed. In verses 6–13, he explains that the corporate election of Israel never meant the salvation of every biological descendant of Abraham: *“not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”* (v. 6b). In verses 14–23, Paul expands on this, explaining that salvation was never a birthright based on biological descent. It has always been a gift based on God’s sovereign election.

In Romans 9:30–10:21, Paul elaborates on the turn that redemptive history has taken, namely, that while Israel has stumbled over Jesus, Gentiles are now streaming into the kingdom. It is important to observe that in Romans 10:1, Paul writes, *“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”* He’s talking about Israel. The very fact that Paul can continue to pray for the salvation of unbelieving Israel indicates that he believes salvation is possible for them.

What Paul has said thus far raises the big question, which he now states: *“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!”* (11:1a). This is the basic theme of chapter 11. In verses 1–10, Paul demonstrates that God has not rejected Israel by distinguishing between the *“remnant”* and the *“hardened.”* Building on what he has already said in 9:6–13 and 9:27, Paul indicates that just as in the days of Elijah, there is also now a believing remnant (11:2–5). In contrast with the remnant, chosen by grace (v. 5), is *“the rest,”* the nation of Israel as a whole, which has been *“hardened”* (v. 7). God has dulled the spiritual senses of Israel (v. 8), and they have stumbled (vv. 9–10).

Paul then asks, *“Did they stumble in order that they might fall?”* (11:11a). What is his answer? *“By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous”* (v. 11b). What is the present significance of Israel’s stumbling? Paul explains that it has happened as a means to bring a multitude of Gentiles into the kingdom. The hardening of Israel is serving God’s purpose. Their trespass has served as the occasion for the granting of salvation to the Gentiles. Paul states, *“Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!”* (v. 12, emphasis mine).

In verses 11–12, Paul mentions three events: the trespass (or “failure”) of Israel, the salvation of the Gentiles, and the full inclusion of Israel. The first of these leads to the second, and the second leads to the third. Israel’s trespass, in other words, started a process that will ultimately lead back to Israel’s restoration. This is the first of five places in this short passage where Paul explains the purpose and future of Israel in terms of three stages. Douglas Moo provides a helpful summary:

vv. 11–12: “trespass of Israel”—“salvation for the Gentiles”—“their fullness”

v. 15: “their rejection”—“reconciliation of the world”—“their acceptance”

vv. 17–23: “natural branches broken off”—“wild shoots grafted in”—“natural branches” grafted back in

vv. 25–26: “hardening of Israel”—“fullness of Gentiles”—“all Israel will be saved”

vv. 30–31: disobedience of Israel—mercy for Gentiles—mercy to Israel



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Continued from Page 6

The repeated occurrence of this “three-stage” process reinforces the idea that Paul is looking forward to a future restoration of Israel. Israel’s present condition is described as “failure” and as “rejection.” Paul characterizes the future condition of Israel in terms of “full inclusion” and as “acceptance.” Israel is not simultaneously in the condition of “failure” and “full inclusion,” of “rejection” and “acceptance.” The “full inclusion” will follow the “failure.” The “acceptance” will follow the “rejection.”

Paul anticipates a potential problem in verses 13–24. Gentile believers who had been taught that they were now God’s people could be easily misled into thinking that this was cause for boasting against the Jews. In these verses, Paul warns against such arrogance. In 11:16–24, Paul explains the development of redemptive history and the place of Israel within it by using the olive tree analogy that we discussed above. Here again, Paul points to three stages in redemptive history: “natural branches broken off”—“wild shoots grafted in”—“natural branches” grafted back in.

Paul’s teaching in verses 25–27 has been at the center of the debate concerning the proper interpretation of chapter 11. Paul writes in verse 25: “*Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*” Here Paul is still speaking directly to the Gentiles (see v. 13). He wants them to understand a “mystery.” In this context, the mystery involves the reversal of Jewish expectations concerning the sequence of end-time events. The “mystery” is that the restoration of Israel follows the salvation of the Gentiles.

In verse 26, Paul continues the sentence begun in verse 25: “*And in this way all Israel will be saved.*” The biggest debate here is the meaning of “all Israel.” Charles Cranfield lists the four main views that have been suggested: (1) all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles; (2) all the elect of the nation Israel; (3) the whole nation Israel, including every individual member; and (4) the nation Israel as a whole, but not necessarily including every individual member. Since Paul repeatedly denies the salvation of every single Israelite, we can set aside option (3).

John Calvin understood “all Israel” in verse 26 to mean all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles. Paul does use this language in other places in his writings. The problem with understanding “all Israel” in 11:26 in this sense is the context. Throughout verses 11–25, Paul has consistently distinguished between Jews and Gentiles. We also have to remember that Paul’s concern in these chapters is for his kinsmen according to the flesh (9:1–5). His prayer in this context is for the salvation of unbelieving Israel (10:1). In Romans 11:26, Paul is revealing that the prayer of 10:1 will be answered once the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

Other Reformed theologians, such as O. Palmer Robertson and Herman Ridderbos, have argued that “all Israel” refers to all the elect of the nation of Israel throughout the present age. As with the view that understands “all Israel” to be the church, there is truth in this interpretation. The Jews who are being saved in the present age are not any different from the Jews who are to be saved in the future. The problem with this interpretation, as with the previous one, is that it conflicts with the immediate context. As John Murray observes, “While it is true that all the elect of Israel, the true Israel, will be saved, this is so necessary and patent a truth that to assert the same here would have no particular relevance to what is the apostle’s governing interest in this section of the epistle.” Paul is not in anguish over the salvation of the remnant. They are already saved. He is in anguish over unbelieving Israel. It is this “Israel” for whose salvation he prays (10:1), and it is this Israel that he says will be saved in verse 26.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Continued from Page 7

The interpretation of “all Israel” that best fits the immediate context is that which understands “all Israel” as the nation of Israel as a whole, but not necessarily including every individual member of ethnic Israel. Paul consistently contrasts Gentiles and Israel throughout this chapter, and he continues to do so in the first half of the sentence we are examining (v. 25). There is no contextual reason to assume that Paul changes the meaning of the term Israel in mid-sentence here. The “Israel” that will be saved (v. 26) is the “Israel” that has been partially hardened (v. 25). This partially hardened Israel is distinct from the Gentiles (v. 25) and is also distinct from the present remnant of believing Jews, who are not hardened (v. 7).

Conclusion

The relationship between Israel and the church in the New Testament is not always easy to discern, but it can be understood if we remember the differences between national Israel and true Israel in both the Old Testament and the New, and if we keep in mind what Paul teaches in Romans 11. Israel’s present hardening has a purpose in God’s plan, but this hardening is not permanent. The future restoration of the nation of Israel will involve their re-grafting into the olive tree, the one people of God. The restoration of Israel will mean their becoming part of the “true Israel” by faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah. ~ *Dr. Keith Mathison*

God’s Sovereignty and Glory

God is sovereign in creation, providence, redemption, and judgment. That is a central assertion of Christian belief and especially in Reformed theology. God is King and Lord of all. To put this another way: nothing happens without God’s willing it to happen, willing it to happen before it happens, and willing it to happen in the way that it happens. Put this way, it seems to say something that is expressly Reformed in doctrine. But at its heart, it is saying nothing different from the assertion of the Nicene Creed: “*I believe in God, the Father Almighty.*” To say that God is sovereign is to express His almightiness in every area.

God is sovereign in creation. “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*” (Genesis 1:1). Apart from God, there was nothing. And then there was something: matter, space, time, energy. And these came into being *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. The will to create was entirely God’s. The execution was entirely His. There was no metaphysical “necessity” to create; it was a free action of God.

God is sovereign in providence. Traditional theism insists that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent—all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere present. Each assertion is a variant of divine sovereignty. His power, knowledge, and presence ensure that His goals are met, that His designs are fulfilled, and that His superintendence of all events is (to God, at least) essentially “risk free.”

God’s power is not absolute in the sense that God can do anything (*potestas absoluta*); rather, God’s power ensures that He can do all that is logically possible for Him to will to do. “*He cannot deny himself,*” for example (2 Timothy 2:13).



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Sovereignty and Glory *Continued from Page 8*

Some people object to the idea that God knows all events in advance of their happening. Such a view, some insist, deprives mankind of its essential freedom. Open theists or free-will theists, for example, insist that the future (at least in its specific details) is in some fashion “open.” Even God does not know all that is to come. He may make predictions like some cosmic poker player, but He cannot know absolutely. This explains, open theists suggest, why God appears to change His mind: God is adjusting His plan based on the new information of unforeseeable events (see Genesis 6:6–7; 1 Samuel 15:11). Reformed theology, on the other hand, insists that no event happens that is a surprise to God. To us it is luck or chance, but to God it is part of His decree. *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”* (Proverbs 16:33). Language of God changing His mind in Scripture is an accommodation to us and our way of speaking, not a description of a true change in God’s mind.

God is sovereign in redemption, a fact that explains why we thank God for our salvation and pray to Him for the salvation of our spiritually lost friends. If the power to save lies in man’s free will, if it truly lies in their unaided ability to save themselves, why would we implore God to *“quicken,” “save,”* or *“regenerate”* them? The fact that we consistently thank God for the salvation of individuals means (whether we admit it or not) that belief in absolute free will is inconsistent.

God is sovereign in judgment. Few passages of Scripture reflect the sovereignty of God in election and reprobation with greater force than Romans 9:21: *“Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”* On the face of it, this might appear unfair and arbitrary—as though God were playing some vindictive child’s game with the petals of a flower: *“He loves me; He loves me not. He loves me; He loves me not.”* In response, some people have insisted that God has the right to do whatever He pleases and it is none of our business to find fault with Him—a point that Paul himself anticipates (Romans 9:20). Others have taken the view that if God were to grant us what we deserve, we would all be damned. Election is therefore a gracious (and not just a sovereign) act. Both are true. But in any case, our salvation displays God’s glory: *“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”* (Romans 11:36)

Human Responsibility

The assertion of divine sovereignty is not without further questions that should be addressed.

First, there is the question of evangelism. If God is sovereign in all matters of providence, what is the point of exerting human effort in evangelism and missions? God’s will is sure to be fulfilled whether we evangelize or not. But we dare not reason this way. Apart from the fact that God commands us to evangelize—*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”* (Matthew 28:19)—such reasoning ignores the fact that God fulfills His sovereign plan through human means and instrumentality. Nowhere in the Bible are we encouraged to be passive and inert. Paul commands his Philippian readers to *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* (Philippians 2:12–13).



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Sovereignty and Glory *Continued from Page 9*

Second, there is the question of ethics. We are held responsible for our actions and behavior. We are culpable in transgression and praiseworthy in obedience.

Third, in relation to civic power and authority, there is the question of God's sovereignty in the determination of rulers and government. God has raised up civil governments to be systems of equity and good and peace, for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them who do well (Romans 13:3; 1 Peter 2:14). But this is also true of evil powers and corrupt regimes that violate the very principles of government itself; these are also under the sovereign government of Almighty God.

Fourth, in the question of both the origin and continued existence of evil, the sovereignty of God meets its most acute problem. That God does not prevent evil from existing seems to call into question His omnipotence or His benevolence. Some non-Christian religions try to solve this problem by positing that evil is imaginary (Christian Science) or an illusion (Hinduism). Augustine and many medieval thinkers believed part of the mystery could be solved by identifying evil as a privation of the good, suggesting that evil is something without existence in and of itself. Evil is a matter of ontology (being). Reformed thought on this issue is summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (3:1)

God is the "first cause" of all things, but evil is a product of "second causes." In the words of John Calvin, "First, it must be observed that the will of God is the cause of all things that happen in the world: and yet God is not the author of evil," adding, "for the proximate cause is one thing, and the remote cause another." In other words, God Himself cannot do evil and cannot be blamed for evil even though it is part of His sovereign decree.

God is sovereign, and in His sovereignty He displays His majestic glory. With out it, we would have no being, no salvation, and no hope. *Soli Deo gloria. ~ Dr. Derek Thomas*



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

If you have a March birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt at gwlcfl0415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner March 2022

Birthdays

Rory Alexander H. (4)
Marlow S. (12)
Haddon W. (13)
Rose M. (15)
Les T. (19)
Hannah L. (20)

Lydia H. (22)
Daniel K. (23)
Peggy G. (25)
Jonathan F. (26)
Tom S. (29)

Anniversaries

Marlow and Wilma S. (15)
Tony and Lorraine H. (22)
Rick and Peggy G. (31)

Humility on Display

The Greek word for humility is a compound word. The first part means “low.” In a metaphorical sense it was used to mean “poor” or “unimportant.” The second part of the word means “to think” or “to judge.” The combined meaning is to think of yourself as lowly or unimportant.

Did you know this word never appears in classical Greek? It had to be coined by Christians. The Greeks and Romans had no word for humility because they despised that attitude. They mocked and looked down on anyone who thought of himself as lowly.

In contrast, Christ taught the importance of humility and was our greatest example of that virtue. The exalted Lord Jesus was born in a stable. During His ministry He never had a place to lay His head. He owned only the garments on His body. He washed His disciples’ feet, doing the job of a slave (John 13:3-11). When He died, He was buried in a borrowed tomb. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

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

Office: 1001 Kenyon Court, Suffolk, VA 23435

E-Mail: pastorscofield@gmail.com

Website: <https://www.graceforsuffolk.org>

Phone/Fax: 757-539-0363

Teaching Pastor/Elder: Pastor Ben Scofield

Teaching Elders: Scott Thomas and Mike Prince

Deacons: Marlin Halsey, John McPhatter and John Hurst

Editor: Walt Lawrence, gwlcfl0415@gmail.com

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 it’s leadership.