



Volume 10 Issue 3

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



March 2023

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Leadership and Spiritual Maturity

New believers, and especially young men, are often very passionate for the truth. The joy of new life in Christ goes hand in hand with the desire to proclaim God's truth to others and see them come to repentance and faith in Him.

But that passion usually exceeds the new believer's preparedness to preach. Without a tested and proven faith, and without a strong understanding of Scripture—or any training in how to study and understand it—new believers should not assume leadership positions in the church.

Nor should they launch into ministry simply because “God told me to.” To the undiscerning, that might be a persuasive argument. But God's people have a responsibility not to blithely believe everyone who claims to speak for Him. Moreover, they need to hold the leaders they follow to biblical standards.

Godly leadership is always the fruit of spiritual maturity. It takes more than just a pulpit, a microphone, and an audience to make a faithful shepherd. In fact, rushing unprepared and immature believers into church leadership—or letting them grasp it too early—presents significant spiritual danger to the Body of Christ.

It's also dangerous for the immature believer who desires such leadership. The apostle Paul understood those dangers, and included them in his list of qualifications for church leaders. Highlighting the need for spiritual maturity, he wrote: “*And not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil*” (1 Timothy 3:6).

In his commentary on 1 Timothy, John MacArthur explains the dangers Paul describes.

Since one of the great dangers facing the overseer is pride, humility is an essential qualification. The Greek word *neophutos* (“new convert”) appears only here in the New Testament. It is used in extrabiblical Greek to refer to a newly planted tree, hence its metaphorical use here.

An elder must not be newly baptized as a Christian, “*lest he become conceited.*” Placing him in a leadership role would expose him to the temptation of pride. That would be especially true if he were elevated in a respected, established church like Ephesus. That this qualification is absent from the list in Titus 1 may reflect the fact that the churches on Crete were relatively new, made up of new believers. In that case, placing younger converts in leadership would not so readily lead to pride, since their fellow elders would be relatively new.

An elder, then, is to be drawn from the most spiritually mature in the congregation, but that maturity must be viewed in relationship to each individual congregation. The relative measure of spiritual maturity in an established church in the United States varies from that in a first-generation church in a third-world nation.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Leadership and Spiritual Maturity *Continued from Page 1*

“Conceited” is from *tuphoō*, which derives from a root word meaning “smoke.” The verb means “to puff up like a cloud of smoke.” Putting a new convert into a position of spiritual leadership is apt to puff him up, to put his head in the clouds. That would place him in grave danger of falling “into the condemnation incurred by the devil.” That does not mean an individual is condemned by Satan, since the Bible never portrays him as a judge. Instead, it means the prideful man falls into the same kind of judgment pronounced by God on Satan. The context, which deals with the danger of pride, also lends support to that interpretation. The judgment or condemnation of the devil was a demotion from a high position due to his sinful pride. That is the danger awaiting the man placed in a position of spiritual leadership before he is ready. As Proverbs 16:18 warns, “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.*”

It was pride that brought Satan down. Not content with being the highest ranking angel, he sought to exalt himself above God. The five “I wills” of Isaiah 14:12–14 clearly show his pride. As a result, Satan, who had “*the seal of perfection*” and was “*full of wisdom and perfect in beauty*” (Ezekiel 28:12), who had been on the “*holy mountain of God*” and served as “*the anointed cherub who covers*” (v. 14), was “*cast . . . as profane from the mountain*” (v. 16; cf. Revelation 12:9).

What happened to Satan could easily happen to an immature Christian elevated to eldership. It is that danger which Paul warns Timothy against. The antidote to pride is humility, which is the mark of a spiritually mature leader (Matthew 23:11–12).

Too often churches put undue emphasis on the skills, giftedness, charisma, and likability of potential leaders. Those enticing attributes can supposedly cover or negate a lack of spiritual maturity—or at the very least excuse it, buying him time to grow in maturity. But that’s the inverse of the biblical model. Without proven spiritual maturity, what real leadership does a man have to offer the church?

In his commentary, John MacArthur reminds us of the dire consequences of elevating an unqualified shepherd: “The church must heed Paul’s warning and not lift up those whom the Lord will later have to cut down.” ~ *Jeremiah Johnson - Teacher - Grace Community Church - Sun Valley, California*

The Power of Integrity

What is the most important quality leaders can demonstrate? Intelligence, a forceful personality, glibness, diligence, vision, administrative skills, decisiveness, courage, humor, tact, or any other similar natural attribute? Those all play a part, but the most desirable quality for any leader is integrity.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Power of Integrity *Continued from Page 2*

While integrity is most desirable in secular leadership, its absence is fatal to spiritual leadership. Underlining this, John Stott writes,

Communication is by symbol as well as speech. For “a man cannot only preach, he must also live. And the life that he lives, with all its little peculiarities, is one of two things: either it emasculates his preaching or it gives it flesh and blood.” We cannot hide what we are. Indeed, what we are speaks as plainly as what we say. When these two voices blend, the impact of the message is doubled. But when they contradict each other, the positive witness of the one is negated by the other. This was the case with the man Spurgeon describes as a good preacher but a bad Christian: he “preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again.” It is at this point that a practical problem presents itself to us. Pastors are told to be models of Christian maturity.

All leadership seeks to accomplish one goal: influence. Leaders seek to influence people to achieve their objectives. Influence is a direct result of teaching and example. Teaching sets the nails into the mind, but example is the hammer that drives them in deep.

Not surprisingly, Scripture has much to say about the power of example to influence behavior, both for good and for evil. In Leviticus 18:3 God warned Israel not to follow the example of their pagan neighbors:

You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes.

Deuteronomy 18:9 repeats that warning: “When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.”

Proverbs 22:24–25 warns, “Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man, lest you learn his ways and find a snare for yourself.” The power of an evil ruler to influence his subordinates is seen in Proverbs 29:12: “If a ruler pays attention to falsehood, all his ministers become wicked.” Hosea echoed that warning: “And it will be, like people, like priest; so I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds” (Hosea 4:9).

Our Lord gave this indictment of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:1–3:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.”

The Bible also encourages us to follow godly examples. Paul commended the Thessalonians for becoming “imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). To the Philippians he wrote, “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things” (Philippians 4:9).



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



The Power of Integrity *Continued from Page 3*

He encouraged both Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12) and Titus (Titus 2:7) to be good examples for their people to follow. Hebrews 13:7 exhorts us to follow the example of godly leaders, while James 5:10 points us to the example of the prophets. Peter admonishes elders to be examples to their flocks (1 Peter 5:3).

It is not enough for a leader in the church to teach the truth, he must also model it. Richard Baxter writes,

It is not likely that the people will much regard the doctrine of such men, when they see that they do not live as they preach. They will think that he doth not mean as he speaks, if he do [sic] not live as he speaks. They will hardly believe a man that seemeth not to believe himself.

Integrity is living what you teach and preach. That's why Paul describes the moral character at the heart of the pastoral qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:4-7.

He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

That is not the typical list a corporate analyst might come up with, because the issue is not merely leadership skills but spiritual example. One who would lead people to Christlikeness must live out a pattern of godly behavior for his people to follow. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**

God's Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

A little over a decade ago, English journalist Melanie Phillips, writing on the state of Western civilization, observed, "Society seems to be in the grip of a mass derangement." There is, she writes, a "sense that the world has slipped off the axis of reason," causing many to wonder, "How is anyone to work out who is right in such a babble of 'experts' and with so much conflicting information?"

As I started to reread this book a few weeks ago, I was struck once again by what's missing in her writing. Phillips writes as an agnostic but observant Jew, and many of the points she makes are profoundly helpful. But noticeably absent from her analysis, I find, is any recognition of the Bible's account of how the world that God made in its entirety and perfection could have gone so haywire (à la Genesis 3)—particularly, in our day, in the realm of human sexuality.

Sexuality as described and prescribed by Scripture is not just a difficult topic; to address it is also unpopular and in large measure offensive.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

Continued from Page 4

I come to it somewhat fearful, with caution and, I hope, with a measure of compassion—but also with the conviction that God's Word and way are absolutely perfect and that God knew exactly what He was doing when He put humanity together. And thankfully, one of the passages that speaks most pointedly to the way in which God's wrath is revealed against sin, Romans 1:16–28, is also preceded by and followed by the amazing offer of God's grace.

Living in a Runaway World

Paul's argument in Romans 1 unfolds from his great declaration in verse 16 that he is *"not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."* Why, we might ask, is the gospel for "everyone"? Because, as Paul goes on to explain, everyone needs the gospel. Every one of us is born in the same hopeless and helpless situation: *"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth"* (Romans 1:18).

Mankind, in other words, lives in a runaway world. Some of us like to suggest that God is hiding, but we are the ones who have done the hiding since nearly the beginning of time (Genesis 3:8–10). We *"suppress the truth"*—the truth that He has shown us about Himself (Romans 1:19). We deny the fact that He has made Himself known clearly in the universe in which we live—that *"his eternal power and divine nature"* (Romans 1:20) are evident all around us—and as a result, we are absolutely *"without excuse"* (v. 20) when we choose not to worship Him or to thank Him. When we refuse to know God as He has made Himself known, we don't give up on worship; we actually just worship something or someone else.

All of this brings us to the matter of human sexuality—not because it is some sort of hobby horse or because we get some (perverse) sense of satisfaction out of being controversial but because that's what comes next in God's Word. And if we simply choose the parts of the Bible we like and reject the parts that we don't like, then we don't believe the Bible; we believe ourselves. Why would we ever want to consider a passage like Romans 1 unless we absolutely believe that the Bible is God's Word, that it is unerring, and it speaks life-giving truth, even in our twenty-first-century Western world? We are not at liberty to rewrite the Bible to accommodate godless perspectives on abortion, on euthanasia, on same-sex marriage, on transgenderism, and more. We are not free to tamper with God's Word.

And so, as we continue reading Paul's inspired words, it is clear that having broken our connection with the Creator, who made us purposefully for Himself, we struggle to actually know who we are. As Paul goes on to explain, when men turned away from God and toward idols (including, as we do in our day, the idol of self),



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

Continued from Page 5

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . . God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24, 26–27)

It's important that we note here that the exchange of the normal, natural function of human sexuality for that which is contrary is not the first "exchange" mentioned by Paul. He has already described mankind as exchanging "*the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*" (Romans 1:23)—the exchange of the creator God for created idols. They have also "*exchanged the truth about God for a lie*" (Romans 1:25)—the exchange of knowledge for ignorance. And it is because they refuse to believe in Him, to worship Him, that God gives men and women up to their "*dishonorable passions.*" He has given them up to something which contemporary society regards as an alternative lifestyle but which the Bible pronounces to be an abomination, to be a perversion. Idolatry, in other words, leads to all sorts of immorality—and the immorality gets deeper as it goes.

From Idolatry to Immorality

Such is the state of our culture in the twenty-first century. But how did we get here? A brief reflection on the past several decades of Western culture makes it clear that there has been a strategy at play as it relates to those driving the revolution we have seen. **First**, there have been efforts to make sure that the broader society would sympathize with their struggles—both of a personal and societal nature. (And Christians surely ought to lead the world in sympathy, but only of the Christlike sort.) **Secondly**, there was and is a clear desire to normalize homosexuality, transgenderism, etc. through media and individuals' platforms. And **thirdly**, there has been and continues to be a concerted effort to demonize those who oppose the revolution. Dissenters will be canceled at nearly any cost.

The West as a whole, and America in particular, is not, I suggest, in the mess that Phillips describes because it is immoral—not ultimately. We are in such a mess because we worship modern-day Baals rather than the living God. The moral squalor, the brokenness of our culture, is merely the clearest evidence of "*the wrath of God*" being "*revealed from heaven*" (Romans 1:18). The actual immorality is not the cause; it's the evidence. It's what happens when we turn in upon ourselves.

And the evidence is all around us. When Paul describes both men and women giving up "*natural relations*" in favor of those that are "*contrary to nature*" (Romans 1:26–27), he uses the word "natural" to describe the material order as God intended it. (In fact, the words that he uses for "women" and "men" are actually "female" and "male" in Greek—a deliberate echo, I think, of Genesis 1:27: "*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*") Anatomy, physiology, biology—all of them, even without theology—testify to God's perfect plan, the violation of which leads to chaos, sadness, and despair.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

Continued from Page 6

Homosexuality, then, is not simply an alternative lifestyle. According to Scripture, it is an unnatural decision born of a preceding idolatry. It is an expression of rebellion against God: “I will decide who I am, what I am, what I’m doing, and with whom I am doing it.” It’s not the greatest sin, but it is perhaps the clearest evidence of a society’s defiance of God. When a culture finally reaches the place where even manhood and womanhood, gender itself, is deconstructed and reconstructed according to whatever agenda an individual has, whatever ethical set of norms they’ve decided to embrace, then that culture is in deep trouble.

We see this disintegration not only on a societal level but also on a personal level. When our longings are no longer filled by God, who has made us for Himself, the longings don’t go away. We still have to satisfy our questions about our identity. We still have to answer the yearnings of our heart for peace, for fulfillment, for joy, for satisfaction, for sexual gratification—whatever it might be. When we read Paul’s words about men and women “*receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error*” (v. 27), we can easily jump to conclusions about just what he meant. I find William G. T. Shedd’s observation helpful: “The recompense is the gnawing unsatisfied lust itself, together with the dreadful physical and moral consequences of debauchery” (i.e., excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure). When we reject God as the answer to our longings, we don’t stand on morally neutral ground; we actually become, in Paul’s words, “*consumed with passion.*”

A Gospel for the Whole World

For the Christian, all of this presents quite a challenge. We must, as John Stott did so masterfully, have one foot firmly planted in the world of the Bible and the other planted in our own context. On the one hand, we’re called to refute false, bad ideas in the awareness that Jesus said, “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you*” (John 15:18)—even as we treat those who hate us with honor. On the other hand, we have this good news to share: Jesus was delivered up to the cross so that men and women might be delivered from sin and born again to life everlasting. In Him, broken lives are made new.

So how do you honor God, obey His Word, and love your neighbors, friends, and family members who have decided to go on this path? Some people have decided the way to respond to our culture’s broken understanding of human sexuality is by admonition—to simply stand up and keep declaring, “This is terrible,” “This is terrible,” “This is terrible.” Others have decided they won’t say anything at all. Neither is a possibility for a Bible-believing Christian.

In my experience, those who reject God’s plan for their sexuality are either reviled or affirmed by the people around them. By contrast, Christians ought to say, “We will not treat you in either of those ways. We will not revile you, but we cannot affirm you. And the reason we won’t revile you is the same reason we can’t affirm you: because of the Bible, because of God’s love, because of His grace, and because of His goodness.” It isn’t easy to speak about God’s wrath. But I’m glad that when I do address it, I can do so knowing that it is wrapped in the amazing news of God’s grace.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



God's Wrath and Human Sexuality in a Romans 1 Culture

Continued from Page 7

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul urged them, *“Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God”* (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). If we’re clear-eyed and honest, we will all find ourselves described somewhere in this list. What’s the answer? Look at the next sentence: *“Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

The hope for the greedy, for the immoral, for all of us is the same hope. The answer is the same answer: the cross of Jesus Christ. He was given up on our behalf so that we might enjoy all the beauty and goodness that is found in Him. This is what we mean when we say that the gospel is for everyone. It’s a gospel for atheists and agnostics, for Jews and gentiles, for Hindus and Muslims; for the lost and the lonely, for the happy and the successful; for the homosexual or transgender person; for those who experience gender dysphoria and those who don’t—ultimately, for anyone who humbly casts any other identity aside and loses his or her life for Christ’s sake (Matthew 16:25). It is a gospel for the whole world, for the whole world undoubtedly needs it. ~ **Dr. Alistair Begg**—Senior pastor of Parkside Church in Cleveland, Ohio

God's Glory in Christ

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Christ displayed God’s glory on earth and will again when He comes back. After seeing His glory in Scripture, we should respond in worship and righteousness.

From eternity past Christ had the glory of God. He *“is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature”* (Hebrews 1:3), and He prayed, *“And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with Thee before the world was”* (John 17:5). Christ also displayed God’s glory on earth. Most often He looked like an ordinary man, but one night He appeared in great glory to Peter, James, and John (Luke 9:28-36). *“While He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming”* (v. 29). Moses and Elijah came and spoke to Him, and the disciples *“saw His glory”* (v. 32).

When He comes again, He will come *“on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory”* (Matthew 24:30), to the joy of His people and to the terror of those who reject Him. His glory will fill the whole earth (Numbers 14:21), and all creation will worship Him.

What should be our response to God’s glory? Like the angels who sing, *“Glory to God in the highest”* (Luke 2:14), we should give Him praise. Also, as we see His glory we should change: *“But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit”* (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we look at God, the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and helps us grow and live righteous lives. As *“children of God,”* we *“appear as lights in the world”* (Philippians 2:15). ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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If you have a birthday or anniversary in March that is not posted here or is listed in error or you do not want to be published in this newsletter, please contact Walt or e-mail him at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner March 2023

Birthdays

Rory Alexander H. (4)
Jared E. (5)
Marlow S. (12)
Rose M. (15)
Les T. (19)
Hannah L (20)

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

Anniversaries

Marlow and Wilma S. (15)
Rick and Peggy G. (31)

Ligonier National Conference - Orlando, Florida *“Stand Firm”*

The world around us is constantly changing, yet “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). As Christians are pushed toward the margins of a hostile society, we cannot afford to surrender our convictions or to retreat in fear. By God’s grace, we have the truth that this lost world needs. Now is our time to stand with unrelenting devotion to God’s unchanging Word.

Our 2023 National Conference - March 23—25, 2023 will encourage us to stand firm on the everlasting doctrines of the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 16:13). Since the Lord does not change in turbulent times, we must live courageously and without compromise for His eternal truth.



*West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership*

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

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