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April 2023

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

What is True Conversion?

Jesus said, “Unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Jesus is clear that if a person of this world is to be accepted into this other kingdom—the kingdom of heaven—he must be converted. Put very simply, to be converted is absolutely necessary to enter the kingdom of God.

What does the word conversion mean? In the biblical sense, conversion means a turning—a spiritual turning away from sin in repentance and to Christ in faith. It is a dramatic turning away from one path in order to pursue an entirely new one. It involves turning one’s back to the system of the world and its anti-God values. It involves a turning away from dead religion and self-righteousness. It involves a complete pivot, an about-face, in order to enter through the narrow gate that leads to life.

Conversion also involves the idea of changing direction. A true spiritual conversion radically alters the direction of one’s life. It is not a partial change wherein one is able to straddle the fence between two worlds. It is not a superficial turning, a mere rearranging of the outward facade of a person’s life. Conversion is not a gradual change that occurs over a period of time, like sanctification. Instead, a genuine conversion occurs much deeper within the soul of a person. It is a decisive break with old patterns of sin and the world and the embracing of new life in Christ by faith.

This spiritual conversion is so profound that it involves many changes in a person. It involves a change of mind, which is an intellectual change; and a change of view, a new recognition of God, self, sin, and Christ. It involves a change of affections, which is an emotional change, a change of feeling, a sorrow for sin committed against a holy and just God. It involves a change of will, which is a volitional change, an intentional turning away from sin and a turning to God through Christ to seek forgiveness. The entire person—mind, affections, and will—is radically, completely, and fully changed in conversion.

Theologically speaking, regeneration and conversion are two sides of the same coin. Regeneration is God’s sovereign activity by the Holy Spirit in the soul of one who is spiritually dead in sin. Regeneration is the implantation of new life in the soul. Regeneration gives the gifts of repentance and faith. On the other side of the coin, conversion is the response of the one who is regenerated. Esteemed British pastor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: “Conversion is the first exercise of the new nature in ceasing from old forms of life and starting a new life. It is the first action of the regenerate soul in moving from something to something.” Regeneration precedes and produces conversion. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between these two. Regeneration is the cause, and conversion is the effect. Put another way, regeneration is the root and conversion is the fruit.

To affirm true conversion implies that there is also false conversion. Put simply, there is such a thing as non-saving faith. Not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord” has entered the narrow gate (Matthew 7:21). People may know the truth and may have felt grief regarding their sin, but it is a selfish sorrow over what their sin has caused them to suffer, not how it has offended a holy God. The most stark example of a false conversion we have in Scripture is that of Judas Iscariot.



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In a counterfeit conversion, there is no death to self, no submission to the lordship of Christ, no taking up a cross, no obedience in following Christ, no fruit of repentance—only empty words, shallow feelings, and barren religious activities. On the contrary, with a true conversion sin is abhorred, the world renounced, pride crushed, self surrendered, faith exercised, Christ seen as precious, and the cross embraced as one's only saving hope.

The whole purpose of conversion is to bring men and women into a right relationship with God. This is why Christ came, and it is the reason for which He died. It was God who was *"in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself"* (2 Corinthians 5:19). Conversion is the crying need of the soul. Until one's life is turned from sin to Christ, nothing else matters. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson**

Jonathan Edwards' Driving Passion

Jonathan Edwards lived with one driving passion: *Soli Deo Gloria*—for the glory of God alone. His master purpose in all things, his overarching aim in all of life, was to bring honor and majesty to the name of God. He desired to exalt the greatness of God with every breath he drew and with every step he took. Every thought, every attitude, every choice, and every undertaking must be for the glory of God.

Each of Edwards' seventy resolutions was centered on this supreme passion for God's honor. Through these ambitious purpose statements, Edwards pursued his passion for glorifying God in all things. His God-centered vision pulled him and propelled him forward in all of life. It was God, majestic and holy in His infinite being, whose sovereignty knows no limits, whose grace knows no bounds, whom Edwards kept constantly before his adoring eyes. It was God, sufficient in Himself and all-sufficient for His people, whom Edwards sought with all his might to please. It was God who became Edwards' goal in daily Christian living and whom he pursued with radical resolve and holy ambition. Amid all his labors as a pastor, Edwards remained riveted upon God, who is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things, the first cause and last end, and everything in between. God Himself has made the promotion of His glory to be His highest end, and Edwards, likewise, lived for this above all else.

In this day, some three hundred years after Edwards' time, there is a desperate need for a new generation to arise onto the scene of history that will prize and promote the glory of our awesome God. Beholding the soul-capturing vision of this all-supreme, all-sovereign, and all-sufficient God transforms individuals in life-altering ways. This is what we learn from Edwards, and this is what we must experience in our own lives. Our lofty theology, centered on God Himself, must be translated into daily Christian living in practical ways.

May God raise up a growing host in this day that will be consumed with striving to be holy just as He is holy. May God give to His church an army of followers of Christ who are radically surrendered and fully devoted to Him. May such a righteous remnant come in due season for the cause of another Great Awakening. And may Edwards' "Resolutions" be the footprints they follow. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson**



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What is Dispensationalism?

Dispensationalism is a popular and widespread way of reading the Bible. It originated in the nineteenth century in the teaching of John Nelson Darby and was popularized in the United States through the Bible Conference movement. Its growth was spurred on even more through the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, which was published in 1909. Scofield's Bible contributed to the spread of dispensationalism because it included study notes written from a distinctively dispensationalist perspective. The founding of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924 by Lewis Sperry Chafer provided an academic institution for the training of pastors and missionaries in the dispensationalist tradition. Some of the most notable dispensationalist authors of the twentieth century, including John F. Walvoord, Charles C. Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost, taught at Dallas Seminary.

Dispensationalist theology is perhaps best known for its distinctive eschatological doctrines, particularly the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. According to this doctrine, this present church age will be followed by a seven-year period of tribulation. Before the tribulation begins (thus "pre-tribulation"), the church will be caught up to heaven where believers will be with Christ until the second coming, which occurs at the end of the tribulation. At that time, they will return with Christ, who will then inaugurate His millennial kingdom (dispensationalists are thus also premillennialists).

Although dispensationalism is best known for its eschatological doctrines, at its heart is the distinction between Israel and the church. Every other distinctively dispensationalist doctrine rests on this idea. What this distinction means for dispensationalists is that there are two peoples of God. Israel is one of these and consists of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church is the other, and it consists of all those and only those (whether Jew or gentile) who are saved between the Day of Pentecost and the rapture. Part of the reason for the pre-tribulation rapture is to remove the church from earth so that God can begin dealing with national Israel again.

Dispensationalism differs from Reformed covenant theology in a number of ways, but the most significant is this idea of two peoples of God. Covenant theology affirms that there is one people of God and thus continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. Covenant theology is not, as some dispensationalists assert, "replacement theology" because in covenant theology, the church is not technically replacing Israel. The church is the organic continuation of the Old Testament people of God. (For a helpful introduction to covenant theology, see Stephen Myers' *God to Us*.) The oneness of the people of God is evident by an examination of several New Testament texts.

Consider first the olive tree analogy in Romans 11. In this passage, Paul is addressing gentile believers and urging them not to be arrogant toward Jewish believers. He uses the illustration of an olive tree to explain. Note that in the illustration there is one good olive tree. Paul explains that branches were broken off this olive tree and gentile "wild shoots" were grafted into it. The one olive tree represents the people of God that has long existed. Unbelieving Jewish branches (e.g., Pharisees) have been broken off this tree by God, leaving only believing branches (e.g., Jesus' Apostles). Believing gentiles have been grafted into this one tree so that it now consists of believing Jews and gentiles. This tree is the church. If Paul were illustrating the dispensationalist doctrine, we would have numerous gentile trees and one Jewish tree (Israel). God would then plant a new tree (the church). He would take believing Jews from the Israel tree and believing gentiles from the gentile trees and graft them into this one new tree. Paul says nothing like this. The one tree that existed in the Old Testament continues, but now God has removed unbelieving Jews and grafted believing gentiles into it.



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In this light, consider what Paul says to gentile believers in Ephesians 2:11–22. Paul first tells these gentile believers what they used to be: *“separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”* (v. 12). If that’s what they used to be, the implication is that the opposite of each is true of these gentile believers now. They are now part of the commonwealth of Israel and partakers of the covenants precisely because they’ve been grafted into the one tree representing the one people of God. But there’s more than implication. Paul goes on to say explicitly in verses 19 and following that these gentiles are *“no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.”*

Dispensationalists have a difficult time grasping this because of their idea that the seed of Abraham is only the physical offspring of Abraham. Again, Paul begs to differ. In Galatians 3:16, he explains that *“the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.”* He then explicitly identifies the offspring as Jesus Christ. But note what he then adds a few sentences later in verse 29: *“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* Paul defines Abraham’s seed in terms of Jesus Christ. Christ is a literal physical descendant of Abraham. However, because believers, whether Jew or gentile, are united to Christ, we too are Abraham’s offspring if we belong to Christ.

Does Paul continue to use the terms Israel, church, and gentile in the New Testament? Of course! But not in the way that these terms are used by dispensationalists. He continues to speak of ethnic Jews and ethnic gentiles, both inside and outside the church. But he does not do so in a way that results in two peoples of God. There is one tree in the Old Testament that consists primarily of ethnic Jews, although some gentiles (e.g., Ruth) are brought in. This is the one tree that exists when Christ comes. He doesn’t chop it down, and He doesn’t plant a new tree. He prunes the unbelieving Jewish branches off, leaving only the believing Jewish branches. He then begins to graft believing gentiles into this one tree. This tree with ingrafted gentile branches does not “replace” the old tree. These gentiles are now part of the old tree by faith in Jesus Christ.

If the biblical teaching regarding the one people of God is allowed to stand, all of the distinctive dispensationalist doctrines that rest on the doctrine of two peoples of God are left without any foundation. ~ ***Dr. Keith A. Mathison***

Important Contexts for Understanding Reformed Theology

Most Christians understand the importance of context for properly interpreting Scripture. We realize that the books of Scripture were written thousands of years ago in cultures very different from ours and in languages we do not grow up speaking. Those things that were simply given, everyday realities for the original human authors and their audiences are things we have to study and learn about. We know that if we are studying the Old Testament, we have to learn Hebrew and Aramaic (or trust the translators who learned those languages). We have to learn about ancient Near Eastern history, geography, culture, and practices in order to understand what the biblical authors are talking about.



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If we are studying the New Testament, we have to learn Greek. We have to learn about the first century world under the Roman Empire. All of this is simply part of the nature of grammatical-historical interpretation.

Context is also important if we are to properly understand Reformed theology. Reformed theology was a fruit of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, and that Reformation took place in a particular historical and cultural context. The authors writing at that time wrote within a particular philosophical and theological context. Having a grasp of these various contexts is important for understanding Reformed theology. I want to briefly mention three such contexts: the historical, philosophical, and theological contexts.

Historical Context

The Protestant Reformation did not occur one afternoon because a bunch of Roman Catholic monks got bored and decided to throw a party that got out of hand. The Protestant Reformation was the culmination of numerous historical events that reached back over the course of many centuries. Conflicts between the church and various political entities (imperial as well as more local) in addition to various conflicts among the political entities themselves played a role. Conflicts within the church itself resulting from corruption and numerous reforming attempts played a role. Cultural changes, including economic changes and technological changes, played a role.

We can see the direct relevance of the historical context when, for example, we read Martin Luther's *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* or his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, two of the most important Protestant writings of the early Reformation. We can see the relevance when we read John Calvin's "*Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France*" at the beginning of his *Institutes*. That preface is important context for understanding the content of the *Institutes*.

In addition, many of the Reformed confessions address issues that assume specific historical conditions or that are responding to specific historical conditions. The clearest example of the impact of historical context on the content of Reformed theology can be seen in the difference between the original Westminster Confession of Faith and the American revision of the same Confession on the subject of the civil magistrate and the relation between church and state. We have to understand that historical context is important for understanding Reformed theology. If a believer desires to have a better grasp of Reformed theology, he or she should take some time to study the history of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—the two hundred years immediately preceding the Reformation—and then study the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries themselves. Theology does not exist in a historical vacuum.

Philosophical Context

In order to understand the importance of the philosophical context of Reformed theology, it is necessary to remember the historical timeframe of the Reformation. The Protestant Reformation began in the early sixteenth century with the work of Martin Luther. The first Latin edition of John Calvin's *Institutes* was published in 1536 and the final Latin edition in 1559.



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The major writings of Reformed theologians such as Zwingli, Musculus, Vermigli, Bullinger, Beza, Zanchius, and Ursinus were published in the sixteenth century. All of the works of the Reformed scholastic theologians in the period of Early Orthodoxy and the majority of the works published in the period of High Orthodoxy were published before the end of the seventeenth century. This includes the works of Reformed theologians such as Polanus, Ames, Wollébius, Maccovius, Witsius, Turretin, and Mastricht.

All the major Reformed confessions and catechisms were also published in these two centuries. For example, the Tetrapolitan Confession (1530), the First Helvetic Confession (1536), the French Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Canons of Dordt (1618–19), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) were written in the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century.

This is important because it means that the great theological works of the classical Reformed theologians and the Reformed confessions that they produced were all published in the last days of a pre-Enlightenment philosophical context. In other words, these theologians were writing before the Enlightenment's "turn to the subject." Remember that the so-called father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, was born in 1596, at the very end of the sixteenth century. His most significant philosophical works were not written until the late 1630s and early 1640s, well into the seventeenth century, and it took time for the influence of those works to be felt in the universities and among theologians.

This does not mean that the pre-Enlightenment philosophical context was monolithic. It also does not mean that there were no philosophical precursors to what became modern philosophy. There were, for example, in the philosophy of nominalism as well as in the ancient Greek skepticism that was rediscovered during the Renaissance. What it does mean is that the philosophical presuppositions of classic Reformed theology have much more in common with the general philosophical presuppositions of medieval theologians than with anything in the post-Cartesian era. In general, they worked within a context that did not question the existence of an external world independent of human minds or our ability to have true knowledge of that world through the use of our God-given sensory and rational faculties. Furthermore, they worked within a philosophical context that, with some exceptions (e.g., nominalism), granted that things have real natures.

This general philosophical context of Reformed theology was gradually lost as Enlightenment views finally filtered down and began impacting the thinking of the theologians. It had a catastrophic impact on Reformed theology. As Richard Muller explains (using the phrase "Christian Aristotelianism" to describe pre-Enlightenment philosophy):

The decline of Protestant orthodoxy, then, coincides with the decline of the interrelated intellectual phenomena of scholastic method and Christian Aristotelianism. Rationalist philosophy was ultimately incapable of becoming a suitable ancilla and, instead, demanded that it and not theology be considered queen of the sciences. Without a philosophical structure to complement its doctrines and to cohere with its scholastic method, Protestant orthodoxy came to an end.



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In other words, if we want to know why there are so many Reformed theological giants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and comparatively few afterwards, a large part of it has to do with the later theologians adopting various forms of Enlightenment philosophy and rejecting the pre-Enlightenment philosophical context. When Reformed theology is adapted to Enlightenment philosophical presuppositions, it withers and dies.

Our philosophical presuppositions affect our understanding of the most basic principles of reality and knowledge. Most readers of Reformed theology today have grown up imbibing post-Enlightenment philosophical principles without even being aware of it because it's the very intellectual air we breathe. This easily leads to a misunderstanding of traditional Reformed doctrines if we read those doctrines through post-Enlightenment lenses. More seriously, many contemporary Reformed theologians have consciously or unconsciously adopted one version or another of post-Enlightenment philosophy. Post-Enlightenment philosophy has an enormous impact on our understanding of God, man, sin, everything.

When a contemporary Reformed theologian who has adopted one form or another of post-Enlightenment philosophy also subscribes to a Reformed confession, all of which were written by theologians who thought within a pre-Enlightenment philosophical context, there will inevitably be internal conflict. The temptation to radically revise or reject the confessional teaching will be ever-present. Such radical revision and rejection of confessionally Reformed doctrine has already begun to occur. We see this most clearly in the writings of contemporary Reformed theologians who reject the doctrine of God taught in the Reformed confessions (e.g., WCF, ch. 2).

Theological Context

If someone desires to study the theology of the Canons of Dordt, we generally understand that it's necessary to have some grasp of the Arminian controversy and the theology of the Remonstrants because the Canons of Dordt are responding to the specific doctrines of the Remonstrants/Arminians. The same principle is true also of classic Reformed theology in general. Reformed theology is responding to and re-forming something that already existed—namely, late medieval Roman Catholic theology.

This assumed theological context can be seen throughout the writings of the early Reformed theologians and throughout our Reformed confessions. Over and over again, we see the Reformed theologians and the Reformed confessions responding to various specific Roman Catholic doctrines and practices. Sometimes they correct those doctrines and practices. Sometimes they completely reject those doctrines and practices. Unless we have some understanding of those Roman Catholic doctrines and practices, it can be very difficult to understand what our Reformed theologians and confessions are getting at.

The Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understood the theology of late medieval Catholicism, and they could assume that most of their readers (other theologians and pastors) would have some understanding of it as well.



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Many, if not most, contemporary readers of Reformed theology do not have the same basic knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice that the early Reformed theologians and their readers had. They do not have the same grasp of the overarching ecclesio-sacerdotal-soteriological system of Roman Catholic theology. They may have heard isolated bits and pieces regarding things such as justification or the relation between Scripture and tradition, but most do not understand the all-encompassing nature of the entire Roman Catholic theological system and how each piece relates to all the others.

This puts contemporary readers of Reformed theology in something like the position of a reader of the Canons of Dordt who does not understand the Arminian theology to which those Canons are responding. We can get some understanding of Reformed theology without that knowledge, but without the theological context it is very easy for that limited understanding to slide into misunderstanding. How Christians, for example, understand how significant Rome's understanding of Adam's pre-fall constitution and the relation of nature and grace at that point in time is for Rome's understanding of sin, grace, and justification? That knowledge is an important context for understanding the Reformed theology of sin, grace, and justification.

Conclusion

Classic Reformed theology did not fall out of the sky without any context. It was developed within real human history with real historical, cultural, political, philosophical, and theological contexts. We are five hundred years removed from those contexts. Our twenty-first century historical, philosophical, and theological context is very different from that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If we are not aware that there are differences, it can be very easy to read our contemporary context back into the writings of those centuries. If we are aware that there are differences but remain ignorant of the sixteenth and seventeenth century contexts, we can easily miss the true import of some of their teachings. In short, the same kind of effort that we put into learning the context of the biblical writings ought to be put into learning the context of classical Reformed theology. ~ *Dr. Keith A. Mathison*

United in the (Whole) Truth

We are prone to partiality. It is our habit not only to have preferences but to establish ourselves and pride ourselves in the preferences we choose. We play favorites and then rally around our favorites as we strive to demonstrate why our favorites should be everyone's favorites. Being partial, having preferences, and playing favorites isn't inherently wrong, so long as our partiality, preferences, and favorites are in accord with sacred Scripture. Problems quickly emerge, however, when we begin to play favorites with Scripture itself.



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Paul boldly confronted the Corinthians on this very matter when he wrote at the outset of his epistle:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10–13)

The Corinthians were playing favorites with the Apostles and their teachings. Individual Christians within the church were holding up one Apostle's teachings over those of another, thereby creating unnecessary and, thus, unbiblical divisions within the body of Christ, which cannot be truly divided any more than can Christ Himself.

Even now, though we would never admit it, we play favorites with the Apostles and their teachings. We rally around our favorite New Testament Epistles to the exclusion of others and sometimes wind up being unnecessarily divided within the body of Christ. Paul doesn't trump Peter, Peter doesn't trump John, and John doesn't trump James. In His sovereign wisdom, God was quite partial in providing us with a beautiful array of inspired Epistles on all matters pertaining to life and godliness, to the end that we would glorify Him and enjoy Him forever as one, united body of Christ, because of the truth, not in spite of it. ~ *Dr. Burk Parsons*

Adopting Christ's Attitude

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross!" (Philippians 2:4–8, NIV).

Here the attribute of glory is ascribed to all three members of the Trinity. This glory is then confirmed as a glory that is eternal. It is not something added to or acquired by Jesus at some point in His earthly life and ministry. He held this glory at the beginning and will possess it for eternity:

"Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9–11, NIV).

Though the form of servanthood covered Jesus and His life was marked by a willing humiliation, nevertheless there were moments in His ministry where the glory of His deity burst through. It was these moments that provoked John to write, "And we beheld His glory" (John 1:14). ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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If you have a birthday or anniversary in April 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 April 2023

Birthdays

*Amber H. (4)
Carol L. (7)*

*David A. (8)
Raena Grace P. (20)*

Anniversaries

*Walt and Carol L. (15)
Jack and Rita B. (16)*

Forgiving As You Are Forgiving

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:12, 14-15).

It's possible to confess your sins and still not know the joy of forgiveness. How? Failure to forgive others! Christian educator J. Oswald Sanders observed that Jesus measures us by the yardstick we use on others. He didn't say, "Forgive us because we forgive others," but "Forgive us even as we have forgiven others."

An unforgiving Christian is a contradiction in terms because we are the forgiven ones! Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." God forgave us an immeasurable debt, saving us from the horrors of eternal hell. That should be motivation enough to forgive any offense against us, yet some Christians still hold grudges. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



**West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership**

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