



West Suffolk Epistle



Volume 12 Issue 9

West Suffolk Baptist Church

September 2025

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Revelation The Names of Jesus in Revelation

- ☐ The faithful witness (1:5)
- ☐ The firstborn of the dead (1:5)
- ☐ The ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5)
- ☐ The Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 21:6)
- ☐ The first and the last (1:17)
- ☐ The living One (1:18)
- ☐ The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1)
- ☐ The One who has the sharp two-edged sword (2:12)
- ☐ The Son of God (2:18)
- ☐ The One “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and ... feet ... like burnished bronze” (2:18)
- ☐ The One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1) The One “who is holy, who is true” (3:7)
- ☐ The holder of “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7)
- ☐ The Amen, the faithful and true Witness (3:14)
- ☐ The Beginning of the creation of God (3:14)
- ☐ The Lion that is from the tribe of Judah (5:5)
- ☐ The Root of David (5:5)
- ☐ The Lamb of God (5:6; 6:1; 7:9–10; 8:1 and others)
- ☐ The “Lord, holy and true” (6:10)
- ☐ The One who “is called Faithful and True” (19:11)
- ☐ The Word of God (19:13)
- ☐ King of kings, and Lord of lords (19:16)
- ☐ Christ (Messiah), ruling on earth with His glorified saints (20:6)
- ☐ The root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star (22:16)

Far from being a mysterious, incomprehensible book, Revelation’s purpose is to reveal truth. The very title in the first verse, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” introduces this fact. Even the Greek word translated “Revelation” can be translated “an uncovering” or “a disclosure.” It is used in the New Testament to speak of revealing spiritual truth (Romans 16:25), the revealing of the sons of God (Romans 8:19), and of Christ’s manifestation at both His first (Luke 2:32) and second (2 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7) comings. In each case, the word describes something or someone formerly hidden, but now made visible.

Revelation unveils truths about Jesus Christ, clarifying features of prophecy only hinted at in other Bible books. This clarity is sometimes obscured by a rejection of literal interpretation in favor of an allegorical or spiritual approach. Such approaches attempt to place Revelation’s account in the past or present rather than the future. But once the plain meaning of the text is denied, readers are left to their own imagination, leaving the truths of this book lost in a maze of human inventions. As we will see through our study, a literal approach provides the most accurate handling of this inspired portion of Scripture.



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The Author

Four times in Revelation the author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Until the third century, the early church unanimously affirmed this John as the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles and author of the Gospel According to John and the epistles of John.

Writing early in the second century (ca. A.D. 135), Justin Martyr declared, *“There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place.”* Since Justin lived in Ephesus, one of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation, his testimony is especially significant.

Dating from about the same time as Justin (ca. A.D. 100–150) is the gnostic writing known as the Apocryphon of John. It cites Revelation 1:19, attributing it to John the brother of James and son of Zebedee.

Another second-century affirmation that the apostle John penned Revelation comes from Irenaeus. He introduced a string of quotations from Revelation with the statement, *“John also, the Lord’s disciple, when beholding the sacerdotal and glorious advent of His kingdom, says in the Apocalypse.”* Irenaeus’s words are valuable because he was a native of Smyrna, another of the seven churches John addressed in Revelation. Interestingly, as a boy Irenaeus had been a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn had been a disciple of the apostle John.

Also writing in the second century, Clement of Alexandria noted that it was John the apostle who had been in exile on Patmos. Obviously, it was the John who had been exiled to Patmos who penned Revelation (1:9).

Other early testimony to the apostle John’s authorship of Revelation comes from Tertullian (Against Marcion, 3.24), Origen (De Principiis, 1.2.10; 1.2.7), Hippolytus (Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 36), and Victorinus, author of a third-century commentary on Revelation (in his comments on Revelation 10:3). Such strong, early, and consistent testimony to the apostle John’s authorship affirms the book’s internal claims and clearly confirms his hand in its writing.

Date

Two main alternatives have been proposed for the date of Revelation: during either the reign of Nero (ca. A.D. 68) or of Domitian (ca. A.D. 96). The earlier date is held primarily by some who adopt the preterist interpretation of Revelation. It is based largely on attempts to relegate its prophetic fulfillment entirely to the period before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Those who hold to the early date see in Jerusalem’s destruction the prophesied second coming of Jesus Christ in its first phase. However, external evidence for this earlier date is almost nonexistent.



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Date

On the other hand, the view that the apostle John penned Revelation near the end of Domitian's reign was widely held in the early church. The second-century church father Irenaeus wrote, "*We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision [the book of Revelation]. For that was seen not very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign.*" The church fathers Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Victorinus, Eusebius, and Jerome also affirm that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign. The testimony of the early church that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign is difficult to explain if it had been written at an earlier date.

Revelation was written during a time when the church was undergoing persecution. John had been exiled to Patmos, at least one believer had already suffered martyrdom (2:13), and more persecution loomed on the horizon (2:10). The condition of the seven churches to whom John addressed Revelation also argues for the later date. As seen in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Timothy, those churches were spiritually healthy as of the mid-sixties, when Paul last served in that region. Yet by the time Revelation was written, those churches had suffered serious spiritual decline. Such a decline would have taken longer than the brief period between the end of Paul's ministry in Asia Minor and the end of Nero's reign.

A final reason for preferring the late (a.d. 95–96) date for Revelation is the timing of John's arrival in Asia Minor. According to tradition, John did not leave Palestine for Asia Minor until the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome (a.d. 66–70). Placing the writing of Revelation during Nero's reign would not allow sufficient time for John's ministry to have reached the point where the Romans would have felt the need to exile him.

The weight of the evidence clearly favors a date for the writing of Revelation in the mid-nineties, near the end of Domitian's reign. This is critically important, because it eliminates the possibility that the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70.

Interpretation

Four main perspectives have been taken to interpret Revelation. The *preterist* approach views Revelation not as future prophecy, but as a historical record of events in the first-century Roman Empire. The preterist view ignores the book's own claims to be a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). The second coming of Christ described in chapter 19 has obviously not yet occurred. The preterist view requires that one see the words about Christ's second coming as fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in a.d. 70, even though He did not appear on that occasion.

The *historicist* approach portrays Revelation as a record of the sweep of church history from apostolic times to the present. Historicist interpreters often resort to allegorizing the text in order to find in it the various historical events they believe it depicts. This subjective approach has given rise to a complexity of conflicting interpretations of the actual historical events in Revelation.



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Interpretation

The **idealist** approach views Revelation as the timeless struggle between good and evil that is played out in every age. According to this view Revelation is neither historical record nor predictive prophecy. If carried to its logical conclusion, this view disconnects Revelation from any reality with actual historical events. The book is reduced to a collection of myths designed to convey spiritual truth.

The **futurist** approach sees chapters 4–22 as predictions of people and events yet to come in the future. Only this approach allows Revelation to be interpreted following the same literal method used throughout the rest of Scripture. The other three approaches are frequently forced to resort to allegorizing or spiritualizing the text to sustain their interpretations. The futurist approach provides justice to Revelation's claim as prophecy.

Other approaches leave the meaning of Revelation to human opinion. The futurist approach takes the book's meaning as God gave it. In studying Revelation, we will take this straightforward view, accepting what the words say.

The book of Revelation deserves immediate proclamation because the end is near. As the angel told John in the final chapter of Revelation, "*Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.*" (22:10). And so we study Christ's future return—a return Jesus Himself says is imminent (22:7, 12, 20). ~ "***Because the Time is Near***" - **Dr. John MacArthur**

The Roots of Legalism

One of Martin Luther's many contributions concerns the Latin word *incurvitas*. This sounds like something a dentist might say to you as he pokes and prods in the molars. But it's not. It means "turned inward." It means that we are naturally selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed. While all of those are damning enough, this condition of *incurvitas* has an even more telling effect. Because we are turned inward, we think we can achieve righteousness entirely on our own. So we strive, white-knuckling it, to achieve a right standing before God.

How many times have you heard someone say that as long as our good deeds outweigh our bad ones, God will welcome us open arms? How many religious systems are built upon works? How many people feel trapped by their incessant failed attempts to achieve perfection? Those are all cases of *incurvitas*. It's an epidemic.

Understanding this concept of *incurvitas* so well, Luther said, "It's very hard for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can't grasp this." If we don't look to grace, we look to ourselves and to our own efforts.

Therein lie the roots of legalism.



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The roots of legalism are in the sinful and fallen human heart itself. The heart manifests its sinful condition in our crippling desire to lean on our own merits and our own abilities in the attempt to somehow climb out of the miry pit of sin and reach all the way to heaven. We find grace to be far too bitter of a pill. It tells us we can never be good enough.

Curiously enough, the opposite of legalism also stumbles over grace. The opposite of legalism is antinomianism. This word includes the Greek prefix anti-, “against, in place of,” and the Greek word nomos, “law.” Theologically speaking, antinomians run away from any obligation to law or to any divine command. Antinomians are like James Bond: they have a license to sin. But that is the sad lie of antinomianism. It’s not liberty—it’s license.

The solution to legalism is not antinomianism. The solution to antinomianism is not legalism. The solution to both is grace, that thing Luther told us was hard to grasp. Exploring the roots of legalism further will serve not only to expose it, but also to display the brilliant and stunning contours of its solution, the grace of God.

Legalism in Scripture

The clearest expression of legalism in Scripture comes in the stories of the antagonists in the Gospels, the Pharisees. In fact, thanks to them, we have the term pharisaical, defined as “hypocritical censorious self-righteousness.” Not one of those three things is a good thing. Taken together, we get a really bad thing. Another definition informs us that the term pharisaical means an extreme commitment to religious observance and ritual—apart from belief. Both aspects of the definition are crucial. The first is the striving and white-knuckling it to heaven. The second part takes us back to Luther’s quote and our aversion to grace—it just can’t be as simple as belief.

Christ confronted this tendency to be pharisaical on about every page in the Gospels. One such place is the parable concerning the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. “*I thank you that I am not like other men,*” the Pharisee prays. There is the self-righteousness. The Pharisee further protests that he fasts and tithes. There is the external obedience.

In this parable, the Pharisee is contrasted with the tax collector. The tax collector simply prays, “*Be merciful to me, a sinner!*” There is the cry for grace.

A few verses later, the rich ruler comes to Christ. He too plays the part of a Pharisee. He too protests his self-righteousness. It seems that everywhere Christ goes, He meets Pharisees.

Ironically, the Pharisees, though they thought otherwise, were not truly concerned with the law of God. They actually set up a whole system of regulations to enable them to get around God’s law. They were experts at setting up loopholes. They had a man-made system of law to avoid the divine law. And they led Israel astray. Hence, we see why Jesus so vehemently opposed them and called them the false shepherds of Israel, as in the series of “woes” unleashed in Matthew 23.



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Before his conversion, Paul was one such false shepherd. Paul was the consummate legalist. In fact, you would be hardpressed to find another person so zealous for the law. He had firsthand knowledge when he declared, *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight”* (Romans 3:20). He had firsthand knowledge when he lamented, *“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse”* (Galatians 3:10).

Paul also had firsthand experience with grace. So he joyfully declared, *“God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law”* (Galatians 4:4–5). It is impossible to study Paul without coming into contact with grace. So we read in Romans 5 that all our striving comes to an end in Christ. We can only attain peace with God by faith in Christ—the only one who kept the law perfectly.

Legalism in History

As we turn to the pages of church history, we see the church’s focus on grace eclipsed by legalism. This happened on a grand scale after the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius. In the aftermath of that controversy, the seeds were sown that would eventually result in a full-blown system of works as the medieval church’s view of salvation. A key here is the shift from the biblical teaching on repentance to the church’s teaching of penance.

Repentance is illustrated by the tax collector in Christ’s parable. The repentant one simply prays to God, *“Have mercy; I’m a sinner.”* Penance is the list of things to do that will put you right with God. By Luther’s time, the list had grown rather long. So, Luther vainly tried to reach God by being a good monk. Luther even went into the monastery as a sorely misguided attempt to please God.

Only one thing resulted from Luther’s ardent work: he found himself even further away from God and mired in anxiety. Later in life, he even suffered physically from his earlier attempt to attain righteousness by these efforts. But in His grace, God reached down to Luther. We can’t grasp grace naturally. That’s why grace grasps us.

One branch of the Reformation initially celebrated this glorious truth of grace and then departed from it. In Zurich, there arose the Anabaptists. In addition to their other beliefs, they advocated withdrawing from society and living in segregated communities. They would soon develop a dress code and rules for how they would live and work. They called themselves the Mennonites, as they followed the teachings of Menno Simons (1496–1561). In 1693, Jakob Ammann broke from the Mennonites over the practice of “the ban”—shunning those who transgress rules. His followers would be known as the Amish. They went beyond the gospel to regulations and traditions.

The same dynamic occurred in the twentieth century in various pockets of fundamentalism. I remember walking into a church in the 1970s and being confronted with two large diagrams showing acceptable hair and clothing guidelines for men and for women. Christianity was reduced to lists, mostly of what not to do.



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As Christ confronted legalism on nearly every page of the Gospels, you can find legalism throughout the pages of church history. So, too, you can find the opposite. Antinomianism thrived during the Reformation. It also thrived and continues to thrive amid pockets of fundamentalism. Sadly, we can tell the whole story of mankind's misguided quest for God by tracing these ever-present threads of legalism and antinomianism.

Legalism in Life

The opposite of legalism is not license. It is liberty. Luther called Galatians his "Katie." "I am betrothed to it," he would say. That is a compliment that goes two ways. It reflects how deeply he loved his wife, and it reflects how deeply he loved the message of Galatians. It is the "Epistle of Liberty."

In our attempt to uncover the roots of legalism, we must look ultimately at our own lives. *Incurvitas* keeps us from seeing our true need. It tricks us into thinking we are basically good and only need to be better. Legalism is truly damning and rather damaging. Legalism can even catapult us to its opposite, to a life of license and a life, ultimately, of rebellion.

The reality is that we are not good. How ironic that part of the "good news" of the gospel is that we are not good at all. And because we are not good, we could never look to ourselves but must look to the One born of a woman, born under the law. He is the only righteous One. He kept the law and bore its punishment for those who trust in Him. God pours out His grace freely upon us because of what Christ has done for us. Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1).
~ **Dr. Stephen J. Nichols** - *President of Reformation Bible College, Chief Academic Officer for Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries Teaching Fellow.*

The Desperate Need for Reformed Ethics

I recently watched a short video of a lecture by my mentor and former pastor Dr. R.C. Sproul. In it, he explained that his ministry from the early 70s to the early 90s had been focused on addressing the catholic questions of Christianity—the doctrine of God, the doctrine of the person and work of Christ, the doctrine of Scripture, and such. During those first twenty years, he wanted to minister to broad evangelicalism, and these were the foundational doctrines under attack everywhere. But having addressed all those issues over the course of twenty years, Dr. Sproul says in his lecture that he wants to begin focusing on the distinctives of Reformed theology. He believed that the broad evangelical church could never be truly healthy until it was Reformed. He made the point that "Unreformed Christianity has failed."

One of the things he said in this lecture especially caught my attention. He said that the broad evangelical church has been "pervasively antinomian." I've been thinking about this comment a lot since watching the video, and I believe it makes a point that we need to seriously consider, namely, the fact that there is a radical difference between broadly evangelical ethics and distinctively Reformed ethics. There is a difference in the way each addresses ethical questions, and there is a difference in the sources used to answer those questions.



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The Desperate Need for Reformed Ethics

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One of the doctrinal issues that separates broadly evangelical theology from confessional Reformed theology is covenant theology. The majority of evangelicals reject Reformed covenant theology, often because of its implications for our understanding of the sacraments. Among those evangelicals who are dispensationalists, the differences are even greater. Why is this significant? Because a rejection of Reformed covenant theology results in a very different hermeneutical approach to the Bible. The impact of those covenantal and hermeneutical differences is evident when it comes to how each handles the Old Testament in general and biblical law in particular. And how we approach biblical law is enormously important for our approach to Christian ethics. This is where Dr. Sproul's charge of "pervasive antinomianism" arises.

Reformed theology historically has a way of approaching ethical questions. This approach includes careful examination of God's law as revealed in Scripture. It includes examination of biblical wisdom literature. It includes consideration of natural law. It includes examining how other Reformed pastors and theologians of the past dealt with similar issues. In other words, it looks at Scripture as understood within our Reformed theological and confessional heritage. As an example, if an ethical question not explicitly addressed by Scripture arises, the Reformed would first go to the biblical law and wisdom literature to find applicable biblical principles. Natural law issues would be taken into consideration. Then we would look at how our confessions address this issue. The questions and answers on the Ten Commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism, for example, are a rich resource on ethical questions.

Those among the broadly evangelical world whose covenant theology effectively rules out the relevance of Old Testament law do not have these resources. When an ethical question not explicitly addressed in the New Testament arises, they are often forced to look elsewhere for ethical guidance. Sadly, many are looking to the culture for direction on ethical questions. A century ago, Christian liberalism did the same thing. It looked to culture for its categories, its definitions, its standards. Liberalism did this because it self-consciously rejected biblical authority. Antinomian evangelicalism is doing this inadvertently because its hermeneutical principles effectively render four-fifths of the Bible ethically irrelevant.

When we do this, we end up replacing *sola Scriptura* with *sola cultura*. Since our hermeneutical principles render most of the Bible ethically irrelevant, we don't turn first to Scripture. Instead, we go to the culture. We look at the lines the culture has drawn, the sides that the culture has created, the definitions that the culture has made, the agendas that the culture has endorsed, and then we hitch our wagon to one.

This is a big part of the reason unreformed Christianity has failed as Dr. Sproul said. This way of doing ethics is pervasively antinomian. It is most certainly not Reformed. As someone who is unapologetically Reformed observing the way ethical issues have been dealt with over the last several decades, I often feel like Treebeard. In the Lord of the Rings films, there is a scene in which Pippin, one of the hobbits, asks Treebeard, "*And whose side are you on?*" Treebeard responds "*Side? I am on nobody's side, because nobody is on my side.*" The confessional Reformed tradition doesn't let culture define the "sides." Jesus Christ defines the sides and He does so through His commands in Scripture. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.**



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If you have a birthday or anniversary in September 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 September 2025

Birthdays

Ben P. (3)

Zachary A. (9)

Rhydian H. (12)

Larsen E. (13)

Jonathan D. (15)

Ruth T. (23)

Anniversaries

None to Report

God's Wrath on Unrighteousness

Romans 1:18–20

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. - **ESV**



West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership

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