

West Suffolk Baptist Church

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant



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West Suffolk Epistle



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Discerning - Self Evaluation

Scripture is clear that believers must be faithful to examine and judge our own selves: *“If we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged”* (1 Corinthians 11:31). This calls for a careful searching and judging of our own hearts. Paul called for this self-examination every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). All other righteous forms of judgment depend on this honest self-examination. That is what Jesus meant when He said, *“First take the log out of your own eye”* (Luke 6:42).

Clearly, the command in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to “examine everything” in no way contradicts the biblical strictures against being judgmental. The discernment called for here is *doctrinal* discernment.

The unusually gullible Thessalonians seemed to have a problem in that regard. Like many today, they were eager to believe whatever was preached in the name of Christ. They were indiscriminating. They were prone to be like *“children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming”* (Ephesians 4:14). Luke contrasted the Thessalonians with the more discerning church at Berea. The Bereans *“were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so”* (Acts 17:11). Evidently the Thessalonians were lacking in discernment from day one.

Paul addresses this continual lack of discernment in both of his Thessalonian epistles. There is evidence in the first epistle, for example, that someone had confused the Thessalonians about the return of Christ. They were going through a time of severe persecution, and apparently some of them thought they had missed the second coming. In chapter 3 we learn that Paul had sent Timothy from Athens specifically to strengthen and encourage them in their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2). They were unaccountably confused about why they were being persecuted. Paul had to remind them:

You yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass (1 Thessalonians 3:3–4).

Evidently someone had also taught the Thessalonians that believers who died before the second coming of Christ would miss that event entirely. They were in serious confusion. Chapters 4 and 5 contain Paul’s efforts to correct that confusion. He tells them that the dead in Christ will rise and be caught up with the living (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). And he assures them that although that day will come like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2), they need not fear being caught off guard (1 Thessalonians 5:3–6).

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Incredibly, shortly after this, Paul had to write a second epistle, again assuring the Thessalonians that they had not missed some great event on the prophetic calendar. Someone, it seems, had sent them a counterfeit epistle claiming to be from Paul and suggesting that the Day of the Lord had come already. They should not have been duped by such a ploy, because Paul had written so plainly in his first epistle. He wrote them again:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you. (2 Thessalonians 2:1–3)

There was no excuse for their chronic gullibility.

Why were they so vulnerable to false teaching? Surely it was precisely because they lacked the discernment exemplified by the Bereans. The Thessalonians did not examine everything in light of God's Word. If they had, they would not have been so easily hoodwinked. That is why Paul urged them to "examine all things," and why we must also heed that counsel. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. (1939 - 2025)**

Listening to the World

Christians should listen to the Word of God, of course, in the sense of heeding it, following it, and taking it in. Listening to the competing voices of the world in that way can get us into trouble. But there is another sense in which we do need to listen to what the world is saying. Paying attention can help us avoid the world's errors and can make us more effective witnesses and evangelists.

The Bible commends King David's allies from the tribe of Issachar, "*men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do*" (1 Chronicles 12:32). These men did not advocate going along with the times, as the false prophets of Israel's apostasy would later do. Rather, the men of Issachar understood the times—including, doubtless, the allure of Canaanite idolatry in those days—an understanding that helped keep Israel faithful.

An important reason for listening to the world is to recognize false philosophies and worldviews, lest they infect our Christian faith. For example, one of the governing assumptions of the world today is progressivism. This view takes for granted that what is "new" is always better than what is "old." Thus, progressive educators tend to cut out or attack our heritage of old books and old ideas in favor of "new ideas," "the latest developments," and "cutting-edge thinking."

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Such language appeals to most of us, since we are, like it or not, denizens (an inhabitant, resident, or regular frequent-er) of our culture. But among the old ideas progressivism has no use for is Christianity, and the belief in progress—that things are getting better and better over against the "darkness" of the past—is one of the main vehicles for excising Christianity from society.

If we listen carefully to progressivists, we will note the syndrome that the Apostle Paul faced in the intellectual center of Athens: *"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new"* (Acts 17:21). We will also see the marks of Darwinism, the notion that we are ever evolving to a higher level.

Believers, having considered the source, then notice the fallacies. Progress in science and technology is real, but it builds on past truths without rejecting them. Computers don't have to be re-invented in order to keep getting better; innovations expand what they already do. Knowledge accumulates, so it can increase. Scientists and engineers know this, but artists, authors, and philosophers keep trying to start over from ground zero in the humanities. Thus, they don't really progress—they become primitive.

The point is this: Christians—who have no patience with Darwinistic materialism—often sound as progressive as the most ardent evolutionist. They look for "new" theologies, "new" ways of worship, and "new" music, being quite willing to toss out their entire "old-fashioned" Christian heritage. Such thinking comes from a failure to "understand the times" in which we live.

Pragmatism is another non-Christian philosophy that has found its way into the church. Since we can never know what is true or good, according to pragmatist philosophers, we should simply do "what works," conceived of in material terms. This is an important strain of American philosophy, from the modernist John Dewey with his atheism and socialism to the postmodernist Richard Rorty with his relativism and leftist politics. Few Christians would agree with these philosophers if they listened to them, but simplified pragmatism can be heard constantly in church committee meetings, church-growth seminars, and books for pastors. "What works"—to increase church attendance, attract non-Christians, bring in more money, or achieve another goal—can trump all theological, historical, and biblical considerations.

Another reason to listen carefully to the world is given in Scripture: *"If one gives an answer before he hears,"* says Solomon, *"it is his folly and shame"* (Proverbs 18:13). In evangelizing nonbelievers, we need to "hear" them so that the answers we give as Christians will address their questions and respond to issues they are struggling with.

In many conversations, Christians and non-Christians talk past each other. The Christian may be running through an evangelism spiel from memory, while the person being witnessed to is trying to understand why God let his mom die of cancer. The non-Christian may start a political argument, while the Christian is raising spiritual issues.

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In apologetics, we often give a rational argument for Christianity to postmodernists who reject reason. Often the church addresses issues only after the culture has moved on. Churches trying to reach young people turn to folk songs and pop music when their young people scorn those styles in favor of rock and rap.

By first listening to those we are trying to reach, we can avoid giving pat, canned, impersonal answers. Instead, we can address them personally, authentically, and soul to soul. If they sense we are truly listening to them, they may grant us a hearing. They will feel that we have earned the right to be heard.

We can listen superficially—hearing their vile, violent music just to condemn it and them—or we can listen more deeply and notice why this music is so angry. As Mary Eberstadt has shown, most of it is about being abandoned, especially by a father. By the same token, the person struggling with his mother's death is not asking for just an abstract treatise in theodicy (a defense of God's goodness and power given the existence of evil); rather, this can become the occasion of acquainting him with Jesus who Himself died, taking on all death—including His mother's—and defeating it through His resurrection. Pragmatists who are impatient with abstraction can be pointed to the God who became flesh. We can agree with the relativist that the world alone gives no basis for universal truth but then introduce him to the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

If we listen carefully to the world and to those trapped in the world, with its futility and sin, we can hear the cry of the lost behind the cacophony of false ideas and twisted worldviews. That can awaken our empathy and compassion in such a way that we can effectively do what the Apostle calls for: "Always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. . .with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). ~ **Dr. Gene Edward Veith is a retired English professor and college administrator, most recently at Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Va.**

What Is Dispensationalism?

The below article first appeared in the March 2024 of the West Suffolk Epistle. Since Pastor Mike Prince mentioned "Dispensationalism" in his sermon entitled "The Genesis of the Abrahamic Covenant" on August 2, 2026 I felt it would be appropriate to re-visit this for further meditation. ~ **Walt Lawrence - Editor**

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.

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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** - *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 September 2026

Birthdays

Ben P. (3) ***Jonathan D. (15)***
Zach A. (9) ***Ruth T. (23)***
Rhydian H. (12) ***Matthew A. (28)***
Larsen E. (13) ***Jeremiah James P. (28)***

Anniversaries

None to Report

Jesus, Founder and Perfecter of Our Faith **Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)**

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.



West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership

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