

04 Why You Should Preach
the Doctrines of Grace
STEVEN J. LAWSON

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Discernment
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42 Why Can't
They See This?
TOM NETTLES

EXPOSITOR

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PREACHING THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

II TIMOTHY 1

is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called:

21 Which some professing have

THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE

TIMOTHY

CHAPTER 1

PAUL, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus,

2 To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord,

3 I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day.

4 Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy;

5 When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.

6 Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.

7 For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

8 Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God;

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Advice to Timothy

erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen.

1 The first to Timothy was written from 14-64-1-3-4, which is the chalet city of Turky 14-14-64-1-3-4.

9 Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,

10 But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

11 Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.

12 For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.

13 Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

14 That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.

15 This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phileas and Hieronymus.

16 The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.

Conduct to prize and shun

17 But when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me.

18 The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well.

CHAPTER 2

THOU therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

2 And the things that thou hast heard of me among many watchful men, who shall be able to teach others also.

3 Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

4 No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please his duty.

5 And if a man also strive for exact he shall be crowned.

6 The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruit.

7 Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.

8 Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel:

9 Wherein I suffer trouble, as an elect of God is not bound.

10 Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

11 It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him.

II TIMOTHY 2

12 If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us:

13 If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself.

14 Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers.

15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

16 But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.

17 And their word will eat as a canker: of whom is Hymeneus and Philetus;

18 Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and they will throw the faith of some.

19 Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

20 But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.

21 If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared for every good work.

22 Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

23 But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

24 And the servant of the Lord

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GOD-HONORING DOCTRINES

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



I vividly remember my first experience of preaching the doctrines of grace. It was in a church that had never been taught them. Subsequently, I preached these provocative truths in two more Arminian churches that I pastored. Trust me, it was never easy.

As I preached verse by verse through books in the Bible, these monumental doctrines were lying there in the text like landmines, ready to explode as soon as I touched upon them. In those churches that were unfamiliar with these high-powered doctrines, preaching these truths proved to be the challenge of a lifetime.

Addressing these particular verses, I knew that I would teach the Bible as it was intended to be understood. The difficulty was in knowing how I would present the doctrines of grace in as positive a manner as I could. No matter how hard I tried, they always proved to be inflammatory in the lives of many in our church.

This reaction always required many follow-up discussions with disgruntled church members who had never seen these truths in Scripture nor heard them preached. It required much patience on my part and repeated

explanations in order to help them understand these truths.

At the end of the day, I had to realize that the battle belongs to the Lord. These are not my truths, but His doctrines. God Himself must illuminate the minds of my listeners and lead them into an understanding of these truths.

I do not know what your church is like nor how receptive they are to the doctrines of grace. But we must remember that God is sovereign over who believes in His sovereignty. Your job is to teach the truth, and His work is to open their eyes.

May the Lord give you the patience of Job and the perseverance of Paul as you preach these God-honoring doctrines. ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven J. Lawson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



Join Dr. Lawson for a practical look into the life and ministry of the expositor.

EXPOSITOR
with STEVEN J. LAWSON *podcast*





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MICHAEL HORTON is the J. Gresham Machen professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary California. He is also president of White Horse Inn and editor-in-chief of *Modern Reformation* magazine.

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L3-64:23-4, which is the *shafat*
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WHY YOU SHOULD PREACH THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

STEVEN J. LAWSON


If you are a faithful preacher who preaches verse by verse through books in the Bible, you will inevitably address the doctrines of grace. These core beliefs have come to be known as total depravity, sovereign election, definite atonement, effectual calling, and preserving grace. To varying degrees, one or all of these doctrines are found in almost every book of the Scripture, giving them an unavoidable presence in the written Word. To fail to proclaim the sovereign grace of God, you would have to not preach consecutively through books in the Bible. You would then have freedom to skip around the Scripture and avoid expounding these obvious texts.

These central tenets have sometimes been called the points of Calvinism, though the Genevan Reformer John Calvin did not invent them. As we will discover, these core doctrines are taught throughout the Old Testament. They were carefully expounded by Jesus Christ, both in His public and private ministry, both to believers and unbelievers. On several occasions, Jesus even preached these truths to His enemies who sought to take His life. They

were proclaimed by the apostles in the book of Acts and clarified in their written epistles. The books of Romans and Ephesians make these truths unmistakably clear. From beginning to end, the Bible bears consistent testimony to the doctrines of grace.

In later centuries, these truths have been confirmed by many of the most seminal figures in the church. In the most pivotal eras of church history, these biblical teachings rose to the forefront of the life of the church. Augustine brought a clarified understanding of these doctrines that would leave its influence for the next millennium. The days preceding the Reformation saw John Wycliffe espousing these truths. John Hus died for them. In the Protestant movement, Martin Luther and John Calvin became their standard-bearers on the European continent. So did William Tyndale in England and John Knox in Scotland.

In the golden Puritan age, these same doctrines were championed by the Westminster divines and later by John Owen. In the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield declared these teachings with



Your congregation needs to be well fed by a steady diet of these magnificent doctrines. They are designed to be part of the meat and potatoes upon which they feast. They should not be hidden in the shadows.

extraordinary power. In the Modern Missions Movement, these truths fueled brave souls like William Carey and David Livingstone. In the Victorian age, these beliefs were trumpeted by Charles Spurgeon and a host of other stalwarts. In recent years, this Reformed theology has been taught by James Montgomery Boice, R. C. Sproul, and John MacArthur.

What Are These Explosive Truths?

Historically, the doctrines of grace are identified under the five main headings mentioned above. The first doctrine is total depravity, which teaches the sinful condition of all men outside of Christ. The second truth is sovereign election, which focuses upon the selection of God in eternity past of those whom He will save. The third teaching is definite atonement, which states that Jesus died to save these same chosen ones. The fourth is effectual calling, the teaching that God will summon to faith in Jesus Christ each of these chosen ones and regenerate them. The fifth is preserving grace, which affirms that every genuine believer

will persevere in the faith, never to fall away from Christ.

James Montgomery Boice writes, “These doctrines are important because they take confidence away from any spiritual good that might be thought to reside in man and instead anchor it in the will and power of God alone.” In other words, these truths put everything into the right perspective. They exalt God, while humbling man. They magnify the sovereign authority of God over the moral inability of man. They give credit for the salvation of sinners where it belongs—with God alone.

These truths should be a regular staple in what you serve people in your preaching ministry. Your congregation needs to be well fed by a steady diet of these magnificent doctrines. They are designed to be part of the meat and potatoes upon which they feast. They should not be hidden in the shadows. These doctrines need to be under the spotlight of your pulpit, out in the open for all to see.

In this article, I want to address why you should preach these grand truths. The following are compelling reasons why the teaching of these doctrines should be prominently

featured in your preaching ministry. As you seek to be faithful to the Word of God, here is the value of proclaiming these truths.

THEY ARE BIBLE-BASED

The doctrines of grace are important for your preaching ministry because, first and foremost, they are clearly and consistently taught throughout the Bible. Because we are expositors of the sacred text, every truth in the Bible should be important to us. Every word of every verse, every verse of every chapter, and every chapter of every book is profitable for life and faith. If God puts a truth in the Bible, it necessarily rises to a high level of importance. The Scripture is divine revelation that records the perfect intention of God in the salvation of sinners. The foundational core of this divine rescue mission is spelled out in the doctrines of grace.

These truths are important because they originated with the sovereign will of God. They were conceived and taught by God Himself. These doctrines are not the philosophical musings of ivory tower thinkers. They are not the intellectual reasonings of religious leaders. They were not conceived in Hippo, North Africa. They were not coined in Wittenberg nor invented in Geneva. Neither were they composed at the Senate of Dort. They were not created in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey, London. Nor were they composed in Northampton, New England.

Instead, these truths of sovereign grace came from the infinite genius of God. They were designed in the eternal counsels of the Trinity. They proceeded from His inscrutable mind and incomprehensible wisdom. They were directed by His sovereign will before the world was created. The doctrines of grace are God's truths, permanently recorded in God's Word. All who love God will love His Word, and all who love His Word should embrace these truths.

The doctrines of grace are virtually everywhere in the Bible. The more carefully you search the Bible, the more clearly you see these precious truths. Once you discover them in one place in the Bible, you see them everywhere in the Word. These verses that you previously did not see are now staring you in the face and are glaringly obvious. You wonder how you ever missed them. From cover to cover, you see these doctrines taught in the Law, historical books, Psalms, Prophets, Gospels, Acts, epistles, and Revelation.

John Broadus once quipped, "It would be easier to remove Mont Blanc from the face of the earth with snowballs than to remove the doctrines of grace from Scripture." There they are, forever emblazoned in the Word of God. The prophet writes, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8). The

testimony of the Word is irrevocable. The same can be said of these truths. They endure in Scripture forever.

THEY ARE FRONT-LOADED

These doctrines of grace are not hidden in remote places in the Bible. They are not concealed in obscure locations in the Scripture. Neither are they relegated by the biblical authors to the end of books, rarely to be seen. Instead, they are placed in the most prominent places for all readers to plainly see. They are often front-loaded in the opening verses of many books (Rom 1:6–7; 1 Cor 1:2, 9; Eph 1:4–5; Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:1–3; 2 Pet 1:1; 2 John 1; Jude 1). They are placed on the front doorstep of these divinely inspired writings. You virtually trip over them as you begin reading these books. Quite frankly, these truths are unavoidable.

This highly visible placement at the beginning of most New Testament epistles indicates how well taught the first century church was in the doctrines of grace. These profound truths could be brought up at the outset of these books without any fanfare. No explanation was needed. These truths were regarded as mere entry-level Christianity—quite basic and elementary. In the early church, these teachings were treated as core curriculum for Christianity 101. They were considered foundational truths for everyday Christians.

If the Bible treats these doctrines so prominently, then you should make them equally open in your teaching and preaching. Do not relegate teaching these doctrines to only a small cross-section of your church. The Bible never restricts these doctrines this way. You must teach and preach them to all who sit under your pulpit ministry. Do not withhold these tenets from your congregation. Whatever God has put in His Word, shout it from the housetops for all to hear. The doctrines of grace are not to be reserved exclusively for a midweek gathering or for a select small group that you think can handle it. This should be a main staple in your regular Sunday morning preaching.

In fact, these truths of sovereign grace should be preached even to unbelievers. Jesus certainly did so (John 6:37–40, 44, 65; 10:3–4, 11, 14, 27–29), as did Peter (Acts 2:23, 39). Peter spoke of "the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) and God's effectual "call" (v. 39). These doctrines certainly did not hinder the success of his evangelistic preaching, but enhanced it. As a result, three thousand souls were saved. Likewise, Stephen spoke about how God singled out Abraham to appear to him—as opposed to others—while he was still a pagan moon worshiper (Acts 7:2). Stephen announced this sovereign election to the unconverted religious leaders of the Sanhedrin.

These mighty preachers of old are to be examples to us. Following in their footsteps, we are not to withhold preaching the doctrines of grace from unbelievers. Who are we that we should censor God? If God has put a truth in the Bible, we should not be hesitant to declare it.

THEY ARE TRINITY-FOCUSED

The most fundamental truth of Christianity is that God is one God who exists in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three Persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal. Each Person of the Godhead is distinct from the other two Persons. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit. The Son is not the Father or the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father or the Son. Together, they constitute the Trinity—one God, yet three distinct Persons.

This teaching from Scripture is hard for our finite minds to grasp. Nevertheless, the doctrines of sovereign grace help to clarify the Tri-unity of God. With these truths, we especially see the unique roles of each Person in an easy-to-understand manner. Here, we see the ministries of each Person—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—clearly distinguished as working together in perfect unity to rescue sinners from the condemnation of their sins. As with no other set of truths, each Person of the Trinity assumes their specific roles in carrying out the execution of the plan of salvation.

This Trinitarian nature of God is clearly seen in the baptismal formula that was taught by Jesus in the Great Commission. He commanded His disciples to baptize new believers in the name of all three Persons of the Trinity. Jesus said: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). They were charged to baptize in the name of each of the three Persons, because all three Persons function as a Savior. The Father is a Savior, the Son is a Savior, and the Spirit is a Savior. They operate individually, yet collectively as one Savior.

These distinctions are made clear in the respective part that each Person plays in salvation. God the Father chose His elect in eternity past and gave them to His Son to be His cherished bride. The sole requirement was that Jesus must come into this world to die for the sins of these chosen ones. As the Son of God, Jesus willingly obeyed the Father and laid down His life to save the elect. When Jesus ascended back to heaven, the Father and His Son sent the Holy Spirit to apply this redeeming work to the elect. The Spirit has come to convict, call, regenerate, and give the gifts of repentance and faith to these same chosen ones. All these believers are sealed, sanctified, and secured by the Spirit.

Perhaps no other area of theology makes the distinction between the Persons of the Godhead so clear as do the doctrines of grace. When Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), He did not mean that the Father and He are one person. That is the ancient heresy of Sabellianism or Modalism that marks a departure from Christian orthodoxy. This false teaching stated that there is only one person in the Trinity, who assumes three different modes at different times. But Jesus was not teaching that They were one person. Rather, He was asserting that They are of one will, one purpose, and one mission.

The apostle Peter makes this same Trinitarian distinction when he writes, “To those...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Pet 1:1–2). Here the Father chose His elect according to the foreordination of His foreknowledge. The Son sprinkled these same chosen ones with His blood. The Holy Spirit sanctifies them to obey Jesus. This again teaches that the three Persons of the Trinity act as one Savior in delivering the same elect individuals from the tyranny of their sin nature.

Theologian J. I. Packer writes:

The five points, those separately stated, are inseparable. They stand together. You cannot reject one without rejecting them all. There’s really only one point... the point that God saves sinners. GOD—the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son, and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power, and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people; the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father’s will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of the Father and Son by renewing. SAVES—does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory; plans, achieves, and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies. SINNERS—men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God’s well or better their spiritual lot. God saves sinners.

There truly is only one point to the five points of sovereign grace—namely, God saves sinners.

THEY ARE GRACE-MAGNIFYING

It should be a self-apparent truth that the doctrines of grace magnify the grace of God. The teaching of sovereign grace causes the saving grace of God to be most vividly put on display. Grace is God’s unmerited favor freely given to those who are undeserving and helpless to save themselves


from their sin. These doctrinal truths make divine grace most vibrantly displayed.

When you preach these doctrines of grace, it is like holding up a diamond in the pulpit before the watching eyes of the congregation. The light shines through this precious gem with its many cuts on all sides. As you rotate the diamond, it causes the different aspects of the brilliant stone to display its beauty. The many cuts of the jewel cause it to radiate with stunning splendor. So it is when you expound the doctrines of grace and hold them up before your listeners. The multi-sided facets of God's saving grace—from eternity past to eternity future—are put on display before your listeners. Sovereign grace is saving grace in its most dazzling form.

Perhaps there is no better passage to examine the fullness

of God's grace than in Ephesians. In the opening two chapters, the word "grace" is featured prominently seven times (1:6,7,12,14; 2:5,7,8). The truth of grace is seen even more eminently. Here we see: electing grace (1:4), predestination grace (1:5), redeeming grace (1:7), forgiving grace (1:7), revealing grace (1:9), believing grace (1:13), preserving grace (1:13-14), quickening grace (2:5), saving grace (2:5), elevating grace (2:6), enthroning grace (2:6), believing grace (2:8-9), and recreating grace (2:10).

If you want to magnify saving grace, there is no higher ground upon which to stand than to preach the fullness of sovereign grace. Your expositions on the saving grace of God will go from stark black-and-white pictures to bright technicolor portraits as you expound the doctrines of grace. When you stand in the pulpit and hold forth these



If you want to magnify saving grace, there is no higher ground upon which to stand than to preach the fullness of sovereign grace. Your expositions on the saving grace of God will go from stark black-and-white pictures to bright technicolor portraits as you expound the doctrines of grace.

truths, you will be like an artist painting with all the colors of the rainbow on his palette.

Preaching on the doctrines of grace causes grace to be seen not as commonplace, but in all its fullness. Here is portrayed *amazing* grace, whereby “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” Here is eye-opening grace that is heart-pounding, jaw-dropping, knee-bending, heart-thrilling grace.

THEY ARE THEOLOGY-SHAPING

More than most truths, the doctrines of grace prove to be a major Continental Divide of theology. In the natural world, a mountain ridge known as the Continental Divide runs through the Great Smoky Mountains in the eastern part of the United States. Another one runs through the Rocky Mountains in the western region. Rainwater on one side of the Divide runs down mountain slopes in one direction, while water on the other side runs in the opposite direction. The Continental Divide determines the direction of water, whether it flows into streams, then rivers, that eventually empty into either the Atlantic or Pacific oceans.

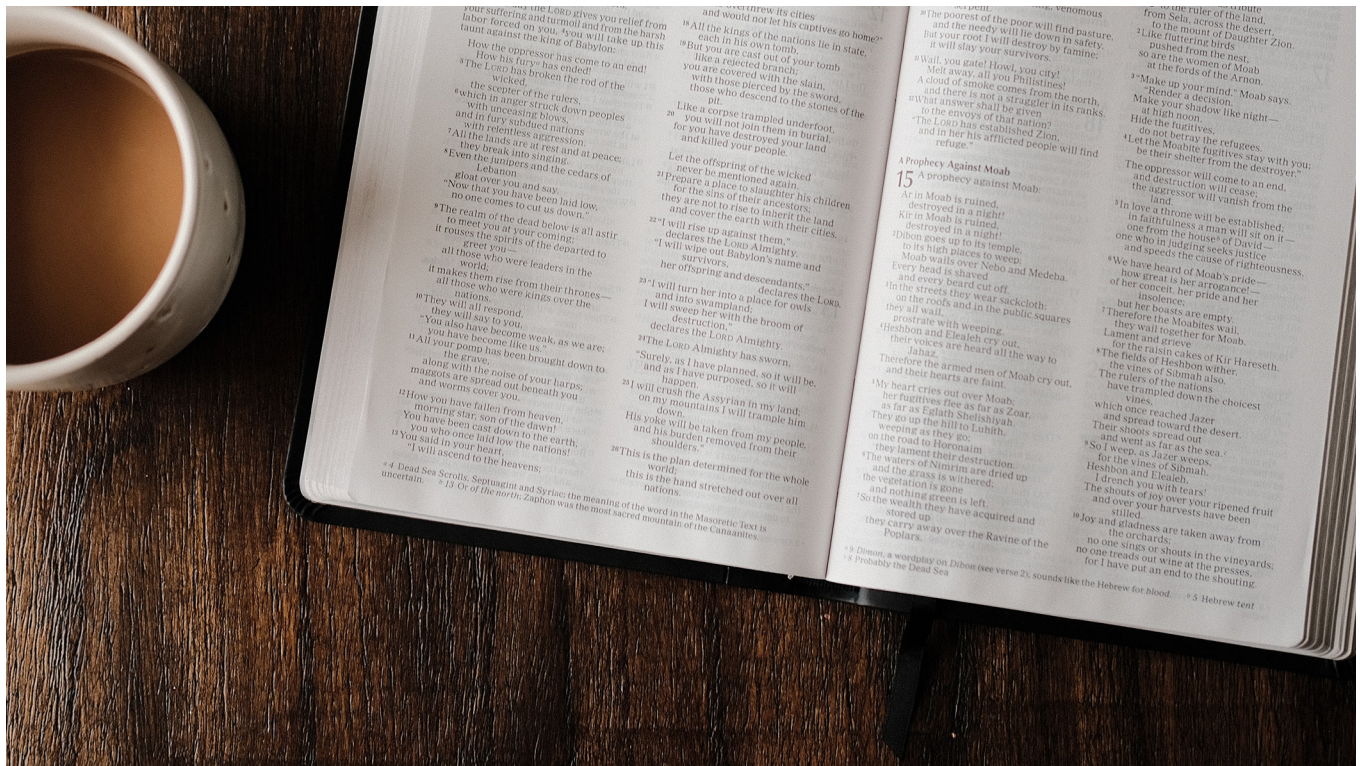
There is a similar Continental Divide in theology. This defining ridge is the biblical teaching of the doctrines of grace. Whatever you believe about these truths will determine much of what you believe in many other areas


of theology. These doctrines will bring sharply into focus what you believe about God. They will affect what you believe about worship and prayer. They will largely govern what you believe about the new birth and personal conversion. They will affect how you perceive whether a professing believer is truly converted or whether you falsely assume someone is in the kingdom.

As you preach the truths of sovereign grace, your congregation will be brought into right alignment with the larger body of systematic theology. If they are right about the doctrines of grace, they will be correct in twenty or thirty other areas of doctrine. Likewise, if we go astray here, we will be off the mark in multiple other realms. These truths are *telling* doctrines, because they demonstrate much about what we believe in other arenas of theology.

R. C. Sproul has written a book entitled *Everyone’s a Theologian*. Sproul argues that, for better or worse, everyone utilizes a theological grid. With some, it is a correct belief in God, Christ, sin, the world, and salvation. With others, it is an incorrect understanding of these areas. But the fact remains, everyone is a theologian.

Here is where the doctrines of grace are so helpful. They help bring into focus the right knowledge of theology, beginning with each Person in the Trinity and their work in salvation.





Our ultimate priority in the Christian life is to glorify God. *Soli Deo gloria*, for the glory of God alone, is our North Star that always points our life in the right direction. These truths of the doctrines of grace do this in our worship of God.


THEY ARE WORSHIP-INSPIRING

Our ultimate priority in the Christian life is to glorify God. *Soli Deo gloria*, for the glory of God alone, is our North Star that always points our life in the right direction. These truths of the doctrines of grace do this in our worship of God. Perhaps the best verse that teaches this is Romans 11:36, which reads, “for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” This verse is the summation of Paul’s entire theology of salvation, previously taught in the first eleven chapters of Romans. This verse stipulates that every aspect of our salvation is proceeding from God and is accomplished by Him. No part is attributed to man. The entirety of redemption is

credited to God.

Here is the golden chain of salvation (Rom 8:29–30). When Paul writes “from Him,” he points back to eternity past with the truths of foreknowledge and predestination. With “through Him,” he addresses how saving grace is applied to the elect within time. This includes the effectual call of God to faith in Jesus Christ that results in the divine act of justification. By this divine act, the believing sinner is declared to be righteous in Christ. “To Him” extends into the endless ages of eternity future with the doctrine of glorification.

What should be the effect of this profound teaching? How should we respond to God’s truth about electing, calling,



The higher our preaching can take people to learn about the eternal counsels of God, the higher their hearts will soar in adoration for God. But the more veiled we are in the pulpit about these glorious truths, the less prone they will be to worship God. Preaching the whole purpose of God leads to wholehearted praise for Him. Simply put, sovereign grace produces people who wholeheartedly sing about God's extraordinary, amazing grace.

justifying, and glorifying grace? Paul tells us: “To [God] be the glory forever. Amen.” This high theology should produce high doxology. The deeper we take people in the doctrines of grace, the higher they should rise to praise God. Eternity will not be long enough to declare God’s greatness shown in His redeeming grace. Proper worship is inseparably connected to the truths of sovereign grace.

Paul’s own worship of God was inflamed by the doctrines of grace. In Ephesians 1:3, the apostle writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” God is to be praised because of the fullness of His saving grace. Because of God’s sovereign election and predestination in eternity past, the apostle directs his worship “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (v. 6). Because of God’s gift of redemption in His Son, he proclaims, “to the praise of His glory” (v. 12). Again, because of God’s seal upon believers, securing them in Christ into eternity future, he repeats, “to the praise of His glory” (v. 14).

This is why we must preach the doctrines of grace. These truths lead our congregation into the heights of greater praise for God. The higher our preaching can take people to learn about the eternal counsels of God, the higher their hearts will soar in adoration for God. But the more veiled we are in the pulpit about these glorious truths, the less prone they will be to worship God. Preaching the whole purpose of God leads to wholehearted praise for Him. Simply put, sovereign grace produces people who wholeheartedly sing about God’s extraordinary, amazing grace.

THEY ARE PRIDE-CRUSHING

Humility is a leading Christian virtue. Only those who are lowly of heart enter into the kingdom. No one struts into the presence of God. We all come to Christ deeply convicted of having offended holy God. We are brought into lowly submission beneath the mighty hand of God under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Moreover, every step of advancement forward in personal holiness is a step deeper into greater humility before God.

We should preach the doctrines of grace because they are the great pride-crusher of our souls. They repeatedly remind us that God was the Initiator and Accomplisher of our salvation. God first pursued us—we did not first pursue Him. God first chose us—we did not choose Him. God chose us not because of anything good about us. He chose us in spite of us. God chose us for reasons known only to Him.

Left to ourselves, we would have gone our own way, away from God. We would never have taken steps toward God

unless He had taken the necessary steps toward us.

Preaching this truth will produce humility in the lives of those who sit under your preaching. They clarify how undeserving we are of His grace and how humble we should be in receiving it. Preaching such a high calling upon the elect should produce a lowly walk in them. These doctrines should be a death blow to self-assertive pride.

THEY ARE JOY-PRODUCING

Further, preaching the doctrines of grace is a sure means of producing joy in the hearts of God’s people, even in the midst of great trials. These truths bring an excitement for God even while a person passes through the fiery trials of affliction. Rather than boring listeners, the preaching of these truths will produce unspeakable joy in receptive hearts. In the midst of grief, it fills beleaguered souls with gladness.

The apostle Peter writes, “to those who reside as aliens, scattered...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood” (1 Pet 1:1–2). How does Peter encourage these battered saints who are scattered abroad as aliens and strangers by persecution with the doctrine of election? They should be encouraged, because though rejected by the world, they are chosen by God. Though shunned by others, they are selected by God.

Peter adds to this that God has “caused” them to “be born again” (1:3). “In this you greatly rejoice” (1:6). “This” cause for rejoicing in the midst of their suffering points them back to their sovereign election by the Father and monergistic regeneration by the Spirit. As they have been scattered from their houses, they can rejoice that they have been chosen for a new home in the world to come.

THEY ARE HEART-AWAKENING

Whenever someone comes to embrace the doctrines of grace, they often experience something of a personal revival. Many times, I have had someone tell me that coming to understand the sovereignty of God in salvation was like a second conversion. For them, it felt like being saved all over again.

A new understanding of these truths will often reignite an invigorated passion for God. When people come to understand these doctrines in the Scriptures, they are often aroused out of their spiritual slumber. They are rekindled afresh with new zeal for the Lord. Their sluggish heart is awakened. They are jarred out of their apathy. It is like an electrical current has surged through them, and they turn to the Lord with a new intensity. These doctrines have a

way of pouring gas on the fire of our hearts, igniting greater passion for God.

A great evangelist, George Whitefield, wrote in a letter: “The doctrine of our election...fills my soul with holy fire.... I hope that we can catch fire from each other.... Nothing but the truths of the Reformation can do this.” These truths kept the fires of Whitefield’s heart raging for God.

This was certainly the case with me. I was raised in an Arminian church, having never heard these glorious truths. When I was confronted with them in seminary, I was bitterly opposed to them. At the same time, I was drifting spiritually from God’s call upon my life to preach His Word. I was becoming comfortable in the things of the world. All of a sudden, these truths finally broke through my hard head. When I at last saw these truths as the glory of God revealed to my heart, it was as though a lightning bolt out of heaven had struck my soul. My life was reignited with holy passion for God.

That was over forty years ago, and I still have not recovered from this awakening in my soul. These doctrines have continued to reinvigorate my spirit with fresh fire from above. A lukewarm Calvinist should be a contradiction in terms. Being the “frozen chosen” should be the ultimate oxymoron. An apathetic believer in the doctrines of grace should be an inconsistency of the highest order.

If you want your congregation to be revived at a deep level, then preach these doctrines. Though they may be initially resisted, these truths will be the means by which many will be renewed in their walk with the Lord.

THEY ARE RESOLVE-DEEPENING

Those who hold to the doctrines of grace believe that no situation is truly impossible, but that God will work to convert souls. These rock-solid truths cause people to believe that nothing can prevent the elect from coming to faith in Christ. No government opposition can hinder God’s purposes. No physical imprisonment, no active persecution, and no godless society can prevent any of the elect from being saved.

The apostle Paul writes while imprisoned in Rome, “I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:9–10). Paul is confined in the dreaded Mamertine prison. He is in a dark hole in the ground, held captive like a caged animal. Yet he knows that the Word of God cannot be restrained from doing its work in the hearts of God’s elect. He may be imprisoned in

chains, but God’s eternal purposes are not stopped.

Consequently, Paul can endure all kinds of ill treatment—beatings, floggings, shipwrecks, stonings, and even this imprisonment. He is assured that those who are chosen by the Father will surely come to faith in Jesus Christ. These chosen ones have not yet all been brought to faith in Christ. Paul nevertheless remains unwavering in his confidence that they will be saved and, one day, glorified. As a result, he can endure through these difficult times. He can remain steadfast under great external pressure.

As you preach these doctrines, people sitting under your expositions will be emboldened to endure through difficult times. As they see how these truths strengthened Paul, they apply this to their own lives and circumstances. They will see that sovereign electing is not merely a point for theological debate. Rather, these truths put steel into the spiritual backbone of believers, enabling them to stand strong in difficult days.


THEY ARE LOVE-INCREASING

Moreover, the doctrines of grace teach us how intentional God has been in loving His chosen ones, even from eternity past. When His elect were still in their sins and most unlovely to His holy eyes, when they were under His just wrath, God chose to set His heart of love upon them with distinguishing affection. He chose to love them, though not because of anything virtuous in them. To the contrary, God loved them in spite of their wretchedness. God loved them because He is love. Even so, our preaching must show how intentional the believer’s love must be toward others.

The apostle Paul writes, “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12). He makes his entire appeal for believers to love others in the church based upon the sovereign election of God. The foundational motivation for them to love the brethren is that they are chosen by God. If God has directed His love toward His elect, then so must they. How can the Colossians withhold their love from those whom God has chosen?

Another reason to preach the doctrines of grace is that they promote genuine love among believers. Sovereign election is not a harsh truth, but one that is full of love. Paul states, “In love He predestined us to adoption as sons” (Eph 1:4–5). Again, he writes, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.... I will have mercy upon whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom 9:13, 15). In like manner, Scripture calls believers to exercise this same kind of love toward other believers.

If you preach the loving choice of God, it will place



When you preach the doctrines of grace, many people will be ignited to share the gospel. They will be liberated, because they now see that God goes before them to prepare the way. They understand that God opens the doors of providence to speak to people about Christ.

before believers the divine standard that calls them to do the same. As God chose to love the unlovely, so also must every believer. A “harsh Calvinist” should be a contradiction in terms. Only a “loving Calvinist” is living consistently with what they claim to believe.

THEY ARE EVANGELISM-IGNITING

When you preach the doctrines of grace, many people will be ignited to share the gospel. They will be liberated, because they now see that God goes before them to prepare the way. They understand that God opens the doors of providence to speak to people about Christ. They also perceive that God prepares the hearts of the yet-unconverted

elect to receive the gospel.

A person who understands the doctrines of grace realizes that not only has God appointed the end of all things, but He has ordained all the means to accomplish that end. This trusting in God’s sovereignty over life circumstances and human hearts affects their efforts in evangelism. Far from hindering their outreach with the gospel, these truths expedite and expand their gospel witness.

As you teach these truths, believers will understand that God guarantees the success of evangelism. This reality motivates them to work in partnership with God. Since they know that there are people whom God has predetermined that He will save, they become emboldened to witness for

Christ. Many times, when they extend the invitation of the gospel, God will extend the internal call of the Spirit. While their external call of the gospel can be resisted, the internal voice of God cannot be refused.

The apostle Paul writes to the Romans to give instruction concerning the true nature of the gospel (Rom 1:1). It was revealed in Old Testament times (v. 2) and focuses upon the person and work of Jesus Christ (vv. 3–5). How will this good news ever be received by a world that has defiantly rejected God? The answer is that God Himself guarantees the success of His own gospel. He will effectually draw into fellowship with His Son those whom He has chosen and powerfully calls by the Holy Spirit. God will overcome their resistance and make them willing in the day of His power (Ps 110:3).


Preaching the doctrines of grace will energize believers to share their faith. They will have a new confidence to go

forward to bear witness for Christ, because they know that God has His elect everywhere.

THEY SOLIDIFY OUR ASSURANCE

The doctrines of grace are used by God to bring the assurance of salvation to the hearts of the elect when they come to faith in Christ. These truths cause genuine believers to look at what *God* has done in their lives rather than what they have done. Otherwise, people will always be looking at themselves and having doubts. They will be focused upon external activities, such as walking down an aisle, repeating a prayer, signing a commitment card, and joining a church. This will often be in the place of what God has done in transforming their lives.

The apostle Peter writes, “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you, for as long as you practice these things, you will



Preaching the doctrines of grace will energize believers to share their faith. They will have a new confidence to go forward to bear witness for Christ, because they know that God has His elect everywhere.



never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you” (2 Pet 1:10–11). This passage says that everyone who professes to be a Christian must make a determined effort to validate their election by God. This is done by the pursuit of personal holiness. There is an inseparable connection between sovereign election and sanctification. Everyone who is genuinely born again will be living a distinctly different lifestyle marked by godliness.

Such a person will never stumble in their walk with the Lord by doubting their salvation. They will enjoy the assurance of their salvation as they see the fruit of a changed life produced in them. This is a transformation that only God could effect. Wherever election is the root, sanctification will be the fruit. If there is no good fruit, there is no good root.

YOU MUST PREACH THESE TRUTHS

By this point, it should be thoroughly clear why we should

preach the doctrines of grace. The reasons articulated above should be sufficient to compel you to expound these great truths. Many more reasons could be cited, but these should be enough to convince you to preach the sovereign grace of God. We have seen convincing evidence from Scripture itself why these doctrines must be proclaimed.

You must preach these doctrines of grace, above all, because they point to the glory of God. If for no other reason, your pulpit should be ablaze with the doctrines of grace because they most glorify the God of grace. There could be no greater motivation for you than this. If we are to do all things for the glory of God, then surely we must preach for the glory of God. No other teachings in Scripture bring such glory to God as these magnificent truths.

May you be a champion of sovereign grace, because these doctrines of grace magnify the God of grace. May your pulpit always point to the greatness of God in His glorious salvation. ♦



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Two open notebooks are visible on the desk. The notebook on the left has several pages of handwritten text, including the words "STRUCTURE" and "REVIEW". The notebook on the right is open to a page with a table of text. The table has several columns and rows of text, some of which is highlighted in blue. The text in the table is mostly illegible due to the angle and lighting.

STRUCTURE
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CULTIVATING DISCERNMENT

—
JOHN MACARTHUR

We cannot simply flow with the current of our age. We cannot elevate love while downplaying truth. We cannot promote unity by repressing sound doctrine. We cannot learn to be discerning by making an idol out of tolerance. By adopting those attitudes, the church has opened her gates to all of Satan's Trojan horses.

God gives us the truth of His Word, and He commands us to guard it and pass it on to the next generation. Frankly, the current generation is failing miserably in this task. Our failure to discern has all but erased the line between biblical Christianity and reckless faith.

The church is filled with doctrinal chaos, confusion, and spiritual anarchy. Few seem to notice, because Christians have been conditioned by years of shallow teaching to be broad-minded, superficial, and noncritical. Unless there is a radical change in the way we view truth, the church will continue to wane in influence, become increasingly

worldly, and move further and further into all sorts of error.

How can we cultivate discernment? What needs to happen if the church is going to reverse the trends and recover a biblical perspective?

DESIRE WISDOM

Step one is desire. Proverbs 2:3–6 says, "Cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding."

If we have no desire to be discerning, we won't be discerning. If we are driven by a yearning to be happy, healthy, affluent, prosperous, comfortable, and self-satisfied, we will never be discerning people. If our feelings determine

The desire to be discerning therefore entails a high view of Scripture linked with an enthusiasm for understanding it correctly. God requires that very attitude (2 Tim 2:15)—so the heart that truly loves Him will naturally burn with a passion for discernment.

what we believe, we cannot be discerning. If we subjugate our minds to some earthly ecclesiastical authority and blindly believe what we are told, we undermine discernment. Unless we are willing to examine all things carefully, we cannot hope to have any defense against reckless faith.

The desire for discernment is a desire born out of humility. It is a humility that acknowledges our own potential for self-deception (“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” [Jer 17:9]). It is a humility that distrusts personal feelings and casts scorn on self-sufficiency (“On my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses” [2 Cor 12:5]). It is a humility that turns to the Word of God as the final arbiter of all things (“...examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things [are] so” [Acts 17:11]).

No one has a monopoly on truth. I certainly do not. I don’t have reliable answers within myself. My heart is as susceptible to self-deception as anyone’s. My feelings are as undependable as everyone else’s. I am not immune to

Satan’s deception. That is true for all of us. Our only defense against false doctrine is to be discerning, to distrust our own emotions, to hold our own senses suspect, to examine all things, to test every truth-claim with the yardstick of Scripture, and to handle the Word of God with great care.

The desire to be discerning therefore entails a high view of Scripture linked with an enthusiasm for understanding it correctly. God requires that very attitude (2 Tim 2:15)—so the heart that truly loves Him will naturally burn with a passion for discernment.

PRAY FOR DISCERNMENT

Step two is prayer. Prayer, of course, naturally follows desire; prayer is the expression of the heart’s desire to God.

When Solomon became king after the death of David, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Ask what you wish me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon could have requested anything. He could have asked for material riches, power, victory over his enemies, or whatever he

liked. But Solomon asked for discernment: “Give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9). Scripture says, “It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing” (3:10).

Moreover, the Lord told Solomon:

Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days. And if you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will prolong your days. (1 Kings 3:11–14)

Notice that God commended Solomon because his request was completely unselfish: “Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself.” Selfishness is incompatible with true discernment. People who desire to

be discerning must be willing to step outside themselves.

Modern evangelicalism, enamored with psychology and self-esteem, has produced a generation of believers so self-absorbed that they cannot be discerning. People aren’t even interested in discernment. All their interest in spiritual things is focused on self. They are interested only in getting their own felt needs met.


Solomon did not do that. Although he had an opportunity to ask for long life, personal prosperity, and health and wealth, he bypassed all of that and asked for discernment instead. Therefore God also gave him riches, honor, and long life for as long as he walked in the ways of the Lord.

James 1:5 promises that God will grant the prayer for discernment generously: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

OBEY THE TRUTH

Someone will point out that with all his abundance of wisdom, Solomon was nevertheless a dismal failure at the end of his life (1 Kings 11:4–11). “His heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (1 Kings 11:4). Scripture records this sad assessment of the wisest man who ever lived:


King Solomon loved many foreign women along



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with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.” Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old,

his wives turned his heart away after other gods.... For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he



Knowing the truth without obedience is worthless. What good is it to know the truth if we fail to act accordingly? That is why James wrote, “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). Failure to obey is self-delusion; it is not true discernment, no matter how much intellectual knowledge we may possess.

did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord. (1 Kings 11:1–9)

But Solomon did not suddenly fail at the end of his life. The seeds of his demise were sown at the very beginning. First Kings 3, the same chapter that records Solomon’s request for discernment, also reveals that Solomon “formed a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt” (1 Kings 3:1). Verse 3 tells us, “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places.”

From the very beginning his obedience was deficient. Surely with all his wisdom he knew better, but he tolerated compromise and idolatry among the people of God (1 Kings 3:2)—and even participated in some of the idolatry himself!

Knowing the truth without obedience is worthless. What good is it to know the truth if we fail to act accordingly? That is why James wrote, “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). Failure to obey is self-delusion; it is not true discernment, no matter how much intellectual knowledge we may possess. Solomon is biblical proof that even true discernment can give way to a destructive self-delusion. Disobedience inevitably undermines discernment. The only way to guard against that is to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

FOLLOW DISCERNING LEADERS

Another key ingredient in biblical discernment is this: Emulate those who demonstrate good discernment. Do not follow the leadership of people who are themselves “tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). Find and follow leaders who display an ability to discern, to analyze and refute error, to teach the Scriptures clearly and accurately. Read from authors who prove themselves careful handlers of divine truth. Listen to preachers who rightly divide the Word of Truth. Expose yourself to the teaching of people who think critically, analytically, and carefully. Learn from people who understand where error has attacked the church historically. Place yourself under the tutelage of those who serve as watchmen of the church.

I do this myself. There are certain authors who have demonstrated skill in handling the Word and whose judgment I have come to trust. When I encounter a difficult issue—whether it is a theological problem, an area of controversy, a new teaching I have never heard before, or any

other matter that raises a question in my mind—I turn to these authors first to see what they have to say. I wouldn’t seek help from an unreliable source or a marginal theologian. I want to know what those who are skilled in exposing error and gifted in presenting truth have to say.

There have been outstanding men of discernment in virtually every era of church history. Their writings remain as an invaluable resource for anyone who wishes to cultivate discernment. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J. Gresham Machen are just two of many from the last hundred years who have distinguished themselves in the battle for truth. Charles Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, and scores of other writers from the nineteenth century have left a rich legacy of written material to help us discern between truth and error. In the century before that, Thomas Boston, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield battled for truth, as did many others like them. The preceding era was the Puritan age—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which gave us what is undoubtedly the richest catalog of resources for discernment. And before that, the Reformers fought valiantly for the truth of God’s Word against the traditions of men.

Virtually every era before the Reformation also had godly men of discernment who stood against error and defended the truth of God’s Word. Augustine, for example, preceded John Calvin by more than a thousand years, but he fought exactly the same theological battles and proclaimed precisely the same doctrines. Calvin and the Reformers drew heavily on Augustine’s writings as they framed their own arguments against error. In the year 325, a contemporary of Augustine, Athanasius, took a decisive stand against Arianism, the very same error that is perpetuated by modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses. His writings stand today as the definitive response to that error.

Much of the written legacy these spiritual giants left behind is still available today. We can all learn from these men of discernment—and we would do well to emulate the clarity with which they spoke the truth against error.

Those who can expose and answer the errors of false teachers are set in the body of Christ to assist us all to think critically and clearly. Learn from them.

DEPEND ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Spirit of God is ultimately the true Discerner. It is His role to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). First Corinthians 2:11 says, “The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” Paul goes on to write:

We have received . . . the Spirit who is from God, so that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught

by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. (1 Cor 2:12–15)

Discernment ultimately depends on the Holy Spirit. As we are filled with and controlled by the Spirit of God, He makes us discerning.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

It cannot be overemphasized: True discernment requires diligent study of the Scriptures. None of the other previously stated steps is sufficient apart from this. No one can be truly discerning apart from mastery of the Word of God. All the desire in the world cannot make you discerning if you don't study Scripture. Prayer for discernment is not enough. Obedience alone will not suffice. Good role models won't do it either. Even the Holy Spirit will not give you discernment apart from His Word. If you really want to be discerning, you must diligently study the Word of God.

God's Word is where you will learn the principles for discernment. It is there you will learn the truth. Only there can you follow the path of maturity.

Discernment flourishes in an environment of faithful Bible study and teaching. Note that in Acts 20, when Paul was leaving the Ephesian elders, he warned them about the deadly influences that would threaten them in his absence (Acts 20:28–31). He urged them to be on guard, on the alert. How? What safeguard could he leave to help protect them from Satan's onslaughts? Only the Word of God: "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

Let's look once more, closely, at 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman

who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." Notice what this mandate to Timothy implies.

First, it suggests that the discerning person must be able to distinguish between the Word of Truth and the "worldly and empty chatter" mentioned in verse 16. That may seem rather obvious. But it cannot be taken for granted. The task of separating God's Word from human foolishness actually poses a formidable challenge for many today. One look at some of the nonsense that proliferates in churches and Christian media will confirm that this is so. Or note the burgeoning stacks of "Christian" books touting weird views. We must shun such folly and devote ourselves to the Word of God. We have to be able to distinguish between the truth and error.

How? "Be diligent." The exhortation to be diligent calls to mind a worker giving maximum effort in his or her work. It describes someone driven by a commitment to excellence. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God." The Greek phrase literally speaks of standing alongside God as a colaborer worthy of identifying with Him.

Furthermore, Paul says this approved workman "does not need to be ashamed." The word "ashamed" is very important to Paul's whole point. Any sloppy workman should be ashamed of low-quality work. But a servant of the Lord, handling the Word of truth carelessly, has infinitely more to be ashamed of.

What Paul suggests in this passage is that we will be ashamed before God Himself if we fail to handle the Word of Truth with discernment. If we can't distinguish the truth from worldly and empty chatter, if we can't identify and refute false teachers, or if we can't handle God's truth with skill and understanding, we ought to be ashamed.

And if we are to divide the Word of Truth rightly, then we must be very diligent about studying it. There is no shortcut. Only as we master the Word of God are we made "adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17). That is the essence and goal of discernment. 💡





A QUESTION WITH ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Have you ever been asked by a stranger, “Are you saved?” Many Christians use this question as an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus. But a common response to that question might catch us off guard: “Saved from what?” Until this essential question can be answered, we won’t be able to make sense of Christ’s sacrifice or explain it to others. In *Saved from What?*, Dr. R.C. Sproul reveals that the greatest danger we face is the holy wrath of God against our sin. But the glory of the gospel is that the One from whom we need to be saved is the very One who saves us. As we better understand the severity of our sin and the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, the truth of God’s grace will deepen our worship and drive us to make His salvation known.

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PSALM 113:6

6 Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! Ps. 114
7 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill. 1 Sam. 2:8
8 That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people. Job 36:7
9 He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD.

PSALM 114

1 When Is-ra-el went out of E-gypt, the house of Ja-cob from a people of strange language;
2 Ju-dah was his sanctuary, and Is-ra-el his dominion. Exod. 6:7
3 The sea saw it, and fled. Jor-dan was driven back. Exod. 14:21, Ps. 77:16
4 The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs.
5 What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jor-dan, that thou wast driven back? Hab. 3:8
6 Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams, and ye little hills, like lambs?
7 Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Ja-cob;
8 Which turned the rock into a standing water, the flint into a fountain of waters. Exod. 17:6; Ps. 107:35

PSALM 115

1 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake.
2 Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God?
3 But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. 1 Chron. 16:26; Dan. 4:35

772 Tremble at the Presence of the Lord

4 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. Deut. 4:28
5 They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not.
6 They have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not.
7 They have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; neither speak they through their throat.
8 They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. Ps. 135:18, Jer. 2:8
9 O Is-ra-el, trust thou in the LORD: he is their help and their shield.
10 O house of Aa'-ron, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield.
11 Ye that fear the LORD, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield.
12 The LORD hath been mindful of us: he will bless us; he will bless the house of Is-ra-el; he will bless the house of Aa'-ron.
13 He will bless them that fear the LORD, both small and great.
14 The LORD shall increase you more and more, you and your children.
15 Ye are blessed of the LORD which made heaven and earth.
16 The heaven, even the heavens are the LORD's; but the earth hath he given to the children of men.
17 The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.
18 But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and for evermore. Praise the LORD. Ps. 113:2

PSALM 116

1 I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.
2 Because he hath inclined his ear

4 Gracious Lord

unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.
3 The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.
4 Then called I upon the name of the LORD; O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.
5 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous ye, our God is merciful.
6 The LORD preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me.
7 Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee. Ps. 136, Matt. 11:29
8 For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. Ps. 56:13
9 I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. Ps. 27:13
10 I believed, therefore have I spoken: I was greatly afflicted.
11 I said in my haste, All men are liars. Ps. 31:22
12 What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?
13 I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD.
14 I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people. Ps. 22:25
15 Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.
16 O LORD, truly I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid; thou hast loosed my bonds. Ps. 86:16
17 I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD. Lev. 7:12
18 I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people. Ps. 116:14
19 In the courts of the LORD'S house, in the midst of thee, O Je-ru-salem. Praise ye the LORD.

773

PSALM 118:4

1 O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.
2 For his merciful kindness is great toward us; and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye the LORD. Ps. 100:5

PSALM 118

1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever. 1 Chron. 16:8; Ps. 106:1
2 Let Is-ra-el now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. Ps. 115:9
3 Let the house of Aa'-ron now say, that his mercy endureth for ever.
4 Let them now that fear the LORD say, that his mercy endureth for ever.
5 I called upon the LORD in distress: the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place. Ps. 118:19
6 The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?
7 The LORD taketh my part with them that help me: therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me. Ps. 54:4
8 It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man.
9 It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes.
10 All nations compassed me about: but in the name of the LORD will I destroy them.
11 They compassed me about; yea, they compassed me about: but in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.
12 They compassed me about like bees; they are quenched as the fire of thorns: for in the name of the LORD I will destroy them. Deut. 1:44; Nah. 1:10
13 Thou hast thrust sore at me that I might fall: but the LORD helped me.
14 The LORD is my strength and song, and is become my salvation.

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to have a broken spirit over our sin.

PREACHING CHRIST ALONE


MICHAEL HORTON

If our preaching does not center on Christ—from Genesis to Revelation—no matter how good or helpful, it is not a proclamation of God’s Word. “You search the Scriptures in vain, thinking that you have eternal life in them, not realizing that it is they which testify concerning me” (John 5:39, paraphrased). With these words, our Lord confronted what has always been the temptation in our reading of Holy Scripture: to read it without Christ as the supreme focus of revelation.

Many people who come to embrace the specific tenets of the Protestant Reformation (grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, to God alone be glory, faith alone) are liberated by the good news of God’s free grace in Christ. Pastors who used to preach a human-centered message suddenly become impassionate defenders of God’s glory, and particular doctrines that often characterized their messages and shaped their teaching are exchanged for more biblical

truths. This is all very exciting, of course, and we should be grateful to God for awakening us (this writer included) to the doctrines of grace. Nevertheless, there are deeper issues involved.

Not infrequently, we run into a church that is very excited about having just discovered the Reformation faith, but the preaching remains what it always was: witty, perhaps anecdotal (plenty of stories and illustrations that serve the purpose of entertainment rather than illumination of a point), and moralistic (Bible characters surveyed for their usefulness in teaching moral lessons for our daily life). This is because we have not yet integrated our systematic theology with our hermeneutics (i.e., way of interpreting Scripture). We say, “Christ alone!” in our doctrine of salvation, but in actual practice, our devotional life is saturated with sappy and trivial “principles,” and the preaching is often directed toward motivating us to follow practical tips.



The recovery of reformational preaching isn't just a matter of concern for preachers themselves, for the ministry of the Word is something that is committed to every believer, since we are all witnesses to God's unfolding revelation in Christ. It is important not only for those who speak for God in the pulpit in public assemblies, but also for the layperson who reads his or her Bible and wonders, "How can I make sense of it all?"

The recovery of reformational preaching isn't just a matter of concern for preachers themselves, for the ministry of the Word is something that is committed to every believer, since we are all witnesses to God's unfolding revelation in Christ. It is important not only for those who speak for God in the pulpit in public assemblies, but also for the layperson who reads his or her Bible and wonders, "How can I make sense of it all?" Below, I want to point out several reasons there has been a decline of evangelical preaching in this important area.

MORALISM

Whenever the story of David and Goliath is used to motivate you to think about the "Goliaths" in your life and the "Seven Stones of Victory" used to defeat them, you have been the victim of moralistic preaching. The same is true whenever the primary intention of the sermon is to give you a Bible hero to emulate or a villain who will teach you a lesson like "crime doesn't pay" or "sin doesn't really make you happy." Reading or hearing the Bible in this way turns the Scriptures into a sort of Aesop's fable or Grimm's fairy tale, where the story exists for the purpose of teaching a lesson to the wise and the story ends with "and they lived happily ever after."

In his *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has Screwtape writing Wormwood in the attempt to persuade Wormwood to undermine the faith by turning Jesus into a great hero and moralist. He has to be a "great man" in the modern sense of the word—one standing at the terminus of some centrifugal and unbalanced line of thought—a crank vending a panacea. This kind of approach distracts men's minds from Who He Is, and what He did. We first make Him solely a teacher, and then conceal the very substantial agreement between His teaching and those of other great moral teachers.

This is the greatest problem, from my own experience, with the preaching we hear today. There is such a demand to be practical—that is, to have clever principles for daily living. But the danger, of course, is that what one hears on Sunday morning is not the Word of God. To be sure, the Scriptures were read (maybe), and there was a sermon (perhaps), but the message had more in common with a talk at the Lion's Club, pop-psychology seminar, prophecy conference, or political convention than with proclamation of heavenly truth "from above" (see James 3:17).

Because we are already seated with Christ in the heavens (Eph 2:4) and are already participating in the new creation that dawned with Christ's resurrection, we are to be heavenly minded. This, of course, does not mean that we are irrelevant mystics who have no use for this world; rather,

it means that we are oriented in our outlook toward God rather than humanity (including ourselves), the eternal rather than this present age, holiness rather than happiness, *God's* glory rather than demands that God meet our "felt needs." Only with this kind of orientation can we be of use to this world as "salt" and "light" (Matt 5:13–16), bearing a distinctive testimony to the transcendent in a world that is so bound to the present moment.

From the Reformation point of view, moralism commits a basic hermeneutical error. Both Lutherans and the Reformed have insisted, in the words of the *Second Helvetic Confession*, that "the Gospel is, indeed, opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing" (Chap. XIII). Calvin and his successor, Beza, followed the common Lutheran understanding that while both the law and the Gospel were clearly taught in Scripture (in both Old and New Testaments), the confusion of the two categories lay at the heart of all wayward preaching and teaching in the church. It is not that the Old Testament believers were under the law and we are under grace or the Gospel, but rather that believers in both Testaments are obligated to the moral law: to perfectly obey its precepts and conform to its purity not only in outward deed, but in the frame and fashion of heart and soul. And yet, in both Testaments, believers are offered the Gospel of Christ's righteousness placed over the naked, law-breaking sinner so that God can accept the wicked—yes, even the wicked—for the sake of Christ.

Both Lutherans and the Reformed have also affirmed that the law still has a place after conversion in the life of the believer, as the only commands for works that are now done in faith. Nevertheless, preaching must observe clearly the distinction between these two things. As John Murray writes, "The law can never give the believer any spiritual power to obey its commands." And yet, so much moralistic preaching presupposes the error that somehow principles, steps for victory, rules, or guidelines that the preacher has cleverly devised (i.e., "the traditions of men"?) promise spiritual success to those who will simply put them into daily practice. Those who are new in the faith regard this kind of preaching as useful and practical; those who have been around it for a while eventually burn out and grow cynical about the Christian life because they cannot "gain victory" even though they have tried everything in the book.

It must be said that not even the commands of God Himself can give us life or the power to grow as Christians. The statutes are right and good, but I am not, Paul said in Romans 7. Even the believer cannot gain any strength from the law. The law can only tell him what is right; the Gospel


alone can *make* him right by giving him what he cannot gain by law-keeping.

If the law itself is rendered powerless by human sinfulness, how on earth could we possibly believe that humanly devised schemes and principles for victory and spiritual power could achieve success? We look to the law for the standard, realizing that even as Christians we fall far short of reaching it. Just then, the Gospel steps in and tells us that someone has attained that standard, that victory, for us, in our place, and now the law can be preached again without tormenting our conscience. It cannot provoke us to fear or anxiety, since its demands are fulfilled by someone else's obedience.


Therefore, it is our duty to preach "the whole counsel of God," which includes everything in the category of law (the divine commandments and threats of punishment; the call to repentance and conversion, sanctification and service to God and our neighbor) and in the category of Gospel (God's promise of rest, from Genesis to Revelation; its fulfillment in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, ascension, intercession, second coming; the gift of faith, through which the believer is justified and entered into a vital union with Christ; the gift of persevering faith, which enables us

to pursue godliness in spite of suffering). But any type of preaching that fails to underscore the role of the law in condemning the sinner and the role of the Gospel in justifying the sinner or confuses these two is a serious violation of the distinction which Paul himself makes in Galatians 3:15–25.

Much of the evangelical preaching with which I am familiar inspires neither a terror of God's righteousness nor praise for the depths of God's grace in His gift of righteousness. Rather, it is often a confusion of these two, so that the bad news isn't quite that bad and the good news isn't all that good. The basic claim is that we actually *can* do something to get closer to God; we aren't so far from God that we cannot make use of the examples of the biblical characters and attain righteousness by following the "Seven Steps to the Spirit-Filled Life." But in the biblical view, the biblical characters are not examples of *their* victory, but of God's! The life of David is not a testimony to David's faithfulness, surely, but to God's! And for us to read any part of that story as though we could attain the Gospel (righteousness) by the law (obedience) is the age-old error of Cain, the Pharisees, the Galatian Judaizers, the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Arminians, and Higher Life proponents.



Much of the evangelical preaching with which I am familiar inspires neither a terror of God's righteousness nor praise for the depths of God's grace in His gift of righteousness.



Some moralists are sentimental in their preaching. In other words, their goal is to be helpful and a loving nurturer who aims each Sunday at affirming their congregation with the wise sayings of a Jesus who sounds a lot like a talk-show therapist.

There are varieties of moralism. Some moralists are sentimental in their preaching. In other words, their goal is to be helpful and a loving nurturer who aims each Sunday at affirming their congregation with the wise sayings of a Jesus who sounds a lot like a talk-show therapist. Other moralists are harsh in their preaching. Their Gospel is, “Do this and you shall live” (see Luke 10:28). In other words, unless you can measure a growth in holiness by any number of indicators or barometers, you should not conclude that you are entitled to the promises. The Gospel, for these preachers, is law, and the law is Gospel. One can attain God’s forgiveness and acceptance only through constant self-assessment. Doubt rather than assurance marks mature Christian reflection, these preachers insist, in sharp distinction to the tenderness of the Savior who excluded only those who thought they had jumped through all the right hoops. The sinners were welcome at Christ’s table, while the “righteous” clearly were not.

Therefore, even the Christian needs to be constantly reminded that his sanctification is so slow and imperfect in this life that not one single spiritual blessing can be pried from God’s hand by obedience; it is all there in the Father’s

open, outstretched hand. This, of course, is the death-knell to moralism of every stripe. The bad news is very bad indeed; the good news is greater than any earthly moral wisdom. That’s why Paul said, paraphrased, “You Greek Christians in Corinth want moral wisdom? Okay, I’ll give you wisdom: Christ is made our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Aha! God in his foolishness is wiser than all the world’s self-help gurus!” (1 Cor 1:18–31).

Moralism might answer the “felt needs” of those who demand practical and inspirational pep talks on Sunday morning, but it cannot really be considered preaching.

VERSE-BY-VERSE EXPOSITION

Having been raised in churches that painstakingly exegeted a particular passage verse-by-verse, I have profited from the insights this method sometimes offers. Nevertheless, it too, as a mere method, falls short of an adequate way of preaching, reading, or interpreting the sacred text.

First, let me offer an explanation of how this is done. I remember the pastor going through even rather brief books like Jude over a period of several months, and there we would be, pen and paper in hand as though we were in a

classroom, following his outline—either printed in the bulletin or displayed on an overhead projector. Words would be taken apart like an engine is dismantled by an auto mechanic as the pastor conducted an extensive study on the root of various terms in the Greek language.

This is inadvisable, first, because word studies often focus on etymology (i.e., what is the root of the word in the original language?) rather than on the actual *use* of the word in ancient literature. Yet, very often, the use of a particular word in ancient literature had nothing at all to do with the root meaning of the word itself. It is dangerous to think of biblical words as magical or as different somehow from the same words in the secular works of their day.

This approach is also dangerous because it misses the forest for the trees. In other words, revelation is one long, unfolding drama of redemption, and to get wrapped up in a technical analysis of bits and pieces fails to do justice to the larger context of the text. What God intended as one continuous story that is proclaimed each week to remind the faithful of God's promise and our calling is often turned into an arduous and irrelevant search for the technical meanings of words. The same tendency is present in Bible study methods or study Bibles that outline, take apart, and put back together the pieces of the Bible in such a way as to divert our attention from Scripture's inherent power and authority.

Another fault of this verse-by-verse method is that it often fails to appreciate the variety of genres in the biblical text and imposes a woodenly literalistic grid on passages that are meant to be preached, read, or interpreted in a different way. The Bible is not a textbook of geometry that can be reductionistically dissected and summarized as a list of simple conclusions, but a book in which God Himself speaks to us, disclosing His nature, His purpose, and His unfolding plan of redemption through history.

A final danger of this method is that it tends to remove the congregation from the text of Scripture. Even though the hearers may be very involved taking notes, this only serves to reinforce in their experience that they could not simply sit down and read their English Bibles for themselves and discover the deeper meaning of the text apart from those who have the method down and know the original languages.

CARELESSNESS

Unfortunately, too much of the preaching we come across these days does not even have the merit of attempting a faithful exposition of the Scriptures, as these preceding methods do.

When John Calvin was asked to respond to Cardinal

Sadoletto as to why Geneva was irretrievably Protestant, the Reformer included this indictment of the state of preaching before the Reformation:

Nay, what one sermon was there from which old wives might not carry off more whimsies than they could devise at their own fireside in a month? For as sermons were usually then divided, the first half was devoted to those misty questions of the schools which might astonish the rude populace, while the second contained sweet stories and amusing speculations by which the hearers might be kept awake. Only a few expressions were thrown in from the Word of God, that by their majesty they might procure credit for these frivolities.

Calvin then contrasts this former way of preaching with the Reformation approach to Scripture:

First, we bid a man to begin by examining himself, and this not in a superficial and perfunctory manner, but to cite his conscience before the tribunal of God, and when sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, to reflect on the strictness of the sentence pronounced on all sinners. Thus confounded and amazed at his misery, he is prostrated and humbled before God; and, casting away all self-confidence, groans as if given up to final perdition. Then we show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions; by His sacrifice, appeased the divine anger.

The Genevan Reformer goes on to ask the Cardinal what problem he has with that. It is probably, says Calvin, that the Reformation way of preaching is not “practical” enough; that it doesn't give people clear directions for daily living and motivate them to a higher life. Nevertheless, the Reformers all believed that the preacher is required to preach the text, not to decide on a topic and look for a text that can be pressed into its service. And the text, said they, was aimed not at offering heroes to emulate (not even Jesus), but at proclamation of God's redemptive act in the person and work of the God-Man.

Who couldn't find in Calvin's description of medieval preaching something of the contemporary situation? In many of the church growth contexts, once more the sermon is not given the central place liturgically, and the sermon itself often reveals that the speaker is more widely

Good communicators can get away with the lack of content by their witty, anecdotal style, but they are still unfaithful as ministers of the Word, even if they help people and keep folks coming back for more.

read in marketing surveys, trend analyses, biographies of the rich and famous, “One Hundred & One Sermon Illustrations,” and *Leadership Journal* than in the Greek New Testament, hermeneutical aids, and the riches of centuries of theological scholarship. One can often tell when a pastor has just read a powerful book of pop-psychology, Christian personality theories, end-times speculations, moral or political calls to action, or entrepreneurial successes. He has been blown away by some of the insights and has scouted about for a text that can, if read very quickly, lend some divine credibility to something he did not actually get from that text, but from the Christian or secular best-seller’s list. “I’m a pastor, not a theologian,” he says, in contrast to the classical evangelical notion, inherited from the Reformation, that a pastor is a scholar as well as a preacher.

Good communicators can get away with the lack of content by their witty, anecdotal style, but they are still unfaithful as ministers of the Word, even if they help people and keep folks coming back for more.

THE “CHRIST AND...” SYNDROME

In Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, the devil’s strategy is not to remove Christ altogether from the scene, but to propagate a “Christ And...” religion:

What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of “Christianity And.” You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychic Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian coloring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing (from Letter XXV).

Today, we see this in terms of Christ and America; Christ and Self-Esteem; Christ and Prosperity; Christ and the Republican or Democratic Party; Christ and End-Time Predictions; Christ and Healing; Christ and Marketing and Church Growth; Christ and Traditional Values, and on we could go, until Christ Himself becomes little more than an appendage to a religion that can, after all, get on quite well without Him. That is not, of course, to say that the evangelical enterprise could do this without some difficulty. After all, every movement needs a mascot. We say we are Christ-centered, but what was the sermon about last Sunday?

In fact, it is not even enough to preach the centrality of Christ. It is particularly Christ as He is our sacrifice for sin and guarantor of new life because of His resurrection that the Bible makes central in its revelation. After a tragic car accident, Fr. James Feehan, a seasoned Roman Catholic priest in New Zealand, realized afresh the significance of Paul's command to preach Christ and Him crucified:

If the pulpit is not committed to this utter centrality of the Cross, then our preaching, however brilliant, is doomed to sterility and failure. We preach the Christ of the Mount; we preach the Christ of the healing ministry; we preach the Christ of the sublime example; we preach the Christ of the Social Gospel; we preach the Christ of the Resurrection but rarely, if ever, do we preach the Christ of the Cross. We have evaded the very heart of the Christian message. In our preaching we tend to decry the human predicament, the turmoil of our lives, the evil in the world, and we wonder if there is a way out. The Way Out is staring us in the

face. It is the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross.

In other words, to guard the centrality of Christ in our preaching, it is necessary to guard the centrality of Christ's ministry as prophet, priest, and king. Otherwise, we will even use "Christ" as a means of preaching something other than Christ. We will insist that we are preaching Christ even though we are really only using His name in vain as a buttress for some fashionable tangent we happen to be on this week.

What, then, is the proper method for reading, preaching, and interpreting God's Word? Many resist the idea that there is a proper method at all, dismissing it as naive. The content is normative and unchanging, they say, but the method is relative and depends on what works best for each pastor. This decision is often treated as a matter of style, like whether one wears robes or has the choir in the front or the back of the church. But not only does the Bible give us the content of what we are to believe; it gives us a method for properly determining that message. ♦



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MORE

TO OUR LIVES THAN

“NOW.”

IF THERE IS NOT, THEN EVEN
THE NOW IS MEANINGLESS.

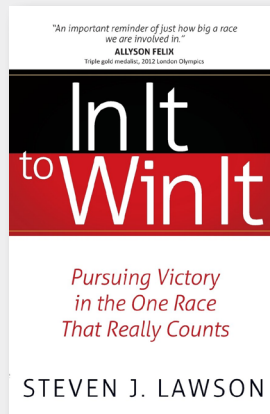
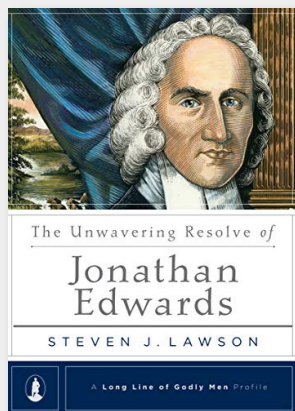
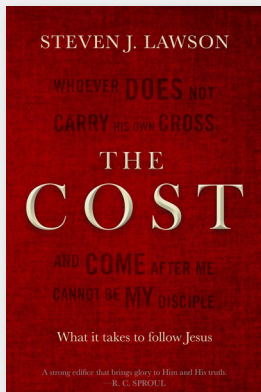
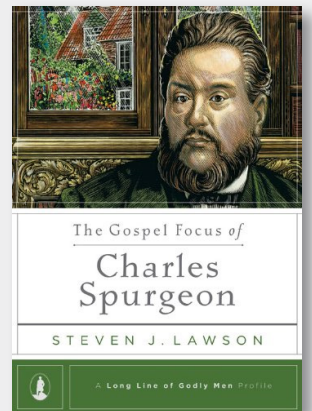
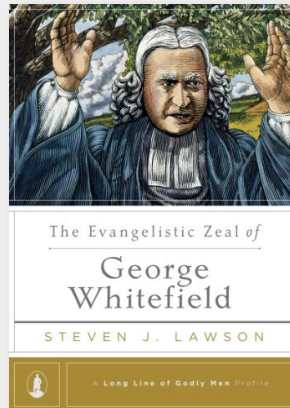
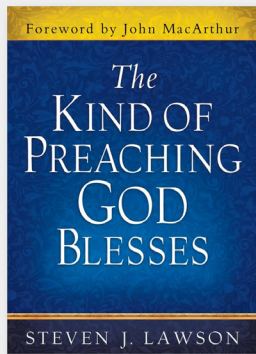
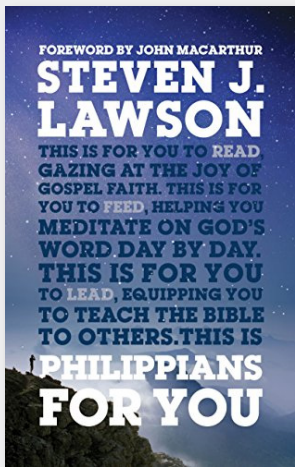
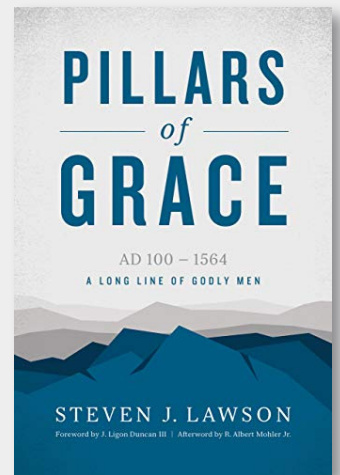
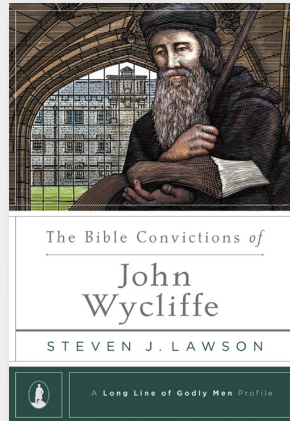
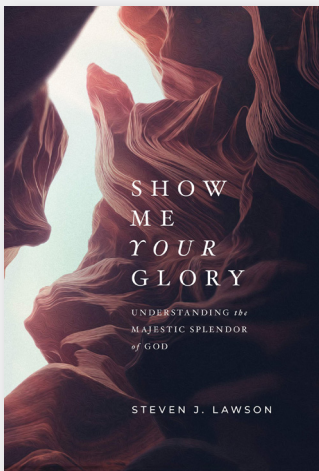
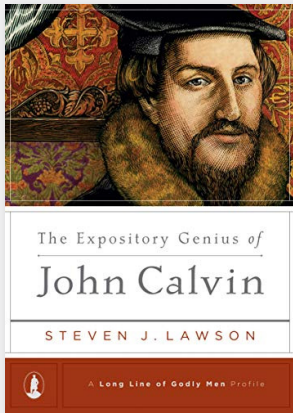
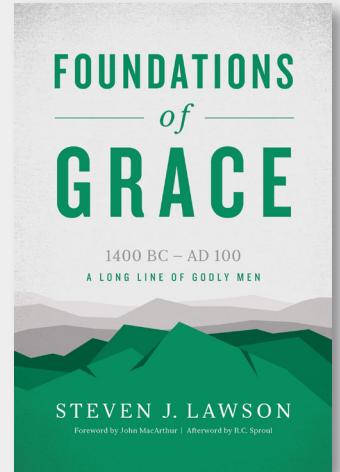
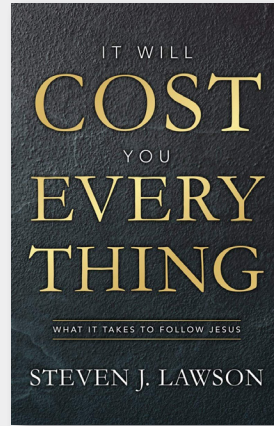
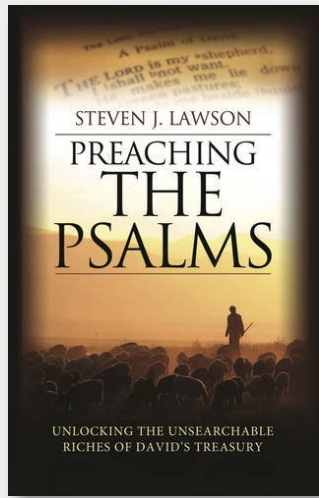
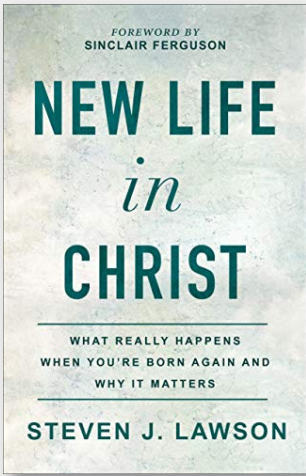
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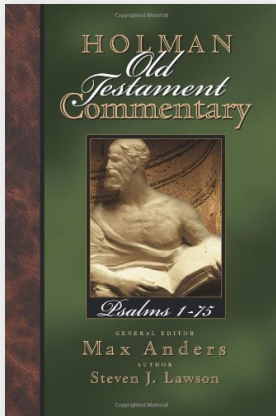
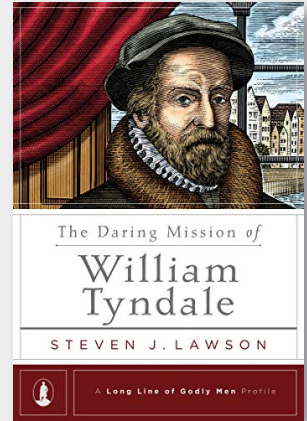
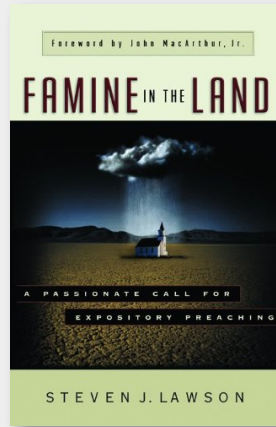
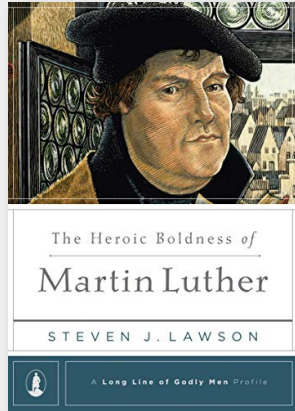
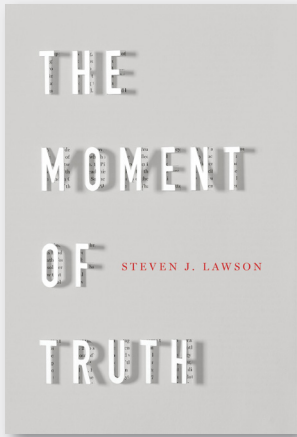
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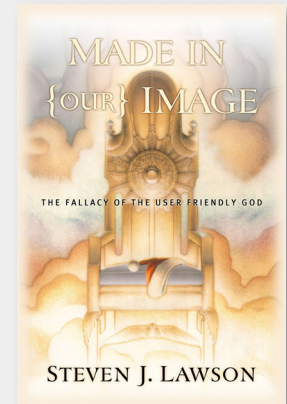
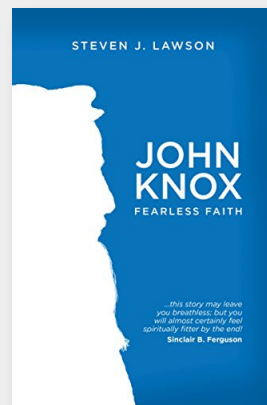
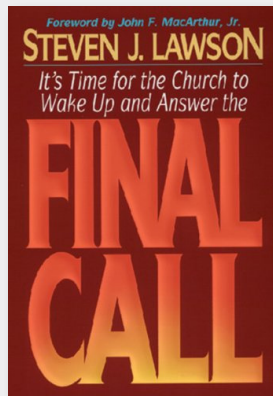
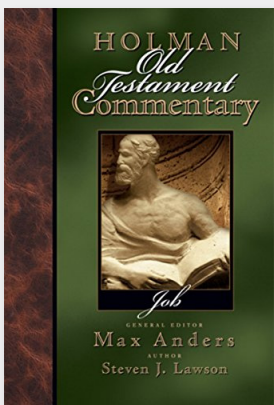
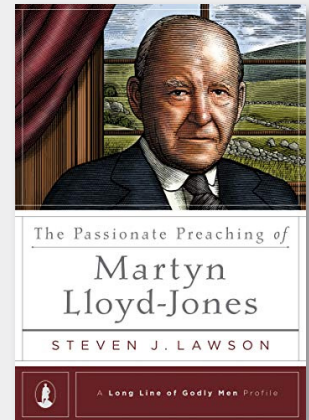
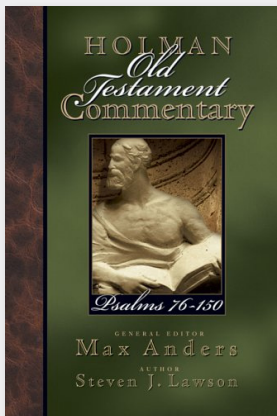
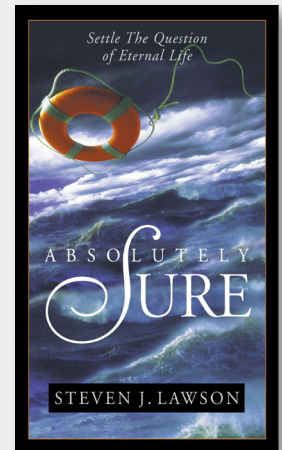


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WHY CAN'T THEY SEE THIS?

—
TOM NETTLES

“Why do my Christian friends have such an aversion to the doctrines of grace?”

“In addition to that, how can I keep open the channels of communication with them while making progress in helping them understand?”

This article focuses on a few principles to bear in mind in the pursuit of these relationships.

DIFFICULTIES AND PRIORITIES

Many have learned firsthand that the doctrines of grace have a jolting effect when one who has been able to ignore them all his life first feels the impact of the encounter. If it were not true in our own experience, we have observed the perplexity, and sometimes outrage, of someone else's struggle.

Such reactions, which highlight the revolutionary tendencies of these doctrines, should let us know that these

truths are not toys used only to relieve momentary boredom and to be put back into a box when one is tired of playing. Fragile! Handle with care: the opportunity is like cutting and setting a precious stone, not like throwing husks and scraps to pigs. But the delicate nature of the task doesn't diminish the strength necessary for steadiness and perseverance in the job, and it increases the need for sharpness in the tools. This spiritual odyssey calls for rigorous preparation and a readiness for some painful personal growth. Firmness and sharpness of personal conviction, compassion and kindness toward the other person, and patience toward a resistant attitude are necessary.

Furthermore, we should not approach this as if it were the top priority of spiritual life. In the hierarchy of importance, nothing can replace the value of truth in one's own life: that God should be glorified through the increase of repentance, growth of faith, and increasing conformity to

Christ in my life must not be retarded or eclipsed by a misplaced zeal for any other thing. Jesus' instruction as to how we should value our own soul (Mark 8:35) and Paul's zeal for "this one thing" (Phil 8:13, 14) set the standard here.

Working for the salvation of others is another priority. There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents (see Luke 15:7). Paul was willing to become all things in order to win some (see 1 Cor 9:22). Most notably, our Lord's infinite condescension to seek and save the lost (see Luke 19:10) gives an urgency to the evangelistic task more compelling than the development of a consistent and systematic approach to Christian truth.

Not to be minimized in importance, however, is this particular adventure that is akin to the joy that the apostle John expressed in knowing that his children walked in truth (3 John 3, 4). Only rarely does something compare with the spiritual delight of seeing a friend, fellow Christian, or fellow minister embrace and enjoy this truth. Though less immediate in its importance, this task is not disjointed from the others, but supports, informs, and purifies them. What could be more revolutionary to a person's sense of worship, gratitude, and adoration of the greatness, kindness, and worthiness of God than an experiential knowledge of the true dimensions of the grace of God?

PRINCIPLES TO ENCOURAGE PATIENCE

The reality and power of this, however, often dawns slowly and after a night of tumultuous resistance. The specific truths entailed deal with the most fundamental issues of the relationship between God and man. What is at stake, therefore, on the one hand, is our thinking about God: the nature of His attributes, decrees, and providential interaction with history. On the other hand, they lay bare before our own eyes our sense of pride, self-sufficiency, fair play, and independence. Nothing in our society or natures prepares us for such things as utter dependence, reception of gifts (in this case of infinite worth) for which we have absolutely no merit, the necessity for continual acknowledgment of debt, and the admission that one's glory can consist only in a self-deprecating gratitude (see Phil 3:1–11 and Gal 6:1–3, 14–15). For this reason, it is good to be reminded of the following principles that may profitably guide our approach to understanding and teaching the doctrines of grace.

The Principle of Growth

Sometimes resistance to this may come because one is still unregenerate. It would, however, be both unbiblical and uncharitable to conclude this about everyone who fails to approve immediately the doctrines of grace (though, to


my mind, they are so clear and so God-glorifying that I am both pained and baffled when these truths are either ignored or treated with malice). Many times the absolute dimensions of our depravity; the harmony of justice, holiness, and compassion with the unfettered rights of a sovereign God; and the purely gratuitous nature of salvation are so overwhelming that, though experienced immediately in the moment of regeneration and justification, they can only gradually take shape in our mental apprehension of how God has acted savingly toward us.

Firmness of teaching coupled with great longsuffering is a necessary combination in this ministry of doctrinal reformation. Paul recognizes this precise idea in his correspondence with the Ephesians. After having given a clear and moving affirmation of the glory of God in His sovereign bestowal of salvation (1:3–14), he prays that they might know the hope to which God had called them, the riches of God's inheritance in the saints, and omnipotent display of effectual power in bringing about their saving belief (1:17–23). Paul knew they did not grasp all he had told them; but he told them anyway, prayed for them, and continued with instruction as to the centrality of these teachings to an understanding of salvation (2:1–10).

He also recognizes that the Philippians must grow in their grasp of the completely gratuitous nature of justifying righteousness and the relation of this to one's energetic efforts toward sanctification. In Philippians 3:15 he expresses confidence that God will give them advancement in that understanding; until then, they must live in harmony with the truth that they do understand.

In giving instruction to the Corinthians, Paul indicated that such foundational teachings as the unity and exclusiveness of the triune God as creator and sustainer were not fully operative in the actions of some for whom Christ had died (1 Cor 8:4–7, 11). Their lack of grasping this made them weak and less able to cope with the moral challenges and ambiguities of a pagan culture. Paul does not call a moratorium on teaching the doctrine of God and its implications for living in God's world. On the contrary, Paul uses them evangelistically in Acts 17 and in refutation of heresy in 1 Timothy 4:1–5. He even urges Timothy to point these truths out, and in doing, so he will be a good minister of Christ (v. 6). Nevertheless, those who were fully aware of these truths were not to use them as a bludgeon on the weaker brother. Paul was willing to sacrifice even his apostolic freedoms in order to treat the Corinthians lovingly while more firmly establishing them in the truth.

Prayer, patience, and self-sacrifice, therefore, are necessarily fundamental in discussion of these truths. I have seen people, even in the intensified study of a seminary



The specific truths entailed deal with the most fundamental issues of the relationship between God and man.

atmosphere, endure months and sometimes years of resistance before grasping with joy the truth that from first to last, “Salvation is of the Lord” (cf. Ps 3:8; Rev 7:10).

The Principle of Common Ground

An important step in maintaining an open relationship in which these biblical truths can be discussed is to establish common ground. Neither party of the discussion need have the impression that a conflict is being waged between two entirely contrary views of Christianity. One should remind himself as well as his partner in the discussion of the many things on which there is agreement.

The greatness of these should not be underestimated. All of them are the results of God’s revelation of Himself and are distinctive of evangelical Christianity.

For instance, both believe that there is one God; He has revealed Himself in all of creation and in our conscience but particularly and most clearly in His Word, the Bible; this God is a Trinitarian being existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All human beings are children of Adam and Eve; God has a right to judge, His judgment is exhaustively just, and His final judgment establishes eternal abiding places for all moral creatures.

In addition, our obligations to God are commensurate with His worthiness; all His creatures, whether they have special revelation and grace or not, continue to be responsible for their worship of this triune God; our failure to meet those worthy obligations places us in a debt proportionate

to the worthiness of the person to whom we are obliged; in the fall of Adam and Eve we all fell and are constituted as sinful by nature, and we immediately become sin by choice.

Moreover, salvation involves the re-establishing of a relationship of righteousness and holiness before God; our present condition of condemnation is just and therefore God has no other obligation to the re-establishment of the relationship, completely unmerited on our part and unobligated God’s part; the core of this salvation is the delivering over of the Lord to death in which He voluntarily suffered the just wrath of the Father for our sin; it is only in this death that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to bring us to a saving knowledge of Christ in His saving work; this saving knowledge of Christ consists of repentance of sin and faith in Christ; who come to Him in this way will be received and not turned away; Christ will come again to judge all those living and all those who died, will establish the new heaven and new earth, and so shall we ever be with the Lord continually worshipping the triune God in all His Glory (Rev 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 21).

It would be very unlikely for one to have any serious disagreement with an evangelical friend on the truth of the above statements. How much common ground is shared and what wonderful common affirmations we can make because of the clarity and beauty and graciousness of God’s revelation to us! It would be good to make much of these in order to see that you and those you are speaking with

are not at odds in your thinking about a large number of foundational truths.

PRINCIPLES FOR PROCEEDING

A discussion whose goal is reformation, however, cannot indefinitely remain at the level of the patient tolerance of immaturity the affirmation of common ground. Progress must be made. Guiding principles for this stage include the following.

The Principle of Progressive Consistency


One, foundational truths always have other truths that are built on them and are consistent with them. The nature of this consistency sometimes surprises us. Habakkuk 1:12–2:1 pictures a prophet startled and bewildered over what he felt was contradiction to his understanding of God.

Habakkuk knew quite well God's attributes of immutable holiness and justice. In fact, his perception of those attributes cause him great problems with what he observed in the history of God's people and what God revealed about His purposes. Can God use treacherous people and cruel events in His purposes and not be the author of sin and evil (v. 13)? This *apparently* arbitrary sovereignty did not fit the inferences Habakkuk drew from the attributes. The attributes were true, however, and though complex, God's active providence was not inconsistent with them. Habakkuk learned this, trembled at the power, wisdom, and justice of God, and received a deeper and more steadfast faith (3:16–19).

According to 1 John 2:20–28, every person born of the Spirit of God is very protective of the truth he knows about God. If something appears to him to be a lie, he will not accept it, because he “knows the truth” and no lie comes from the truth. Such was the reason for Habakkuk's incredulosity. When the doctrines of grace are dismembered from the larger body of Christian truth and made to appear as Frankensteinian monstrosities, it should not surprise us that they are rejected. They appear to be lies and at odds with indisputable Christian faith. Showing the integral relationship these members have to some of the more prominent parts of the body is the task of the “Reformationist.” Those slow to hear may be as surprised as Habakkuk, but hopefully they will also be just as strengthened in faith.

In the final analysis, all revelation is preparation for further revelation and consistent with previous revelation. The Bible is filled with this progressive revelation of truth on truth. All of us must realize, however, that the process of revealing truth on truth in an ever more beautiful, if complex, unified body ends a good bit short of exhausting all the knowledge of God (Eph 3:8, 19). Finally, we must be content that some truths that are revealed have implications that are yet mysterious and must remain so because God has not counted it wise to let us know.

Nevertheless, many things are cleared up for us by God's gracious revelation. The prophets gave revelation about the things of Christ that they did not quite understand (suffering and glory), but the fulfilling of the gospel in the



We must be content that some truths that are revealed have implications that are yet mysterious and must remain so because God has not counted it wise to let us know.

incarnation and salvific work of Christ made them clear (1 Peter 1:10–12). The Jews believed the Old Testament and taught it truly, but many were unable to make the advance into seeing Christ as the fulfillment of all previous revelation. They took away the key to knowledge by refusing to advance in their understanding (Luke 11:52). Jesus said that a scribe of the kingdom can receive the new revelation as giving the old its proper meaning (Matt 13:52).

Examples of the fulfillment of previous revelation by new, and explanation of old by new, would be endless. Jesus does it with the new birth in John 3 (He indicates that Nicodemus as a teacher of the Law should have understood these things); Paul knew that this was his specific calling as he tells the Ephesians, “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:4, 5 NIV). He fulfills his apostolic calling in describing the relationships between faith, works, law, and righteousness in Romans and Galatians and God’s calling of the Gentiles by grace in Ephesians and other places and in giving a host of other truths. Their explanations point out what was implied in the old all the time but only made clear and specific in the person and work of Christ. This is Peter’s point in 2 Peter 1:19 when he says, “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain and you will do well to pay attention to it as a light shining in a dark place.”

This principle is true in the doctrines of grace. They do not contradict the truths I mentioned above, but give to them their purest and most consistent expression. What could be more consistent with salvation by pure unmerited favor than *unconditional* election? That means His choosing of us is not premised upon anything meritorious in us. What could be more consistent with the reality of human depravity than the doctrine of effectual calling? Surely if we are dead in trespasses and sins and not seeking God, then He must raise us from death to life before we will hate, and thus repent of, our sin and before we will love, and thus place faith in, Christ. What could be more consistent with the love of God for His Son and the impeccable justice of God than the doctrine of definite atonement? If Christ’s death involved a true suffering of the just wrath of God for sins, will any portion of his suffering for sinners go unrewarded or unsatisfied (cf. Isaiah 53:4–6, 10–12; and Romans 8:31–39)? We could go on, but the point is easily established. While we speak this way, however, we are aware that these doctrines are not simply logical inferences drawn from prior truths (though they certainly are consistent with them as mentioned above) but are themselves

the result of biblical exegesis and involve receiving the full revelation of God in Scripture.

The Principle of Grace


A second principle is this: no element of the doctrines of grace is a hindrance to the salvation of any individual. Grace makes the way; it does not block the way.

Would grace be more gracious if it stopped short of the actual bestowal of infinite blessings? All of us are in a hopeless condition (Titus 3:3) and under condemnation (John 3:18–21). Neither grace nor any particular element of its manifestation is in any sense the ground of any person’s condemnation (John 3:16, 17). Unconditional election, effectual calling, definite (or if someone prefers, limited) atonement, and preserving grace are all gracious, purely unmerited, and explanatory of how God does finally save undeserving, resistant, justly condemned sinners.

Christ’s atonement will not hinder or place a barrier in the way of anyone who comes to Him: “[he] that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37 KJV). God’s calling of all sinners to repentance is not insincere but in dead earnest; His requirement of repentance and right to command it does not diminish one whit simply because we are so hardened that only omnipotent power will turn us (Eph 1:19, 20). To complain about this is to turn God’s grace into a debt He owes us. Because of this, no one can suppose that the doctrines of grace prohibit him from coming to Christ if he desires to do so or excuse him from seeking to know God through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The manner of the operations of grace is revealed in order that we might know to whom we are to be grateful for salvation and that we might learn to lament ever more deeply such sinfulness that would still condemn us were it not for grace. The objects of the operations of grace remain hidden, except evidentially from genuine demonstrations of repentance, faith, and perseverance, so that all may realize that Christ’s urging to “strive to enter in at the strait gate” applies equally to all (Luke 13:22–24 KJV).

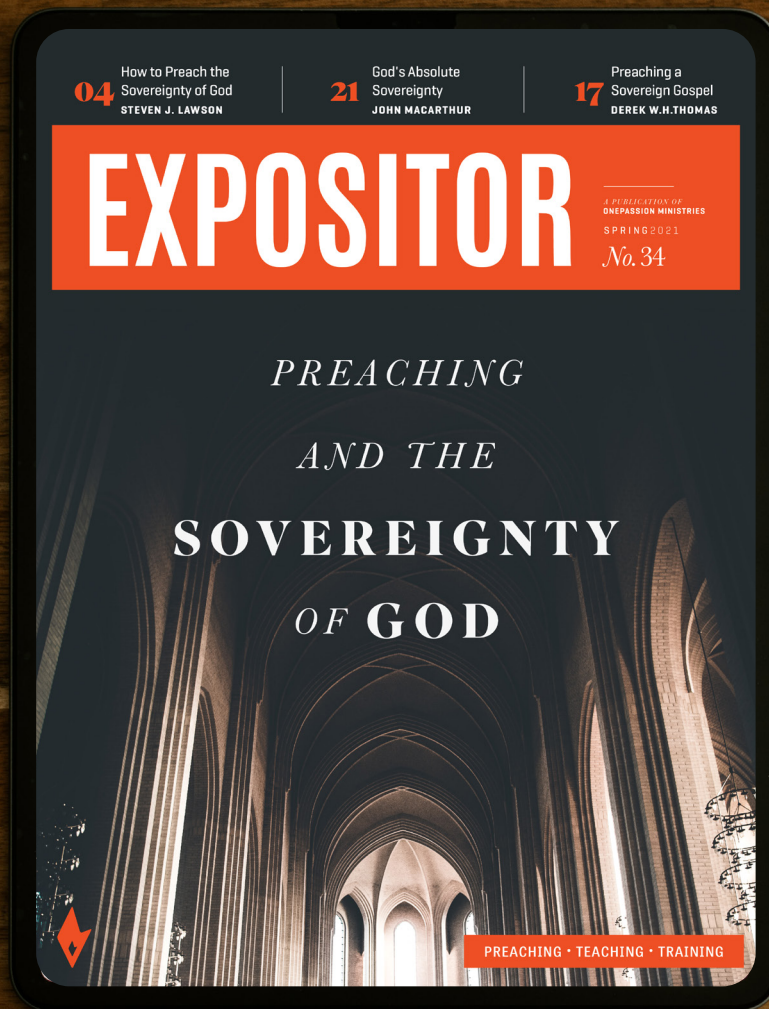
CONCLUSION

The one who would teach for reformation must be patient, loving, and gentle. He must be not only mentally apt but also spiritually prepared in his heart both for the kinds of objections that come and the length of the journey. In addition to avoiding a compromise of the truth, he must work at holding it in the beauty of holiness. Also, he should continually relate distinguishing grace to the large foundation of evangelical agreement. Give no reason for any to doubt that you only want to honor the Lord Jesus in His matchless and gracious condescension for sinners. 



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