



# Pastoral Priorities

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Contents

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[Inside Cover]

## Pastoral Priorities

*Thomas K. Ascol*

## Pastoral Purity

*Conrad Mbewe*

## News

## An Open Letter to Reformed Baptist Pastors & Churches

*Ted Christman*

## Book Reviews

- ***Authority*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984; originally published in London by Inter-Varsity Press, 1958), pb. 94 pp., \$5.99 *Ray Van Neste***
- ***A Pastor's Sketches, Conversations with Anxious Souls Concerning the Way of Salvation*, Ichabod Spencer (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Books, 2001; reprint edition) pb., 285 pp., \$12.95 *Jeff Robinson***
- ***Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry*, by Arturo G. Azurdia III (Christian Focus Publications, 1998), pb, 192 pp. æ9.99/\$15.99. *Ray Van Neste***

- **Revelation**, by **Simon J. Kistemaker**. **William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker**, editors. *The New Testament Commentary, Vol. 15* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001. X, 635 pp. \$39.99. *Roger Nicole*
- **Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915**, by **Terry A. Chrisope**, Geanies House, Fern, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000, 240 pp. *William G. Moore*

## Medieval Mistakes

*Sinclair Ferguson*

## Letters

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**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

# The Founders Journal

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**Contributors:**

**Dr. Thomas K. Ascol** is Pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.

**Ted Christman** is Pastor of the Heritage Baptist Church in Owensboro, Kentucky.

**Dr. Sinclair Ferguson** is Senior Minister of St. George's Tron Church in Glasgow.

**Conrad Mbewe** is Pastor of Kabawata Baptist Church in Zambia.

**Book Reviewers:**

**William G. Moore** is a PhD student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Roger Nicole** is visiting professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Jeff Robinson** is a PhD student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Ray Van Neste** is instructor of Christian Studies and director, R. C. Ryan Center for Biblical Studies at Union University, Union, Tennessee.

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*Editor:*

Thomas K. Ascol, PhD

*Associate Editor:*

Ernest C. Reisinger

*Contributing Editors:*

Bill Ascol, MDiv

Timothy George, ThD

Fred A. Malone, PhD

Joe Nesom, PhD

Tom Nettles, PhD

Phil Newton, DMin

Roger Nicole, ThD, PhD, DD

Don Whitney, DMin

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*Graphic Design Editor:*

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*Webmaster:*

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Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

# Pastoral Priorities

*Tom Ascol*

One of the greatest challenges I face in my life as a pastor is maintaining a proper balance in my priorities. Every pastor has several roles which he must fulfill in order to remain faithful to his calling. He must be a student of God's Word. He must be a man of prayer. He must give leadership to the church. He must work hard to preach and teach the Word so that the people under his care are continually being formed by it into the image of Christ. He must do the work of an evangelist and he must give himself to personal work with individual members. All of this and more goes with the territory of serving Christ as an undershepherd of souls.

But every pastor is more than a pastor. He is first and foremost a disciple. Typically he also is a husband. And he will most likely be a father. In addition to this he may take on other ministry-related duties. How are all of these important roles to be fulfilled without sacrificing the best on the altar of the good? It is a daunting challenge under the very best of circumstances.

A question which I often ask people I counsel is this: "What, in order of priority, has God called you to be?" It is a clarifying question because it forces an evaluation of life on the basis of what is most important. From time-to-time I put that question to myself and find that it helps me fight the battle for balance in my life.

## A Christian

What has God called me to be? First, He calls me to be a sincere, devoted follower of Jesus Christ. This is so basic that it is easy to take for granted and to forget about it. One great danger of the ministry is professionalism. A pastor can become very adept at doing his job. Like any other vocation, certain skills can be developed and polished in the gospel ministry. A pastor can become so proficient in his public ministry that others will regard him as very successful.

But where "professionalism" as a mentality takes over a pastor's outlook, his heart will inevitably begin to be neglected. And the heart is the primary tool of every pastor. If you are not loving God with all of your heart because you have neglected the basic responsibilities of discipleship, it does not matter how professionally "successful" you become. In reality, it is a sham.

Spurgeon tells of a pastor who "preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said that he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again."<sup>[1]</sup> Such compartmentalization of life may be acceptable in other professions but it is hardly agreeable with vital Christianity and much less with faithful pastoral ministry.

Many good men have been tripped up at this basic level. So guard your heart. Go to God's Word first and foremost as a believer. A pastor needs the very same things which he tells others that they need. He should follow the wisdom of Robert Murray M'Cheyne who noted, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."<sup>[2]</sup>

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## **A Husband**

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It is an awesome responsibility to be a husband. Jesus Christ in his relationship to the church is to be our model. Being the head of a household is a great challenge. A godly wife both needs and desires godly leadership from her husband. The call to be a godly husband includes providing such leadership. Christ calls a man to fight against the opposite and equally deadly errors of self-protecting passivity and self-serving authoritarianism in the way that he relates to his wife.

The pastor's wife may have the most difficult role in the whole church. She sees all of her husband's blemishes and shortcomings and yet must receive instruction in God's Word from him week by week. She lives in a fishbowl. Unrealistic expectations from the congregation can often add great stress to her life. Thoughtless comments, which may or may not be designed to hurt, can wound her deeply. If, in addition to these and other pressures, she feels that her own husband is neglecting her, the pressure can become too great to bear. As a husband, it is my responsibility and privilege to reassure my wife that she is more important to me than any other human relationship or responsibility which I have. I am called to nurture and cherish her, to help her fulfill her own calling as a woman of God.

Donna needs to know that she is more important to me than my ministry as a pastor. When this message is clearly and regularly communicated then those inevitable seasons of unusually high demands from the church are more easily weathered.

## **A Father**

The third thing which God has made me is a father. Donna and I have six children, so I get a lot of practice at fatherhood. If pastors' wives have been singled out for special concern, pastors' kids have become proverbially notorious. Too often they are sacrificed for "the sake of the ministry." I remember sitting in my study as a young pastor listening to a retired pastor whose successful ministry was widely acclaimed. He spoke of many of the wonderful things he had experienced in the churches he had served. Then he added, "But I paid a high price for my success. My children did not get what they should have from their father and today have turned away from the Lord and the church."

As he wept I pondered. At that time my only child was barely a toddler. The draw of never-ending needs and opportunities to minister was tempting me to neglect my family for the sake of "my ministry." But, God reminded me that, in terms of priority, He calls me to be a father before He calls me to be a pastor. My children need to know that, next to their mother, they are the most important people in my life. My congregation also needs to know this.

A pastor can easily though unintentionally neglect his children out of a misguided notion that he must

always be available to minister to other people. Under the best of circumstances there will be some disruptions in a pastor's home life. He is on call 24 hours a day. If a death or tragic accident involving one of the members occurs just before a pastor heads out the door to take his son fishing, his plans must necessarily change. Such demands are to be expected.

Because of this two temptations face every pastor who is a father. The first is to simply expect his child to understand his change of plans the same way that he does. A pastor knows that it is sometimes necessary to interrupt plans in order to minister the gospel of God's grace to hurting people. But, depending on his age, all his son knows is that he did not get to go fishing because somebody else needed and received his dad's time and attention. When these occasions arise, a father needs to talk to his son, sympathize with him and seek to make it up to him in a reasonable and intentional way.

The other temptation is to become so overwhelmed with guilt because he had to change his plans that the pastor allows his child to manipulate him into actions or decisions which he would not otherwise intentionally pursue. Parenting by guilt has become all-too-common in our culture, and pastors are unfortunately not immune to it. Pastors should intentionally carve out time in their schedules for their children and then guard it scrupulously. When plans affecting our children have to be changed because of ministry emergencies, we must be diligent in making it up to them.

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The fourth thing which God has made me is a pastor. This is my vocational calling. This is what occupies the bulk of my time. I am constantly amazed that God has given me the privilege to serve Him in this way. It is the highest vocational calling in the world. My responsibilities as a pastor take precedence over any recreational activities or avocations. All that is involved in shepherding the flock of God, which the Bible spells out in a fairly comprehensive way, comprises my duty. In this, my most important tasks are to labor faithfully in the ministry of the Word and in prayer. Again, these must not be carried out simply on a "professional" level. Rather, they must be taken up in the midst of my own pursuit of holiness.

There is an inevitable loneliness that goes with being a pastor. Much of the work which must be done can only be done when a man is alone with His God. Without this intimate time with God, time spent with people will not be of much value. There are a thousand "aids" available to pastors today to enable them to mskirt the hard work of study and prayer. "Powerful" sermons and "guaranteed" programs are regularly marketed to pastors with shameless bravado. A man with a little ingenuity, less integrity and ample finances can keep himself well-supplied with a constant stream of such resources. But he denies his calling by living off of the work of others rather than doing the work of the ministry himself.

## **A Helper**

Beyond these four callings in my life, I also am involved in helping with other worthwhile endeavors. My work with Founders Ministries (editing the *Founders Journal*, publishing, etc.) and my involvement in my local pastors' conference and association are all important. But in terms of priorities all of these rank below the four things which I have mentioned above. By keeping this in mind I can save myself much heartache and confusion.

## Maintaining Balance

How do these priorities work? Well, those who know me best can easily testify that I do not always practice what I have written here. Though my desire and intention is never to deviate, I have repeatedly had to make mid-course corrections through the years. But that is the value of having clearly defined priorities. They provide a reliable map to make such adjustments.

Each priority builds on the ones that precede it. I want to be faithful in my work with Founders Ministries. But I cannot be--no matter how much good might be accomplished through my efforts--if I do that work at the expense of my pastoral responsibilities to Grace Baptist Church. Furthermore, I can be a faithful pastor without being involved in other ministries. But I cannot be a faithful pastor if I neglect the higher priorities of my wife and/or children. In fact, according to 1 Timothy 3:4-5, I am disqualified if such neglect characterizes my life. Nor can I be a faithful father if I fail my wife. On the contrary, one of the best things I can do for my children is to love their mother very well. And I cannot be a faithful husband if I neglect my relationship with Christ.

All of the priorities in my life can function with appropriate importance as long as I keep them in their proper place. But when a lower priority leaps above a higher, then I am setting myself up for a fall. It is spiritually disastrous to put my wife above my Lord, or my children above my wife, or my pastoral ministries above any of those three. It is no slight to the church that I serve that their place in my priorities comes after my devotion to Christ and family. On the contrary, the church gets more of what they need from me when I minister out of a conscious commitment to these priorities.

By remembering the priorities of these callings in my life, I am better able to establish and maintain balance in my obligations. Perhaps the most useful discipline to facilitate this balance is learning to say no. Spurgeon said that for a minister, learning to say no is of far greater value than learning Latin! He was right. No matter how much a pastor tries to do there will always be more to be done. Some good things which scream out for his attention should be left undone so that he can do what is better and best. When he has to make those hard choices, he should do so on the basis of the priority of his callings. Then he can take heart in knowing that he has acted in faith based on the claims which God has made on his life.

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*Founders Journal* • Winter 2002 • pp. 1-4, 9

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**Founders  
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Ministries**  
Home Page

# Pastoral Purity

*Conrad Mbewe*

It is a well-known fact that the future of anyone's preaching and pastoral ministry depends on how he himself develops in the years ahead. This explains the apostle Paul's advice to Timothy to "watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). This was to be a life-long watching. It was to be a watching that ensures proper rather than warped growth and development. It was a watching that ensured a development that is full-orbed, i.e. encompassing his spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual and domestic life. A preacher is not a disembodied spirit. Once he is affected, say, in the physical faculties his being even the spiritual will be affected as well. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every preacher to ensure that his whole redeemed humanity undergoes a positive life-long development.

However, one of the chief enemies against this full-orbed development is that of inordinate affections--a defiled heart. If anyone is going to exercise a growing and effective pastoral ministry he must deal with the issue of his own sanctification regularly. He must pursue pastoral purity in an ever-growing measure. That is why this subject is so vital.

We shall address it by drawing our attention to the charge given to Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:13-16. In it the apostle Paul says to Timothy, "In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, that you keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time--God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen."

Our first task is to ascertain what command Timothy is being charged to keep "without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." One of the very first rules in biblical interpretation should be sufficient to help us here; namely, that of context. Paul's concern in the context of our text is that Timothy must, as a man of God, be conspicuously different from others by a contented godliness (6:3-8). While others are pursuing monetary gain as an end in itself (6:9-10), Timothy should single-heartedly pursue godliness (6:11-12). Paul makes it clear that this is not some advise for Timothy to take or leave, but a command that he should keep to the very end. It is part of his duty as "a man of God." So the charge is for Timothy to single-heartedly pursue godliness.

## The Need for this Holiness

Although New Testament pastors are not priests as exclusively as those in the Old Testament were, their role in the church gives them similar privileged responsibilities. For instance, Old Testament priests had charge over the Temple to ensure that biblical standards were upheld in divine worship. That was why in the book of Malachi God puts the blame for the declining spirituality in worship squarely on the shoulders of the priests. This was also the responsibility of New Testament pastors, hence the very reason why 1 Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy. Paul said, "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am

writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). It is the responsibility of pastors to ensure that worship is conducted in a God-honoring manner.

Why am I drawing this parallel? It is because just as in the Old Testament the priest was called to holiness, so also is it the case with the New Testament pastor. In the Old Testament, the priest wore a sacred diadem made out of pure gold on which were engraved an inscription with the words "HOLY TO THE LORD" (see Exodus 39:30). Also God was so concerned about this that he did not allow those Levites who had backslidden into idol worship to return to serve him as they used to before they served idols. In Ezekiel 44:10-16 he said, "The Levites who went far from me when Israel went astray and who wandered from me after their idols must bear the consequences of their sin. They may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them. But because they served them in the presence of their idols and made the house of Israel fall into sin, therefore I have sworn with uplifted hand that they must bear the consequences of their sin, declares the Sovereign LORD. They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices. Yet I will put them in charge of the duties of the temple and all the work that is to be done in it. But the priests, who are Levites and descendants of Zadok and who faithfully carried out the duties of my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me; they are to stand before me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares the Sovereign LORD. They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service." The priest was also called to wholeness, symbolized by his exclusion from the altar if he had any physical impairment (Leviticus 21:17). All this was necessary because the priest more than anyone else was invited into the closest possible contact with Israel's God.

Surely if God was as jealous about this in the days when worship was more of symbols than substance, he must be even more jealous about this today. Therefore, pastors must be men of very high personal godliness. In 1 Timothy 4:7, Paul tells Timothy to train himself to be godly. Similarly, in 2 Timothy 2:20-22, he tells him that "in a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." Anyone who reads this will soon appreciate that the office of pastor is nothing less than a vocation to holiness. This is not just for the sake of acceptance before God but also because the nature of the pastoral ministry is such that your spiritual power is linked with your walk with God. Athanasius said it well: "You cannot put straight in others what is warped in yourself." To speak with a note of urgency and unction that cannot be imitated demands an ongoing single-eyed culture of the inner life.

## **The Need to Guard the Heart**

The first responsibility in this single-eyed pursuit of godliness is the guarding of the heart. The wise man spoke well when he said, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). The minister's heart is the heart of his ministry. Be sure of this: Out of the abundance of the heart

the mouth speaks. Keeping the eye and heart and spirit and conscience pure is the future of a man's ministry. So, beware of sins of the heart--pride, envy, jealousy, lust, greed, anger, and sloth. No wonder that history has dubbed them "the seven deadly sins"! Long before a person makes visible shipwreck of his life and ministry, his heart has been allowed to be a citadel of sin. I say again, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

This is the greatest battle you will ever wage in your life and ministry. We may all keep away from physical adultery and actual theft. But how many people have reduced their ministries into ego-centric showrooms that have absolutely nothing to do with the glory of God? How many men's once robust ministries have shriveled because they were envious of other men's ministries? How many good men have been driven by jealousy into riding a hobbyhorse of what the Chinese call "killing a fly on the forehead of a friend using a hatchet"? What about that wandering eye that fails to see a member of the opposite sex without thinking of the bedroom? How many men are presently laboring outside God's will, all because of seeking a more lucrative ministry? The list is endless. Brethren, these are the sins that kill the spirituality and power of our ministries long before any overt sins are visible to our people. There is no doubt that to keep your ministry alive and kicking year after year, you must train yourself to be godly.

## **Attaining and Maintaining Devotion**

An important question needs to be asked. How does one pursue this single-eyed devotion? Remember that true devotion never grows out of mere resolve. There must be action as well. Now, whereas the public means of grace (such as church services) will do a lot for others, those of us who are pastors have to rely a lot more on the private means of grace. This is because we are so often pre-occupied with the details of our church services that we lose out on the benefit of the injunction: "Be still and know that I am God." Therefore, for us the single-hearted devotion will have to be largely the fruit of a soul that retires for Bible reading, prayer, meditation, and other private means of grace. We often rationalize our absence from these soul-cleansing exercises by using duty as an excuse. And, granted, sometimes it will be inevitably so. But when this begins to go on week after week, then just know that you are on the decline and are killing the inner life of your ministry. God never intended it to be so. If your place in the closet has been vacant for some time, then get back as soon as you can to your devotional exercises! It is in the place of secret prayer that the truths of the man of God come clothed in the fiber of his being. It is there that the matters of grace are kept fresh. You abandon the secret place to your own undoing.

## **The Enemies of the Devotion**

Let us be honest here. The reason why so many of us fail to maintain disciplined private exercises for the soul is not because we do not know these things, but because we fail to persevere in them. Anyone can run the hundred meters sprint because it is short. All you need is to put in your all and before you know it you have reached the finishing line. However, the marathon race is a different kettle of fish. It demands perseverance because it is a long haul. That is where the difficulty comes in with the work of ministry. Many start well but fail along the way because of "the long haul." That was Paul's concern for Timothy. He wanted him to persist, to continue, to abide in Christian faith and conduct. And so he says to him, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ"

(6:12-14). It is not enough to throw a few good punches at the beginning of the fight, you must last the entire bout. The charge must be kept without spot or blame "until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, until the final whistle! The tendency in ministry is to grow weary and tired of this single-hearted devotion and standards of personal godliness along the way. By and by you begin to play where angels fear to tread. You merely maintain the outward form of your ministry, but inwardly you have long lost the power and passion that you once had. Brethren, that ought not to be!

Apart from the fatigue caused by the fight with the flesh (i.e. the fallen nature that still resides within us), the other source of fatigue is the bad influence of those who we look up to in the Lord's work. Therefore, if you are to pursue a single-eyed devotion to God in ministry you must beware of the company you keep in your ministerial life. The apostle Paul's warning applies both to the laity as well as to those in church leadership, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character' (1 Corinthians 15:33). The warning of Paul to Timothy in this regard is vital. He says to him, "But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God--having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). There are men out there in the ministry who answer to this description. Whenever you are with them you come away feeling soiled in the soul because of their talk and attitudes. They make you feel as if you take your Christianity and ministerial functions too seriously and ought to let down your guards a little bit. From such people, flee. Do so before their cancerous effect upon you spreads too far in your soul!

## Conclusion

Too many ministries have been short-circuited because not enough emphasis was placed on this duty in the personal realm. Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. The apostle Paul certainly saw the seriousness of this by making it a charge "in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus ..." To fail here is to fail everywhere. Let each one of us use all the means available to keep the charge. May God give us grace to fight the good fight of the faith victoriously at this front to our dying day. Amen!



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

## News

### Conservative Baptist Spurgeon Fellowship

In early October, a number of pastors gathered to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Conservative Baptist Spurgeon Fellowship. The purpose of the Fellowship is to promote church renewal through sound doctrine, expository preaching, fervent prayer, and godliness which arises from Scriptural fidelity (not only inerrancy, but sufficiency). In its first year the Fellowship has expanded beyond the Northeast Region as pastors from different States have learned of the Fellowship or have participated in one of the theological seminars presented by some of the members. For further information contact: Rev. Ronald Bridge (chairman) at [rwbatrbc@juno.com](mailto:rwbatrbc@juno.com) or Rev. James Harrison (secretary) at [rmc@rcn.com](mailto:rmc@rcn.com) or visit the website at [www.klink.net/~rcklueg/spurgeon/](http://www.klink.net/~rcklueg/spurgeon/)

### Announcing a New Web Site

Jim Elliff (Christian Communicators Worldwide) has launched a new web site that is totally dedicated to gospel content. You may find it at [www.WayToGod.org](http://www.WayToGod.org). On the site are clear evangelistic articles, questions and answers, audio, and short stories that convey the gospel. He will soon add an evangelistic Bible study and real life stories of conversion. A free item is offered each month. Because the site is pure gospel, Jim would like to invite churches and organizations to use the site as an evangelistic link to their homepages. You may copy and paste the WayToGod button by going to Jim's teaching site at [www.CCWonline.org](http://www.CCWonline.org). If you don't know how to put that button on your site, read simple instructions under "webmaster helps" on the teaching site.

### New Founders-Friendly Church Started in Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Believers Fellowship Church  
YWCA Building  
1660 Oak Ridge Turnpike  
Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830

Pastor: Dr. Douglas Pruiett  
Times: Sunday 10:30 AM and Wed 7:00 PM  
Telephone: (865) 717-9491  
Email: [believersfellowship@earthlink.net](mailto:believersfellowship@earthlink.net)  
Web Site: <http://home.sprintmail.com/~pruiett/BFChurch/>

### Curtis Vaughan's Study Guide Commentary Series

Founders Press has been granted the rights to re-publish Dr. Vaughan's *Study Guide Commentary* series on selected New Testament books. The first volume to be published will be *Ephesians*, scheduled to be off the press in late April.

## Annual Founder Fellowship Breakfast

Founders Ministries will once again host a Founders Fellowship Breakfast during the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis, MO. The breakfast is scheduled to be held Tuesday, June 11, at 7:00 AM. The keynote speaker will be Pastor Roger Ellsworth from Benton, IL. For more information visit our website at [wwwFOUNDERS.org](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org).

## 2002 Southern Baptist Founders Youth Conferences

This summer's YOUTH Conferences promise to be both challenging and soul-stirring. The theme for all three conferences is "Surviving as a Christian in a Pagan Culture" with a strong emphasis on helping young people develop a biblically based Christian worldview. Three conferences will be held this summer with the first one slated to begin July 8 at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri. Pastor Erroll Hulse of the Leeds Baptist Church in Leeds, England will be our keynote speaker. The second and third conference will be held at Laguna Beach Christian Retreat in beautiful Panama City Beach, Florida. Pastor Phil Newton of the South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee will be the keynote speaker for the second conference (scheduled to begin July 29) and Pastor Cary Kimbrell of the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Laurel, Mississippi will be the keynote speaker for the third conference (scheduled to begin August 5). In addition to great Bible preaching there will be some very challenging seminars on topics such as "Confronting the Cults," "Islam and Other World Religions," and "The Religion of Secular Humanism." For more information, contact Bill Ascol, YC Coordinator, at:

YC2002  
c/o 457 Mohican Lane  
Shreveport, Louisiana 71106  
318-798-7088  
318-798-7086 FAX  
[wwascol@bellsouth.net](mailto:wwascol@bellsouth.net)

## Founders Website Update

When we first established our web site several years ago we made a conscious decision to put every issue of the journal online for free. That has undoubtedly hurt our regular subscriptions, but our burden has always been to get the truth published as widely as possible. The internet allows us to do that in ways we could only imagine several years ago. Currently we have an online subscription list of approximately 1500. The "hits" on our web site have been steadily increasing all year. During the spring we saw a significant jump to over 180,000 hits per month. In December that number went up to 220,000. If you have not visited the web site lately, take a look! [wwwFOUNDERS.org](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org)



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

# An Open Letter to Reformed Baptist Pastors & Churches

[Ted Christman](#)

*The following letter was sent out to pastors and churches who have been primarily involved with the independent, Reformed Baptist movement in the United States. Its sad occasion was the serious moral failure of a very visible and deeply respected leader of that movement. It is printed here as a reminder of the dangers and consequences of disqualifying sins on the part of pastors, and as an encouragement to pursue redemptive restoration of brothers who are thus ensnared.*

Dear Brethren,

Recently our hearts were jolted and profoundly grieved through news of the calamitous spiritual and moral plummet of \_\_\_\_\_. By now the shock waves of this "earthquake" have made their way around the world. To most of us the slightest reflection upon this sad event (whether in the quietness of our own minds, or through a sober discussion with someone else) results in a kind of emotional aftershock--fearful and disconcerting. Surely, we have significant reason to plead with God, both corporately and privately, for many great mercies. First and foremost, we must each (shepherds and sheep alike) beg the Lord for preserving and persevering grace for ourselves. Second, we need to continue to intercede for the faithful elders of our sister church in \_\_\_\_\_ that they may have the wisdom, guidance and heart of God as they seek to deal faithfully with and measure out appropriate discipline to their fallen and recovering church member/missionary. Third, we need to beseech the Lord in a tender, untiring and redemptive way that He continue to pour out upon our dear brother and friend the recovering grace that seems so evident and encouraging. If our gracious God hears and answers these cries, the "success" of Satan will be minimized and God's greater glory will be secured--a glory which will wonderfully and significantly eclipse the evil--in spite of its magnitude.

Having encouraged us all to pray, may I share a deep concern and burden which lies heavily upon my heart? As I do so, please be assured of my profound sense of humility and personal unworthiness to be exhorting or instructing fellow pastors and churches. I am fully aware of my relative obscurity and somewhat low profile. (This is a status I hope to enjoy for the rest of my days). If there is any "mandate" to share my thoughts, it is to be attributed to my own conscience and heart as well as the encouragement of my fellow elders.

My concern pertains to our ability to forgive and restore our recovering friend. When I use the word "restore" I obviously have no reference to a return to the pastorate or the mission field. Rather, I have in mind \_\_\_\_\_'s complete spiritual recovery, i.e. his renewed determination to be a holy man, his sense of God's perfect forgiveness, his possession of peace and joy and the persuasion that the people of God have also happily and fully forgiven him.

Allow me to share my fears and hopes. First, my fears: I fear there are those among us who have an "elder brother" attitude toward the returned prodigal rather than that of the Father. The elder brother could not rejoice and delight in the signs of repentance even in his own brother. He was angry with his

father for having initiated a celebration. He was disgruntled. He was self-absorbed. He didn't know if his brother's repentance was "for real" or not. Hence, he was unable to rejoice with hope. How different his Father! He so loved and longed and hoped for repentance that he daily looked for the slightest evidence that his son might appear trudging down the dusty road toward home. Why wasn't the elder brother standing next to his dad looking and praying for the same return?

I fear there are those among us who do not possess a healthy portion of that love which "hopes all things" (1 Cor. 13:7) but rather are troubled with an attitude of "I'm not going to believe this repentance is true until I have *overwhelming* evidence that it is."

I fear there are those among us who believe that \_\_\_\_\_, in spite of the fact that he gives many, many, many hopeful signs of true repentance and has humbly "listened to the church," ought *still* to be excommunicated. How unbiblical! How contrary to our Lord's teaching in Matthew 18.

I fear there are those among us who so equate the granting of forgiveness with *full* restoration that they are unable to render obedience to our Savior's clear instruction found in Luke 17:4. There our Lord said, "If he [your brother] sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." How much evidence could a person give of the genuineness of his repentance if he found it necessary to come to you seven times in the same day? Obviously, very little. Yet, we are required to say, "I forgive you." Note, we are *not* required to have total trust and confidence in such a person. We have good and wise warrant to wait prayerfully for the sustained evidence of true repentance and that does require time. Confidence and trust must be earned the old-fashioned way by hard work and consistency. Nevertheless, the point is we are to be *predisposed* and *inclined* to grant forgiveness. Unless we have solid evidence that the penitent is deceiving us, we are clearly not to withhold it. This predisposition, inclination and desire to forgive will manifest itself attractively in a discernable quality of spirit and attitude. The contrary predisposition and inclination will also inevitably manifest itself in our attitudes, posture and demeanor.

What are my hopes? My hopes are that we will do what the Apostle Paul commanded us to do in Eph. 4:32 namely, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other *just as God in Christ also has forgiven you*". How has God forgiven us? Freely, unreservedly, graciously, lovingly, completely and forever.

My hope is that we will take long, sobering looks into our own hearts and propensities and wonder in amazement why God has so graciously preserved us from such a fall. It surely is not because we are more godly, holy and mature than our friend ever was.

My hope is that we will look upon our brother's sin through the eyes of our own "10,000 talent debt forgiveness" and find it not only *possible* to forgive him, but *easy*.

My hope is that we will realize that there was a context to our friend's fall and humbly wonder what might happen to us if we ever found ourselves in a sustained slough of disillusionment, despair and spiritual darkness. (To be sure, these factors do not remove \_\_\_\_\_'s responsibility or excuse his guilt, but they should elicit some sympathy and make us reticent to pass hasty and heartless judgment).

My hope is that we will spend as much time praying for God's immediate and ultimate triumph over Satan and for our friend's full restoration as we do talking about the tragic event.

My hope is that we will use this sad occasion to teach our children and one another about the wonderful

doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. This is no longer merely a story about a sheep that went hopelessly astray. This is a story about a Shepherd who went out and found His lost sheep, put it upon his shoulders and brought it home to the rest of the flock and then called his friends and neighbors saying to them, "Rejoice with me for I have found my lost sheep" (Luke 15:6). Great falls require great recoveries. Great recoveries require a great salvation. A great salvation requires a great God. And that is exactly what we have--a great and gracious and glorious God!

I know there are some of us who feel especially betrayed--I am one. But may I encourage each of us to remember this. Those who have been hurt the deepest are those who loved \_\_\_\_\_ the most. And those who have loved \_\_\_\_\_ the most also happen to be those whom *he* has loved the most. We are the ones he has poured his very life into. From that perspective, we should be the ones who find granting forgiveness the easiest. His wife, the children and \_\_\_\_\_'s parents have forgiven him. Who has been wounded more severely than they? Yet, they have forgiven him. If *they* have begun to extend this healing token of love, who are we to withhold it?

We need to remember something else. It's easy to view sins and their heinousness like the rungs on a ladder. Our tendency is to put the physical sins up near the top, and some of the spiritual sins near the bottom. May I suggest that we often invert God's ladder? What really belong at the top are sins such as envy, pride, resentment and unforgiveness. On the day of Judgment, those who in this life refused to forgive our friend (...*from their hearts*, Matt. 18:35) may sadly discover not only that their sin was worse than his but even more fearfully, that their own sin remains unforgiven.

I apologize for the length of my communication. If there is any wisdom in what I have shared, may the Lord bless it to our lives. If there is any fault in it, may He banish it from our minds. If you view my concerns and perspectives as unbalanced in any way, I genuinely welcome your corrections. Again, all that I have shared comes with a sense of humility and unworthiness to be instructing others. I only long that we as individuals and as Calvinistic Baptists be God-like in our response to this calamity. I desire that we be known in this world not only for our devoted adherence and faithfulness to the Scriptures, but also for our spiritual, moral and behavioral likeness to the redemptive and compassionate character of our Heavenly Father.

Sincerely and humbly your servant in Christ,  
Pastor Ted Christman



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

# Book Reviews

*Authority*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984; originally published in London by Inter-Varsity Press, 1958), pb. 94 pp., \$5.99

Reviewed by [Ray Van Neste](#)

This little book consists of three chapters representing three addresses originally given in 1957. I suppose a book like this can be read and reviewed from a number of different angles, such as the historical angle seeking to understand what was going on in evangelicalism or the ministry of Lloyd-Jones at this time. My concern, however, was simply how this book might speak to my current situation personally and denominationally.

In the foreword, Lloyd-Jones suggests that the church and culture are facing an authority crisis with the church having lost its authority and the culture looking for authority somewhere. This is still true today. The chapters then address this focusing on the authority of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit. I must confess that I purchased the book with only an interest in the chapter on Scripture but benefited the most from the other two chapters!

Lloyd-Jones appropriately begins with the authority of Jesus, tracing how the manifestation of this authority is a major theme of the gospels. This is a well-known truth, but precisely for that reason it can be overlooked. Lloyd-Jones provides a stirring treatment, which caused me to turn aside to ponder afresh the majestic authority of our Lord as He boldly and frankly asserts His authority. "Here is One who does not hesitate to speak in a kind of totalitarian manner when He commands them, 'Follow me.' And they went and followed Him" (20). Lloyd-Jones then aptly applies this to his fellow preachers writing,

So often when we ministers preach through the Gospels we take these things and turn them into parables, accompanied by nice, soothing little messages. But we are really missing the point. We should be preaching the Lord Jesus Christ and asserting His authority (21).

Amen! He also applies this to how we do evangelism, taking particular aim at the peddling of the gospel as the remedy to whatever aches or ails you. Cults can promise results. We are to proclaim Christ in His authority.

Chapter 2 takes up "The Authority of the Scriptures," and in his first few sentences makes the point so often made in the battles within the SBC concerning this issue: "We are concerned about the matter [biblical authority] because it involves the whole question of evangelism" (30). He dismisses any idea of affirming the *message* of the Bible without worrying over the accuracy of the *facts*, rightly noting that this leaves us at the old liberal position where man's understanding is still the authority since it decides which parts of Scripture can and cannot be trusted. He sounds like he is addressing our recent convention as he takes up the charge of "Bibliolatry" asking, as others have done recently, "What do you know about the Lord, apart from the Scriptures?" What follows then is a good presentation of the regular arguments. However, Lloyd-Jones prefaces the arguments with a warning about over-confidence in apologetics (a theme which runs throughout the book). While apologetics has its place, at the end of the day "it is the preaching and exposition of the Bible that establishes truth and authority" (41). This is, of course, true and an important point for Southern Baptists at this time. Why is it that at a time where there is

widespread assent to the notion of Biblical inerrancy there is so little impact of the Bible's actual authority in the lives of the people? Perhaps it is because in spite of the lip service paid to the Bible, there is not enough of the regular sustained exposition of its actual contents to bring home to our hearts its authority so that we tremble before it (Isaiah 66:2).

The third chapter, "The Authority of the Holy Spirit," was the one which at first seemed to me unnecessary and out of place. In the end, though, it was the most challenging and useful. Lloyd-Jones seemed to anticipate thoughts like mine by making several statements such as: "If I were to hazard an opinion I would say that no aspect of the Christian faith has been so tragically neglected and perhaps misunderstood ... Here, I truly believe, we are dealing with the main source of weakness in modern Evangelicalism" (64). He powerfully reminds us of the inability of all our efforts and programs apart from the work of the Spirit--indeed, this is the point behind his regular chiding of an over-confidence in merely rational arguments. This is of course an area where we tend to extremes.

I grew up around a lot of talk about "unction" and "revival" but as I matured theologically much of this seemed quite thin, manipulative and most often not coupled with any depth of doctrine. Indeed it sometimes led to anti-intellectualism. However, one must not throw out the baby with the bath water. It is too easy to overreact by becoming over-reliant on the intellectual and having no place for the less objective areas such as the empowering of the Spirit. This does not imply anything hokey, but simply a reminder that the most brilliant address with the best exegesis may be received well by the people but will not come with life-changing power without the empowering of the Spirit. These are lessons which we all, no doubt, know, but ones that I, at least, need to be reminded of and Lloyd-Jones provides an apt reminder. Having told a story of an old Welsh preacher, Lloyd-Jones concludes:

He was wise enough, and had sufficient spiritual discernment to refuse to preach until he knew that he had his authority, and that the Holy Ghost was going with him, and would speak through him. You and I, however, often preach without Him, and all our cleverness and learning, and all our science and all our apologetics lead to nothing because we lack the authority of the Holy Ghost (88).

This is not anti-intellectualism but a proper assessment of the necessity of both study and prayer as Thomas Boston wrote, "thou wilt not dare study without prayer, nor yet pray without study." Lloyd-Jones, himself, summarizes his point well.

Let us go on, however, and seek knowledge and equip ourselves as perfectly as possible. But, in the name of God, let us not stop at that. Let us realize that even that, without the authority and power of the Spirit, is of no value at all (92).

I heartily recommend this book as a good reminder of the need and source of authority from one whose ministry bore the marks of such authority.

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*A Pastor's Sketches, Conversations with Anxious Souls Concerning the Way of Salvation*, Ichabod Spencer (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Books, 2001; reprint edition) pb., 285 pp., \$12.95

Reviewed by [Jeff Robinson](#)

There are more books presently available on the subject of evangelism than at perhaps any time in the history of the church but virtually none that provide a theologically sound approach to dealing with "anxious souls concerning the way of salvation."

But along comes "*A Pastor's Sketches*" by Ichabod Spencer and never has so much glory been found in the words of one named "Ichabod."

It should come as no surprise that Spencer's book--subtitled "*conversations with anxious souls concerning the way of salvation*,"--is not actually a new title but is the reprint of a book first published in 1850.

Unlike the standard fare which issues from contemporary publishing houses on evangelism, "*A Pastor's Sketches*" offers no cotton-candy, formulaic approach to soul-winning, no "spiritual laws," no facile four-point outline with a prayer tacked on at the end.

Instead, Spencer provides a much-needed paradigm for pastors and believers who would seek a patently biblical approach to evangelism, one undergirded by the unshakeable foundation of a full-orbed theology, and lashed immovably to an inspired body of truth.

The book is a collection of 40 personal sketches and interviews recorded by Spencer during the 25 years in which he labored in ministry. It is unique in both form and function and is a rare jewel which shines with theological fidelity to give pastors and believers an expert model of doing evangelism biblically.

Spencer served as pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, NY from 1832-54, during which time the church experienced remarkable numerical and spiritual growth.

At Spencer's arrival, the church had no building and about 40 persons. By the time of his death, the church had grown to become one of the largest and most influential in the state of New York.

Spencer's method of church growth would likely confound many of today's seeker-church gurus; this "Bunyan of Brooklyn" as he was known, committed to visit every member of his church at least once every year, an approach similar to that of Puritan Richard Baxter.

Spencer averaged nearly 800 appointments annually. Additionally, he regularly visited those who were not directly tied to his church. It is from these personal visits--both with souls inside and outside his church--that the majority of these sketches arise.

The theological tides of Spencer's time were washing forth a tsunami of revolution. The church was rapidly moving away from the theology of Jonathan Edwards toward the pragmatic New Divinity of Charles Finney. Spencer speaks often of the enthusiasm intrinsic to the revivals of his time.

But Spencer continued unmoved as a stalwart in the classical Reformed tradition, his feet planted firmly upon the biblical doctrines of grace. His commitment to biblical doctrine provides the reader with an expert example of how systematic theology should be put into practice in order to point "anxious souls" to their need for the Redeemer. Spencer was no "speculative theologian."

All the doctrines are wisely and fittingly deployed in Spencer's evangelistic method and they function within the Scriptures. In one sketch, Spencer details a young man who is wrangling with issues of election and predestination. As in all his other encounters, Spencer shows uncommon sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's work ("I am to conspire with the Holy Spirit," he writes of his endeavors) and offers sage counsel to the somewhat perplexed young man, unpacking for him the three-fold purpose of election ("...to teach men the character of God, to repress the audacity of the wicked, and to comfort God's people...") and demonstrating how the doctrine in no wise eliminates human responsibility. He fervently

admonishes the man to "Do what God bids you. Obey the invitations of his grace. Flee to Christ and be saved." He does not argue with anyone on the basis of philosophy, but always reasons directly from Scripture. As Spurgeon said of Bunyan, Spencer "bleeds bible."

Spencer's style of interaction varied depending on the psychological makeup of the individual and here the reader sees his remarkable sensitivity toward those to whom he sought to minister. Often Spencer tells of visiting a seeker many times, day after day, unpacking the gospel to them over several weeks and even months. Though he called for immediate decision he never rushed simply for the sake of putting another notch in his "gospel gun." Spencer's love for people and his patient care for their souls and a concern for true Spirit-wrought conversion permeates each story.

During one encounter Spencer said he found it best to be silent after presenting Christ to one man. Wrote Spencer, "He (the man) sat in silence for a long time. I did not think it best to interfere with his thoughts." He knew when to talk, when to listen, and when to simply be silent as the Spirit applied God's truth to the heart.

Spencer also demonstrated unusual savvy in presenting the gospel's unvarnished truth in love. One person whom Spencer counseled told him that she had been comforted by a friend. Though she still remained outside the grace of God the lady told Spencer she "felt better about herself" because of the friend's words. Spencer's reply slashed directly to the heart of the matter: "Feel better? Mary, you are resting on a lie. You are miserably deceived. Doing well? How can you be doing well while an impenitent sinner rejecting Christ and exposed every moment to the wrath of God forever?"

Spencer was the very embodiment of the pastor/theologian, a man who practiced Acts 20:27 with the greatest of God-ordained skill and was "always ready, in season and out of season." *A Pastor's Sketches* is required reading for anyone who would seek to proclaim the gospel to individuals in a way that is thoroughly God-centered and who would accurately light the narrow way down which anxious souls will be drawn to the One True Sovereign Lord.

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*Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry*, by Arturo G. Azurdia III (Christian Focus Publications, 1998), pb, 192 pp. £9.99/\$15.99.

Reviewed by [Ray Van Neste](#)

A book from an unknown author and a title that suggests a "hyper-charismatic" content is not immediately appealing to me and would have little chance of getting on my reading list. However such a book caught my attention because I noticed that Christian Focus had published it. They use the sort of authors that I know and trust, and I have yet to find a "bad book" from them. Then a glance at the back cover with rave reviews from people like John Armstrong and Ed Clowney served to further reassure me that this was likely to be a sound book. Indeed, as I opened the pages of this Biblical exhortation I found the Lord ready to instruct, challenge, and correct me.

The author is a PCA pastor in California and describes himself as "without shame, a local church pastor of average gifts" (7). That self-description alone gained my attention. The book itself appears to have begun as a project (thesis, dissertation?) at Westminster Seminary. The goal of the book is to present a biblical theology of Spirit empowered preaching and it succeeds very well.

Azurdia argues, in the vein of Lloyd-Jones and others, that while serious and diligent exegesis is essential

for preaching, it is not enough. The hard exegetical work will provide us with material but we still need power--power from on high. Indeed, Azurdia states, "It is my deep conviction that the greatest deficiency in contemporary expositional ministry is powerlessness; in other words, preaching that is devoid of the vitality of the Holy Spirit" (12). He argues clearly that if we take seriously the effects of sin on humanity we are forced to the point of absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit to make any preaching effective. Surely we would all affirm this but I, for one, admit that it is too easy to slip into a perfunctory acknowledgement of the Spirit's role whilst actually relying on my own strength (which is weakness).

Azurdia makes the fine point that the powerlessness of evangelical churches is evident from the various other things to which so many have turned for "attractive power," things which may have value in themselves but are not the goal of the church. He mentions specifically pop-psychology, marketing techniques and political activism. Concerning the ability of marketing techniques to draw a crowd, for instance, he writes:

they have erroneously confused the presence of physical bodies with the existence of spiritual life. In reality, many of these "seekers" have not come to flee the wrath of God. They have not come to take up the cross of Jesus Christ. Instead, they have come to add a layer of frosting to their lives (31).

Azurdia argues from the Scripture that God has shown that His intention is to work through the preaching of the Word. Then he argues that the role of the Spirit is to glorify Christ and that the whole of the Scriptures are to be interpreted Christologically. This book can be of much profit here for many who were not taught to read the Scriptures as Jesus and the apostles did (Luke 24:27). Azurdia handles the topic well not condoning sloppy interpretation but interpretation which places every text into its place within the flow of redemptive history. If we expect the Spirit's power, he argues, we must use His means (preaching) and His method (Christ-centered interpretation).

Finally, if we would know the power of the Spirit in our preaching we must begin with an awareness of our abject need of Him. "A major step toward experiencing the power of God necessitates a thorough-going recognition of our lack of it" (143). Such awareness will drive us to careful study and fervent prayer. The author searchingly notes, "Rarely are seminarians taught to pray and fast and weep for the subjective and internal illumination of the Holy Spirit in correspondence with their diligent efforts in the sacred text" (39). Azurdia also focuses on the church's role in supporting the preacher with prayer and by maintaining an environment eager to receive and to submit to the Word of God.

Reading this book I was reminded of much, challenged, rebuked, convicted (having frequently to turn aside to prayer), humbled, encouraged, and stirred up with a renewed desire to go at it again! My heart has truly been stirred. I want to be a part of "the proclamation of the gospel, by men clothed with an alien power to overcome the most violent resistance of sinners" (66). I yearn to know more of that "other-worldly kind of courage that can compel an ordinary man to invade the domain of darkness and demand the deliverance of people enslaved to that realm" (126). And yet, I know what it is to be "a man possessed by a holy compulsion but hobbled by human inability" (118). I have been reminded that the answer is neither to lower my expectations of the effectiveness of preaching, nor to rely subtly on human oratory to "back it up," but to learn ever more of my weakness and to find in that weakness the power of God to glorify Himself.

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Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*. William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, editors. *The New Testament Commentary, Vol. 15* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001. X, 635 pp. \$39.99.

Reviewed by [Dr. Roger Nicole](#)

There is always great joy when a significant and long-range work comes to its conclusion. This is the case for this volume, the fifteenth of a series inaugurated in 1953 by William Henriksen, who completed eight volumes before his death in 1982, and carried on by Simon J. Kistemaker so as to cover all the books of the New Testament not treated by Hendriksen. This series is a magnificent achievement covering the whole of the Greek Scriptures with a thoroughly conservative and Reformed standpoint that takes account of the "analogy of faith" (Romans 12:6).

Although I cannot claim intimate acquaintance with the other volumes, this one on the New Testament book which often remains puzzling to modern readers appears to be the most successful of the whole series.

Here we have a new translation from the hand of the commentator, paralleling fairly close the NIV; some 500 pages of commentary verse by verse; more than 100 pages of introduction, bibliography and indices; a new and careful articulation of the Apocalypse in terms of seven visions together with a very brief introduction (1:1-8) and a conclusion (22:6-21). Each of the visions is introduced through the words "I saw" or their equivalent, although that oft-repeated term in John's book does not always introduce a new vision.

The remarkably lucid introduction does indeed prepare the reader for an intelligent approach to the book. The twelve headings are subdivided in more than forty subheadings whose nature is not announced in the outline of page 2, but must be gathered as the reading proceeds.

The commentary itself is divided in terms of the chapters of our Bible as evident in the Table of Contents on page V, but the development proceeds according to the very detailed outline of the book located on pp. 66-70. The text is written in such a way that a reader not acquainted with Greek may understand it. Whenever a Greek word is referred to, it appears in a transliteration in the English alphabet. At the end of each section a brief consideration is given to "Greek Words, Phrases and Constructions" where the Greek alphabet is used.

There are 1120 footnotes throughout the book referring to the labors of others or to important tools of Biblical research. These are evidence of the immense labor and outstanding scholarship of the author. His standpoint favors the amillenarian and idealist method of interpretation (if these terms appear unfamiliar to you refer to the "Introduction" in which they are carefully explained)--but even those who do not agree with him on this may profit greatly from his work. His approach has the very decided advantage that it recognizes clearly that the Apocalypse was not intended for one limited period of Church History, but that it has a perennial message for all ages from the time of composition until the final consummation of God's redemptive plan.

If you have to limit yourself to just one book on Revelation, buy this one. Baker Book House is to be commended for the very fine work of publication manifest here.

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*Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915.* Terry A. Chrisope, Geanies House, Fern, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000, 240 pp.

Reviewed by [William G. Moore](#)

When a student of church history encounters the name of J. Gresham Machen, he usually is presented with Machen's determined opposition to theological liberalism. In *Toward a Sure Faith*, Terry Chrisope provides an often-unexplored aspect of Machen, examining Machen's work in New Testament criticism prior to 1915 and its impact upon Machen's later writings and ecclesiastical activity.

Chrisope sets forth the apology for his work in his introduction. By the time of Machen's venture into biblical studies, historicism--the assumption that the Bible was simply a product of its culture--enjoyed almost universal acceptance among biblical scholars. Chrisope seeks to demonstrate that Machen's mature theological thought arose from his personal, intellectual struggle with the claims of historicism. Consequently, the book's "central thesis is that in his early years Machen developed and exhibited a profound conviction of the propriety and necessity of the historical study of the Bible, while at the same time he gradually became convinced that the New Testament and the events it relates were partially conditioned but not wholly determined by the historical environment in which they originated" (13). Because historicism's impact remains present at the beginning of the twenty-first century and because Machen successfully answered those claims with careful, historical scholarship, Chrisope convincingly argues that this approach to Machen will prove profitable in both establishing a more complete picture of Machen and in fortifying a new generation of students of biblical Christianity.

Part One sets forth the historical setting for Machen's work. By the end of the nineteenth century, the shift in historical outlook previously experienced in Europe had become widely popular in American academia. With this turn to historicism, "all human activities and cultural phenomena are to be entirely understood as manifestations of the particular time and place in which they originate" (26). Consequently, all that humans know or believe is the result of social development, not of supernatural revelation. Because no revelation can penetrate history from outside, truth is necessarily historically conditioned and is, therefore, relative to time and place. The claim by historic Christianity to permanent truth finds a formidable foe in historicism.

Chrisope traces the development of this historical consciousness in three major intellectual sources: the eighteenth-century philosophers of the Enlightenment, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German romantic idealism, and nineteenth-century Anglo-French positivism. History was seen as inherently and ceaselessly progressive. This historical consciousness brought about deleterious effects upon traditional understandings of the Bible: events in the Bible were the result of naturalistic principles of development, biblical literature is to be treated no differently than other ancient documents, biblical theology is primarily a historical study, and much of the religion of Israel and of Paul resulted from pagan ideas.

In America, biblical criticism, a sub discipline of historical scholarship, began seriously to impact biblical scholarship during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Chrisope points to Charles A. Briggs, professor at New York's Union Seminary, as being principally responsible for the introduction of biblical criticism to American Christianity. Indicative of liberal thought for the next three decades, Briggs' 1891 inaugural address on biblical authority presented "six barriers to the operation of the divine authority of the Bible: superstition (in the form of bibliolatry); the doctrine of verbal inspiration; anxiety over the authenticity of biblical writings; the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible; the conception of miracles as violations of the laws of nature; and the conception of prophecy as minute prediction" (41).

In Part Two Chrisope recounts the well-known story of Machen's training in the home of Arthur and Mary Machen, his education at Johns Hopkins University (1898-1902) and Princeton Theological Seminary (1902-1905), and his experiences at Marburg and Göttingen (1905-1906). At Johns Hopkins,

Machen received rigorous training in classical studies, earning both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. At Princeton Machen was involved in no less rigorous studies, but now in an institution committed to Reformed confessionalism, a high view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, a modified adherence to the philosophy of Scottish Common Sense Realism, and an emphasis on religious experience. Machen excelled in New Testament exegesis, winning the Middler Prize in New Testament Exegesis for 1903-04 for the best paper on the exegesis of John 1:1-18. During his final year he won a fellowship in the field of New Testament, writing the best paper on the assigned topic, "A Critical Discussion of the New Testament Account of the Virgin Birth of Jesus." Chrisope summarizes the significance of this paper by the twenty-three-year-old scholar:

It reveals Machen's early view of the Bible, displays his presuppositions and modes of argumentation in handling critical schools of thought, and provides a means for assessing his promise as a young scholar--a means of which the Princeton faculty clearly availed themselves. It is also noteworthy that the subject matter of the essay, the virgin birth of Jesus, which was to constitute a major focus of Machen's scholarly work for the rest of his career, was not a topic of his own choosing but one assigned for the fellowship competition (70).

Chrisope concludes his analysis by noting that, while Machen "fully recognized the historical origination of the biblical documents, he was unwilling to accept the antisupernaturalistic assumptions which characterized the historicist outlook" (75).

Winning the fellowship allowed Machen to pursue a year of additional study in Germany, a year which would create great spiritual and intellectual anguish as he struggled with attacks upon biblical orthodoxy. The first of these attacks came in the form of Ritschlian liberalism, effectively represented by Wilhelm Herrmann, professor of dogmatics at Marburg. Herrmann's passion for Christ produced an attraction to liberalism which Machen had never before witnessed. Machen came to sense, however, that the biblical criticism which Herrmann taught and the theology which the German championed were inconsistent. The second attack came from the history of religions school, represented for Machen at Göttingen by Wilhelm Bousset. Here Machen saw the profound influence of historicism upon biblical studies. While Machen struggled with where the truth lay, as Chrisope notes, "it could not be with both camps at the same time: traditional Christianity could be true, or the modern theology could be true, but they could not both be true" (85). Machen's struggles, though, reveal a character which found unacceptable the provision of superficial answers made in isolation. Machen's later fervency for biblical orthodoxy cannot be explained apart from his meeting the claims of liberalism with intellectual integrity, regardless of where his investigation should take him. Machen's struggles also reveal a character which could not consider the ordination to ministry before settling fundamental, theological issues in his own mind. Machen would later be "filled with indignation at those who formally subscribed to the Bible as the Word of God and to the Westminster Standards while rejecting the theological substance which they contained" (94-95).

Part Three examines the focus of Chrisope's study, "The Decisive Years, 1906-1915": "a natural epoch in Machen's life ... [because] the period begins with Machen's appointment as Instructor at Princeton Seminary and concludes with his installation as Assistant Professor in May 1915" (99). Chrisope first investigates Machen's early book reviews, which appeared in the *Princeton Theological Review* from 1907-1912. These reviews, which comprise almost all of Machen's writings during this period, reveal a progression from relatively tentative theological statements to much more definite theological assertions. Toward the end of this period, one can see "concerns and convictions" that "were becoming characteristic

of his essential position":

He was convinced that the historical difficulties presented by the New Testament are capable of reasonable and scholarly explanation when the documents are correctly understood. Furthermore, he stoutly maintained that Christianity was at its center a religion of supernatural redemption and that any contrary interpretation misconstrued its essential character. In addition, he was exceedingly anxious for the future of the church ... , fearing that the expanding influence of naturalistic biblical criticism and liberal theology would alter the historic identity of Christianity, to its own spiritual impoverishment and weakness. Back of this anxiety was his evident frustration that the church was not vigorously addressing the intellectual challenges it faced, but met them rather with "astonishing indifference (109-10).

The struggles with which Machen entered this period had become evidently settled by 1912.

Chrisope provides further evidence of the resolution of Machen's intellectual struggles with his 1912 publication of four major essays. Three of the essays dealt with the virgin birth of Jesus and the fourth investigated the relationship between Jesus and Paul. Machen continued to exhibit the work of a first-rate scholar with even Adolf Harnack reviewing his articles and expressing admiration of them, though obviously disagreeing with their conclusions. While using historical methods, Machen contended that certain issues, such as the virgin birth and the origin of Christianity, ultimately were determined by one's presuppositions. Because historicism advocated at the outset a closed universe, any historical data supporting the traditional Christian view was rejected.

Chrisope concludes Part Three by examining Machen's survey of New Testament history and literature, his ordination to the ministry, and his installation to the Princeton Seminary's faculty, all of which took place during 1913-1915. The events of this period "saw the gradual resolution of his intellectual problems and the development of an open and unqualified commitment to the content and goals of the Princeton theological tradition" (137). Machen's New Testament survey was a one-year series of Sunday School lessons prepared for the Northern Presbyterian Church. Chrisope notes that the lessons were historically grounded without capitulating to the naturalistic assumptions of historicism; they emphasized the authority of the Bible; they adopted conservative positions on questions of authorship; they emphasized Presbyterian confessionalism; and they forthrightly applied biblical teaching to the contemporary church and culture.

At his installation service to Princeton's faculty, Machen presented his inaugural address, "History and Faith." Here Machen maintained that history and faith cannot be separated. Chrisope aptly notes that "'History and Faith' provided the capstone and marked the culmination of Machen's intellectual and spiritual maturation, not only for the years 1913 to 1915, but also for that whole period of his life which was consummated with his installation at Princeton in his thirty-fourth year" (153).

In Part Four, "The Mature Years, 1915-1937," Chrisope observes that "the views to which Machen had begun to give forceful public expression in the years 1912 to 1915 provided the unifying ideological foundation for both his scholarly work and his ecclesiastical activities during his later years" (157). Chrisope analyzes four later works to show the theological continuity: *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921), *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930), *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), *What Is Faith?* (1925). While the first two dealt with New Testament studies and the latter two with theological concerns, all dealt with issues such as historicist assumptions regarding history, the influence of philosophical presuppositions, and the truth of supernatural Christianity--issues with which Machen had struggled and answered by 1915.

Chrisope's *Toward a Sure Faith* will prove to be a welcomed and needed addition to the libraries of Christians in general and of pastors in particular for at least four reasons. First, pastors will find the book to be an aid in their counseling of young converts shaken by the still rampant historicism found in both secular and religious institutions of higher learning. Those involved in personal intellectual struggles will be instructed and encouraged as they engage with Chrisope's presentation of Machen's own struggles and discover the oft-overlooked fallacies of historicism.

Second, Chrisope's representation of Machen will encourage Christians to think deeply concerning the claims of orthodox, supernatural Christianity. Because we do not live in a closed universe, the saving truth of Christ cannot be comprehended through convincing proofs based upon historical findings alone. Chrisope notes, "[Machen] believed that there is a subjective element in human knowledge; that philosophical presuppositions may influence one's evaluation of historical evidence; that the evidence in itself is not necessarily convincing; and that the human mind is incapable of attaining to truth (in the sense of recognizing the truthfulness of Christianity) or of exercising faith by its own power, but that for these ends the operation of the Holy Spirit is necessary" (189). Presuppositions are changed through the work of the Holy Spirit in changing deeply held perceptions. In our day when evangelistic success is measured by an acquiescent prayer at the end of a prescribed gospel presentation, we would do well to remember that conversion is the result of the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual.

Third, Chrisope's study of Machen reminds those seeking to enter the ministry of the need for intellectual integrity. While Machen would debate and tolerate academics who rejected orthodox Christianity, Chrisope notes that "he manifested a distinct unwillingness to consider liberal churchmen as anything other than dishonest traitors who were denying the faith they professed" (131). Certainly those who use the terminology and expressions of orthodox Christianity merely to gain religious employment are little more than base hirelings. Machen sought ordination only after his intellectual struggles concerning historic, supernatural Christianity were resolved in his own mind.

Last, we are reminded that truth matters, and neither the attainment of truth nor its defense are without high personal costs. Machen underwent intense, personal struggles in his seeking after truth. Once he was convinced of the truth of supernatural Christianity, he could not remain silent while fellow churchmen were undermining orthodoxy. Consequently, he endured intense ecclesiastical struggles in opposing heterodoxy. Twenty-first-century Baptists will do well to follow the example of this twentieth-century Presbyterian defender of the faith.



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

# Medieval Mistakes

*Sinclair Ferguson*

Although provoked by the indulgences peddled by Johannes Tetzel, the very first proposition which Luther offered for public debate in his Ninety Five Theses put the axe to the root of the tree of medieval theology: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance." From Erasmus' Greek New Testament, Luther had come to realize that the Vulgate's rendering of Matthew 4:17 by *penitentiam agite* ("do penance") completely misinterpreted Jesus' meaning. The gospel called not for an act of penance but for a radical change of mind-set and an equally deep transformation of life. Later he would write to Staupitz about this glowing discovery: "I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek!"

Is it not true that we have lost sight of this note that was so prominent in Reformation theology? We could well do with a Luther *redivivus* today. For a number of important reasons evangelicals need to reconsider the centrality of repentance in our thinking about the gospel, the church and the Christian life.

One of our great needs is for the ability to view some of the directions in which evangelicalism is heading, or perhaps more accurately disintegrating. We desperately need the long-term perspective which the history of the church gives us.

Even within the period of my own Christian life, the span between my teenage years in the 1960s and my forties in the 1990s, there has been a sea-change in evangelicalism. Many "positions" which were standard evangelical teaching are now, after only three decades, regarded as either reactionary or even dinosauric.

If we take an even longer-term view, however, we face the alarming possibility that there may already be a medieval darkness encroaching upon evangelicalism. Can we not detect, at least as a tendency, dynamics within evangelicalism which bear resemblances to the life of the medieval church? The possibility of a new Babylonian or (more accurately, following Luther) the Pagan Captivity of the Church looms nearer than we may be able to believe.

Consider the following five features of medieval Christianity which are evident to varying degrees in contemporary evangelicalism.

## 1. Repentance

Repentance has increasingly been seen as a single act, severed from a life-long restoration of godliness.

There are complex reasons for this--not all of them modern--which we cannot explore here. Nevertheless, this seems self-evident. Seeing repentance as an isolated, completed act at the beginning of the Christian life has been a staple principle of much of modern evangelicalism. It is sad that evangelicals have often despised the theology of the confessing churches. It has spawned a generation who look back upon a single act, abstracted from its consequences, as determinative of salvation. The 'alter call' has replaced the sacrament of penance. Thus repentance has been divorced from genuine regeneration, and sanctification severed from justification.

## 2. Mysticism

The canon for Christian living has increasingly been sought in a 'Spirit-inspired' living voice within the church rather than in the Spirit's voice heard in Scripture. What was once little more than a mystical tendency has become a flood. But what has this to do with the medieval church? Just this. the entire medieval church operated on the same principle, even if they expressed it in a different form: the Spirit speaks outside of Scripture; the believer cannot know the detailed guidance of God if he tries to depend on his or her Bible alone.

Not only so, but once the 'living voice' of the Spirit has been introduced it follows by a kind of psychological inevitability that it is this living voice which becomes the canon for Christian living.

This view--inscripturated Word plus living voice equals divine revelation--lay at the heart of the medieval church's groping in the dark for the power of the gospel. Now, at the end of the second millennium we are on the verge--and perhaps more than the verge of being overwhelmed by a parallel phenomenon. The result then was a famine of hearing and understanding the Word of God, all under the guise of what the Spirit was still saying to the church. What of today?

## 3. Sacred Powers

The divine presence was brought to the church by an individual with sacred powers deposited within him and communicated by physical means.

Today an uncanny parallel is visible wherever cable TV can be seen. Admittedly it is no longer Jesus who is given by priestly hands; now it is the Spirit who is bestowed by physical means, apparently at will by the new evangelical priest. Special sanctity is no longer confirmed by the beauty of the fruit of the Spirit, but with signs which are predominantly physical.

What we ought to find alarming about contemporary evangelicalism is the extent to which we are impressed by performance rather than piety. The Reformers were not unfamiliar with similar phenomena. In fact one of the major charges made against them by the Roman Catholic Church was that they did not really have the gospel because they lacked physical miracles.

## 4. Spectators

The worship of God is increasingly presented as a spectator event of visual and sensory power, rather than a verbal event in which we engage in a deep soul dialogue with the Triune God.

The mood of contemporary evangelicalism is to focus on the centrality of what 'happens' in the spectacle of worship rather than on what is heard in worship. Aesthetics, be they artistic or musical, are given a priority over holiness. More and more is seen, less and less is heard. There is a sensory feast, but a hearing famine. Professionalism in worship leadership has become a cheap substitute for genuine access to heaven, however faltering. Drama, not preaching, has become the 'Didache' of choice.

This is a spectrum, of course, not a single point. But most worship is to be found somewhere on that spectrum. There was a time when four words would bring out goose-bumps on the necks of our grandfathers: 'Let Us Worship God'. Not so for twentieth-century evangelicals. Now there must be colour, movement, audio-visual effects, or God cannot be known, loved, praised and trusted for his own

sake.

## 5. Bigger means better?

The success of ministry is measured by crowds and cathedrals rather than by the preaching of the cross and the quality of Christians' lives.

It was the medieval church leaders, bishops and archbishops, cardinals and popes, who built large cathedrals, ostensibly *Soli Deo Gloria*--all this to the neglect of gospel proclamation, the life of the body of Christ as a whole, the needs of the poor and the evangelism of the world. Hence, the 'mega-church' is not a modern, but a medieval phenomenon.

Ideal congregational size and specific ecclesiastical architecture thankfully are matters of indifference. That is not really the central concern here. Rather it is the almost endemic addiction of contemporary evangelicalism to size and numbers as an index of the success of 'my ministry'--a phrase which can itself be strikingly contradictory. We must raise the question of reality, depth and integrity in church life and in Christian ministry. The lust for 'bigger' makes us materially and financially vulnerable. But worse, it makes us spiritually vulnerable. For it is hard to say to those on whom we have come to depend materially, 'When our Lord Jesus Christ said "Repent!" he meant that the whole of the Christian life is repentance.'



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page

## Letters

As God would have it, he just led me to your sight from a search on "Basil Manly Jr." I have just spent about an hour doing a little research on the site and I am impressed. Great historical documents and the *Journal* is excellent. I will be back, often. Keep up the God-centered, Christ-exalted work.

Laboring for the Truth,  
T. C., via email

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Dr. Ascol,

I just wanted to drop a line to let you know that your diligence is paying off. Your work is having an impact on many of us whom God has revealed the doctrines of grace to. Thank you for challenging us to hang in there against what seem to be impossible odds. Thank you also for the patient and gracious advice you give to our brethren who are frustrated, discouraged, and ready to leave their churches.

To your advice I would only add that you might mention that love demands that they not give up on their Arminian brethren. None of us understand the doctrines of grace without God, in His good pleasure, revealing them to us. If He has been patient and loving with us in this matter then we must do the same. Like many, I've been subtly ostracized by the pastors in my church because I am a Calvinist. I know from personal experience how painful and frustrating that can be (and is!). Yet, I know they love God and the unsaved with a passion I wish I had. The love of God demands that I not give up on them even though they may have given up on me.

Tell our brethren to hold on to that attribute of God that sometimes gets lost when discussing election. God loves us in spite of our rebellion. We must pray to do the same when we're on the brink of giving up on our friends.

Again, keep up the good work. My older brother and I benefit greatly from it. I won't bore you with the details of how God has used you and Founder's ministry in our lives and what's happening at our church.

Thx.,  
L. P. via email

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Dear Dr. Ascol:

I appreciated your article in the Summer 2001 issue of the *Founders Journal* entitled, "Calvinism, Evangelism and Founders Ministries." I thought that the article was thorough, informative, edifying and well-done. I also respect your effort to avoid "naming names" and focus on the issues. Yet, I must admit that I am curious about a couple of things. Did you happen to send the "one conservative SBC leader" a copy of your article? Did you happen to send copies to the Seminary students who heard his comments? Don't you think that the reformation we prayerfully seek is more likely to come when this kind of information is placed before those in need of reformation? Reformation study and talk, like our "evangelistic efforts," may accomplish more for the glory of God if we move beyond preaching to the

choir.

God bless you,  
M. R., via email

*Response from Tom Ascol, editor:*

Thanks for your note and encouraging comments. Thanks also for your observations and suggestions. Yes, before publishing it I did send the article to the leader who is referenced. In fact, I sent him the original version which named him and contained a challenge about doctrinal integrity in it based on further comments he made which I did not include in the published article. I asked him if I had misrepresented him; if I had been unfair; and if he would like to respond--because I would print his unedited response next to my article. He delayed responding for some time and finally wrote that he had no time to respond then but would do so thoroughly in the future.

It was a difficult decision to eliminate his name from the article. I followed the counsel of the Founders Board of Trustees in doing so. We debated the issue for nearly 2 hours, trying to determine what route would be most useful and glorifying to God. Several matters were considered, such as not wanting to embarrass a man we all respect in many ways. Our motives, I believe, were proper. My decision to leave his name out is debatable. It was a judgment call. ...

Thanks, again, for taking the time to write and stating your views. I, and our whole board, stand with you in desiring real reformation to break out in churches across our land.

In Christ,  
Tom

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Dear Sirs:

...I discovered your website sometime ago and always find interesting reading ...

I found the most recent issue [#45], with the articles about Calvinism, fascinating. I have wondered for some time if all (well, at least most) of the "fuss" over Calvinism isn't that the doctrine is misunderstood or distorted. Thanks for your point of view. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,  
J.S., OK

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Thank you for your ministry. I have been reading your web site. I appreciate your work in promoting the essential doctrines of God's Word. I heard a man say, "there can be no revival without reformation." As I pray for reform among God's people and awakening for our nation, I am thankful for those who still shine the Light of the True Gospel.

Grace & peace,  
D.A., TN

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Dr. Thomas Ascol,

Greetings, my brother in Christ Jesus. I want to thank you for the solid theological journal and sound ministry that comes by way of the Founders. I hold up your ministry before the Throne of Providence on a regular basis. I am really young in the Lord and I do confess that some of the issues that are dealt with in the Journal are a bit over my head. But, for the most part, I leave an issue edified and encouraged. The amazing truth of God's absolute sovereignty has been a consoling truth for me in great times of need. I am truly thankful for all ministries who uphold this truth in Christ.

I am currently incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, but our Lord in His holy and wise providence has been pleased to grant me an undeserved parole. In fact, I should be released this month and I do hereby ask you to change my subscription address ...

Thank you! May the Lord our God continue to use Founders Ministries to thunder His truth and may He be pleased to give the increase.

Your Brother,  
R. G., TX

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Sir,

I came across your web-site by accident, and read "Southern Baptists at the Crossroads" [FJ #19/20]. I have to agree with the whole article, and comments. A short time ago I came out of the "Mormon" church, (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). I was a convert to it for 22 years, being raised a Roman Catholic. Over the years as a Mormon, and active in the priesthood, I was for ten years a Seventy, and tracted door to door, with the full time Missionaries. I helped to give the missionary discussions and baptize new converts. How I left Mormonism, and found the real Jesus Christ, and not the polygamist christ of Mormonism, is another story. But working as a Stake missionary all those years, I could not help but notice that most of our baptized converts, were coming out of Southern Baptist churches. In fact one of our Mormon general authorities mentioned, how well the Baptist churches prepared their active members, to eventually become Mormon converts. You probably know that the far majority of converts to Mormonism, are active Christians, in their own churches, not the un-churched. Also, the Mormon secret temple ritual was copied from Scottish Rite Masonry. All the founders of the Mormon Church, including Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, and others too were all Masons. With so many Baptist men and their families being involved in Masonry, that may have some separate bearing for study too. I could go on with a more lengthy story, but I will cut it short, only to say that the situation you describe in Baptist churches, gives a very good reason why you are losing your members. And sadly the local churches don't even realize or care, when they see their members leave, and join the Mormon Church, or other cults. There is no effort to even rescue your own people. I know this from first hand knowledge, having been a Mormon missionary. Churches love to report their yearly baptism convert numbers, but never have to report how many they have lost to Mormonism. Look at the explosive growth every year of Mormonism, even in the "Bible belt" states, compared to other denominations in the USA. Paul said in the last days there would be "seducing spirits and doctrines of Demons." He was so right, and especially the toll that is taken of the "elect" and to deceive them. Scripture says also, "My people perish, for a lack of knowledge." The Lord is speaking clearly of "His" people here, and the Christians of today especially.

Best Wishes.  
D.K. via email

Dear Brother at Founders,

Greetings in the most precious name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Today I received the Founders CDs. Thank you very much for sending this valuable resource for my study. I received the CDs before Christmas as Christmas gift. After receiving the CDs my heart filled with great joy.

Kindly keep on praying for my wife, Anuradha, suffering from breast cancer. Once again, thank you very much for the gift.

By Grace,  
J.D., India (via email)

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I would like to buy two subscriptions of the *Founders Journal*. I want to thank you for your web site and for standing for truth. Your website has helped my family a lot. The articles are helpful and we found the church we are now attending on the web site. So, thanks again.

T.W., MO



**Founders  
Journal**  
Issue 47

**Founders  
Ministries**  
Home Page