



A Pastoral Theology of Tragedy

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A Pastoral Theology of Tragedy

[Tom Ascol](#)

September 11, 2001 has in many ways defined our modern era. So much of our thinking is now in reference to the acts of terror perpetrated against the United States on that day. In the immediate aftermath, multitudes gathered to pray in churches across the land. People who had neglected spiritual concerns suddenly became spiritually sensitized. Everyone began to have opinions about God and concerns about God and wanting to hear from Him. There was no shortage of those who began to speak for God.

Tragedy presents unusual opportunities—for both good and ill. The potential for good arises from the fact that people are awakened to realities that they would otherwise ignore. C. S. Lewis famously made this point in his observation that “God whispers to us in pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” [\[1\]](#) This is profoundly true. Once the world is awakened by tragedy and attention is drawn away from those trivialities that blind people to God a pivotal opportunity emerges. But there is no guarantee that it will automatically be redeemed. Someone must rise to speak God’s truth into the pain and suffering.

Those of us who are called to the work of pastoral ministry in the church bear the greatest responsibility for doing so. Shepherds of God’s flock must be willing to seize such opportunities and do our very best to point people in paths of truth and righteousness in the wake of tragedy. We must help people understand what God is saying in the midst of sorrow and suffering. There is great opportunity for tremendous good to be done for the kingdom of God when tragedy strikes.

But there is also tremendous opportunity for spiritual damage to be done—damage that arises out of misunderstanding or misrepresentation of God. This can happen even when intentions are good and motivations are proper. Unhelpful commentaries were abundant in the wake of September 11.

One well-known Baptist pastor wrote an editorial that was picked up by several media outlets. In it he stated, “You may hear misguided minds say ‘this must have been God’s will.’ Nonsense. In a world of free choices, God’s will is rarely done! Doing our own will is much more common. Don’t blame God for this tragedy. Blame people who ignored what God has told us to do: love your neighbor as yourself.”

This pastor rightly placed moral blame where it belongs, namely on the terrorists and their supporters. They were sinful and their actions were clearly evil. He further tried to guard very carefully the reputation of God as One who is not the author of evil. That is also appropriate. But in his effort to separate God from evil results in a cure that is ultimately worse than the disease that he is trying to address. His overly simplistic view of God’s will inhibits serious Bible reading because, as I explain below, Scripture refers to God’s will as being in some sense inviolable as well as in some sense

breakable.

The unwillingness or inability to reconcile God's absolute sovereignty with man's absolute responsibility betrays a greater affinity to rationalism than Biblicism. The Bible certainly affirms both. If we are going to be students of the Word and ministers of the Word, then we must be willing to submit our thinking to Scripture and refuse to deny whatever the Bible teaches.

Theology Prepares Us for Tragedies

A cogent pastoral theology equips one to speak for God in a redemptive way when the inevitable difficulties of life occur. A theology of tragedy helps prepare people in advance to face difficulty with hope and encouragement. The Scripture instructs pastors to do precisely that—to help our people anticipate and prepare for tragedies that will come in their lives.

Two texts that teach us to think this way are John 16:33 and Ephesians 6:13. The former comes from the end of our Lord's discourse in the upper room before His high priestly prayer on the night He was betrayed. Jesus concluded His message by saying, "These things I have spoken to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

In this world, you will have tribulation. That is one promise that no one ever likes to claim. But it is a promise of the Lord. Tragedies will come. But even when they do, Jesus wants His followers to have peace and good cheer. How? By paying attention to "these things," that is, the truths that He has just taught.

Study through John 13–16 and you will find our Lord teaching on important theological subjects. He speaks of His death and resurrection and of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He talks about the necessity of living in vital union with Him and submitting to His Word. He addresses His oneness with the Father and the unconditional election of His people. There is no shortage of doctrinal content in those chapters and it is that content that He has in mind when He refers to "these things." Jesus taught His disciples doctrine so that they might have peace in a world which He knew was going to be filled with tribulation.

Our Lord is a model for pastors at this point. It is imperative that those who shepherd the church of God not wait for devastating trials to come before developing a theology of tragedy. We must prepare ourselves and our people for the inevitable difficulties of life. How? By heeding, meditating on, teaching and applying sound doctrine.

Paul does this in Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." The apostle is addressing the issue of spiritual warfare. He has introduced the subject in verse 10 after spending the previous 21 verses addressing the key relationships in life. Commentaries often miss the connection between Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and 6:10–20. I am convinced that what Paul is doing in the earlier verses is marking out the battlefield for the

spiritual warfare that he describes in the latter verses. The most significant dimensions of spiritual warfare don't take place in some exorcist's chamber or demonically infested neighborhood (as is commonly thought today). Rather, the bloodiest theatres of spiritual warfare are the kitchen table, the den, the classroom, the bedroom, the office and job site.

After he has marked out the battlefield Paul then brings to light the deadly nature of the conflict. Beginning in 6:10 he reminds us of the reality of the devil and all the demonic determination to undo the work of God in the lives of God's people.

Because believers are in this spiritual war on a daily basis, we need to take up daily the whole armor of God. This is necessary so that, "having done all we may be able to stand" (13). Specifically, that we might be able to stand "in the evil day." Now some take that reference to the "evil day" to be simply a generic reference to life after the fall. That may be. But more likely he is referring to particularly trying times, "*perilous times*," as he calls them in 2 Timothy 2:1. These would be seasons of unusual outbreak of evil. Such times will come and in order to be prepared for them and to keep standing through them, believers need to take up the whole armor of God.

In verses 14-18 Paul explains his meaning and it is immediately obvious that the armor he has in mind can only be identified theologically. Truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, Scripture and prayer—these are the armament that will enable the Christian to withstand in the evil day.

So like his Lord before him, Paul instructs believers to prepare for tragedies by becoming theologically equipped. And it is every pastor's job to help prepare his people in the same way. Like the ant in Proverbs, when it is summer, we ought to be storing up, knowing that winter is coming. Jesus promised, "In this world you will have tribulation." Tragedies will come both personally and in larger contexts of family and friendships. They will also come nationally and, as the efficiency of communication continues to increase, even globally. The present is always the proper time to prepare for them.

Let me offer a few suggestions for developing a pastoral theology of tragedy. What I am talking about is learning to think of tragedies theologically. This should just be a subset of thinking about all of life theologically. In order to live life to the fullest we must live *coram Deo*, conscious that we are always under God's gaze. He is the one who has made us and is providentially ordering our lives. He has a purpose and a kingdom that is being advanced in the world. As His redeemed children, we need to see everything in life through these lenses.

Exegesis

Specifically, to develop a theology of tragedy we must first give careful attention to exegesis. Study those didactic passages that directly address the issues of trial and suffering. If you start with the book of Psalms you will be more than introduced to the inspired thinking of God's people regarding trials and tragedies. But there are many clear passages in the New Testament as well.

Consider Romans 5:1–4:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Notice how Paul links justification with tribulation and trials. Confident of possessing peace with God and standing in grace the believer can rejoice in the hope of God's glory. "And not only that," the Christian can also glory in tribulations. Why? Because he knows that they will ultimately serve for his spiritual growth and cannot diminish in the least his acceptance with God. This confidence is his because of the Lord Jesus Christ whom he is depending on by faith.

A similar type of reasoning is in the apostle's mind in Romans 8, especially beginning in verse 16. This section is filled with insight on suffering and trial. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." What in the world is the apostle talking about? From the personal dimension to the cosmic dimension, he goes on to speak of how everything in creation is anticipating the great day of redemption because the whole created order has been kept captive through the damage of the fall.

What is it that the apostle is seeing? What is it that he wants his readers to see about tragedy and suffering when he says that it is not worth comparing with what awaits us? In thinking through trials and tragedies we need to linger over such texts with this prayer on our hearts: "O, Lord, show me what you showed Paul! Teach me to see and believe what he saw so that I can honestly say what he said—that my present suffering is not even worth mentioning when compared to the glory that awaits me in heaven." Such praying will prevent our exegesis from being superficial or merely academic.

Philippians 1:29 is another verse that should be given attention. "For you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake." God has "granted it" to us to suffer? Suffering is a gift? That is exactly what this verse says. If suffering is a gift, then the means of suffering whereby God gives that gift need to be seen for what they are. It is not true that they "have nothing to do with God's will," but rather they are the outworking of God's will in giving us the gift of suffering. Pastors need to meditate on this and to teach their people to think deeply about suffering as a gift from God.

There is no shortage of passages that provide direct instruction about Christian suffering. Philippians 3:7–11, Colossians 1:24, 1 Peter 4:12–19, Hebrews 10:32–39 and Matthew 5:11–12 are some of the key ones that should not be overlooked.

I preached from Luke 13:1–4 the Sunday after 9/11:

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem?”

This passage is filled with insight on how to respond to and evaluate tragedies. It considers trials that arise both from human malice (as with Pilate and the people that he murdered) and from natural disasters (as with the tower fell). Jesus does not say many of the things that we might have anticipated, but what He does say is very instructive regarding how we ought to view such things and prepare for them before they arise. Tragedies, He indicates are like warning shots fired across the bow of the unrepentant’s ship. They are a call to repentance.

Case Studies

Along with exegesis of key passages, I also suggest a careful study of biblical examples of tragedy. How have God’s people handled tragedy in different situations? The Bible is filled with these kinds of stories. Hebrews 11 is a great place to start. Along with the better known heroes of faith mentioned in that chapter (Abraham, Joseph and Moses) the last verses include people whose experiences do not look very victorious. They were tortured, mocked, chained, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed with the sword, tormented, destitute, and forced to live in deserts and caves. Yet the writer says of them, “of whom the world was not worthy” (38) and says that they “obtained a good testimony through faith” (39). We should study their examples and pay particular attention to the exercise of their faith through trials.

Joseph is a classic example of one who suffered well in the Old Testament. Tragedy invaded his life but he saw at the end of the story that God was behind it all. Joseph did not simply confess that God somehow worked his trials into an overarching purpose that had been planned all along. Rather, he confessed that God really actually did it and He did it in order to bring about great good (Genesis 50:20; cf. 45:8). He had a theological understanding of God’s ways with His people.

Job’s proverbial story teaches the same lesson—that God uses tragedies to accomplish His good and wise purposes in the lives of His people. The book of Job is a great help in drawing together key doctrines that must inform our thinking about human suffering. From our insider perspective we see things that Job could not see as he was going through them. From the beginning we know what God was doing, but Job did not know. We know about the discussion between God and the devil and how God granted him specific permission to disrupt Job’s life. But Job knew none of this. He is going about his life as he always had when suddenly, through both natural disaster and moral evil his life is devastated.

Job did not deserve to suffer in this way. It was innocent suffering. I do not mean that he was sinless. Rather, I am pointing out that he did not do anything to deserve this. He did not get cancer because he

smoked or he did not get AIDS because he was promiscuous. He was seeking to live the way he knew to live and these tragedies came to him despite his best efforts to honor God.

His story confronts us with the questions that always arise in the wake of tragedy: “How can we trust God? Where was He? What are we to make of God?”

It is interesting to see how this line of questioning is addressed in the book of Job. Job of course confesses that the “Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord,” and he humbles himself in sackcloth and ashes. His first three friends show up and for seven days do a great thing by keeping their mouths shut. They are just with him. Here is a vital lesson for pastoral ministry—knowing when to speak and when not to speak. Most of the time in the immediate aftermath of tragedy it is better to say too little than too much.

Job’s three friends did well until they opened their mouths. When they did speak they revealed a very trite understanding of God and evil. Their theology was neatly wrapped up but it turned out to be patently false. They offered simplistic answers with a condemning spirit. Their thinking is summarized in Eliphaz’s comments in chapter 4:7–9:

Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off? Even as I have seen, Those who plow iniquity And sow trouble reap the same. By the blast of God they perish, And by the breath of His anger they are consumed.

He speaks for all of them that God brings good to the righteous and suffering to the unrighteous. Such was their theology.

This is a classic example of what not to say to a suffering person. Does God bring judgments on people for their sins? Yes, He does. Is all tragedy the result of sin? Yes, in the general sense that we live in a fallen world and there were no tragedies before sin. But it is dangerous at best to reason from that generality to any specific case. To do so with infallible certainty is foolish and to do so in the immediate wake of suffering is heartless.

Job responds to this with some very hard questions of God and tried to justify himself in ways that are not admirable. But the real point of the story begins to unfold in chapter 38 when God starts questioning Job. The Lord’s questions explode like theological cluster bombs on Job’s thinking. “Where were you?” “Who are you?” Job is humbled to the dust.

These rhetorical questions have their intended effect by bringing him to a deeper, healthier knowledge of God. Out of that deepened understanding Job says in chapter 42, “I have not known anything.” He learned that God alone is sovereign and blameless in all His ways.

In response to the question, “can we trust God?” Job’s wife says, “no, you cannot trust God. Curse him and die.” That is the way many people feel in the wake of tragedy. “If this is what God is like, I want

nothing to do with him. Why in the world would you trust a God that would allow this to happen to you?”

Job’s friends answered the question with a qualified “yes.” “Yes, you can trust God if you will start dealing honestly and directly with your problem and just buy into a cheap theology that says, ‘God always blesses those who try to do right and He always judges those that do not try to do right.’ So if you will admit that your suffering is a specific judgment of your specific sin, then you may trust God to bless you when you do good and give you trials only when you do not do good.”

But Job comes to a completely different answer. As he contemplates the question of God’s trustworthiness he concludes, “Yes, though I do not know where to find God at times, and though it seems at times that He is my enemy, He can be trusted in the face of inexplicable pain and suffering—especially, when you see Him for who He is and come to understand that you do not know nearly as much as you thought you knew.”

Can God be trusted in times of tragedy? Yes, particularly if you refuse to make the mistake of misrepresenting what faith looks like in times of tragedy. This is an important point for developing a theology that would be helpful in tragedy.

What does faith look like in the midst of horrific suffering and confusion? It is not the happy-go-lucky, glib kind of superficial expressions that we often see on the cover of glossy magazines and TBN. It is patently not that. Nor is it merely the positive mental attitude that many commend in the name of Christ. Faith, real faith, is built on certainties. And because of that, it is able to live with mysteries. It rests confidently on what it knows and waits humbly on God when confused by what it cannot understand. And sometimes that humble waiting upon God does not look very strong and it does not look very victorious. But it can be a rugged determination that refuses to curse God when some of your closest relations are saying to you, “curse God and die.” I like the way that John Piper put it. Sometimes true faith is nothing more than an “uncursing hope in an unfelt God.”

That is what Job had. This is also what we see in Jesus on the cross. “My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?” That was a real cry of discouragement and concern. But it was a cry to “My God.” He was crying out to God. It is a cry of faith, faith that does not look very victorious, faith that could be held up to ridicule by some who think that faith should always appear glitzy and with a broad smile. Job is a wonderful example of this but even more so is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Systematic Theology

A third suggestion concerns the work of systematic theology. There is no substitute for it. The longer I stay in the pastorate the more I recognize how relevant systematic theology is to ministry. Do not let anyone ever convince you that theology does not matter or that courses in systematic theology are unimportant.

Those who would pastor the church of Jesus Christ must develop a careful, rigorous systematic theology. Such discipline will help you minister the Word of God to God's people in a variety of life's circumstances. The pastor who does not have this will at best miss many opportunities and at worst, confuse and hurt people by misrepresenting God to them.

There are many important biblical doctrines. I will highlight just a few of the most essential ones for this subject.

Certainly you need to grasp and go deep into your study of the doctrine of sin. An appreciation of what the Bible says about sin will destroy all utopian myths. Such myths permeate our culture. We live in a world that seems always to be progressing and we are regularly told about things that are going to get better. We must not allow the dizzying advances in medicine and technology to blind us to the desperate reality of sin.

In Romans 3:10–20 Paul takes several Old Testament snapshots of sin and weaves them together into an imposing mosaic. Paul writes as if he is following the path of a spiritual tornado. To see the universality of sin and the devastation it has wreaked not on human nature alone but on all of creation is to be reoriented toward the problem of evil in the world. As John Gerstner so aptly put it, the problem is not so much the problem of pain but the problem of pleasure. Given what the Bible says about sin, why isn't this world filled with streets flowing with blood? It ought to be, in light of the wickedness of sin. But God, in his mercy and grace, restrains sin and sinners and we come to appreciate more of that grace and mercy only in the light of sin. Because of sin, tragedy and suffering are inevitable.

Second, develop a healthy doctrine of the devil. By healthy, I do not mean popular. Too much that is popularly believed about satan is not at all healthy. The devil is wicked. He is purely evil in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Think of how the Bible portrays him. He is the one who originates lies, who is a murderer, who comes to destroy. Think about the power of the devil. The Bible ascribes incredible power to him—power to ensnare, to make sick, to work miracles and even to kill. We must believe everything the Bible says about the devil and never forget him. But we must also remember that the devil is inferior to God. He is God's devil. He is like a dog on a leash. God can let him out and He can pull him back. So as we acknowledge his power we must not fall into dualism. The devil belongs to God.

Third, develop a doctrine of heaven and hell. People too often lose sight of eternity. We need a two-world view if we are going to live biblically. This world is not all that there is. We must constantly remind our people of this because all the advertisements and entertainment produced by our culture are designed to focus our attention exclusively on this world. The temporary nature of this world is kept out of view. People are bombarded with thoughts of getting every benefit and payoff here and now. But the Bible teaches about heaven and hell.

Along with this, develop a doctrine of judgment. Because God has designed us in His image, there is within us a desire for justice. This desire is right and it remains even in our fallen nature. It does not

always work itself out properly because of sin, but it is there. So we should be sensitive to the cry for justice that sometimes expresses itself in terms of “it’s not fair” or “it’s not right.” Such laments are too often quickly dismissed as self-centered protests (and they may well be only that). But the impulse that desires justice is a reflection of God who is Himself just and we ought to understand and teach a doctrine of justice and judgment that distinguishes the cry for justice from the desire for vengeance.

The former is right. The latter is wrong. Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” It can be a great comfort to those who have been tremendously mistreated to know that God will make things right. They should be urged to commit themselves to their faithful Creator who always will judge righteously (1 Peter 4:19).

Study and think clearly about the doctrine of conversion. What does it mean to be a real Christian? That sounds so simple in our day but, sadly, it is naïve to assume that everyone in our churches has a biblical view of this. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? How does one become one? Of what is a real Christian capable in the face of tragedy?

The reality of remaining sin in the life of every believer should make us cautious and gracious in our judgments of those who respond intemperately to trials. Job did not look like a model of faith while in the throes of suffering. What do faith and repentance look like in a fiery trial? Being clear on this will prevent us from encouraging unrealistic and unhealthy responses to suffering.

We must guard against stoicism, on the one hand. Some Christians equate keeping faith in the midst of suffering with maintaining a stiff upper lip. But a refusal to feel the pain of tragedy is superficial. God never calls us to that. There is a time to weep. If Christ calls us to do anything it is to be real and to respond realistically. He Himself did that. Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb. He wept and cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane. He visibly and audibly suffered on the cross. And He never tells us to be faithful by denying our emotions.

Stoicism is not the answer. But on the other hand, neither is an unbridled emotionalism where emotions and passions rule. We must guard against that. How do you do that? By remembering what we are and what we have in Christ. We must learn and encourage others to learn to focus on unseen realities, especially when suffering. 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 teaches this:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The most important issue is the doctrine of God. How does God fit into these things we experience as tragedies? Study and believe the sovereignty of God. What does the Bible say about His sovereignty? It

says that He is absolutely sovereign without any mitigation. That is offensive to many people, but it is a fact from the Scriptures. The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign in the details of life. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's will (Matthew 11:29).

The Bible also teaches that God is infinitely good. "You are good and do good" (Psalm 119:68). Goodness is an attribute both of His person and of His work.

The Bible teaches that God is full of wisdom. He is infinitely wise. That is, He always does the best things in the best way. After writing about the plan of God's gracious salvation for eleven chapters Paul erupts in praise of divine knowledge and wisdom (Romans 11:33). The more clearly we see what the Lord has done and the more deeply we will be amazed, like Paul, at His wisdom.

Christians are called to believe that God is always sovereign, wise and good at the same time. These attributes of God are foundational for faith in the midst of trial. Whether it seems like it or not, God is always sovereign, good, and wise and all of the temptations to respond in ways that would deny any of these characteristics are always wrong. Believers must fight against such temptations and remember and believe the truth about God.

Along with the character of God, study His will. How do you understand the will of God? If you have a simplistic view of the divine will, you will be hopelessly confused in trying to read the Bible and apply it to the world.

The Bible speaks of God's will as both secret and revealed. James Boyce, the principle founder of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has a very good section on the will of God in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. He makes some very nuanced arguments about how we should understand God's will as it's set before us in the Scripture. Whether or not one agrees with the details of Boyce's discussion his main point is absolutely critical. That is, one must recognize that God's will is both decretive as well as revealed. He has a will of decree and a will he has made known to us for is our duty.

Scripture speaks clearly that God's will, in the sense of His decree, cannot be broken. In Daniel 4:35 we see that King Nebuchadnezzar finally learned this. "All the inhabitants of earth are reputed as nothing, he does according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain his hand or say to him, 'what have you done?'" Job also learned this lesson and so he prayed, "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You" (42:2). In terms of His decree, God's will is going to be worked out always and infallibly.

In terms of what God has revealed for us to do, as summarized in His law, His will is often violated. In that sense, no one measures up to God's will at any time in this life in a perfect way. We are called to live our lives in accordance with His revealed will and it is by this will—His law—that we will ultimately be judged.

Without this two-fold understanding of God's will, you cannot come to a balanced perspective about

God's ways with us. It is His (revealed) will that we live perfectly. This does not happen in this world. It is also His (decreed) will that all of our imperfections, indeed every event in the world, work together for the good of His people and the glory of His Name.

Deuteronomy 29:29 is an important verse to remember when thinking of God's will. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." We live in the light of what God has commanded and we leave the secret things concerning His decree with Him.

All of these doctrines get their focus and come together in the doctrine of Christ. It is here that we need to live and from which we need to minister. Think through His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and His return. It is in Christ that we find all the other teachings of the Scripture culminating and being expressed in a way that gives us hope and meaning in the midst of and in the wake of real tragedy.

We can with confidence say that "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus knows what you are going through when you suffer. God knows what it is like to have a son die. He has experienced that. Christ knows what it is to be mistreated, to be subjected to moral evil in the world, to be unjustly treated. He has experienced these things.

And in His cross we are given the paradigm by which all tragedies in the world are to be evaluated. Was the crucifixion of Jesus the will of God? That is a question that should be asked of those who reject the idea that God can in no way will tragedies of life. The death of Jesus is the most atrocious, scandalous, heinous, unjust crime in all of human history. Nothing compares to what happened to Christ on the cross. If there is any event that should never have happened in terms of the laws of justice on a human level, it is the execution of Jesus Christ. Was that God's will? God says "You shall not murder." Men murdered Him, didn't they? Then His death was clearly a violation of God's revealed will.

But do we not also read time and again in Scripture how Jesus' death on the cross was the very purpose for which He came? He is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8) and "it pleased the Lord to bruise Him" (Isaiah 53:10).

So was the crucifixion of Jesus the will of God? The question cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." First, one must determine what aspect of God's will is in view. If the question is about God's secret will—His decreed will, then the answer is yes, infallibly. If, however, the question is about God's revealed will, then the answer is no.

Peter keeps both aspects in mind in his sermon at Pentecost. He says of Jesus, "Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). Peter tells his hearers that they have sinned, they have violated God's will by crucifying Jesus. They are guilty and accountable before God for the death of Jesus. But in another sense

God did this according to His own foreknowledge and predetermined purpose.

So where was God at the crucifixion of Jesus? Was he there? Absolutely He was there. Nor was He a mere bystander, He was orchestrating the events. God was doing His greatest work, redeeming people to Himself in an event that looked like a completely gratuitous tragedy. This becomes the paradigm by which we must measure every other tragedy in life. If God was doing His deepest work in the greatest tragedy of human history then we must be willing to believe that God is also doing great works in lesser tragedies of life. That is the hope that pastors must give their people. We must call people to look to Christ, to believe in the goodness of God in Christ, to see it, to live off of it, to taste it, to try to bring it into experience before tragedy and then to go on living on that truth in the midst of and in the wake of tragedy.

Out of all of these other truths grows the doctrine of providence. Just like the incarnation and the Trinity, so providence is a mystery. God has taught us that He is sovereign over the events of life but that does not in any way mitigate our responsibility for our actions. We must, therefore, live with the tension these truths produce because they are revealed. And the certainties that He has taught us about our faith gives strength to face the mysteries without despair.

Conclusion

Expect tragedies and tribulations to occur. Do not be surprised by them. Prepare for them because the Scripture says they are inevitable. Learn from them. Do not miss the lessons. There is much to be learned through suffering. In 2 Corinthians 1:8–10 Paul says that he was “burdened beyond measure, above strength”, so that he “despaired even of life.” And the reason that this happened to him (as he later came to understand) was so that he might learn not to trust in himself “but in God who raises the dead.” He is saying, “tragedy came to teach me to trust God.” Three chapters later he refers to those trials as light and momentary. In chapter 1 he says “I nearly died by them” but in chapter 4 he says they are light and fleeting, “working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (4:17). Tragedy prepares you for glory. Tragedy works in you the ability to experience greater glory. We may not understand exactly how this is so, but that is what Paul says.

Trials wean us away from the world. They lead us to develop greater desires for heaven. When we suffer losses we are forced to remember that the things which are seen are temporary and fading away. Such times direct our vision to the unseen realities that are eternal.

Through tragedies we discover sin that may lie deeply buried in our hearts. Trials have a way of bringing such sin to light. Moses was the meekest man in all the earth the Scripture says. And yet in the midst of tragedy, we see his passions sinfully displayed. Or think of Job. His patience is proverbial and yet in his story his impatience is starkly displayed. Tragedy exposes our remaining sin thereby helping us to see our need for repentance.

Respond pastorally to tragedies. People are not interested in nor do they need a lecture on theodicy when

they are awaiting the emergency room doctor's report or facing a fresh grave. Every pastor ought to develop and constantly refine an imminently biblical theodicy, but none should feel compelled to say everything at any one moment. When the opportunity to speak does come, speak honestly, wisely and lovingly. But speak with consideration to what the Larger Catechism calls "the necessity and capacity of your hearers."

Address people in terms of what they can handle and what they need. Jesus did not tell his disciples everything at once. On the night He was betrayed He said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). It is also instructive to note what Jesus did not say in Luke 13 when tragedies stemming from human malice and natural disaster were brought to His attention. He did not try to explain them. He did not try to defend God. Rather, He seizes the opportunity to call them to self-examination and repentance.

I love the Heidelberg Catechism. The first question and answer summarizes much of what I have tried to communicate in this article.

Question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

Answer: "That I am not my own but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my father in heaven."

To know and believe this is to be equipped to provide encouragement to any child of God when tragedy comes.

Notes:

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: MacMillan, 1962), 93.



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Do Something Extraordinary

Roger Ellsworth

And again He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men. And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.” And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, “Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!” (Mark 2:1–12).

We can summarize the message of these verses in this way: Jesus did something extraordinary when ordinary men took extraordinary measures to meet an extraordinary need.

There can be no doubt that the four men in this passage were dealing with an extraordinary need. As they made their way to hear Jesus preach, they came across a paralyzed man. How long had he been paralyzed? We cannot say. It would, however, be a dreadful thing to be in that condition for no more than a day. The impression we get is that he had been paralyzed for a very long time.

There also can be no doubt that these men took extraordinary measures. The mass of humanity around Jesus made it impossible for them to set the paralytic before Him. The situation seemed bleak, but they were not deterred. They carted their friend up to the roof, tore through two feet of earth, reeds and branches, and lowered the paralyzed man to Jesus.

Jesus responded to this extraordinary measure by doing a couple of extraordinary things Himself. He first forgave the man of his sins (v. 5). Then to show His critics, the scribes, that He indeed had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed the man of his paralysis (vv. 5–12).

Finally, it is clear that these four men were quite ordinary. They disappear from the stage of human history as quickly as they appeared without even having their names mentioned. They are forever

obscured in the sea of anonymity.

This passage opens the door for us to consider three vital truths.

We live in a time of *extraordinary* need

First, we may say that just as the four men in this account were faced with an extraordinary need with the paralyzed man, so are we. The need of our day is manifested in a couple of conspicuous ways. First, there is exceptional evil in general, and then there is exceptional evil and apathy in the church.

It is the second manifestation of the evil of our times that should most concern us, that is, the evil and apathy in the church. We don't like to admit this, but there is a very clear and definite link between the health of the nation and the health of the church. Jesus says His followers are the salt of the earth. Salt is a preservative. Rub it into meat and it will keep the meat from decaying. In like fashion, Christians are to have a preserving influence on society. Their presence should retard moral decay in their society.

But if the salt loses its saltiness, which is a very real possibility according to Jesus, then there is nothing to retard the moral decay of society. How does salt lose its saltiness? John R. W. Stott says:

Now, strictly speaking, salt can never lose its saltiness ... sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound, which is resistant to nearly every attack. Nevertheless, it can be contaminated by mixture with impurities, and then it becomes useless, even dangerous.

Stott then makes this application: "If Christians become assimilated to non-Christians and contaminated by the world, they lose their influence."

The sad fact is the modern church has not only lost much of her ability to influence society, but also shows that she has massively succumbed to society's influence. The impatience of the world with the whole idea of absolute truth is often within the ranks of the church herself. The sexual immorality that is so generally prevalent in society all too often crops up in the church, as does divorce. The addictions to pornography and alcohol so typical of society frequently rear their ugly heads in the church.

The divisions and bickering so apparent in society periodically blemish the church's witness. The raging tide of self-centeredness that runs through the heart of society often flows unabated through the church as members disregard calls to sacrificial service and focus on their own felt needs and desires. The consumer mentality of society has taken root in our churches as worshipers often come, not to worship the sovereign God, but to be catered to and entertained.

How we Christians need to recognize this! We so easily get caught up in bemoaning the conditions of our day and in pointing fingers of condemnation at wicked people and their wicked ways. Government is to blame! Education is to blame! Hollywood is to blame! The ACLU is to blame! But while the church points her finger of blame at others, God's finger is pointed squarely at her.

We will be helped at this point by calling to mind the captivity of the people of Judah in Babylon. The prophet Isaiah was enabled by the Spirit of God to see this captivity in advance and to vocalize the prayer that would be on the lips of the people of God during this time (Isaiah 63:16–64:12). It is fascinating that this prayer contains no references to the Babylonians at all. There in the captivity the people would recognize that they were in Babylon, not primarily because of the Babylonians, but because of themselves. They had lived for years in flagrant disobedience to the laws of God and had shown nothing but apathy toward God and spiritual concerns. That was the cause of their captivity. The Babylonians were nothing but instruments God chose to use to judge them for their sins. It was those sins the people focused on as they prayed:

You are indeed angry, for we have sinned—in these ways we continue; and we need to be saved. But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away, and there is no one who calls on Your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have consumed us because of our iniquities (Isaiah 64:5–7).

The church of today will never see revival until she learns from this prayer, stops blaming the Babylonians of our day, and starts looking to herself and her sins and judging them scripturally. That leads us to yet another truth, that is,

In times of *extraordinary* need, God has been known to do His *extraordinary* work of revival.

The four men who lowered the paralytic to Jesus witnessed extraordinary things as Jesus extended forgiveness and healing to him. And down through the centuries, the saints of God have, in times of extraordinary evil, seen God move in a extraordinary way. We call this extraordinary moving “revival.” The word means “back to life” or “back to vitality.”

Only God’s people can experience revival. It is the sovereign act of God in which He moves upon the hearts of His people and restores them to spiritual vitality after they have slipped into a lethargic state.

God has often done this in the life of the church. One of the greatest examples of God’s extraordinary work of revival came during the ministries of George Whitefield and John Wesley. Prior to this, England was in the most dreadful condition imaginable. In the first of his two remarkable volumes on the life of Whitefield, Arnold Dallimore documents the moral and spiritual darkness of that time. He cites “the uncontrollable orgy of gin drinking and the unwonted heartlessness” which often manifested itself in cruelty to animals, and “a deep-sea inhumanity” that had come over England. Crime was so prevalent that the authorities made 160 crimes punishable by death but the tide flowed on unabated. Dallimore writes:

The treatment of the insane, cruelties to children, the London mob—Sir Mob it called itself

—the incredible extent of gambling, the obscenity of the stage—“that sink of all corruption” as John Wesley termed it—these and similar aspects of English conditions might be depicted at length.

Conditions in the American colonies were not much better. Samuel Blair on New Londonderry offered this observation in the spring of 1740: “Religion lay, as it were, a-dying and ready to expire its last breath of life.”

Many considered the situation to be utterly hopeless, but God did His extraordinary work of revival. J. R. Green described the effects of this revival in England:

A religious revival burst forth ... which changed in a few years the whole temper of English society. The Church was restored to life and activity. Religion carried to the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education.

The revival that came to England and the American colonies through the ministries of Whitefield and Wesley is by no means an isolated incident. As many historical accounts of revival show, God has frequently done this extraordinary work. In his perceptive and helpful book, *Revival: A People Saturated with God*, Brian Edwards lists 57 major revivals from 1150 to 1972.

Revivals have not occurred often enough to be classified as ordinary, but they have occurred often enough for the people of God to know that the possibility of revival is not inconceivable. What does God’s extraordinary work of revival look like? What are its distinguishing characteristics? The following are some of the marks listed by revival historian Richard Owen Roberts:

- an intense spirit of conviction will be felt immediately
- pride and self-centered living will no longer be excused
- agony over sin will be so great that the thought of prolonging life in the midst of such wickedness will be intolerable
- the cross of Christ becomes truly precious
- long-standing habits of self-indulgence will be broken
- pastors will become broken
- confession of sin becomes the order of the day
- great interest in the Word of God
- prayer becomes pure delight
- agony for souls becomes prominent
- holiness becomes the prime object of life
- new converts are made without arm-twisting.

(Taken from Richard Owen Roberts’ book, *Revival*, published by International Awakening Press, Wheaton, Illinois.)

J. I. Packer strikes many of the same notes in these words:

We may list as marks of revival an awesome sense of the presence of God and the truth of the gospel; a profound awareness of sin, leading to deep repentance and heartfelt embrace of the glorified, loving, pardoning Christ; an uninhibited witness to the power and glory of Christ, with a mighty freedom of speech expressing a mighty freedom of spirit; joy in the Lord, love for His people, and fear of sinning

One or two of these marks could legitimately be considered extraordinary, but revival produces all of them. There can be no doubt, therefore, that revival deserves to be called *God's extraordinary work*. That brings us to another truth, which may be stated in this way:

God usually does His *extraordinary* work of revival by prompting ordinary people to take *extraordinary* measures.

The four men in Mark 2 resorted to an extraordinary measure with their friend. They regarded the situation as being so desperate and critical that it required something unusual. They knew a business-as-usual approach would not bring the healing the man so urgently needed. So they took an extraordinary measure that was consistent with their end, a measure that allowed them to get the paralytic to Jesus.

Revivals begin when the people of God recognize the exceptional need of their time, and so feel the burden of the times that they turn away from routine “churchianity” and give themselves to using extraordinary measures to seek revival.

All sorts of churches are using extraordinary measures these days. Super Bowl parties, 1000-foot-long banana splits, increasingly lavish pageants—these things seem to be the order of the day. But God has not promised to do His extraordinary work of revival when the church uses any extraordinary measures she desires, but rather when she uses the measures He has appointed in an extraordinary way.

Humble, fervent, repentant prayer is the means God delights to use in sending His extraordinary work of revival. Jonathan Edwards says of the Lord:

When He is about to bestow some great blessing on His Church, it is often His manner, in the first place, to so order things in His providence as to show His people their need of it, and to bring them into distress for lack of it, and so put them upon crying earnestly to Him for it.

We must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that normal praying produces revival. The means of prayer must be used in an extraordinary way. It is not just a matter of tacking this formula on the end of our prayers, “And, Lord, please send revival.”

Revival does not come by simply praying and talking about how desperately it is needed and how wonderful it would be. We have been doing that for years. Revival is most likely to come when God's people give themselves to prayer in an exceptional way. As Edwards himself would say, there must be explicit agreement, visible union and extraordinary prayer. God's people must agree that revival is needed and join together to seek it by taking prayer to uncommon levels. Extraordinary praying means praying much with an extraordinary burden and fervency at extraordinary times.

In these days of exceptional evil and apathy, the piercing question for each of us to ask is, "Am I doing anything of an extraordinary nature to seek God for a refreshing, cleansing work of revival? Or am I merely lamenting the evil of the day while excusing myself from extraordinary prayer?"

There is great encouragement for us on this matter of revival. If we were planning revival, we would probably have God bring it to one of the population and media centers of our day, using celebrities to do so. But God delights to use the humble and the ordinary. He usually sends His extraordinary work of revival to little people in little places who feel the need of the times and resort to extraordinary measures.

There is no need for us, then, to respond to the evil of the times by saying with a shrug, "There is nothing I can do." There is something every Christian can and must do, namely, give God no rest until He again makes His work and His people "a praise in the earth" (Isaiah 62:7).



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News

“What Ever Happened to Discipleship?”

A conference addressing this theme is planned for November 1–3, 2003 with keynote speakers Dr. Sam Tullock (Pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church, Wylie, Texas and History Professor at Collin County Community College) and Dr. Thomas J. Nettles (Professor of Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY). The conference will be hosted by Sovereign Grace Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. For more information contact Pastor David Goff at david.goff@att.net or call (405) 478-8208 or (405) 620-6904.

Heartland Baptist Church

A new sovereign grace Southern Baptist church has been launched in Oklahoma City, OK. Chris Humphreys, Vance Martin and Bill Stemmons will work alongside one another as elders of this new church start. For more information contact Chris Humphreys at 405-969-2226 or email Humphreys6@gbonline.com.



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Retreating to Rome: The New Battle Over Justification

[James W. Galyon](#)

When God initiated His covenant with Abraham, He declared, “I will make you a great nation.... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3). All the families of the earth will be blessed because of Abraham’s Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of Him, people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will sing out joyfully for all eternity, “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood” (Revelation 5:9). A question related to this wonderful truth, being raised in evangelical circles because of the influence of the “New Perspective on Paul” is, “How does one enter, and remain, in the covenant?” The answer to this question, from a theological standpoint, determines the nature of justification.

The Nature of Justification: An Old Battle

The controversy over selling indulgences, which provoked Martin Luther to post his *Ninety-Five Theses*, focused upon procuring favor with God by performing works of “satisfaction.” The Augustinian monk had come to the correct conclusion that the entire scheme, including penance, was unbiblical. He sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church, centering his enterprise around *sola fide*. Luther and the other Reformers insisted that the instrumental cause of justification is faith. Faith alone is sufficient for appropriating the benefits of the atonement and for having the righteousness of the Lord Jesus imputed to the believer. Grace is vital for justification in two aspects. First, redemption rests in the Lord Jesus Christ having the transgression of His people imputed to Him. Second, by His life of perfect obedience the Lord Jesus achieved the righteousness which is imputed to all who place their faith in Him. The transpiring of this great exchange, which happens at the time faith is exercised, results in God declaring the individual who trusts in the Lord Jesus as “just.” The Lord will affirm this declaration at the last judgment. This understanding of justification has been termed “forensic justification” because justification itself is a forensic, or legal, term. Its meaning is to be understood in the language of a court, the act of a judge acquitting a person accused of a crime. [1] This forensic declaration does not change the nature of the individual, just the status. The sinner is not inherently righteous at the time of this pronouncement, but rather intrinsically sinful. The declaration and blessings attending justification are on account of Christ alone. This is why Luther declared that the believer is “simultaneously just and a sinner.”

According to Roman Catholicism’s understanding of justification “grace” is essential in two aspects. First, atonement is required for the satisfaction of God’s justice. God graciously satisfied His justice in the death of Christ. Second, sinners must be made inherently righteous. This begins with baptism, viewed by Rome as the instrumental cause of justification. This sacrament supposedly results in both cleansing from original sin and the infusion of Christ’s righteousness into the soul. The one baptized is in a state of grace and must assent to, and cooperate with, this infusion in order to become inherently

righteous. Once achieving this righteousness, the individual is considered justified. Justification, however, is not necessarily permanent. One may fall from grace by committing mortal sin (labeled such because it “mortifies” justifying grace). A return to justifying grace is possible through the sacrament of penance, considered the second plank of justification for those who have shipwrecked their souls. This process involves confession to a priest, acts of contrition, receiving absolution, and performing works of satisfaction. Restoration to grace occurs once this procedure is completed. Ultimate justification will take place at the judgment. [2]

There is a vast difference between these two views. Luther called forensic justification, justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, the article upon which the Church stands or falls. He also declared, “If the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost.” [3] Calvin was no less emphatic in his conviction, exclaiming, “Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown.” [4] These two were correct in these assertions. Any attempt to redefine justification is a matter of grave concern.

The Nature of Justification: A New Battle

The works of Krister Stendahl, Ernst Käsemann, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and others have contributed to the ascension of the “New Perspective on Paul” within the evangelical realm. From this viewpoint God chose the Jews to be His covenant people and entrusted them with the covenant standard, the law. While the Jews were initiated into this covenant by God’s grace, they were responsible to maintain their status as the people of God by observing the law. [5] The Jews were awaiting the Messiah, the One who would ensure that the righteous people of the covenant would be vindicated while their enemies, pagan Gentiles, would be judged. Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be the One, did not meet these expectations. Instead He inaugurated the new covenant and included the Gentiles and those who were unrighteous (tax collectors, prostitutes, etc.). He claimed that all those who believe His message and receive His way of salvation are made part of the covenant. Not only were the “unclean” invited to join the covenant family, but the Temple religion was also eradicated. Rituals and restrictions were no longer necessary. The Jews, while not holding to works righteousness, rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. They could not accept His new and inclusive teaching, so they rejected it and retained their adherence to the old covenant. Christians, on the other hand, believed Jesus to be the Messiah. They accepted the new, inclusive message and lived with the understanding that because of Christ’s sacrifice at the cross the old covenant requirements were no longer binding.

The apostle Paul, therefore, did not view the Jews as advocates of works righteousness. His contention with them was that they refused to accept the inclusiveness of the new covenant. The apostle’s antagonism against the “works of the law” centered on a dispute over cultural differences in cultural practice between Jews and Gentiles, such as circumcision and dietary restrictions. It was not a contention with Hebraic attempts to meet God’s standards to attain salvation. The real question surrounding justification from the “New Perspective,” then, has to do with the identity of covenant members rather than the issue of how an individual receives redemption. N. T. Wright declares that

evangelicals who read St. Paul's work on justification through the lens of Luther and the Reformation "may actually lose sight of the heart of the Pauline gospel." [6] He believes justification, as understood by the early Church, pertained to "God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people.... In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church." [7] He adds,

Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian, or attains to a relationship with God.... Within its first-century context, it has to do quite obviously with the question of how you define the people of God; are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way? [8]

For Wright it is possible to identify a member of the covenant because they wear the "badge" of faith. Someone is not received into the covenant through the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ imputed through the instrument of faith, but rather someone is already a member of the covenant and simply recognized as being so because they have faith. Covenant status is maintained by keeping the law, and the member who does so will one day be declared "just."

Attempting to retain traditional Protestant language, Wright maintains justification is a "present declaration" that "constitutes all believers as the single people, the one family, promised to Abraham (Gal. 2.14–3.29; Rom. 3.27–4.17), the people whose sins have been dealt with as part of the fulfilled promise of covenant renewal (Jer. 31.31–34).... Justification is thus the *declaration* of God, the just judge, that someone is (a) in the right, that their sins are forgiven, and (b) a true member of the covenant family, the people belonging to Abraham," then adds, "It doesn't describe *how* people *get in* to God's forgiven family; it *declares that they are in*. That may seem a small distinction, but in understanding what Paul is saying it is vital." [9] So, how do people get in to God's forgiven family? Wright claims that at the cross the Lord acted decisively to manifest His covenant faithfulness, to rescue His people from their iniquities, and to usher in the new covenant, [10] yet he never makes it clear when an individual is actually brought into the family of God.

Covenant Entrance: Baptism

While Wright's position is nebulous, there is no question with some who have been influenced by "New Perspective" thinking as to how covenant entrance is obtained. Steve Schlissel, in an address given at the Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, asserts that baptism is the entryway to the covenant. He declares, "We should realize that the people of God are not few but many, and everyone who is baptized is to be regarded as belonging to Christ with obligations to live in accordance with the covenant in which he has been placed by the grace of God." [11] Note that Schlissel speaks of one having "been placed" in the covenant "by the grace of God." No doubt that those included in the new covenant are there due only to the grace of God. However, Schlissel thinks this of anyone who has been baptized. Does he have a Roman Catholic understanding of baptism? Does he view baptism as a replacement for faith as being the instrumental cause of justification? It seems so. He laments Southern Presbyterians being like Baptists in

that,

They don't believe that their children are saved by the grace of God. They are waiting for a decision—some sort of cogent, confessable experience of personal regeneration in transition from death to life—because they believe that their children are born in death. They have bought into the Baptist way of thinking, and it is an abomination. [12]

He speaks of Baptists and Southern Presbyterians awaiting for a cognitive act, a decision, in the life of their children. This act, this decision, is placing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, Baptists and Southern Presbyterians are evangelicals. They hold to justification by faith alone. Justification is not received through physical birth or by baptism (John 1:12). Evangelicals understand that their children are born dead in trespasses and sins (Romans 5:12), and that they are not brought into the family of God unless, and until, they are awakened by the Spirit of God and granted faith to trust the Lord Jesus alone for salvation (Ephesians 2:1–9). The seed of Abraham are known, not by the sign or seal of the covenant, but by faith (Romans 4:9–25; 9:6–8, 30–33; Galatians 3:6–9). Is Schlissel denying this? Yes, it appears so, and it also seems that he is not the only one within the Reformed camp to take this stand. Steve Wilkins, another Auburn Avenue conference speaker, goes so far as to speak of baptismal regeneration. He declares,

Reading the Bible in this way, and in this sense, we can speak of baptismal regeneration.... By our baptism we have been reborn in this sense—having died with Christ, we've been raised with Him.... Because by baptism—by baptism—the Spirit joins us to Christ. Since He is the elect one, and the church is the elect people, we are joined to His body, we therefore are elect. Since He is the justified one, we are justified in Him. [13]

Notice in Wilkins' sequence that election is preceded by, and contingent upon, baptism. Where the doctrine of justification is concerned, this is a return to Rome.

Rome, nonetheless, must be given credit for its affirmation of such doctrines as the virgin conception and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead. Douglas Wilson, who has helped many with his fine works dealing with family life and his many sharp insights in *Credenda Agenda*, asserts shockingly that a "theological liberal...should be considered covenantally a Christian, even though he denies the virgin birth, the substitutionary death of Christ, the resurrection, and the final judgment. He is a Christian in just the same way that an adulterous husband is a husband." [14] Lest there be any doubt as to Wilson's avowal, he adds, "And when a liberal bishop says that Christ was merely a man, he is more than wrong. He is antichrist. But he does belong to that which he betrays. Judas was this kind of bishop (Acts 1:20)." [15] Wilson presses his point even further, claiming that the "savage wolves" which molest the sheep actually belong to the fold:

What does a faithful shepherd do with a savage wolf? He fights. And where do savage wolves appear? "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in

among you, not sparing the flock. Also *of your own selves* shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30). So, are these men in the covenant? Of course they are, which is why they are so dangerous. [\[16\]](#)

Wilson is correct in stating that a liberal bishop who denies the deity of the Lord Jesus is antichrist, but his assertion that such an individual belongs to that which he betrays is absolutely erroneous. The apostle John, in his first epistle, makes it clear that the one who is “antichrist” is not of God (1 John 4:1–6). In his second epistle the apostle John not only warns that those who deny the deity and humanity of the Lord Jesus are antichrist, but that those who even greet an individual who does not affirm the biblical teaching regarding the Lord Jesus participate in his wickedness (2 John 7–11). Judas followed the Lord Jesus with his feet for three years, but never with his heart. He was the “son of perdition” (John 17:12) whose unregenerate heart, a heart which had never been cleansed (John 13:10–11), was manifested by its greed. Judas’ greed led him to steal (John 12:6) and to betray the King of Glory for a mere thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14–15). Judas was a member of the twelve, but never a member of the covenant (1 John 2:19). If he had any sort of faith, it was the faith of devils (James 2:14–20). One is brought into the covenant by grace alone through faith alone on account of the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Covenant Keeping: Maintaining Justification

Ironically, the same circle advocating that apostates are within the covenant because of baptism is also asserting that justification must be maintained. Schlissel inquires, “Is the law ‘repugnant’ to how we stay right with God?,” and then goes on to assert in discussing Psalm 78, “The keeping of the commands of God is identified as putting trust in God; it is contrasted with forgetting God and disobeying God. To be in the gospel, then, is to be in the law of God.” [\[17\]](#) Norman Shepherd, who is linked to Schlissel and Wilson, declares that justification must be maintained by obedience. He writes:

Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments...are necessary for continuing in the state of justification, good works, works done from true faith, according to the law of God...are nevertheless necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification. [\[18\]](#)

Does one “stay right” with God through personal obedience? Is one’s justification contingent upon personal obedience? No! One is kept in a right relation with God through the completed work of the Lord Jesus which has been applied to the individual. Justification is not ongoing. As the Apostle Paul writes, “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.... Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Romans 5:1, 9). The apostle speaks of justification in the past tense even while discussing the future judgment. The apostle later assures the Romans (see 8:29–30), and all saints, that those whom have been “justified” have also been “glorified” (note again the past tense). Shall the transgressions, the law breaking, of the elect be held against them? Must they “stay right” with God through their obedience? Certainly not! This is why St. Paul writes, “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It

is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:33–35a). Nobody can bring a charge against the people of the covenant because the Lord Jesus has died for them and makes intercession for them. Obedience does not merit justification, but it does flow from the regenerate hearts of those who have been justified. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is not to be thought as a license for sin (1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Titus 2:11–14; Jude 4). As the Reformers declared, "Justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone." Or, as St. Paul puts it, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8–10). The concern about antinomianism shown by Schlissel, Shepherd and others should also be shown by other evangelicals. A disregard for the law of God is a massive problem within the Church in our own day. A disregard for the law, however, is not to lead to a disregard for the true nature of the gospel.

Covenant Entrance: The Nature of Evangelism

If baptism is the way one enters into the covenant then the nature of evangelism is altered drastically. Instead of proclaiming the gospel and inviting hearers to make a cognitive decision to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and to turn from their sins, one will focus upon the baptismal fount. Schlissel argues that the great evangelistic expansion of the nineteenth century, based upon the principle of individual conversion, is in fundamental opposition to the "communal [or what we would call covenantal] form of expression." [19] Schlissel asserts, "Western Christendom was not built up by the method of individual conversions," but rather by rulers ordering their subjects to accept Christianity. [20] By virtue of their baptisms, irrespective of personal faith, these subjects were included in the covenant. What Schlissel has somehow managed to forget is that Western Christendom, in being built by the method of "communal conversions" and paedobaptism, was erected upon a faulty foundation. Western Christendom was blinded by superstition during the Dark Ages until God released the light of the gospel through the revival known as the Reformation.

Serious questions have to be posed in response to this position. While Jesus taught the masses, was He only concerned with them? When Jesus stopped in Samaria at the well, did He look for the "city mayor" or was He concerned about the conversion of a rather insignificant individual residing in an inconsequential community? Certainly others were converted in the region, but it was not because Jesus began with the communal leadership. This account in John 4 does not include any discussion of baptism although Jesus and the apostles certainly practiced baptism. Instead the inspired Word of God records that the Samaritans "believed" (John 4:39–42). Nothing is mentioned of baptism. If baptism were the entryway into the covenant, then why does the apostle Paul declare, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel," and "It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"? (1 Corinthians 1:17, 21) Nowhere does Paul attach a "group" or "community" and its baptism to the gospel. Instead he relates the gospel to "those who believe," to individuals. Even when Paul preached to the masses, the Scriptures record that the message was believed by individuals (see Acts 17:34, for instance). Baptism is often recorded as a result of the preaching that takes place, but it

always follows after individuals have believed the gospel. Individuals who place faith in the Lord Jesus are placed supernaturally with other believing individuals into a family, a community, a holy nation (1 Peter 2:7–10). This supernatural union is evidenced in the life of the local church.

Wright, in his concern about the importance of Christian community and the assault of rampant individualism states:

The gospel creates, not a bunch of individual Christians, but a community. If you take the old route of putting justification, in its traditional meaning, at the centre of your theology, you will always be in danger of sustaining some sort of individualism. This wasn't so much of a problem in Augustine's, or even in Luther's, day, when society was much more bound together than it is now. But both in Enlightenment modernism and in contemporary post-modernism, individualism has been all the rage, with its current symbols of the personal stereo and the privatization of everything. Tragically, some would-be presentations of the gospel" have actually bought into this, by implying that one is justified or saved first and foremost as an individual.... *Of course* every single human being is summoned, in his or her uniqueness, to respond personally to the gospel. Nobody in their right mind would deny that. But there is no such thing as an individual" Christian. Paul's gospel created a community; his doctrine of justification sustained it. Ours must do no less. [\[21\]](#)

While one might disagree with Wright's assessment regarding the position of justification in one's theology, he is certainly correct in his assertion that "there is no such thing as an 'individual' Christian." Many evangelicals, particularly Baptists, shirk from Cyprian's comment that "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." Cyprian rightly understood the biblical concept of , "fellowship." Those who are converted are brought into a new family, a new community. Southern Baptists should lament the fact that our evangelistic practices have been those of which Wright speaks. We generally have a very distorted concept of ecclesiology, at least in practice. We now boast 16,247,736 total members in our convention, yet only 5,839,945 manage to attend worship. This does not mean, however, that evangelism is to be "communal" rather than "individualistic." Rather, it must always be remembered that the Great Commission is a command to "make disciples," and that disciples are made within the confines of the community of God—the church.

Conclusion

Wright claims that the "New Perspective" understanding of justification is extremely important because it "impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong to a different table." [\[22\]](#) Evangelicals are certainly to be concerned about the ecumenical task insofar as there is agreement upon the fundamentals of the faith. Justification is a fundamental. To let go of justification is to let go of the gospel and return to Rome.

Notes:

¹See Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1962), 86–7; 111–15; *Doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, ed. C. Gausewitz (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956), 154; John Calvin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Scholars Press, 1975), 165.

²John F. Clarkson, John H. Edwards, William J. Kelly, John J. Welch, translators, *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1955), 230–42.

³Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. John Prince Fallows, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), xvi.

⁴John Calvin, “On Reform (Reply to Letter by Cardinal Sadoletto to the Senate and People of Geneva),” in *Writings*, 95. See also John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply with an Appendix on the Justification Controversy*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 97–112.

⁵See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).

⁶N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said. Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113.

⁷*Ibid.*, 119.

⁸*Ibid.*, 120.

⁹N. T. Wright, “The Shape of Justification.” Accessed at <http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/shape.html>.

¹⁰N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 458.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Schlissel, “Covenant Reading.” Lecture delivered at the Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, 2002.

¹³Steve Wilkins, “The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant.” Lecture delivered at the Auburn Avenue

Pastor's Conference 2002. It is interesting, from an historical point of view, that Wilkins stated this in a lecture entitled "The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant." From the perspective of Jonathan Edwards, the Half-Way Covenant was unbiblical and led to several problems within the congregation at Northampton.

¹⁴Douglas Wilson, "Judas Was a Bishop," *Credenda Agenda: Presbyterion* vol. 13, no. 2. Accessed at <http://www.credenda.org/issues/13-2presbyterion.php?type=print>.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Steve Schissel, "Covenant Reading."

¹⁸Norman Shepherd, *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance and Good Works*. Accessed at <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/00000076.htm>

¹⁹Steve Schissel, "Covenant Hearing." Lecture delivered at the Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, 2002.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 157–58.

²²N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 158.



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Book Reviews

Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion? by Bruce Waltke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pb., vii + 187pp. ISBN 0-8028-3974-6. \$15.00/£10.99.

Reviewed by [Ray Van Neste](#)

Bruce Waltke has done the church a great service in the writing of this accessible, pastoral and theologically sound book. It is heartening in this book, like some other recent books, to see a prominent scholar address a key pastoral need in the church bringing to bear his scholarly insights in a manner accessible to all.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section is entitled “God’s Will: A Pagan Notion” wherein Waltke argues the basic point that seeking to “find God’s will” is not a biblical notion but one that is very common in pagan religions, particularly in the texts which are preserved from ancient Near Eastern religions—texts with which he is quite familiar from his research in Old Testament studies. This may sound like an overstatement, but Waltke is correct. With poignant anecdotes Waltke illustrates the typical way church members go about seeking to discern God’s will and shows how clearly these practices line up with pagan divination which is clearly forbidden in Scripture (cf. Deuteronomy 18:10). When a group of people in our church studied through this book, practically everyone winced (as I did) at the discussion of these pagan practices realizing that each one had done some of these things in the past. As Waltke states:

God is not a magic genie. The use of promise boxes, or flipping open your Bible and pointing your finger, or relying on the first thought to enter your mind after a prayer are unwarranted forms of Christian divination (12) ... I think “laying out the fleece” is generally a lazy man’s way to discern the will of God. It requires no work, little discipline, and almost no character development (51).

Waltke’s argument is that we are seeking shortcuts to divine the mind of God, when God calls us to develop a relationship with Him and to grow in wisdom. However, this takes time, effort and struggle, and we want shortcuts. Waltke states, “The reliance on signs from God is the mark of an immature person” (12). Indeed, as Waltke points out well, special revelation for guidance was not even the norm for apostolic guidance in the New Testament. We typically find the apostles and others busy about the task of spreading the gospel and when special revelation for guidance comes it was not being sought. We, too, are to be about the task. If God intervenes with something dramatic to shift our direction, fine. If He does not, fine.

This initial section is a real strength. Waltke does not simply say, “People are pursuing God’s will in wrong ways,” but shows how far we have strayed by comparing typical practices with pagan religions

contemporary with Old Testament Israel.

Part Two of the book is entitled “God’s Program of Guidance” wherein Waltke argues that, “The Lord provides a six-point program of supervised care in directing His elect” (59). Waltke stresses that the order of the steps is crucial (see for example page 59), so the six steps in order are:

1. Read Your Bible
2. Develop a Heart for God
3. Seek Wise Counsel
4. Look For God’s Providence
5. Does This Make Sense?
6. Divine Intervention

A chapter is devoted to each of these steps. The chapters are engagingly written and full of well-used Scripture quotations. Personal anecdotes are also well used to illustrate the concepts.

The formulation of these six steps is useful. Waltke is clear about the reading of Scripture being foundational to all else. Before we can hope to understand God’s will for us in specific situations we must be learning and living God’s will as directly stated in Scripture. Once we are reading the Scriptures, we are, over time, to develop a heart for God, and, as God shapes our hearts after His, we can follow the promptings of our hearts (cf. Psalm 37:4). This can easily be abused so Waltke provides some critical questions in evaluating the desires of one’s heart. Subsequently, we ought to seek wise counsel (mature believers, church leaders, etc.). After this we are to watch for God’s providence in our daily circumstances to see if God is leading a certain way. Then we employ sound judgement asking if this path makes good sense, and lastly we are to remain open to God’s sovereign interventions. These do not often happen, but can happen; and we should be open to them.

One of the strengths of Waltke’s formulation, in my opinion, is that it is rooted in objective revelation, but also has a place for a subjective element, noting still that the subjective elements must always be under the control of Scripture. The key weakness, I think, is in the insistence on a certain order for the elements. Waltke is quite firm on the order as seen in the way they are introduced:

The Lord provides a six-point program of supervised care in directing His elect. *The order of those six steps is very important.* You cannot start in the middle or skip to the end. If you want to be clear on God’s guidance for your life, you must begin with the first step, then move to the second. *There is a prioritized sequence for the way He guides His saints, and it begins on the basis of Holy Scripture* (59, italics original).

Of course insistence on the priority of Scripture is crucial, but after that the order is not always so clear in my mind. Yet, Waltke clearly argues that wise counsel comes only “*after* guidance from our own desires” (104, italics original). The point he goes on to make is right—we cannot simply live based on others’ relationship with God. We must develop our own relationship with God. Certainly this is a true

and important point. However, I do not think this means that the order of discernment always flows in this order. Even as I develop a heart for God there is still the potential for self-deception, and I must be very careful about pitting my desires against a significant array of contrary advice from wise counselors, particularly those charged with the oversight of my soul (cf. the comments on pages 119–120). Rather than listing the categories in a strict order, I would prefer to weigh them with the objective ones receiving more weight—Scripture trumping all.

This critique, however, is more directed at how the book can be taken than what the author intends. Waltke primarily stresses the importance of knowing the Scriptures (note the Afterword on the importance of theology!) and the development of a heart of wisdom by living under those Scriptures in relation to God. I think this is the best book on the will of God that I have seen. It is engagingly written and would make a good group study, as was done in my home church.



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Letters

Dear brethren at Founders Ministries,

Greetings to you in the precious name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! We have received your six books and one CD two days back. Thank you very much. I enjoy your spiritual message and articles and some of our brothers (HERMON Reading Room visitors) also appreciated your messages. We praise the Lord for your services. We are praying for your ministry. Please help us in praying for our HERMON Reading Room ministry. If possible, try to kindly send whatever free materials might be useful for our ministry. Once again, we express our exclusive greetings to you. We uphold and remember you in our valuable prayers.

Thanking you,
P.D., India

Dear Founders:

Forgive the long email but you have really blessed me and I wanted to share.

I have been a lifelong Southern Baptist (44 years). I am currently a member in a fairly large Southern Baptist church and my Sunday School class is reading *The Purpose Driven Life* this summer. Over the past year, I have been studying reformed theology because someone challenged me on my position regarding man's free will as the determining factor in man's salvation. After prayerful study, I came to the conclusion that the Bible in fact teaches the doctrines of grace as espoused in reformed theology—God is sovereign in salvation and man is not. Our class study came right on the heels of my personal study and frankly, has been causing me a little bit of despair over my belonging in a Southern Baptist church.

Our class study has led us into the areas of predestination, election and regeneration. I have been quite the “lone ranger” in class and it appears that I am the only person that holds to reformed doctrines of grace. The leader has continually suggested that I should read the latest *Baptist Faith and Message* to discover what Baptists believe in an effort, I think, to dismiss my views as being at odds with Southern Baptist doctrine. One of the class meeting outlines was entitled, “why Southern Baptist do not make good five point Calvinists.” Yesterday was just as bad when we discussed regeneration. Again, the leader held up the *Baptist Faith and Message* and encouraged us to get a copy and read it and to know what Baptists believe. I left feeling like I might need to find another Sunday School class because reformed theology was apparently an anathema to most folks in class.

I was really beginning to doubt whether I belonged in the Southern Baptist church at all. But, then it dawned on me that perhaps historical Southern Baptists did adhere to reformed theology and that over the course of time and with the rise in dispensational theology and the ever-increasing stress placed on the autonomy of man to make choices that a shift had occurred in Southern Baptist doctrine. So I did an internet search and found your site with its wealth of information and was so blessed—you absolutely can't imagine. It was a real blessing to read sermons of the founders of the denomination and to find they clearly embraced reformed theology. (I still need to figure out where this apparent shift towards Arminianism came from and will study it further).

I had to pass along your site to the entire class. I am not a fish out of water! Reformed theology is not at all at odds with Southern Baptist doctrine and maybe class members will take the time to read the sermons and articles contained on your website to discover that Southern Baptists can hold to the great truths of reformed theology that the Bible teaches.

Thank you so much!
via email

Response from the editor:

Thank you for your note. It is encouraging to hear that the Founders website has been a blessing to you. You might actually take a peek at the *Baptist Faith and Message* for the sake of your Sunday School teacher. Though it is not a great confession of faith, it does have a pretty good heritage. The preface refers to the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, which was written in the nineteenth century. In the *BF&M* there is an article (#5, I think) entitled, "God's purpose of Grace." It has a clear, albeit, not very full, statement on unconditional election. The paragraph on regeneration in the article on salvation also affirms the priority of regeneration to repentance and faith. Since your teacher has such high regard for the *BF&M*, it might help to show him exactly what it says. There is an excellent article on Article 5 by Tom Nettles It is available on our website—I think a link is on the main page. Tom's book, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, is the best treatment on the issue of how Southern Baptists lost their commitment to the doctrines of grace.

Thanks again for writing. May God bless your labors.

In Christ,
Tom Ascol

Dr. Ascol,

I want to thank you for all that you have done through Founders Ministries to provide the opportunity for me to participate this summer in the internship program at Northside Baptist Church. The summer

months afforded many wonderful learning experiences. I have greatly benefited through receiving instruction from pastors Hal Wynn and Paul Stith, in regard to my future ambitions and where I feel the Lord is leading me. Not to mention times spent discussing theology, church structure, and various other topics. I have definitely gained a more complete understanding of what it means to be a preacher of God's Word as I have worked through the online course with D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on "Preachers and Preaching." I have wrestled with my calling and the task at hand, feeling both inadequate to complete the work and also a great desire to use the gifts that I believe God has given me. This year was my first time attending the Founders Conference, and being in the company of so many godly men, hearing such great expositions both humbled me and encouraged me as I seek to follow God's call upon my life. I was also fortunate enough to attend the Founders Youth Conference for the first time as a counselor. I had been previously as a youth, but having now grown in my faith and coming to understand God's Word and the Doctrines of Grace in a much richer way, I was able to realize how very different the camp is in comparison to other youth camps, and appreciate the proper focus on God's Word during the worship times. I am also very grateful for the financial provision you have made to help support me as I embark along this path of preparation. God has certainly used you to provide for my needs. May God continue to bless Founders Ministries and your church as you seek to stand for the Truth of God's Word and seek God's glory in all the earth. Thank you so very much!

In His Faithfulness,
L.B.

Dear Dr. Thomas K. Ascol,

Greetings in Him whose mercies never fail! I want to thank you for assisting me in the great work of reformation here and especially in the context of my ministry here [Philippines]. Thank you very much for your book the ministry sent me. It is indeed our (my) primary concern to *Reclaim the Gospel and Reform Churches*. I'm so encouraged to be in the ministry with the help you are providing me especially as we are suffering from perennial currency devaluation, political and economic uncertainties. Life is really difficult here. My passion is to learn and teach and preach God's Word, and my essential need is really deep and quality books like those that this ministry is publishing. As a pastor-teacher, this is my prayer and longing. I know that the Lord will take care of the rest and I have to do my best.

Your lives and Founders Ministries are impacting my life here.

Reclaimer and Reformer,
Pastor G, Philippines

Dear Founders Ministries,

I would just like to take a minute to thank you for providing the “Preaching and Preachers” course this summer. Never before have I thought so deeply about the office of a preacher and the biblical approach to expositing a text. God has used this course to reaffirm His call on my life to full-time ministry and I know preaching will be involved in this call. If I were to say I know exactly where God is calling me, I would be lying, but I take great comfort in knowing it is all in His hands and I am sure this course will be of great value in the future.

I am taking a homiletics course this semester, as is required for my major. With the knowledge given to me prior to this course through “Preaching and Preachers,” I will be able to use this Homiletics course to fine-tune approaches to exposition rather than focus on mannerisms or alliterations ... It is great to know what is truly essential before I am taught the things which are of lesser importance. I pray God will continue to use Founders Ministries to affect the lives of many individuals as He is using it to help me grow in my Christianity.

For His Glory,
F.A.



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