

# The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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**Ernest C. Reisinger**  
1919–2004

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Cover Portrait of Ernie Reisinger (1919–2004): Designed by Robert Nettles.

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# The Founders Journal



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# Editorial Introduction

*Thomas K. Ascol*

The human instrument that God used to establish what is now Founders Ministries was Ernie Reisinger. He is the one who had the vision and burden to see a conference established that would be based on the doctrines of grace and geared toward pastors and church leaders. It was at his invitation that six men met with him twenty-two years ago to plan the first Founders Conference. To the very end of his life, Ernie remained very interested in and supportive of the work of Founders Ministries. Even after his physical health prevented his active participation in most of our efforts, his counsel was sought and willingly given.

This issue of the *Founders Journal* is dedicated to the memory of Ernie. He is the one who proposed the beginning of this journal in 1990 and served as its Associate Editor until his death. All of the articles in this issue are written by men who have benefited from the life and ministry of Ernie Reisinger. The topics addressed are those that were emphasized by Ernie in his preaching and writing.

Fred Malone served as an Associate Pastor with Ernie at North Pompano Baptist Church in Pompano Beach, Florida. His article on law and gospel addresses a subject that was at the very heart of Ernie's understanding of the Bible. Tom Nettles met Ernie on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary during the "Boyce Project" in the late 1970s. Tom writes on one of the most pastorally important issues that Ernie regularly stressed: assurance of salvation. Matthew Allen co-authored several books with and became a valued friend to Ernie over the last several years. His article on confessional Christianity captures the appreciation of good confessions that Ernie demonstrated throughout his ministry. Joe Nesom served with Ernie on the Founders Board. He writes on biblical evangelism, a passion in Ernie's life. Ray Van Neste's book reviews also reflect concerns that Ernie emphasized: a concern for covenantal theology and love for children.

My opening article is adapted from the address given at the memorial service for Ernie at Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral. Many of Ernie's books and other writings are available on the Founders Ministries website ([www.founders.org](http://www.founders.org)). May the burdens of his heart for the revival and advance of true Christianity be shared by all who read the following pages. ☺

# Remembering Ernest Reisinger

*Thomas K. Ascol*

On May 31 of this year, the day set aside to remember those who have died in service to the United States of America, Ernest C. Reisinger went to be with his Lord. In the language of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he often quoted, he finally crossed that “river that has no bridge.”

Ernie was born November 16, 1919 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Death came to him in a Ft. Myers, Florida hospital on Memorial Day after an early morning heart attack. He is survived by His wife of 66 years, Mima Jane, his son, Donald and his wife Barbara, his brother John Reisinger of Pennsylvania, his sister Grace Hooper of Delaware, six grandchildren, fourteen great grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren. He was preceded in death by a brother, Donald Reisinger.

The first time I saw Ernie Reisinger was twenty-four years ago on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. He had a book in his hand, and was giving it away. He was at that time pastor of North Pompano Baptist Church on the east coast of Florida, and the book he was handing out was James P. Boyce's *Abstract of Systematic Theology*. From 1979–1982, the church he served gave away about twelve thousand copies of that book to seminary students and graduates. Many more copies since that time have been distributed.

That first memory of him in many ways epitomizes Ernie's life. He loved good books, and he loved preachers, especially young preachers. So he thought it a life well-spent to invest significantly in both. I am one of untold hundreds of ministers that have been greatly helped and influenced by Ernie Reisinger. He challenged my thinking on several important teachings of God's Word. He was willing constructively to criticize my life and ministry at several points. In the providence of God, he is one who recommended that Grace Baptist Church consider calling me to be their pastor 18 years ago.

Ernie introduced me to good books and authors—especially to the Protestant and Reformed heritage. Through his work with the den Dulk Christian Foundation, the Christian Gospel Foundation, the Banner of Truth and Founders Ministries he was involved in promoting the recovery of what is best and most biblical from that heritage. He wanted to see the truth of God's Word that our forefathers believed and taught reestablished in modern churches. There is no way to calculate how many thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Christian books Ernie distributed in his lifetime. I do not know if I have ever met anyone who knew Ernie very well who had not been given a book by him.

One of his favorite verses was Psalm 68:11, “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it.” He saw himself as part of that great company and encouraged every Christian, as he put it in a little pamphlet, “to be a publisher” of God’s truth. Everyone who loves the Lord is surely able and ought to be willing to distribute gospel literature.

When one thinks of the many books and articles that he wrote, the number of churches that he helped start or strengthen, the countless pastors and missionaries that he has encouraged along the way, and the number of people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ through his witness, one might be tempted to step back and say, “What an incredible life!” But Ernie Reisinger’s life cannot be summarized simply in terms of his accomplishments or personal accolades. If a person stops and considers the real story—the story behind the story—he will not primarily be impressed with an incredible life. Because the real story of Ernie Reisinger

is not the story of a great man. It is the story of a great God—a great Savior who has great grace on great sinners.

Ernie’s life is an illustration of the matchless grace and power of Jesus Christ. His life’s verse was Galatians 6:14, “But God forbid that I should glory except in the cross

## **But God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ... (Galatians 6:14)**

of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Several years ago Ernie told me that he never preached on that verse. It was his prayer, but he was hesitant to make it his text in a sermon. Whatever his reasons were, they had nothing to do with any hesitancy on his part to study or understand this verse. We talked about it on more than one occasion. He thought and meditated on it over the course of his Christian life. It was his verse.

I think it is a fitting verse to consider in this attempt to honor the life and memory of this dear friend, mentor, grandfather, father and husband. As the Apostle Paul draws his magisterial letter to the Galatians to a close, he returns to the dominant theme of the previous six chapters. He reminds his readers one final time that Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone is worthy of our greatest devotion. Christ, specifically Christ crucified, is the only sure foundation of a believer’s life, hope and joy.

Everybody “glories” in something. Before he met Jesus Christ and placed his trust in Him as Lord, Paul gloried in religious attainments and his own righteousness. He says that he took pride in the fact that he was considered a “Hebrew of the Hebrews;” a Pharisee who lived a disciplined life with regard to outward compliance to the law. He was full of zeal in his religious devotion, even to the point of persecuting those who threatened his Jewish faith.

He gloried in the fact that he was a good, honest, hard working, religious man—until He met Jesus Christ. When Christ came into his life, when he bowed the knee to Him as the eternal Son of God who came into the world to save sinners, everything changed for Paul. His desires changed; his values changed; his way of thinking and living changed. What he gloried in changed.

Listen to how Paul explains this change:

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:7–9).

The honor, prestige and success in which he had previously taken great pride, had become for him no more valuable than rubbish. He willingly gave it all up for the sake of having Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Paul came to glory in Christ, and more specifically, Christ crucified.

Ernie could identify with Paul's experience. He grew up very poor and very hard. As an ambitious young man in his early twenties, he had his sights set on financial wealth and success in the business world. He had a wonderful wife and beautiful four-year-old son, a good job and a bright future. And in the kindness of God, he also had a good carpenter friend by the name of Elmer Albright. Elmer invited Ernie to attend his Sunday School class every week for a solid year, until finally, primarily out of concern for his son, Donnie, Ernie agreed to go. He did not understand what was taught and felt very out of place, but after two months he went back, and then met with Elmer and some others from that class. They explained the gospel to him—that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

Over the next two days Ernie felt the weight of his sin against God and began to seek the Lord seriously. He took out their old family Bible and tried to read from different places in it. He also read the tracts that Elmer had given him. God used all of these things to bring Ernie to a deep sense of his own sinfulness and need of salvation. As he came to see that the salvation he desperately needed was found only in Jesus Christ, and received only through faith, he quietly, simply renounced his life of sin and entrusted himself to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Everything changed from that point on in the Reisinger home. His son, Donnie, has described how, even as a young boy, he knew things were different with his dad. Not long after Ernie's conversion, Jane also came to faith in Christ and their home became a Christ-centered home. As his faith grew, so did his understanding of what God had done for him in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul never got over the wonder that God would give up His only

Son to die for sinners on the cross. That is why he puts it the way that he does in Galatians 6:14, “But God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!” Jesus Christ’s work on the cross is the only thing in which any Christian should ever boast because of what His death has done for us. When you recognize what His death means, what it accomplished and where you would be without it, then, as one who is trusting in Jesus Christ, the cross becomes all-important—the most significant event in the world to you.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ has saved us from God’s condemnation and wrath against our sin. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death—not only physical death (which came into the world because of sin) but also spiritual, eternal death. God executes the payment of eternal death by pouring out His wrath against sin. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,” and again in Romans 2:5, “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

When you come to see yourself as the Bible justly and honestly describes you to be—a rebellious sinner against a holy God—then the thought of God’s wrath hanging over you is dreadful. It is horrific. You know yourself to be condemned, justly condemned and deserving of His wrath because of your sin. To a person who rightly understands his condition in this way, the message of the gospel comes as a life-giving reprieve. It is like the sound of coast-guard rescuers to shipwrecked sailors who had given up hope of being saved.

You are a sinner. But God loves sinners. So He has given up His own Son to pay the penalty that sin deserves. All who come to Jesus and in faith, entrust themselves to Him as Lord, who renounce their sin and rebellion against God and depend on Jesus as their hope, their salvation, their joy and their treasure, will receive the pardon that HIS death accomplished on the cross.

To such a person, the awareness that Christ has taken God’s wrath upon Himself by becoming a substitute for sinners fills the mind and floods the heart with wonder, love and awe. That is why the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “Jesus Christ loved me, and gave Himself for me!”

Ernie could say that as well. He saw himself as a natural-born rebel against God who had been rescued by the grace of God through the death of Jesus Christ. And just like Elmer, who would not quit talking to Ernie about Jesus, and who refused to quit praying for him, often with tears born out of love and concern for his soul, once Ernie came to experience the forgiveness of sins that comes to all who trust Christ, he went on to become a life-long ambassador of God’s grace.

Only God knows how many people first heard the good news of salvation from the lips of Ernie Reisinger. On Monday, the day that Ernie died, Jane told me that when he went to bed at night the last thing on his mind was how to expand the kingdom of God, and when he woke in the morning, that was also the first thought on his mind. Ernie wanted people to know that Jesus Christ is King, and that whoever is willing to turn from sin and believe in Him, will be saved.

So it would be a failure of duty on my part, if I did not make that message crystal clear in this article. It may be that you are reading these words while in a state of sinful rebellion against God. One day, you, too will die. You will stand before God to give an account of your life. What will you say to Him on that occasion? How will you answer when your sin is brought out into the light at His judgment seat and you are called to answer for it?

Will you try to argue your way out? Will you plead extenuating circumstances? You cannot plead ignorance—that no one ever told you the truth about judgment. Because you are being warned about that reality in this article. What will you say? If you are not following Jesus Christ as Lord, if you have not received the free gift of salvation that He purchased by His death, then you will be left hopeless and helpless on that day. You will have no option but to pay for your own sin, under the eternal wrath of God.

What did Ernie say on Monday at 6:50 AM, May 31, 2004, when God called him home? How did he plea before God? Well, no one can know what exact words were exchanged on that occasion, but I can tell you that his plea in death was nothing less than the confession he made in life. And we do not have to speculate about that. Because Ernie wrote down his testimony in his last will and testament. These are his words:

I commit my soul into the hands of the only Savior of poor lost sinners. And being such, I cast myself on His mercy and rest on His promise to present my soul spotless before the Throne of my heavenly Father, as His purchased possession.

Can you say that? Are you depending on the mercy and grace of God that is found in Jesus Christ? If so, then death for you will not mean eternal wrath, but graduation into eternal life, just as it did for our dear brother who has gone before us. If you cannot make that testimony, then take God at His Word and believe His promise that whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

We have a great God and Savior in Jesus Christ. He saves great sinners—like Ernie Reisinger, like me and like you. If you want to honor the memory of Ernie, do not focus on what a great man he was and do not try to make some kind of “super-saint” out of him. He had his faults like we all do. He told me more than once that every morning he prayed that God would help him to live like a real Christian for that day. A man does not pray that way unless he has some awareness of his weakness and of the sin that remains within. Ernie had his weaknesses as we all do.

So if you want to honor the memory of Ernie Reisinger, honor the God whom he loved and about whom he wrote and preached and whom he tried to make known to others. Honor Jesus Christ as Lord. Spend time thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus. Meditate on it until it becomes for you an all-consuming passion; your great delight and only hope; your joy and mission to make known. ☺

# The Law and the Gospel

## Romans 6:14

*Fred A. Malone*

If I could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of pastoral preaching and pastoral care in the church, it would be to call all pastors to understand the doctrine of the law and the gospel in Scripture. When I first went to serve as Ernie Reisinger's associate in 1977, he required me to study Romans 6:14 on the law and the gospel and placed a book in my hand to help: *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* by Samuel Bolton. Ernie's book on *The Law and the Gospel* contains much of what we talked about in those days.

There is much controversy and ignorance over this doctrine today. Errors in this doctrine have spawned dispensationalism, theonomy, the New Perspective on Paul, hypercovenantalism, legalism, antinomianism, shallow evangelism, shallower sanctification, many errors in worship and unbiblical mysticism. Yet our Reformed and Baptist forefathers generally did not succumb to such errors before 1900. Why not? I believe it was because they understood the biblical doctrine of the law and the gospel. You can see it in their confessions of faith and their writings.<sup>1</sup> I pray that today's pastors, especially Baptist pastors, will restudy this doctrine and reform their lives and ministries by these truths.

Charles Bridges, author of *The Christian Ministry*, said:

The mark of a minister "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed," is, that he "rightly divides the word of truth." ... This revelation is divided into two parts—the Law and the Gospel—essentially distinct from each other; though so intimately connected, that an accurate knowledge of neither can be obtained without the other.<sup>2</sup>

If understanding the doctrine of the law and the gospel is this important, then it serves every seminary to teach it correctly and every pastor to master it. In this short article, we will look at the doctrine by examining Romans 6:14 both exegetically and pastorally.

### Exegetically

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

The context of this verse is Paul's discussion of sanctification. Paul taught that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 1–3). He also taught that repentant sinners are once-for-all justified by faith alone in Christ alone (Romans 4–5). Such a once-for-all justification might entice some to take advantage of God's grace and to continue in sin that grace might abound (6:1). But Paul rejected such thinking about sanctification as impossible for the justified man (Romans 6–8). Why? Because "sin shall not be master [have dominion, rule, tyranny] over you, for [because] you are not under law but under grace" (6:14).

This is not an imperative statement, a command to obey. It is an indicative, a declaration of fact. You might call it a promise of Paul to the Roman Christians. This statement explains why it is impossible for the justified man to live under the dominion of sin as do the unconverted. He is *under grace*. To be *under grace* is to be freed from slavery to sin, which is the natural state of all men *under law*. God will not allow the tyranny of sin in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 32:40). "Let us sin that grace might abound" cannot be the working principle of the once-for-all justified by faith alone (Romans 5:1–2). Something about being *under grace* prevents this. All else is false faith, still *under law*.

## Under Law

If Paul were speaking only to Jewish Christians, *under law* might have a primary reference to the Sinai Covenant, as in Hebrews. However, the Roman Christians were primarily Gentiles. To be *under law* in this passage cannot mean that they were formerly under the Mosaic law or covenant. Yet, Paul says that these Gentiles were formerly *under law* and, therefore, condemned under sin's dominion.

Paul explains that all men are *under law* to God in Adam as the head of the human race and, therefore, condemned for Adam's one transgression (Romans 5:12–19):

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned... So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men...(Romans 5:12, 18)

Adam was placed *under law* as a working principle in his covenant relationship to God. If he obeyed God's laws perfectly, he would be blessed; if he disobeyed them, he would be cursed. This law-covenant with Adam is often called the Covenant of Works (Life, Eden, etc.; Hosea 6:7). God also declared him the covenant head and representative of the whole human race.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, all men are condemned in Adam's sin against God's law-demand of perfect obedience. In Adam's sin against God's laws, while *under law* to God, he and all his descendants were *under law* with him and fell under God's condemnation for failing to keep "the law" perfectly. All men are born *under sin* because they are born condemned

*under law* in the Covenant of Works, both Jew and Gentile (Romans 3:19–20).

The laws that all men are guilty of breaking *under law* are more than the particular law of not eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They are the moral laws of God, the two great commandments, summarized in the Ten Commandments, the reflection of God’s image in man. Even Gentiles, who do not have the Mosaic revelation, do “by nature” the things of “THE law,” their conscience bearing witness, because they have the “work of THE law written in their hearts” as did Adam, though now defiled (Romans 2:14–16).

What law was originally in Adam’s heart while *under law* and is still written in all men’s hearts? In Romans 2:14–16, this law is defined in context as “the law of nature,” the summary of the Ten Commandments, which the Jews later received and broke (2:21, 22; 7:7; stealing, adultery, idolatry, coveting). Thus, all men are condemned *under law* for not perfectly obeying “the law” of God.

In fact, “the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56). The law itself can only reveal God’s holy nature, the original moral image of God in man, and define sin and righteousness. It ultimately stirs up sin by our inability to keep it perfectly and cannot justify us (Romans 7:8–10). The more we try to keep it for righteousness before God, the more we sin in failure. All men are under sin’s dominion because they are *under law* to God. Therefore, sin is our master while we are *under law*.

## Under Grace

However, our passage also teaches that all true Christians, once-for-all justified, have been transferred from *under law* in Adam to *under grace* in Christ’s headship and salvation. This is often called the Covenant of Grace. Though Adam’s covenant was a law-based covenant, Christ’s covenant is a grace-based covenant. It was announced in Genesis 3:15, prophesied through the Old Testament “covenants of promise” and fulfilled in Jesus Christ’s New Covenant of grace.

To be in Christ is to be *under grace* by faith alone and no longer *under law* for salvation through perfect obedience in Adam’s failed covenant. Everyone is either in Adam *under law* or in Christ *under grace*, but not in both at the same time, nor in neither. This is why we must preach the gospel of grace to all men.

To be *under grace* means that sin cannot have dominion over us because grace in Christ frees us from the condemnation of perfect law-obedience in Adam. This is through our Lord’s perfect law-keeping life and atoning death for law-breakers. You really cannot understand the cross without understanding the law. *Under grace* means that God grants us justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ through His perfect atonement for sin and the imputation of His perfect righteousness as a gift. It also means that the new birth writes God’s law upon our hearts so that we delight in it again (Jeremiah 31:31–34, 32:40; Romans 7:22). This “grace in which we stand” throughout the Christian’s walk impels and empowers the forgiven sinner to love God and keep His commandments without fear of condemnation. *Under grace*, the believer no longer finds obedience to God’s law a

condemning burden, but a joyful privilege of the saved *under grace* (Romans 3:24, 5:2, 5:15, 5:21, 6:14-15).

The Christian lives *under grace* according to God's law so that sin no longer has dominion over him. Although the Christian still commits sins against God's commandments while *under grace*, the power of sin, which is the condemnation of the law, is broken. Sanctification, then, is the daily exercise of saving faith in Christ, redeemed by His blood and covered with His righteousness, by which justifying faith we seek to keep the law of God *under grace*. That is why Jesus said: "if you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Faith working through love to God is the evidence of being *under grace*. And such faith always works.

## Pastorally

### Evangelism

Having lost the importance of the law of God to reveal sin to the sinner, today's evangelism has become more and more shallow. Yet "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). Sin in many presentations is not presented in terms of violating the Ten Commandments and being condemned before God. Therefore, repentance from lawbreaking is either left out of the presentations or repentance is left out altogether. As a result, many who supposedly respond to the gospel call have never repented of their law-breakings and committed themselves to live a holy, obedient life. Our Baptist church rolls are full of them. True evangelism must preach the gospel of deliverance from sin's reign *under law*. But if the law is not used to define sin, how shall sinners know how sinful they are and what kind of holy life they are committing to?

Understanding that the gospel calls sinners to turn from lawlessness to redemption and law-keeping would revitalize evangelistic presentations and preaching with a clear call to break from sin and to follow Christ as Lord. The errors of "the carnal Christian" and rampant mysticism without the guidance of God's law would be resolved at the entrance into salvation. Then the call to be Christ's disciple would be more than an insurance policy for heaven. We would see sinners denying themselves, taking up their cross daily and following Jesus, which is a description of a disciple (Matthew 16:24). Is this not what we want to see in evangelism? Then we must preach the law and the gospel.

### Sanctification

Teachers of the Christian life often neglect the law of God altogether. Emphasis upon "surrendering all...rededicating one's life to Christ...following Him wherever He leads...loving God with all your heart..." etc., have no meaning apart from the law: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments...Herein is the

love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome” (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). A church has not followed the Great Commission until we have made disciples, baptized them and taught “them to do all that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:18–20). The church that is not teaching faithful obedience to God’s law is disobeying the Great Commission. Neither can the church practice church discipline fairly and consistently unless we understand that “through the law comes the knowledge of sin...sin is lawlessness” (Romans 3:20; 1 John 3:4).

## Preaching

If the doctrine of the law and the gospel is at the center of God’s revelation to man for salvation and sanctification, then pastors must be careful to preach the law and the gospel in a proper way.

To the unconverted, we must be sure that we explain that they are *under law* and have no hope of self-righteousness or works-salvation before God. We must also show them their transgressions of the law so they will know that they are sinners condemned *under law* and must repent of their law-breakings before God. We must show them how Christ fulfilled the law for them and died to atone for their law-breakings so they can know forgiveness is just and free as a gift. And we must show them at the entrance of salvation that they are committing themselves to love Jesus Christ and keep His commandments.

To the converted, pastors must make sure that they teach the law of God to explain what holiness is. And when they teach a commandment to the saints, they must make sure that they teach the gospel, that the saints are *under grace* in Christ as they seek to obey, so they will not fall into pride, arrogance or self-righteousness; or despair that their obedience is not good enough for God to accept them. We must make clear when we teach obedience that “having been justified (once-for-all) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Only those living by faith *under grace* will have the comfort and strength that “sin will not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Too many times I have heard pastors calling the saints to holy living, faithful obedience to God’s commands, without giving them the comfort of the gospel on their way.

**Everyone is either in Adam *under law* or in Christ *under grace*, but not in both at the same time, nor in neither. This is why we must preach the gospel of grace to all men.**

## Conclusion

Understanding the law and the gospel properly is the key to Christ-centered living and preaching. We present Him as one who fulfilled the law for sinners *under law*, who vicariously took their law-breakings and their deserved judgment upon Himself, then died a righteous sacrifice to God upon the cross for the unrighteous. “He who knew no sin, became sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now, we call all who are condemned *under law* to repent and accept by faith reconciliation *under grace* and eternal life.

And we call the saved by grace to live joyfully *under grace* by faith and carve out an obedient, holy, law-keeping life out of love for their dear Savior and Lord, who said: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

This is the remedy for shallow evangelism, shallow sanctification, unconverted church members, rampant unguided mysticism and lacking church discipline. The law and the gospel are different, yet they are inseparable friends. The law supports the preaching of the gospel, revealing the meaning and glory of the cross. And the gospel, which saves from the condemnation of the law, sends the redeemed back to the law as a rule of life *under grace*. 🌿

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 19 – “Of the Law of God” in the *Second London Baptist Confession* (1689). This chapter is also included in the Philadelphia and Charleston Baptist confessions to which many of our Southern Baptist forefathers held.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 222.

<sup>3</sup> James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887; reprint, Pompano Beach, Florida: Christian Gospel Foundation, 1979), 234–239.

“Glancing for a moment at the relative aspects and uses of the law, we remark—As a *covenant*, it excites “the spirit of bondage unto fear;” humbling, alarming, convincing, and leading to despondency. As a *rule of life*, under Divine conduct, it exercises in the Christian “the spirit of adoption”—his habitual desire, and delight in conformity to it, witnessing his interest in the family of God. As a *covenant*, the law brings men to Christ for deliverance from its tyranny. Christ returns them to *the law as their rule*: that, while they are delivered from its dominion, (“that being dead wherein they were held,”) they “might serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:6). And thus they show their gratitude to Him for His *perfect obedience to it as a covenant* in their stead, by their *uniform obedience to it as a rule* in His service.”

—from Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 228

# The Lord's Way Of Evangelism

*Joe Nesom*

**E**rnst Reisinger, in his book *Today's Evangelism*, which was published in 1982, outlined a theology of evangelism in dialog with the errors of our day. He issued a clarion call for biblical evangelism. No truncated approach would do. Evangelism must have doctrinal integrity, must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, and must not avoid confronting the sinner with the law as God's standard of righteousness. It must include a call to repentance, just as our Lord and His apostles did. It must hem the sinner in to the reality of his sin and the consequences of not turning to Christ.

The example of our Lord Jesus Christ makes these things clear. One of the most instructive incidents occurred at the well of Jacob in Samaria. There are at least eight principles that can be discovered in the encounter which the Lord had with the woman of Samaria as recorded in John, chapter four.

## **1. The gospel is not to be a tool for competition among God's people (John 4:1–3).**

Our Lord left Judea for Galilee. But the text says that He did so when He “learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John...” Had the Lord been doing the work of evangelism today He would have been told, “You clearly are doing something that works. It would be a mistake not to capitalize on your success. To relocate when things are going so well may mean that you will miss an opportunity which might never come again.” But the Lord would not allow the hostile Pharisees to exploit an opportunity to drive a wedge between His own disciples and those of John.

## **2. The gospel crosses boundaries and breaks down the walls that separate people (John 4:4–9).**

The Samaritans were a mixed breed. In ancient times it was customary for conquerors to move large segments of the population far from their ancestral homeland. This had the tendency to weaken them by cultural disintegration. The Samaritans were only part Jewish. Sargon of Assyria had destroyed the city of Samaria in 721 B.C. By his own testimony he carried away 27,290 of the Samaritans. He later rebuilt the city and populated it with other conquered

peoples. They intermarried with the remaining Hebrews. Thus the Samaria of Jesus' day was a land with a semblance of the Jewish faith but the people, who were the result of intermarriage, were despised by the Jews.

Many Jews, in their movement from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, avoided Samaria altogether. The Lord Jesus Christ could have done so. But we are told that "He had to pass through Samaria." It was not a geographical necessity. Our Lord's travel plans were determined by divine providence. He would preach to the Samaritans and many would be brought to repentance. Our evangelism should be just as inclusive.

Daniel had prophesied that the Messiah would have a kingdom which would be composed of people from every nation (Daniel 7:14). The apostle Paul insisted that the church is a body where "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11b).

I still remember the example of my maternal grandfather. He lived in the "Jim Crow" environment of the post civil war South. But he would not allow himself to be segregated in his duty to the Lord. He was a faithful witness to both black and white, and many came to know Christ through his efforts. We must not allow ourselves to find the comfort of our "own kind" and believe that we have fulfilled our evangelistic responsibility by witness that is limited by concerns of race or class.

### **3. The gospel calls people from ignorance about Christ to knowledge of his uniqueness (John 4:10–12).**

The Lord told the woman at the well that she would have sought living water from Him had she known who He was. This was not the beginning of an attempt to teach a full blown doctrine of Christ's deity and humanity. It was a reference to the grace of God which was being revealed in Him. "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." Our evangelism has to have enough of Christ's person in it to make people understand that there is no way of salvation outside of His divine person. And they must also be told that salvation through Christ is a gift of the Father Himself. Christ Jesus must be presented to poor lost sinners as the embodiment of grace. "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" was her reply. We must convince men and women that there is none greater than our Lord. This becomes clear when we attempt to explain the gospel to those who have been taken captive by cultic groups. They have a doctrine of Christ, but it is false and we must work to show them that the Word of God does not support their claims. A "Jehovah's Witness," for example must be shown that Jesus is Jehovah God. He must not be allowed to think that the Lord is merely a glorious lesser deity. He must be shown that prophets like Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jehovah God to the earth, and that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of those prophecies. There is none greater!

#### **4. The gospel completely satisfies every need of a sinner and does so for all eternity (John 4:13–14).**

There is a tendency among those who bemoan the shallowness of evangelism in our day to focus on the here and now and say little of eternity. Do not many preach deliverance from eternal damnation by various types of formalism? Do not many fail to call people to see their sinfulness and to repent? Do they not seem to reduce salvation to nothing more than escape from the horrors of hell?

That is true, but there is nothing wrong with an emphasis on heaven and eternal life. Our Lord taught the Samaritan woman that His sort of water would “well up” to eternal life. Sinners need to know that sins are forgiven, and that the benefits in this life are large indeed. But they also need to know that the life begun with the new birth is unending and that they will learn to walk through this vale of tears with hope, because of what the Lord has in store for His own.

#### **5. The gospel is preached to people who do not know their true need (John 4:5).**

The woman at the well could only think of what a wonder worker might do for her present situation. Was it possible that this man could ease her work load by a miracle? Could he perhaps arrange for her to have a source of water that would mean that she would make no more trips to the well of Jacob? Health and wealth preachers have a ready made audience for their errors. It was true in Christ’s day and is so now. This ought to serve as a warning to us to be careful not to proclaim a truncated version of the gospel. There are certain truths that must be encountered if sinners are to see their real need. The Lord did not stop there and neither should we.

#### **6. The gospel uses the law to prepare the heart for salvation (John 4:16–18).**

Today’s evangelist would likely have led the woman in a rote prayer at this point. But our Lord raises a question that must have made things very tense: “Go call your husband.” “I have no husband,” was the woman’s reply. This was of course true. She had lived with five husbands and was now living with a man outside of marriage.

Evangelism is not biblical unless it preaches Christ and salvation in the context of transgressions against the true and living God. The woman was being taught that her need for the living water arose out of her condemnation by God’s good and holy law. She needed to see that sin had mastered her and that only God, the righteous judge, had the power to pardon. She needed to see, to feel her wickedness. This is why the Lord told the rich young ruler to keep the commandments. He had to discover that his posture before the bar of God’s justice was far more precarious than he had imagined and that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

## **7. The gospel believed produces true worshipers (John 4:19–24)**

The Samaritan woman decided that the time had come to change the subject. “Let’s talk theology. Let’s talk about what is acceptable in the worship of God. Enough of this talk about me and my husbands!”

There are many ways that sinners have of changing the subject. It is a temptation for Christians to be diverted into arguments about the church, or questions of Christian liberty, or the social and political implications of faith in Christ.

Our Lord refused to be led into such a discussion but he was willing to take the woman’s question and turn it to good. He would teach her that salvation involves not only pardon and justification before God but is designed to create a new people whose primary occupation is the worship of God. This they will do, not with the discredited methods of man, but in Spirit and truth. They will be brought to honor God as he intends and will do so empowered by His own Spirit. A work of regeneration will change their hearts from the love of self and the world to a love for the Lord.

## **8. The gospel declares the Lord Jesus Christ to be the only one who has been anointed by God to save sinners. (John 4:25–26)**

There are two areas of truth on which all that is good in evangelism may hang. This may be expressed with two questions, “Who is Jesus Christ, and what did the Lord Jesus Christ come to do?” There is great benefit in keeping our conversation close to the person and work of Christ when we are seeking the lost. The woman (apparently suspicious that the Lord might be the Messiah Himself) confesses that when the Messiah had come there would be a fuller revelation of God’s truth. “When He comes, He will tell us all things.” The Lord replied, “I who speak to you am He.”

Evangelism is not Christian unless it confesses Christ as the Anointed One. That is what “Messiah” means. It was the Son of God who received His redemptive office in the eternal counsels of God. It was the Son of God who fulfilled the prophecies of Jehovah’s appearance on earth at the “end of the ages” to accomplish what no one else could have done. It was Jesus the Christ, that is Jesus the Messiah, who came to die in the place of His people on the cross.

We live on this side of the cross. We know what God did in time, in history for the salvation of the world. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who must be the one that we point to when sinners become convicted of sin. “Look to Christ and live,” must be the heart of our message. We must revel in the truth that all of Scripture speaks of Him (Luke 24). This is the true evangel, “Jesus saves!” Not only was the woman delivered but she gave a testimony herself, according to her ability, which called many other Samaritans to believe on Christ. They, in turn sat at the Lord’s feet and heard for themselves.

A final word from Ernie Reisinger about what happens when sinners are saved is appropriate here. Speaking of God-centered evangelism and the necessity

of the gospel coming to the sinner with, word and power, he said,

“When this is understood, there will be no more of this man-centered method of begging sinners to respond to an impotent Savior who is standing idly by, patiently and pathetically waiting for the sinners response. No! No! But rather, it will be lifting up a powerful Savior who is ready, able and willing to save all that come to God by Him. The sinner must come to this Savior who actually saves, not one who just makes salvation possible” (Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today’s Evangelism, Its Message and Methods*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 104–105). ☞

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## News

### Mercy Through the Storms

Our thanks to all of you who prayed for us during the recent hurricanes. Hurricane Charley hit the Southwest Florida coast on Friday, August 13, 2004. It was followed by three more storms that made landfall in and near Florida. Many churches and individuals have prayed for us and assisted us, sending work crews as well as financial help. We appreciate the outpouring of love and concern. Please continue to pray that God will give us opportunity to serve and reach out to our community in this time of need.

### First Florida Regional Founders Conference to be Rescheduled

The first Florida Regional Founders Conference, originally scheduled for September 16-18, 2004, was cancelled due to hurricane Ivan. The conference will be rescheduled for sometime early in 2005 (dates will be posted on our website). It will be held at Southside Baptist Church in Live Oak, Florida. The theme will be “God-Centered Missions and Evangelism.”

To register or find more information, call (386) 362-5239

For information online see: [www.founders.org/conferences/sbfc\\_fl/](http://www.founders.org/conferences/sbfc_fl/)

### Founders Study Center

The Founders Study Center will be offering three courses for the Spring 2005 semester. Our new course will be *Theology of the Puritans* (16 sessions with audio lectures by Dr. J. I. Packer). We will also offer *Preaching and Preachers* (16 sessions with audio lectures by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones) and *Maintaining a Healthy Church* (10 sessions with audio lectures by Dr. Mark Dever). Registration for the spring will begin December 10, 2004. Courses are scheduled to begin on January 31, 2005. For more information, please visit our website at [study.founders.org](http://study.founders.org)

# Assurance

*Tom J. Nettles*

God the Father wants His children to have assurance. God has one natural Son. Jesus Christ is “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18). As natural Son, Jesus enjoyed the assurance of His relationship with the Father. Knowing who He was, He could humble Himself for the sake of sinners and go to the cross even under His Father’s wrath on the full strength of that knowledge (John 13:1–4). God also has many sons by adoption and the new birth. John tells us, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). It is God’s will that we also, as His children, know the joy of knowing who we are in Christ. As I hope my own children would find joy and security in knowing whose they are, with infinitely superior reason God has made it possible that His sons by redemption might know that He is their Father. He wants them to experience all the strength and support that comes from saying confidently, “Abba, Father” (Romans 6:15, Galatians 4:6).

## The Dangers of False Assurance

Salvation is a very popular issue. In cultures greatly impacted by a history of Christian preaching, and particularly the revivalistic tradition, concepts of heaven and hell hover ever near the consciousness of large groups of people. The ever-present reality of death makes the Christian hope of heaven an easily popularized, and consequently misleading, idea. A life filled with human relationships, conversation, humor, pain, sympathy, hard work, play and genuine friendship comes to an end in death. The magnetic mystery of personality has suddenly halted. Wonder infuses its power into the affections and demands the judgment that all those delights, and irritants, of personality that once accompanied the physical presence cannot have ceased. Though the body is here, the space it occupies no longer pulsates with the traits that gave pleasure, aggravation, exuded confidence or hovered about dependently. Surely the personality, either maturing or declining, must transcend the body and continue beyond this life.

This intuition, of course, is correct, though clouded, and demonstrates the irrepressibility of the image of God in all humanity. Human personality does continue to exist. It takes on infinitely greater strengths of perception in its sensory, intellectual, spiritual, emotional and moral dimensions. When expanded by false confidence it leads to the assertion that the one departed is now “in a better place” and looking down on all his or her earthly friends smiling, somewhat amused at

our grief, and having a good round of golf or perhaps giving the performance of their [eternal] life on the celestial stage.

We see how easily, therefore, correct intuitive perceptions cause great confusion. If relied on as sufficient for confidence in eternity, they will turn on their bearer with a mocking vengeance. This kind of confidence betrays a most lamentably low view of the divine character, particularly in terms of holiness, justice and wrath. The view of personal sin and its repugnance to God and one's liability to immutable justice, if it exists at all in any form, is checkmated by divine goodness. Unclarified by divine revelation in the context of redemption, those comforting insights will give testimony of our rebellion and godlessness and will shut our mouths to any protest when a verdict of eternal condemnation comes from the divine throne of eternal justice.

Religious certainty, moreover, can be much more evangelical and just as false. The various religious substitutes for the new birth and unalloyed trust in Christ alone go by the name Legion. I will mention only two fallacious sources of confidence in God's favor.

First, perhaps, the most common, comes from the theological roots of revivalism. A belief that the new birth arises from the matrix of human decision gives many an assurance of being in God's favor when they have no experiential

**And because you are sons,  
God has sent forth the Spirit  
of His Son into your hearts,  
crying out, "Abba, Father!"**

**Galatians 4:6**

sense of repentance unto life or believing in the heart. Misleading appropriations of God's promises are urged upon those who had fulfilled the physical or verbal instructions provided by the evangelist. The spiritual wreckage this produces stares us down whenever we read the membership roll of virtually any Southern Baptist church.

Second, ostensible demonstrations of spiritual power delude some into a false security of salvation. Simon Magus believed on the basis of the demonstrations of power (Acts 8:13), but when he revealed that his "belief" stemmed only from an infatuation with power (8:19), Peter warned him that he was still in the "bondage of iniquity" (8:23). Often recipients of special blessings such as answered prayer for healing or financial crisis or personal relations feel that God's caring for them in that way constitutes their salvation. If they have been protected from some calamitous event, the providential intervention shows God's general favor toward them for here and eternity. Much about our church culture as well as American culture prods us to cherish comfort and to view God as the one whose job it is to provide that for us.

A generalized identification of temporal beneficence with eternal salvation is a dangerous thing (Romans 2:4-5). A careful evangelist will work to kick the

props away from anyone that finds security in anything other than Christ Himself. “Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it” (Hebrews 4:1; NASB updated).

## The Grounds for True Assurance

While false security runs rampant, this must not discourage us from seeing that the Bible gives abundant reasons for genuine assurance. The writer of Hebrews, in addition to giving warnings to those whose acquaintance with the gospel was not “united by faith in those who heard,” states it as a certainty, for “we who have believed enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:2–3). Paul told the Thessalonians that God has “loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace” (2 Thessalonians 2:16). Love constitutes God’s sovereign benevolence toward His people, eternal comfort consists of the actual procurement of all the eternal covenantal blessings granted us in Christ, and good hope attests to the firm confidence that the saints have for the future eternity.

The writer of Hebrews desired his hearers whose diligent life indicated a foundation of saving faith to attain to “the full assurance of hope until the end.” Also he desired that those who already had “taken refuge” in Christ’s complete priestly work to have “strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:11, 18). In addition John wrote his first letter with the explicit purpose of laying a groundwork so that true believers could “know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.**

**1 John 5:13**

Since God desires that His people have assurance, and to have it through means that increase their sanctification, He established a fabric of truth through which the

Holy Spirit operates to work assurance in the hearts of Christians. At its most basic level, assurance may be stated in a syllogistic form. The Scripture says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” I have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. I am, therefore, saved.

This syllogism is built on the clarity and certainty of the Word of God. Its major premise gives voice to the absolute efficacy of Christ’s mission to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21) and the fitness of belief as the means by which that salvation consummates on individuals. This underscores what could be called the objective focus of saving faith. It is impossible that the work of Christ

should fail to save sinners. His coming was for that purpose and His work of such merit that God would be unjust not to honor it by granting salvation to those for whom He died. Included in His labors for salvation is the gift of the Spirit whose operation of regeneration produces repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. God is pleased to give union with Christ to those who come to Him desiring precisely the benefits of His offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. The one who has come to see Christ as his only hope and has no confidence in any merit other than Christ's has faith. The one who approves the way of salvation by Christ's substitutionary death as magnifying the holy and loving character of God, and feels spiritual delight in this particular way of being accepted has faith. When such faith takes up residence in our hearts, driving us to Christ alone, we know God has saved us.

That objective focus of faith is primary in assurance and gives rise to what could be called the subjective aspect, or the spiritual texture of faith. Peter speaks of the subjective impact of saving faith in his second letter. The premise of his argument is that a faith that has come by the righteousness of Christ (1:1) has within it a love of all that is involved in His death and righteousness. The manifestation of faith assumes the presence of "everything pertaining to life and godliness." Peter supplies a breakdown of those things, clearly asserting that their presence is certain since we have been made "partakers of the divine nature." Diligence, therefore, in exerting the restored life brings usefulness and fruitfulness and is foundational to real Christian assurance (1:5–11). Christ's objective work forms the centerpiece of assurance, therefore, and our desire to emulate and honor Him shows that our knowledge of Him is true.

## Assurance and Faith

The fact that assurance follows and is built on the implications of faith makes us conclude that faith and assurance are two different things. While it is a property of faith that it has no doubt of one's personal sin or of Christ's ability to save, thus including a kind of assurance, confidence of one's personal benefit from Christ arises in a discreet manner. It may come quickly, virtually on the heels of saving faith, or it might be long and tedious in coming.

From one viewpoint, true faith might include some influences that render assurance difficult. Repentance and loathing for sin are infused into saving faith. Increased awareness of indwelling sin and the heart's deceitfulness flow effusively from faith. That spiritual knowledge could bring desperation to a sinner, not about Christ's ability and worthiness, but about one's own true repentance.

In addition, assurance is as much a function of hope as of faith. Not only does assurance come from contemplating the certain efficacy of Christ's completed work, but from the joyful prospect of the eventual vindication of Christ's glory before the entire universe. He is glorified in His saints in their full sanctification (1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:10). The person that rejoices in that finds that it promotes real spiritual confidence (1 John 4:18).

In the past and in some present-day ministries, the false identification of faith with full assurance has led to grossly manipulative methods by some evangelists. This has caused great consternation and confusion among the saints and has engendered an attitude of false assurance on the part of many.

## The Means of Assurance

In the *Second London Confession*, the article on “Assurance” follows articles on “Effectual Call,” “Justification,” “Adoption,” “Sanctification,” “Saving Faith,” “Repentance unto Life,” “Good Works” and “Perseverance.” In one sense, assurance is the fruit of all of those realities combined. It is what Spurgeon would call “spiritualized common-sense.” If I am fixed on Christ with full confidence in Him and none in myself, have a persistent awareness of and loathing for personal sin, and yet see the “good” of good works and consistently, though often falteringly, press toward such works, and desire to continue so all my life to the glory of such a great Savior as Christ, why should I not conclude that these desires have been given me by God and are not the fruit of my deceitful heart? Peter says diligence in unpacking the full implications of faith makes one’s calling and thus his election sure. John says that a true hope in Christ’s coming blossoms into purity of life. In short, the means of gaining assurance consists of the earnest appropriation of Christian truth and the sincere, cordial pilgrimage in Christian purity and practice.

## The Blessings of Assurance

Since the Scripture urges believers to seek assurance in the right context, we must conclude that both the quest and the find are good. Spurgeon believed “the knowledge that we are greatly beloved of God, instead of doing us harm will be a means of blessing in many ways.” A sinner that knows he is loved by God will “become very humble.” A sense of God’s love will excite great gratitude. It also serves as a fountain of obedience. Confidence in God’s love will consecrate us and forestall any trifling with sin. Assurance of God’s love gives strength for conflicts, great and small, punctiliar and progressive. “Moreover,” Spurgeon continues, “this assurance of God’s love will make us very courageous.” Such a man “defies sin and death and hell. He will burn for Christ.”

To those who considered a state of doubt to be a state of discretion, Spurgeon responded “It is a state of folly.” “If thou art a believer in Christ, though the very least and weakest of believers, thou art a man greatly beloved. Believe it, and be not afraid to rejoice in it. It will have no influence over thee but that which is sanctifying and health giving” (Charles Spurgeon, “Daniel’s Band” in Spurgeon’s *Expository Encyclopedia*, Baker Book House, 6:33-35). ☞

# Confessional Christianity

*D. Matthew Allen*

In the short number of years that I knew Ernest Reisinger, I was privileged to write three Founders Press books with him. A fourth is almost completed. As a result of this collaboration, I got to spend many hours with Ernie, listening to him, praying with him and learning from him. It was from Ernie that I learned to cherish the deep biblical faith of the Puritans. From him I learned to appreciate more fully the rich heritage of our Baptist forebears. Ernie introduced me to the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the works of John Owen and the systematic theologies of James P. Boyce and John L. Dagg. Among these things, one of the most vivid lessons I learned from Ernie is that biblical Christianity must be a confessional Christianity. Ernie felt so strongly about this that he at least twice reprinted the *Abstract of Principles*, the confessional statement of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as an appendix to other works. Our final work together, to be published in the near future, will be a commentary on the *Abstract of Principles*, based in part on articles Ernie wrote on the *Abstract* in his North Pompano Baptist Church newsletter. Ernie approved the manuscript of the final chapter only days before he died.

## Baptists Are a Confessional People

Ernie never understood the often expressed sentiment that “Baptists are not creedal people.” Conservatives who make this statement sometimes add: “We have no creed but the Bible.” Liberals sometimes follow it up with the statement: “We have no creed but Christ.” These statements beg the question. Which Bible? The Bible of Thomas Jefferson (who took a razor blade to the passages he didn’t like)? The Bible of those who argue that homosexuality is consonant with Christianity? Or the Bible of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and John Bunyan? One has to interpret the Bible in order to determine what it means. This requires an understanding of one’s doctrine. Which Christ? The Christ of the Jesus Seminar? The Christ that the Dalai Lama preaches? Or the divine God-man of the Bible? Determining which Christ one believes in similarly requires a doctrinal analysis. This is all a creed is.

In other words, a creed (from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe”) is merely a summary of one’s set of beliefs. It can be informal. As B.H. Carroll said, “Whatever a man believes, that is his creed and is bound to be his basis of life.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the notion that Baptists have no creed but the Bible is tantamount to saying Baptists have no coherent beliefs at all, but merely see the Bible as a collection of

random stories and sayings. May it never be! When we say that God is triune, this is creedal. When we say that God is love, this too is creedal. Every Christian and every Baptist has at least an informal creed.

Of course, Baptists always have been formal creedalists. This is inherent in the name “Baptist,” which says something about what we believe about baptism. Baptists have always insisted on defining the boundaries of their faith, beginning with the General Baptists’ *Short Confession of Faith in Twenty Articles* (1609) and the Particular Baptists’ *London Confession* of 1644, and continuing to the current *Baptist Faith and Message*. As William Lumpkin wrote a number of years ago, “few Christian groups have confessed their faith so freely as the Baptists.”<sup>2</sup>

What is the difference between a creed and a confession of faith? None. A creed is a doctrinal statement. So is a statement of faith or confession of faith. A catechism is a particular type of confession of faith, presented in the form of questions and answers, frequently designed for teaching children. Historically, catechisms have been used as a valuable teaching tool in many Baptist homes and churches. Sadly, they are less used today.

## The Value of Confessional Christianity

Why should we be confessional Christians? Why should we value and use a confession of faith? The first reason is that confessing one’s faith by reciting a doctrinal statement follows the examples of the biblical writers themselves. Confessionalism is as old as the Bible itself. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, Paul declared: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (ESV). In 1 Timothy 3:16, he wrote: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (ESV). These are early creedal statements. Creedal fragments are also found in Philippians 2:6–11, 1 Peter 3:18 and 1 John 2:22, 5:1, among other passages. The writer of Hebrews instructs us to “hold fast our confession” and “the confession of our hope” (Hebrews 4:14, 10:23; 3:1; ESV).

Another reason to be confessional is that it reflects a high esteem of the Bible. Confessions do not take the place of the Bible, but they help us systematize and summarize the teachings of the Bible. They are useful in the same ways that systematic theologies are useful. A systematic theology is a work that sets out in an orderly and coherent manner the truth respecting God and His relations to men and the world. This is to be distinguished from biblical theology, which is the study of a particular Bible book or author. A confession of faith falls on the systematic side of the equation. It describes in a clear, concise and coherent manner what the whole Bible teaches on a number of key topics. The *Abstract of Principles*, for example, contains twenty short but substance-packed articles on the following topics: The Scriptures, God, The Trinity, Providence, Election, The Fall of Man,

The Mediator, Regeneration, Repentance, Faith, Justification, Sanctification, Perseverance of the Saints, The Church, Baptism, The Lord's Supper, The Lord's Day, Liberty of Conscience, The Resurrection, and The Judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason to be confessional is that a confession of faith provides a fixed compass by which doctrine can be judged. Ernie Reisinger believed confessions are useful to (1) describe the truth, (2) discriminate truth from error, (3) delineate the boundaries of ecclesiastical fellowship and (4) disseminate instruction.<sup>4</sup>

The *Abstract of Principles* suitably serves each of these purposes. It was formulated in 1858 by Basil Manly, Jr., under the direction of James P. Boyce, at the founding of Southern Seminary. It was designed to be an “abstract,” or summary, of the Bible’s teachings on the twenty fundamental doctrines listed above. In addressing these twenty topics, it was intended to describe the basic doctrines held by all Baptists. In forming the *Abstract*, Manly drew from the *Charleston Confession*, a reproduction of the *Philadelphia Confession*, itself a minor modification of the *London Baptist Confession* of 1689. Because the *London Confession*, in turn, was adapted in large degree from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (except for those few articles dealing with Baptist distinctives), the *Abstract of Principles* is a compendium of what C.S. Lewis called “mere Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> Albert Mohler calls it “a brilliant summary of biblical and Baptist conviction” and “a faithful repetition of the

central truths found within the *Westminster Confession*.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Abstract* also was intended to discriminate truth from error. When James Boyce proposed the founding of a Southern Baptist seminary, he was concerned to protect the Baptist flock from the inroads that German criticism already had

## Confessions of faith are useful to:

- 1) Describe the truth
- 2) Discriminate truth from error
- 3) Delineate the boundaries of ecclesiastical fellowship
- 4) Disseminate instruction

begun making on other American institutions of higher learning. He proposed the preparation of the *Abstract*—and the requirement that every seminary professor at the new institution sign it—to guard against the rise of liberalism in theological teaching. He believed that anyone who sought to teach in the Baptist seminary should be required to teach according to a “formal and explicit confession of faith which would set forth without compromise, and without forsaking clarity, precisely what would be taught within the institution.”<sup>7</sup> As later Southern Seminary president E.Y. Mullins put it in advocating the adoption of a denomination-wide confession, “If a man holds consistently the Unitarian view of Christ’s person, he cannot long cooperate with those who hold the deity of Christ.”<sup>8</sup> The *Abstract*

still governs the teaching parameters at Southern Seminary, as well as its sister institution, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The *Abstract of Principles* additionally is a sound teaching instrument. When analyzed article by article, it provides a fine summary of doctrinal theology. Ernie was firmly convinced that the use of confessions and catechisms to teach the young was a central tenet of biblical evangelism.

## Answers to Objections to the Use of Confessions

Some people who oppose the use of creeds and confessions are merely ignorant. They know nothing of the history, purpose, value or biblical substance of the historic creeds of the church. This is not true, however, of most opponents of creeds. They are, as Ernie once wrote, “latitudinarians and heretics.”<sup>9</sup> This is because a sound confessional statement exposes false teaching for what it is. It provides a fixed standard by which to judge false teachers’ doctrine. These people really do not oppose the idea of a creed, but the content of orthodox confessional statements.

What are some more honest objections to the use of creeds? One is that requiring subscription to a confession of faith supercedes the Bible. But as Ernie has pointed out, this objection is based on a false assumption—that the confessional statement is of equal authority with the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Confessions cannot usurp the Bible’s place of authority (nor do they claim to do so), but necessarily retain a subordinate place to the Bible. A. A. Hodge noted over a century ago that the real conflict is not between the Bible and creedal statements but between the church’s orthodox interpretation of the Bible and an esoteric private interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Another objection is that confessions interfere with the rights of conscience and naturally lead to oppression. A few Southern Baptist missionaries were vociferous in making this argument to the International Mission Board’s requirement that all SBC missionaries subscribe to the revised *Baptist Faith and Message* as a condition of continued employment. But this objection was answered by Ernie years before the IMB/*Baptist Faith and Message* controversy:

If a body of professing Christians have a natural right thus to associate, to extract their own Creed from the Scriptures and to agree upon the principles by which others may afterwards be admitted into their number, is it not equally manifest that they have the same right to refuse admittance to those with whom they believe they cannot be comfortably connected?

Thus, the answer to the one asserting this objection is to say that association with a group (such as the SBC) is: “Your demand is very unreasonable. Our union is a voluntary one for our mutual spiritual benefit. We have not solicited you to join us, and you cannot possibly have a right to force yourself into our body. The

whole world is before you. Go where you please. We cannot agree to receive you unless you are willing to walk with us upon our own principles.”<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Ernest Reisinger was a confessional Christian. He believed in, used and distributed the great Baptist confessions of faith such as the *Second London Confession* of 1689 and the *Abstract of Principles*. Ernie’s confessionalism, however, did not stand alone. It was part of his broader emphasis on the sacred marriage of biblical doctrine and devotion to Christ. Ernie loved the great gospel doctrines expounded in the historic confessions. Even more so, he loved the impact those doctrines had on his own life and the lives of those he touched for the Lord. Oh, that we who follow in Ernie’s footsteps would love and use the confessions and catechisms of our faith as mightily as Ernie did!☺

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> B.H. Carroll, “Creeds and Confessions of Faith,” in Timothy and Denise George, ed., *Baptists and Their Doctrines* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 84.

<sup>2</sup> William Lumpkin, “Confessions of Faith, Baptists,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), vol. 1, 304.

<sup>3</sup> The *Abstract of Principles* is available on the website for Founders Ministries. See: <http://www.founders.org/abstract.html>

<sup>4</sup> See Ernest C. Reisinger, “Creeds, Confessions, Articles of Faith,” *Good News*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Jan. 31, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Ernie took delight in telling people that the *Westminster Confession* is our “mother confession.”

<sup>6</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “To Train the Minister Whom God Has Called,” *Founders Journal* (Winter/Spring 1995), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 38–42. See James P. Boyce, “Three Changes in Theological Education” is reprinted in Timothy George, *Treasures From the Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 103–138.

<sup>8</sup> E.Y. Mullins, “Baptists and Creeds,” in Timothy and Denise George, ed., *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 190–91.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest C. Reisinger, “Creeds, Confessions, Articles of Faith,” *Good News*, part 2, undated article, available on the internet at [www.reformedreader.org/rbb/reisinger/goodnews02.htm](http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/reisinger/goodnews02.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Ernest C. Reisinger, “Creeds, Confessions, Articles of Faith,” *Good News*, part 3, undated article, available on the internet at [www.reformedreader.org/rbb/reisinger/goodnews03.htm](http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/reisinger/goodnews03.htm)

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Reisinger, “Creeds, Confessions, Articles of Faith,” part 3.

# Book Reviews

D. Patrick Ramsey and Joel R. Beeke, *An Analysis of Herman Witsius's The Economy of the Covenants*. Reformation Heritage Books and Christian Focus Publications, 2002, pb., 67 pages. \$12.99. ISBN 1-89277-722-3

Reviewed by Ray Van Neste

*The Economy of the Covenants* is generally regarded as the magnum opus of Dutch theologian Herman Witsius and was written to promote peace among those divided on covenant theology in his day. This little volume was written to give a detailed outline of the almost 1,000 page original. In a preface to the reprint of Witsius's work, J. I. Packer says Witsius "has been unjustly forgotten" and he goes on to refer to Witsius as "a masterful Dutch Reformed theologian, learned, wise, mighty in the Scriptures, practical and 'experimental' (to use the Puritan label for that which furthers heart-religion)." It was indeed this combination of characteristics found in his "On the Character of a True Theologian" (recently reprinted by Reformed Academic Press) which drew me to Witsius.

In the little book here under consideration, Ramsey and Beeke have intended to provide a help to those desiring to read Witsius's key work. In their introduction they state three ways in which their outline can be used:

1. A summary study guide providing a quick overview of Witsius's arguments. This can be of help since the language may seem difficult to one first attempting such study.
2. A group study guide.
3. A quick reference guide. It will enable one to quickly reference Witsius's key points of argument on a specific issue.

I think this book succeeds as a tool in each of these regards.

Additionally, there are about 20 pages of biography including an overview of *The Economy of the Covenants*. This is very valuable in setting this work in context and also in introducing (perhaps) a new generation to this incredible man of God. May the church be blessed with more leaders who are both convictional and charitable, learned and pious, studious and experiential. 🙏

Susan and Richie Hunt, *Big Truths for Little Kids*. Good News Publishing, 1999, hb., 160 pages. \$12.50. ISBN 1581341067

Reviewed by Ray Van Neste

As parents of three we are always looking for material that properly handles biblical truths and connects them well to every day life for our children. Probably the best book we have found so far in accomplishing this is *Big Truths for Little Kids*, by Susan and Richie Hunt. What's more, this book accomplishes this by combining a catechism with modern day stories. For parents who like the idea of using a catechism but are unsure how to start (like we were) this is a wonderful asset.

The book is arranged in about 30 segments with each one containing about five catechism questions and a story which illustrates the truths found in those catechism questions.

The stories alone would make this book worth purchasing. The stories flow one from another in an ongoing narrative following everyday life for a family where the mother and father hold family devotions and teach their children the catechism. The children provide wonderful models to your children as they encourage each other in learning (Scripture and the catechism), obeying, sharing their faith, and encountering those who mock their faith. At the same time, the children and the parents are not portrayed as perfect or unrealistic, but you encounter them as they struggle and admit their failures (parents and children). Highlights for us included reading early on in the book of one of the children's friends being converted and, later, of one child deciding to pray for another child who was particularly difficult.

If the book is worth purchasing for the stories alone, its value is immeasurably increased by the interweaving of the Westminster children's catechism. We found it to be very accessible to our three-year-old and, in the early parts, even for our two-year-old. The catechism helps you to cover the whole range of basic biblical truth and leads to questions from the children which can be very profitable. Of course, since it is the Westminster catechism and is written by Presbyterians, the baptism section comes from a paedobaptist viewpoint. One can adapt this in a number of ways. With our young children I just adapted and skipped certain questions. With older children you could easily substitute the baptism section from a good Baptist catechism. A Baptist revision of the Westminster's children catechism is available online at [wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/pcat.html](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/pcat.html) (questions 96 to 101 relate to baptism). As far as I can tell the only significant change in the Baptist revision is the baptism section. This site allows one to view the basic catechism used in this book and allows one to print off the Baptist version for free. The fact that older children will almost certainly ask why you are making a substitution only means you will have an occasion to discuss the issue!

Using the catechism with our children has been particularly meaningful to us

as parents (as some of you who are long experienced in this will affirm). Oh the joy, when asking our three year old, “Why did God make you and all things?”, to hear him promptly reply, “For His own glory” [pronounced by him as “gwory”]. Then how sobering to have our little boys repeat after us phrase by phrase, “I am corrupt in every part of my being.” Interestingly when I ask them if they can go to heaven in this state they shout with gusto, “No!” This exercise more than any other has helped to bring home to them their own need of the gospel, such that our eldest has often spoken of his need and desire for a new heart. We have greatly enjoyed and benefited from this book and heartily recommend it to all. This would make a great gift to parents as it would not only provide for training for the children but would also, no doubt, provide much teaching for the parents as well. ☺

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## Letters

Dear Dr. Thomas K. Ascol,

Greetings in Christ. The Lord has been so gracious to me as I labor in His vineyard. I’m so thankful for the ministry of this *Founders Journal*, it has a way of reminding me about the glory and the triumphs of the Christian ministry as well as the pains and the sufferings.

I am so delighted to read your article on “Confusing Times.” Here in our country the kind of evangelicalism is “crypto-cultural Christianity”, try-it-you’ll-like-it Christianity. The ministry here is very challenging because people are getting wearied and tired of this stuff and are looking for solid answers for the many hard issues of life.

Dr. Ascol, as always you and the ministry have been a constant encouragement to me as I continue the task of reforming the church and reclaiming the gospel here in my particular context.

I would like to request a copy of your book *Dear Timothy*. I know this again will assist me in the path of a worthy calling. I thank God for calling me to pastor a church of Christ. I’m fulfilled and find constant encouragement from the power of the gospel.

Thanks for the part you share in the ministry here.

Blessings,  
Pastor L.

Dear people at Founders Ministries,

... I am living in Slovakia, former communist country. Ten years ago I became Christian and as former atheist I would not think that one day I would become the missionary in my own country. It happened just two years ago. I came to Middle Slovakia into strong catholic area with my wife and two children. Before I worked as technician for PC's and servers. This was God's calling into full time ministry. I moved from the church where they started liberal theology which was devastating my life and life of our family. I did not find the peace under such circumstances.

I was thorn in peoples of this church eyes because of my strong believe in Inerrancy and Infallibility of Bible and especially for my believe of different roles for men and women. Also I am not big supporter of ecumenical activities which in real life do not work and cannot work. I joined Slovak Baptist e-mail discussion board where I defended the truth of Bible. Slovak Baptist church struggles with a lot of doctrines.

These were also the reasons why with the help of another couple we have now vision of planting new churches in Slovakia. There are no evangelical churches here at all. But we believe that God will bring His people into church even from such a difficult background. Sometimes it is like dark middle ages here but this make God's work more visible. Can you imagine that two days ago we had two young people knocking on our door wanting me to pray with them and they repent and receive Christ's righteousness? I was amazed how God is preparing people. Our group of new-born Christian is growing and I understand my responsibility to feed them by God's Word, edify them and lead them to be disciples for God.

I lead Bible studies for youth, children and adults and Sunday morning services. But occasionally I do home Bible studies for people who cannot come from certain reasons. We also do ministry for gypsies as well.

I am not schooled theologian. I am self-learner. I wish maybe one day I will join the school but now we are in the best school we ever been. But there is problem in our country. Most of our Christian literature is liberal and I do not plan to become one. We feel strong need to have good books with sound biblical teaching here. We work on translations as well. In Slovakia there is one new publishing company named ORDO SALUTIS where they have good books. Just recently I finished translating the book from R.C. Sproul called *Character of God* and with the help of this publisher we would like to issue it out. I am working also on MacArthur's *Different by Design* book and write articles for our website. Recently Slovak national newspaper published one article of mine concerning the pope and problem of the state church.

I read my Bible, but as self-learner I would like to study more. I have great desire to study God's Word more deeply and be able to multiply what I gain from God in this area. I do not want to keep my knowledge of God for myself.

I would like to humbly ask you if there is any way you could help me with getting some sound theological books or any materials (they can be used and old) for my personal study and growth which I could use when teaching others here

where I am? Even if you have great price down I am not able to afford it at all. This would be my biggest gift and useful tool in my ministry to people and also answer to my prayers. I will receive any study materials from you as a precious gift of grace to me from God. I found a lot of useful information on your web and wanted to ask you if you do not make CD's out of what you published. If you do, It would be also very useful gift for me here...

I know that you are probably allergic to such e-mails where people ask you for something free, but your answer I will fully respect. It has to be God's will. I believe in this very strong. But for me it is the only way how to get good books with sound teaching...

Thank you for any answer. May God bless your ministry richly.

Servant of God in Slovakia

*A second letter after receiving CDs and books:*

Dear Tom Ascol,

I received your books you sent me last week. They are great value to me because I did not have any commentary on the NT letters. And though I did not know Curtis Vaughan before now I found a lot of good teaching in his books.

I would like to thank you and all people who helped me with getting these books. After I finish teaching on the book of Matthew I plan to start with some of the letters like James or Ephesians. The books you sent will help me greatly.

I am very touched by the generosity you have and thank you again.

In His ministry,  
P. J., via email (Slovakia)

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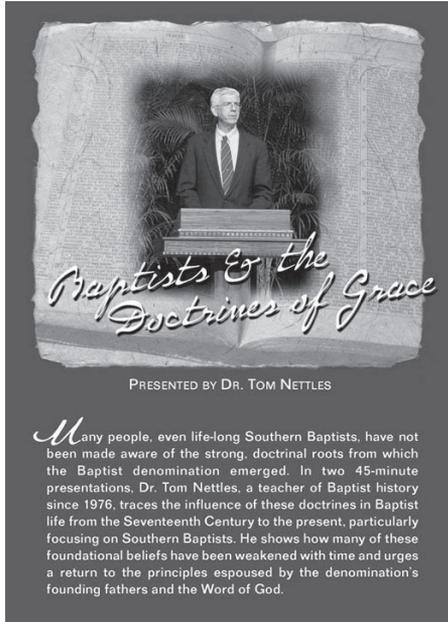
I just wanted to write to apologize first of all. This time, about two years ago, I emailed a letter to you displaying my rejection of the doctrines of grace. I even said that Calvinists were heretics. I beg your forgiveness for my comments. God has really taught me over the past couple of years and illumined the Word and showed me truth. I now can say that I fully adhere to and confirm the doctrines of grace and join you in the effort to teach others of the wonderful grace of our Lord. Thank you my brothers for your ministry.

God Bless,  
B. F., via email

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