

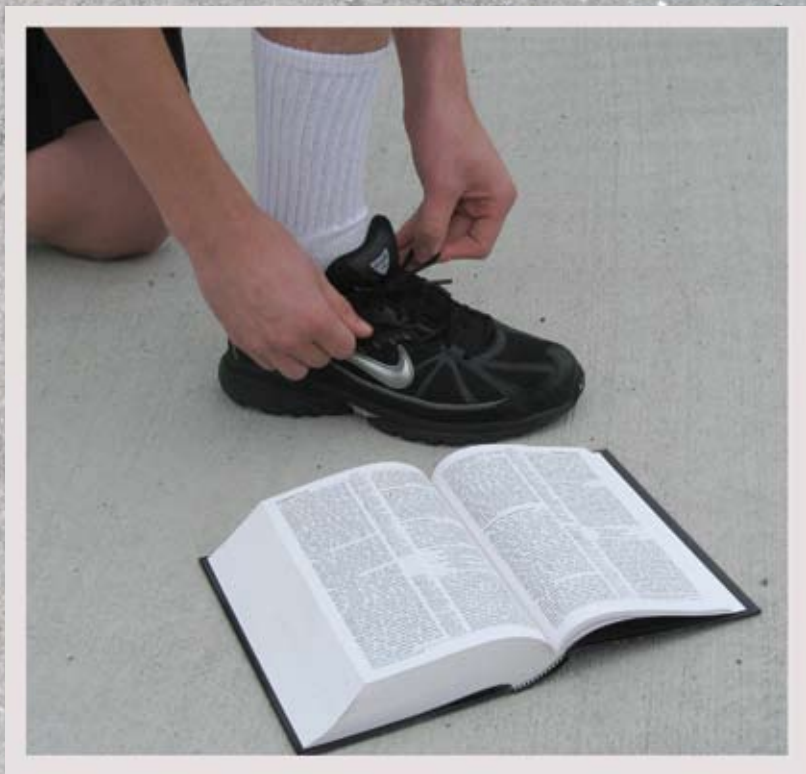
The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

Issue 79

Winter 2010



Doctrine Rightly Held

CONTRIBUTORS:

Dr Tom Ascol is Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL and author of the Founders Ministries Blog: wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/

Martin Downes is Minister of Christ Church Deeside in North Wales. He is also the editor of *Risking the Truth, Handling Error in the Church*.

Roger Ellsworth is Pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Jackson, TN and a part-time Instructor at Union University.

Dr Robert R. Gonzales Jr. is Dean and Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Baptist Seminary, Taylors, SC, and is also adjunct professor of Old Testament Studies at Midwest Center for Theological Studies, Owensboro, KY.

Cover photo taken by Ken Puls.

The Founders Journal

Editor: Thomas K. Ascol

Associate Editor: Tom J. Nettles

Design Editor: Kenneth A. Puls

Contributing Editors: Bill Ascol, Timothy George, Fred Malone, Joe Nesom, Phil Newton, Roger Nicole, Don Whitney, Hal Wynn.

The *Founders Journal* is a quarterly publication which takes as its theological framework the first recognized confession of faith which Southern Baptists produced, *The Abstract of Principles*.

Subscription Price (one year): \$20.00 (\$25.00 outside the USA)

Please send notice of any change in address. Send all inquiries and correspondence to:

Founders Journal • P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL 33915

For those who have access to the InterNet or many commercial online computer services, you may send your correspondence to editor@FOUNDERS.org via electronic mail. Or you may contact us by phone at (239) 772-1400 or fax at (239) 772-1140.

Also visit our web site at <http://www.FOUNDERS.org> for an online version of the *Founders Journal*.

Doctrine Rightly Held

Tom Ascol

In a day when doctrine is too often underappreciated it is exciting to see to a renewed concern about its importance in the Christian life. Scripture puts a premium on the necessity of sound doctrine. Repeatedly Paul counsels Timothy and Titus, as pastors, to give careful attention to their teaching. In Titus 3:1 he introduces extended practical instructions by writing, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” Sound doctrine leads to healthy Christian living. That is, when doctrine is rightly applied, spiritual vitality results.

Sometimes, however, people who make much over doctrinal precision are not living lives that can be characterized as spiritually vibrant. They love the doctrinal foundations, but they do not build devotional houses on them.

It is one thing to know doctrine and another to hold it rightly. In fact, Scripture gives us repeated warnings about mishandling truth. One way this is too often done is to use “truth” as a justification for a lack of love. Where this is allowed to go on uncorrected, sound doctrine suffers more at the hands of its friends than at the hands of its foes.

Paul warns against improperly held truth when he instructs the Corinthians in “a more excellent way.” He writes, “though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, . . . and have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). What he describes in this hypothetical possession of exceptional mental gifts is, in one sense, every doctrine-lover’s dream!

Who that loves the deep doctrines of God’s Word would not want to “understand all mysteries and knowledge?” Imagine if you were so gifted you could be Wayne Grudem’s and D. A. Carson’s tutor! Finally, you could sort out the details of eschatology and settle the lapsarian question. Think of the books that could be written and the help that could be given to others who have an inferior grasp on the Scriptures!

Yet, as valuable as such doctrinal insight might be, Paul says that there is something greater—love. In fact, it is possible to be the greatest theologian in the world and still be “nothing.” That’s a humbling thought for one who loves doctrine.

A person who has a great grasp of the great doctrines of the Bible and yet is unloving toward people is in reality a spiritual freak and does not know what he thinks he knows. Here is the way that it works: The truths taught in Scripture are designed to reveal God to us. Genuine knowledge of God—the kind that is not merely speculative—necessarily humbles a person. Anyone who is truly humbled before God cannot help but love Jesus Christ who is God incarnate. And Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

This is why Paul writes that the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:10). Without this, whatever doctrine you might know, is not being rightly held. ☺

Handling Truth and Error in the Church

An Interview with Tom Ascol

Martin Downes

The following interview is an extract from *Risking the Truth: Interviews on Handling Truth and Error in the Church* edited by Martin Downes, published by Christian Focus, 2009. Reprinted with permission.

Interview

Dr. Tom Ascol is Senior Pastor of Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, Florida. He serves as the Executive Director of Founders Ministries and editor of the *Founders Journal*. Dr. Ascol has edited *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry*.

Dr. Ascol, as you look back over your Christian life and ministry what theological errors has the Lord kept you from?

Early in my Christian life I was greatly attracted to Watchman Nee and the so-called “Deeper Life” movement. The Keswick view of sanctification held out a vision of the Christian life that I desperately wanted. Such teaching leads either to self-deception in thinking that you have attained it, or to despair in knowing that you have not. By God’s grace, the latter was my lot. The discovery of Scripture’s teaching on indwelling sin rescued me.

I also was raised with a semi-Pelagian understanding of grace. A person’s will was regarded as the key to successful evangelism. I became enamored of psychological techniques that could be employed to motivate people to “make decisions” for Jesus. The Bible’s teaching on sinful human nature and depravity disabused me of that understanding and led me to recognize the sovereignty of God’s grace in salvation.

How have you dealt with church members who have become attracted to theological errors?

First and foremost I have tried to emphasize the importance of right doctrine in my regular preaching and teaching. The priority placed on it in Scripture as well as the many warnings of being led astray are regularly highlighted. Sadly, we have had members who have become ensnared by false teaching. I try to persuade them of the error by pressing them to deal with Scripture in its whole. Trusted confessions of faith are helpful at this point. Those members we cannot convince, we leave with a warning and trust them to the Lord. If the error is serious enough, we remove them from membership.

How should a local church, or an association of churches, take seriously Paul's warning that "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30)?

Humility demands that no church or association ignore this sober warning. These were elders that, most likely, Paul himself appointed to serve the church in Ephesus. No man, regardless of his gifts or usefulness, is immune to the temptation to distort the truth. This is true for church leaders as well as others. A church should be prepared to deal with this, should the need arise. By adopting a fulsome confession of faith and requiring its leaders to adhere sincerely to it, a church will be much better positioned to address this sad situation than if it had no such confession.

How should a minister keep himself from bitterness and pride when engaged in controversy?

First of all, a minister ought to try to avoid controversy. Sadly, there often is a perverse desire to battle that tends to well up in a minister who is fully committed to proclaim and defend the truth of God's Word. When that is coupled with the abundant distortions of truth that prevail today, a man very easily could find himself doing little else than engaging in controversies. A minister must learn to distinguish those hills on which he is prepared to die from all others and choose his battles carefully. Prayer, Scripture and godly counsel help in this effort.

Secondly, a man must recognize that in the heat of any controversy his greatest challenge lies within his own heart. One of the Puritans said that the temptations that accompany controversy are greater than those that accompany women and wine. Bitterness and pride are only two of them. John Bunyan recognized this and addressed it very graphically with his character, Valiant for Truth, in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Study the account of that man's bloody battle and remember that the three enemies that left him bruised and battered all resided within his own soul!

On a practical note, I try to remember that the truth for which I am contending commands me to love the one with whom I contend. It does not matter if he is a Christian brother or not, since Jesus tells us to love even our enemies. If I allow myself to become vengeful or bitter or arrogant toward my disputants then I am violating the very truth which I profess to defend in the controversy. It would be better for me to remain quiet and let others better suited to represent Christ and His cause take up the battle. It would be best for me to become such a person.

Also, I try to remember that in controversies my goal should be to win people and not arguments. It is easy to hang people on their words by pointing out every misstatement and accusing them of meaning what they genuinely did not intend to communicate. If I see something more clearly and accurately than my "opponent," then it is only by the grace of God and I should not allow myself to believe or act like it is because I am smarter or better in any way than he is.

Finally, I ask my wife and a few trustworthy men to watch me carefully when I am engaged in controversy and to point out to me where I am exhibiting pride,

thoughtlessness or lack of love. God has used them to help me see what I would not have seen otherwise.

What practical steps should be taken by preachers to “watch their life and doctrine closely”?

Recognize that this admonition is given to us for a reason. Every preacher should remember that better men than we will ever be have fallen into grievous sin and error. Ministers need the gospel as much as anyone and we must learn to live by the grace of God in Jesus Christ every day. We need to deal with our sin daily and trust Christ for forgiveness daily. We must fight against every tendency to resign ourselves to professionalism in ministry. As Robert Murray M’Cheyne said, “My people’s greatest need is their pastor’s personal holiness.” Dealing daily with our hearts before the Lord is not optional. This work does not compete with my ministry, it is a vital part of my ministry.

Using trustworthy catechisms and confessions can help guard our doctrinal commitments. Such documents are not infallible, but they provide guardrails which we should overrun, if ever, only with great caution and clear biblical warrant.

The New Testament warns us about the subtlety of error. If false teaching isn’t always obvious how can we keep ourselves from being deceived?

The best way to avoid being deceived is to be well-grounded in sound doctrine. Becoming vitally connected to a good church is the means which God has provided to ensure this.

Why does God allow His church to be troubled by false teachers?

Deuteronomy 13:1–4 indicates that one purpose false teachers serve is to provide a test for the devotion of God’s people. Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 11:19 when he indicates that factions (heresies) within a church are necessary to prove the faithfulness of genuine followers of Christ.

Have you been surprised that the point of attack in evangelicalism over the last fifteen years has been over doctrines that are central to evangelical orthodoxy?

No. Evangelicalism lost its center long ago in its pursuit of relevance and acceptability to the popular and academic cultures. When the gospel has been forgotten and theology has been marginalized, we should not be surprised to see fundamental doctrines attacked and discarded.

Are the denials of eternal punishment, penal substitution, and justification by faith alone the “unpaid debts” of the church? Are they a sign that evangelicals did a bad job of teaching these doctrines or is there some other dynamic at work?

I think they are an indication that we have too long assumed that we know what we believe and why. Attacks on such core doctrines as these are a call to re-examine our convictions in the light of the Bible and to decide whether or not we really do believe what we have professed and too often assumed. Of course, while we can never shirk our responsibility in this we must also remember that we have an enemy who is the father of lies and loves to deceive people.

How do you pray for those in error?

I ask the Lord to open their eyes and show them the truth.

Is there a point of no return for those who embrace heresies? What are the signs that this line has been crossed?

I operate on the conviction that as long as there is breath there is hope. If the Lord can save me then I have no reason to believe that anyone is beyond the reach of His grace. ☺

News

Join us for Breakfast with R. C. Sproul

The Founders Fellowship Breakfast will be held on June 15, 2010 at the Southern Baptist Convention in Orlando, Florida. Plan to join us in rooms W303A–C on Level 3 of the West Building at the Orange County Convention Center at 6:30 AM. R. C. Sproul will be our guest speaker. Tickets are \$20 and include breakfast. Those who register by May 31st will receive a discount of \$5 off the ticket price. Registration closes June 7, 2010.

Register online at: www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/

Founders Study Center

Audit a Course for Free this Spring

This spring the Founders Study Center is offering the 10-week course on *Worship* with Dr. Bruce Leafblad, free for those who sign up to audit the course. Free course registration continues through April 16, 2010. The Free Course Portal opened for Spring 2010 Orientation on March 1, 2010.

<http://study.founders.org/>

Giving Proper Due To the People in the Pew (Part 1)

A Biblical Defense of Lay-Ministry and Lay-Evangelism

Bob Gonzales

I'm still learning new things about my Reformed heritage. Most of the time, these new discoveries are edifying and serve to confirm my conviction that the Reformed tradition usually has it right. Occasionally, however, I run across a strand of Reformed teaching that doesn't resonate well with my general knowledge of the Bible's teaching. In some of these cases, I'm prompted to do further investigation that reveals a flaw or imbalance in my own thinking. In other cases, I can't get a particular strand of Reformed thought to fit with the contours of Scripture. The doctrine and practice of infant baptism is a case in point.

I've recently stumbled across another strand of thought associated with my Reformed heritage that appears out of balance with the data of Scripture. The strand of thought I have in view is difficult to define. It's more of a propensity than a clearly defined position. The best way I can think to describe it is *a tendency to overemphasize the importance of the ministry of the ordained man and to underemphasize the importance of the ministry of the layman*. It's a penchant for defining the life and ministry of a local church more narrowly in terms of *what happens in the pulpit on Sundays* rather than more broadly in terms of *what happens in the pulpit, pew, and outside the church all seven days of the week*.

How did I run across this strand of Reformed perspective? Several months ago I posted a question on the Puritan Board (PB), an Internet discussion forum for pastors and laymen who hold to one of the Reformed creeds. I raised the question whether the Reformed Confessions adequately affirm the church's duty of evangelistic and missionary outreach.¹ Some answered by pointing to the Westminster Directory for Worship, which commends public prayers for "the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all nations." Others provided references to Puritan sermons on evangelism. One brother suggested that since evangelism and missions is something we "do" whereas creeds are primarily concerned with what we "believe," we shouldn't be surprised if there's little creedal affirmation regarding evangelism and missions in the Reformed symbols. Most often, however, the answer I received was that creedal expressions like "the ministry of the Word" (WCF 10.3, 4; 14.1; WLC 68; 159), "the preaching of the Word" (WCF 7.6; WLC 35, 155; WSC 89), or "the administration of the Word" (WCF 23.3) served

as adequate affirmations of the church's responsibility to proclaim the gospel to its own Jerusalem and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

These responses to my question were not entirely satisfying. I suspected that the phrases cited above had a more narrow reference to the pulpit ministry performed by the ordained minister. My suspicions were confirmed when one brother plainly asserted, "I don't think every Christian is the one 'who is sent' according to Romans 10." A Reformed Baptist pastor followed up and expanded on this remark:

I believe most of us are all settled on the role of the preacher in declaring the gospel. I doubt many on the PB will argue against missionaries proclaiming the gospel. But how about the individual pew sitter? Is there a biblical mandate for them to witness or share the gospel? Is one needed? If I am honest to scripture, I have to admit that I cannot find one inference that commands individuals to preach the gospel.

Then a Presbyterian minister joined the discussion and confirmed this perspective by citing the WCF 8.8, which refers to God's effectual call via "His Word and Spirit," and by asserting:

Presbyterian theology is primarily concerned with asserting the crown rights of the Redeemer, not with meeting human needs. The Presbyterian church has never been preoccupied with "reaching the unsaved," but with the faithful administration of Word and sacraments.

Not only did I disagree with the dichotomy drawn between "asserting the crown rights of the Redeemer" and "meeting human needs,"² but I also was uncomfortable with this tendency to limit the work of evangelism to the pulpit ministry of the ordained man. When I pressed this brother whether the layperson had the privilege and responsibility to evangelize, he pointed to the believers in Philippi and noted that they prayed for Paul, supported Paul financially, and sought to cultivate a godly lifestyle. He even conceded that they might speak "about the things which are believed and practiced." However, he went on to stress, "This is not preaching the gospel." Rather, he averred, "We might call it sharing one's faith; but evangelism, in the NT sense of the word, is the official proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, commanding sinners to repent of their sins and believe upon Him for the salvation of their souls."

Hmm. Speaking about "things believed and practiced" and "sharing one's faith" is not "preaching the gospel"? Not "evangelism, in the NT sense of the word"? Doesn't count as "official" proclamation? Doesn't include "commanding sinners to repent of their sins and believe upon [Christ] for the salvation of their souls"? And does Romans 10:14–17, which identifies special revelation as the means of grace for saving faith (see WCF 14.1; LBCF 14.1), restrict the gospel's proclamation to the ordained minister? True, the ordained minister is one of the vital links in the "Romans 10 chain" that gets the gospel to the unreached. But should we conclude that Paul's list of links is exhaustive? After all, he failed to mention the church praying for laborers (Matthew 9:37–38) and preparing laborers (2 Timothy 2:2).

If the reader should assume those links as part of the chain on the basis of other texts of Scripture, why not assume another link in the chain, namely, that the commissioned minister will, in turn, “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12),³ which would include evangelism?

Perhaps it’s just a matter of semantics, I thought. Maybe I’m reading too much into their comments. So I decided I’d do a little more investigation. I picked up a book off my shelf entitled *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship*, written by Darryl Hart and John Muether, two Reformed scholars, and turned to the section that identifies the agent(s) responsible for carrying out the Great Commission. The authors rightly note, “The Great Commission is the task of the church.”⁴ But then they narrow the church’s agency vis-à-vis the Great Commission “to the ministers of the Word.” Since it is the officers of the church who administer the “baptism” of the Great Commission, we must also confine the ordinances of making disciples and teaching to the ordained ministers.⁵ In fact, these writers draw a parallel between the activities of the Great Commission and the three marks of a true church highlighted in the Belgic Confession, Article 29:

Discipling, teaching, and baptizing—together, these elements of the Great Commission describe what the Reformers understood to be the marks of the true church: the preaching of the Word (‘teaching ... all that I commanded you’), the administration of the sacraments (‘baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’), and the exercise of discipline (‘make disciples’). The Great Commission, then, is a description of the true church fulfilling her mandate.⁶

Wow! This was a new paradigm for me. Not only did these writers seem intent on limiting the task of making and grounding disciples in the faith to the agency of the ordained minister, but they also seemed to narrow its sphere (at least primarily) to what takes place on Sunday within the four walls of a church building. My hunch was confirmed when I turned the page and read an injunction to trust that “[God] will make the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments effectual to salvation” and to believe that “he will supply the officers of his church with all that is necessary for them to carry out this work.” The authors conclude, “It is the *church*, and specifically the *church at worship* that fulfills the Great Commission” (emphasis theirs).⁷

It’s not that I have problems with the authors’ focus on the church. I agree that the task of the Great Commission ultimately belongs to the church, not to para-church organizations. Nevertheless, I struggle with their tendency to narrow the task’s sphere (corporate worship) and its agents (the ordained minister). Although there is an etymological relation between “making disciples” and “discipline,” the two concepts, in their NT context, are not semantically synonymous. “Making disciples” (Greek: μαθητεύω) is a much broader concept semantically than ecclesiastical discipline (whether formative or corrective). To state it differently, making disciples entails evangelism, which, in turn, results (with the blessing

of God) in “adding” disciples to the church.⁸ How does “church discipline” add members to the church? Of course, Hart and Muether don’t actually limit evangelism to church discipline. They also include “the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments” as “effectual means of salvation.” But doesn’t this still limit evangelism primarily to what takes place in the pulpit on Sunday?

Maybe not. That would seem to contradict what they had said earlier, namely, “We [i.e., the church] must proclaim the gospel to the lost and desire that converts come to Christ. But,” they add, “that is not the only function of the church, and certainly not the focus of its worship.”⁹ In other words, “Evangelism,” they write, “is only part of the commission Christ gave to his church.”¹⁰ And to make their position more clear: “Worship, then, is not chiefly about evangelism.”¹¹

I paused to put this all together. The church at worship primarily fulfills the Great Commission on Sunday. Moreover, God is pleased to save souls through the ordained minister who preaches the Word, dispenses the sacraments and administers church discipline. But evangelism, an essential part of “making disciples,” is not to be the focus of worship on Sunday. Something doesn’t fit. It seemed to me that these Reformed authors largely confine the Great Commission to Sunday worship, minimize the task of evangelism in this context, and confine its agency to the ordained minister. What about evangelism outside of worship? What about the layman’s role in evangelism?

I thought again of Ephesians 4:11–12, which speaks of Christ giving to the church “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” After a look at the index, I was happy to discover that the authors devote two full pages to this text. My countenance fell, however, when I read their interpretation. They adopt the older interpretation that limits the ministries envisioned in verse 12 to the ordained man and reject the more common interpretation as

an every-member-ministry construction of Pauline teaching that diminishes the specialness of pastors’ chief duties by elevating to the status of ministry all the service of encouragement and edification that believers quite appropriately offer to each other.¹²

Hart and Muether don’t offer much of an exegetical argument. But they direct the reader to an article by T. David Gordon entitled, “Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4.” Gordon finds the majority view, reflected in most modern Bible translations and commentaries, as grammatically, contextually, and canonically (NT) indefensible. He attributes the view that sees pastors as equipping saints for works of ministry “to the egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, populist *Zeitgeist* [i.e., ‘spirit of the time’].”¹³ Most readers won’t want to be associated with such contemptuous epithets. So they’ll have no other choice but to reject the view that is inclusive of lay-ministry and to embrace the view that’s exclusively clerical.

I found the same kind of name-calling scare tactic in the Hart and Muether book. According to them, those who include the laity in the task of the Great Commission are unduly influenced by “North American democratic and egalitar-

ian culture.”¹⁴ Similarly, one of Darryl Hart’s colleagues, R. Scott Clark, rejects “the ‘every member’ model” as having “a lot more to do with democratic populism than it does with the biblical view of the church.”¹⁵ Clark opines, “There’s not a lot of evidence in the NT that unordained Christians did much ‘evangelism.’ This is the Achilles’ Heel of modern, populist, democratic, egalitarian evangelicalism.”¹⁶

Despite the credentials of these Reformed scholars, I find their tendency to overemphasize the importance of the ordained man and to underemphasize the importance of the layman imbalanced, to say the least. At worst, it’s unhealthy for the Christian church. I’ll refrain from associating their views with papism, fascism and an aristocratic *Zeitgeist*. Instead, I’ll offer biblical arguments in favor of lay-ministry (below) and in favor of lay-evangelism (Part 2).¹⁷ My aim in these articles is not to denigrate the role of the ordained man and the pulpit ministry. I hope, rather, to counter what I perceive to be an unhealthy tendency in some Reformed circles to downplay the importance of lay-ministry and lay-evangelism inside and outside the four walls of the sanctuary. In a word, I’d like to give proper due to the people in the pew.

Defining Terms

Before I launch into a defense of lay-ministry, I’ll need to define some terms. By “ministry” I have in view the basic idea conveyed by the Greek word *διακονία*, namely, the rendering of assistance, help, and/or service to others.¹⁸ For example, Paul requests that Timothy “get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me *for ministry* [εἰς διακονίαν]” (2 Timothy 4:11). We’re not informed of the particular nature of the service Paul desired of Mark. But the basic idea of attending to Paul’s needs is in view. The verbal form, *διακονέω*, is used Matthew 20:28 where Jesus declares, “The Son of Man came not *to be served* [διακονηθῆναι] but *to serve* [διακονῆσαι].” Note how grammatical and contextual considerations circumscribe the nature of this “ministry.” Jesus’ “service” consisted in His redemptive work on behalf of sinners. Elsewhere, the Scriptures speak of “*the ministry to the saints* [τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους]” (2 Corinthians 9:1), meaning financial assistance some Christians voluntarily offer to others (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:12). In Acts 6:1, we read of “*the daily ministration* [τῆ διακονία τῆ καθημερινῇ]” (KJV), a reference to the regular provision of food to needy saints. The apostles direct the congregation to assign certain individuals to administrate this service-oriented task so that the apostles, may give themselves to prayer and “*the ministry of the word* [τῆ διακονία τοῦ λόγου]” (Acts 6:4). Here, the genitive “of the word” defines the nature of the service: the apostles were to assist and help the congregation by means of teaching and preaching God’s Word.

Not surprisingly, the noun *διακονία* is also used to denote a commissioned task. Acts 1:25 speaks of “*this ministry and apostleship* [τῆς διακονίας ταύτης καὶ ἀποστολῆς],” a hendiadys meaning “apostolic ministry” (NIV). Accordingly, the role of apostles and their helpers is often spoken of as a “ministry” (Acts 1:17; 1:25; 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 6:3; Colossians 4:17; 2 Timothy

4:5). This task-oriented meaning of “ministry” is also assigned to men who serve the church not as official teachers or church planters but as official “servants” or *διακόννοι*, often translated “deacons” (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12, 13) whose task resembles that of the men selected in Acts 6 for the “daily ministration” (KJV). To summarize, “ministry” refers to some form of assistance, help, and/or service, the nature of which is usually defined by the context. The fact that the nature of this service takes different forms reminds us that the actual terminology (*διακονία*, *διακονέω*) need not be employed for the concept to be present. Preaching the Word, feeding the hungry, giving to the poor, etc., are all forms of “ministry.” Obviously, within the context of the NT, the term is used primarily for service rendered by believers to others in need on behalf of Christ and His church. Finally, as noted above, “the ministry” of some took on a specialized and/or official nature. An apostle could speak of his task as “the ministry that [he had] received from the Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:24). Similarly, certain individuals within the church were set-aside as “deacons” to assist the church leaders in caring for the temporal needs of others (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8–13).

To ascertain whether Christ authorizes laypeople to engage in the kinds of ministry outlined above, we must now define “layperson.” Few English translations of the Bible employ the terms “layman,” “lay person,” or “laity.” I found a few instances in the NAS or ESV where these terms are used to translate the Hebrew *זָר* (*zar*) which normally means “stranger” or “foreigner” but which can refer, in certain contexts, to anyone outside the priesthood or Levitical order (Exodus 30:33; Leviticus 22:10, 12; Numbers 1:51). This usage corresponds to the common meaning behind the English terminology. Broadly, it can refer to anyone outside a given profession or guild. One without medical training is a “layman” vis-à-vis the medical field. Traditionally, though, the term is commonly used to distinguish the non-clergy, i.e., the “ordinary” church member, from the clergy, i.e., the bishop, pastor, or elder. As we noted above, the NT does identify a class of individuals who are set aside or commissioned for the task of “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Nevertheless, we should not view the two groups, the laity and the clergy, as two juxtaposed entities within the church. Rather, we should view the clergy as a kind of subgroup. That is, all believers are called to be followers of Jesus Christ and active members in His church. From this larger group of disciples, those endowed with extraordinary gifts of utterance and administrative capacity and who exhibit mature Christian character are qualified to serve the more specialized task of the public teaching and managing of the flock. To them is granted an “official” or, better, office-related, “ministry” not extended to the others.

Lay-Ministry by Deed

Do the “others,” that is, the laypeople have a ministry in the church? In our limited survey of the “ministry” vocabulary, non-clergy are included. The act of believers offering financial or material assistance to other needy believers is termed “*the ministry* [*τῆς διακονίας*] to the saints” (2 Corinthians 9:1; cf. 9:12). Other

examples of financial or material aid extended by saints to saints and to those outside the church also qualify as “ministry” though the precise terminology isn’t used (see Matthew 25:36; Luke 8:1–3; Acts 2:44–45; 4:23–37; 9:36, 39; 10:31; Romans 15:25–26; 1 Corinthians 8:1–9, 15; 16:1–3; Galatians 6:6–10; 1 Timothy 5:11; 6:18; James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:16–17). The provision of food to the hungry is called “*ministry* [διακονία]” (Acts 6:1), and this is a role laypeople may fulfill (Matthew 15:32–38; 25:35, 37, 40; Mark 8:2–9; Romans 12:20; James 2:14–17). Indeed, it’s not just the pastor’s duty (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8) but also the layman’s privilege to “show hospitality” (Matthew 25:35; Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9), which is a form of ministry. Notable is the reference to certain women who accompanied Jesus and “*ministered to Him* [διηκόνουν αὐτῷ]” in various ways (Mark 15:40–41; cf. Luke 7:36; 8:1–3; 10:40; John 12:2–3). The example of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) certainly devolves upon every believer and can be appropriately termed “ministry.” Many of the acts of kindness referenced above qualify as “good works” (see John 10:32), a virtue concerning which the laity are frequently enjoined and commended (Matthew 5:16; Acts 9:36; 2 Corinthians 9:8–9; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Timothy 2:10; 5:10, 25; 6:17–18; Titus 2:14; 3:8, 14; Hebrews 10:24).

Lay-Ministry by Word

Is lay-ministry limited to deed? May laypeople also minister to one another and to those outside the church via word? One passage that may shed light on this question is 1 Peter 4:10–11 where we read,

As each has received a gift, use it *to serve* [διακονοῦντες] one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever *speaks* [λαλεῖ], as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever *serves* [διακονεῖ], as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The reader should note the juxtaposition of speaking with serving, both of which are described as “gifts” for service to the saints. Some commentators believe Peter’s making special reference to office bearers. The “one who speaks” is the pastor-teacher; the “one who serves” is probably the deacon.¹⁹ But there’s no indication in the context that Peter’s limiting his remarks to church officers. For this reason, The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith uses this passage as a proof text to support “lay-preaching” (26.11). Commenting on the Confession, Sam Waldron notes,

The prohibition of preaching by non-ministers is usually associated with an unbiblical distinction between ministers and elders. There is, however, no precept forbidding any Christian to preach the gospel as he may have opportunity. There are examples of Christians preaching the Word who were not ordained elders (Acts 8:5; 11:19–21; 1 Peter 4:10). There are

precepts and principles which require him to avoid pride and to submit to the church and its overseers in the estimate and exercise of his gifts (Rom. 12:3; Heb. 13:17).²⁰

New Testament scholar D. Edmond Hiebert also reads Peter's remarks as inclusive of gifted laymen and extends the purview beyond the stated meetings of the church:

No limitations concerning the speaker are indicated; the one speaking is not necessarily an official, but may be an individual member.... Although primarily speaking in the assembly is in view, the verb is broad enough to include speaking outside a church meeting, such as ministering to the sick, or even private conversation.²¹

This more inclusive reading of 1 Peter 4:10–11 finds corroboration in other New Testament texts. Take, for example, Paul's instruction to the church in Rome. In chapter 12, the apostle exhorts each church member to assess the graces and gifts with which God has endowed him (v. 3). Then he identifies several kinds of gifts, some ministry oriented (service, giving, acts of mercy) and some communication oriented (prophecy, teaching, exhortation). There's no hint in the context that the communicative gifts are limited to office-bearers.²² In fact, Paul goes on to assure his readers in the same epistle, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another" (15:14). Saints may instruct or admonish other saints. Elsewhere, Paul addresses the church's corporate worship and writes, "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Once again, nothing in the context constrains us to identify the communicators of biblical truth here as office-bearers. Non-clergy may address the congregation via song, teaching, revelation, or a foreign language prophecy accompanied by an interpretation. While the revelatory modes of communication may have ceased, the principle behind the text has not evaporated. Multiple participation (including the laity) for mutual edification may still inform worship services today. Isn't this also the burden of Colossians 3:16, which reads, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God"? Not just clergy but laypeople "teaching and admonishing" laypeople! And these aren't the only passages supporting a word-based ministry (see also 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14; Titus 2:3–4; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24–25).

Of course, I'm familiar with the argument that lay-people aren't sufficiently equipped to minister God's Word to others. In favor of limiting the proclamation of God's Word to the ordained man, Hart and Muether note that people look to experts when they need a service. "How many automobile owners," they query,

would take their vehicle to a repair shop in which dentists and bakers performed the tune-ups and replaced the timing belts? The obvious an-

swer is that today's Christians tolerate a high degree of hierarchical expertise when it comes to any number of society's functions, but refuse to do so when it comes to religious matters.²³

Good point. For this reason, those responsible for the bulk of public ministry in a church should be qualified pastor and teachers who are set aside to "labor in word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17; cf. Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:9). But Hart and Muether's illustration breaks down at one important level: *it assumes the dentists and bakers have had little or no training in auto-mechanics*. The same cannot be said of many laypeople who have attended churches where the Scriptures have been faithfully expounded for many years. Indeed, some Reformed ministers boast that their people know more Bible than the average evangelical preacher in town. If that's so, shouldn't we pastors long to see our sheep develop the ability to articulate their biblical knowledge to others? Granted, issues of spiritual maturity and communicative ability have to be considered. But such considerations did not stop the author of Hebrews from longing and laboring to the end that those to whom he wrote might become "teachers" (5:12–14), not as office-bearers but simply as laypeople entrusted with the treasure of gospel truth.²⁴

Equipping the Saints for Ministry

That brings us to the all-important passage in Ephesians 4. Verses 11 and 12 are the point of focus: "and [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." As translated in the ESV, the preaching and teaching gift of office bearers has a proximate aim followed by two consequent aims. The proximate aim, introduced by the Greek preposition πρὸς, is "to equip the saints." The two consequent goals, introduced by the Greek preposition εἰς, are to be the result of equipped saints: "*the work of ministry* [ἔργον διακονίας]," which in turn results in "*building up the body of Christ* [οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ]." The subordinate relationship of the key phrases in verses 11 and 12 can be diagrammed as follows:

Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν ... τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους,
And [Christ] gave ... pastors and teachers

πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων
Unto the preparation of the saints

εἰς ἔργον διακονίας,
For work of ministry

εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ,
For edification of Christ's body

This interpretation of the syntax, with slight variations, is supported in the punctuation of the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland NT Greek text, the 4th edition of the United Bible Societies' NT Greek text, nearly all modern English translations (RSV, NAS, NAB, NIV, NET, NRSV, NLT, ESV, CSB), and most commentaries.²⁵

Despite the strong support for this reading, some scholars favor the older interpretation reflected in the Authorized Version, which renders the three prepositional clauses in verse 12 as strictly coordinate and relates them to the task of office-bearers. In this case, the “work of ministry” belongs not to the saints but to the pastors and teachers. Arguments for this “clerical” reading include the following: (1) the Greek word translated “to equip” in the ESV (καταρτισμός) is better rendered “to perfect” or “to constitute”; (2) the prepositions πρὸς and εἰς are sometimes used synonymously and coordinately (Romans 15:2; Philemon 5); (3) when used in juxtaposition with “work” (ἔργον), the term “ministry” (διακονία) refers “to the more specific work of ministering the Word of God” (2 Tim. 4:5); (4) the NT elsewhere distinguishes “the task of ministering the Word of God from other, more general duties that all Christians share.”²⁶

We may rebut these arguments by noting the following: first, while the Greek noun καταρτισμός and its corresponding verb καταρτίζω may denote the idea of “completeness” or “restoration,” they may also denote the idea of *bringing something or someone to a state of adequacy to fulfill a purpose*.²⁷ For example, Jesus declares, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is *fully trained* [κατηρτισμένος] will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). The author of Hebrews prays that God might “*equip* [καταρτίσαι] [his readers] with everything good that [they] may do his will” (13:20–21). Even when the term is used to refer to the ideas of “completeness,” “wholeness,” or “restoration,” there’s often a functional aim in view. Hence, the disciples were “mending [καταρτιζοντας] their nets” (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:19) in order to restore them to a state of functionality (cf. Galatians 6:1). We don’t deny that Christ has given the pastor and teacher to bring the saints to a state of “completeness” or “maturity.” We demur, however, with the idea that the Christian’s maturity is an end-in-itself in Ephesians 4:12. We believe, rather, he’s being conformed to Christ’s image through the ministry of the pastor and teacher *so that he might walk in his Master’s steps*, who came not to be served but *to serve!*

Second, we don’t deny that the prepositions πρὸς and εἰς are sometimes used synonymously and coordinately. But there are also times when the contiguous use of πρὸς and εἰς is neither synonymous nor coordinate. There are, in fact, other occasions when Paul employs πρὸς as indicating the proximate goal and εἰς as the ultimate goal. In Romans 3:26, Paul highlights both a proximate and an ultimate goal of the atonement: “It was *to the proximate end* [πρὸς] of demonstrating his righteousness at the present time, *unto the ultimate end that* [εἰς] he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (author’s translation; cf. Romans 10:1; Hebrews 2:17). Of course, one shouldn’t rest too much weight on the shift from one preposition to another. Taken in isolation from the context, the preposi-

tions in Ephesians 4:12 might be synonymous and coordinate. But that leads us to inquire whether the context favors one reading over the other.

I believe it does. Ephesians 4:11–12 is part of a larger pericope. The gift of clergy (v. 11) is but part of a larger gift addressed in verse 7: “*To each one of us* [Ἐνὶ δὲ ἑκάστῳ ἡμῶν] was grace given but grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (author’s translation). In keeping with his other discussions about spiritual gifts, Paul makes clear that Christ through His Spirit has endowed each believer with the grace to fulfill his or her role in the body (see Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 12:7). We should expect, therefore, that the subsequent context would highlight not simply the gifts of a clerical few but the gifts of all God’s people, which contribute to the edification process. And we are not disappointed. The pericope ends with verses 15 and 16:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by *every joint* with which it is equipped, when *each part* is working properly, makes the body grow so that *it builds itself up* in love (emphasis added).

So the “building up of the body” referenced in verse 12 is here accomplished “when each part is working properly.” Notably, the phrase “working properly” translates the Greek noun ἐνέργειαν, which is related to the noun translated “work” (ἔργον) in verse 12. These facts, together with the implications of verse 7, force Andrew Lincoln, a defender of the “clerical view,” to concede “an active role for all believers” though he insists that “the work of ministry” in verse 12 belongs to the clergy. In other words, much as some of the clergy-proponents would like the saints to “sit still,” Paul won’t have it! No matter how one slices the exegetical pie, the saints get a piece of the “action” and that action, whether “speaking the truth in love” or “mak[ing] the body grow,” may be appropriately termed “ministry.”

That brings us, thirdly, to the argument that the contiguous use of “work” (ἔργον) and “ministry” (διακονία) must refer “to the more specific work of ministering the Word of God.” Three rejoinders are in order. To begin with, the premise itself is tenuous. The fact that these two precise nouns are only used one other place and there refer to the clerical ministry (2 Timothy 4:5) can only be suggestive, not determinative. We have just noted that the term related to “work” in verse 12 is used in verse 16 and tied to the term “building” (οἰκοδομή,) found in both verses. So if verse 16 speaks of the church being built via the work of every member, why can’t verse 12 entail a similar idea? What is more, the “work” and “ministry” family of terms do occur in a context where it is the people of God as a whole, not just clergy, who are in view. The author of Hebrews comforts his persecuted audience with the following thought: “for God is not unjust so as to overlook *your work* [τοῦ ἔργου ὑμῶν] and the love that you have shown for his name in *serv[ing]* [διακονοῦντες] the saints, as you still do” (6:10). Finally, the reader should note that in almost every circumstance where “ministry” refers specifically to an office-related work, it occurs as a *definite noun*, with an article, possessive

pronoun, demonstrative pronoun, or a combination (see Acts 1:17; 1:25; 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 6:3; Colossians 4:17; 2 Timothy 4:5;). So unlike 2 Timothy 4:5, where Paul exhorts Timothy to engage in “*the ministry* [τὴν διακονίαν],” Ephesians 4:12 leaves both nouns anarthrous or indefinite, “*work of ministry* [ἔργον διακονίας].” These considerations conspire to favor a non-clerical reading of ministry in 4:12.

Fourth, Gordon marshals six lines of New Testament evidence supporting a distinction between the clergy and laity. While the data Gordon assembles might serve a different discussion, they’re irrelevant to the interpretation of Ephesians 4:11–12. All sides acknowledge that the Bible distinguishes between clergy and laity. The point of debate is what tasks are assigned to whom. Do the clergy (v. 11) perform all the work envisioned in verse 12? Or do they “equip” the saints to join them in the task of building the church (v. 12)? The fact that other NT data distinguish between clergy and laity misses the crux of the debate and is, therefore, a classic example of *non sequitur* reasoning. I find it passing strange that Gordon expends such energy in gathering NT evidence in favor of a distinction between clergy and laity but virtually ignores the NT evidence I’ve summarized above in support of lay-ministry. More surprising, Gordon even suggests that those of us who don’t accept his reading are motivated by an “egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, populist Zeitgeist.”²⁸ I’d like to think we’re being prompted by *ein Beröageist* [“a Berean spirit”] in our reading of Scripture.

Ministers All?

R. Scott Clark raises and answers that question negatively. “The ‘every member ministry’ model hangs by a very thin biblical reed. It depends upon how one reads Eph 4:11–12.” According to Clark, “we have extensive revelation about the special offices and precious little about so-called ‘every member’ ministry.” This doesn’t mean Clark construes the laity’s role as purely passive. It means, “strictly speaking, ministry is what ministers do.” He concludes, “Not everyone in the congregation is a ‘minister’ and frankly, that should be a relief.”²⁹

Some may think this is just a debate about semantics. After all, men like Clark would probably approve of laypeople engaging in deeds of kindness and exchanging mutual exhortation. Though he’s willing to permit laypeople to bear “witness to the faith” (what’s revealed in the Word and the Reformed symbols) and “witness to their faith,” he’s uncomfortable with calling that “evangelism.”³⁰ On the other hand, pastors like myself distinguish between clergy and laity and acknowledge that not all laypeople are sufficiently gifted to teach the Word publicly at the level and frequency of a trained pastor and teacher. We’re even willing to allow that the English term “ministry,” like the corresponding Greek word, may have a more technical meaning that denotes a specially assigned task or vocation and a less technical meaning that denotes a more general function of service assigned to all God’s people. Indeed, we’ll even speak of “the centrality of preaching,” thinking of the pulpit “ministry” as the hub around which the spokes

and wheel of church “ministry” turn. Hence, we’re not denying or denigrating the strategic place of what Charles Bridges in his pastoral theology calls *The Christian Ministry*.³¹ We’re simply trying to make room, in light of the biblical data, for “The Christian’s Ministry” too.

So it is about semantics, but it’s about more than mere semantics. The Bible itself refers to lay-activity offered to others on behalf of Christ as “ministry.” Paul commends to the church in Rome a laywoman by the name of Phoebe as “a *minister* [διάκονον] of the church at Cenchreae” (Romans 16:1). It’s doubtful she was an office-bearer.³² But Paul wasn’t as linguistically stingy as some of our modern Reformed friends seem to be. I suggest we follow Paul and be no more precise than the Bible in its use of terminology. Moreover, the point of debate is one of “tendency.” In my reading of these writers, I see a tendency to overemphasize the importance of the ordained man’s ministry and to underemphasize the importance of the layman’s ministry. The solution to this clerical myopia is to open our eyes to all the NT teaches regarding ministry. In doing so, we’ll not become “levellers”; we’ll maintain a distinction between the clergy and laity. But we’ll also recognize that Jesus authorizes *all His people* to be ministers: “If anyone would be first,” says Christ, “he must be last of all and *servant* [διάκονος] of all” (Mark 9:35). As Jesus assumed the role of a “servant,” so must all who would follow in his steps. And as we serve one another and the world around us, we’ll be engaged in what the Bible calls “ministry.”

“Ministers All?” With the proper qualifications, “Yes!” It’s just that plain and simple. ☺

Notes:

¹ “Do the Reformed Confessions Affirm the Duty of Evangelistic and Missionary Outreach?” which can be found on the Puritan Board: <http://www.puritanboard.com/f71/do-reformed-confessions-affirm-duty-evangelistic-missionary-outreach-37503/>. For more examples, see also the discussion under the thread, “The Pastor Only Should Evangelize”: <http://www.puritanboard.com/f19/pastor-only-should-evangelize-29582/>.

² Part of “asserting the crown rights of the Redeemer” is doing what His word bids us do and walking in His steps. And since Jesus did not merely go about Palestine proclaiming “I’m the Promised Messiah” but also healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, feeding the hungry, causing the lame to walk, etc., I think we’re on tenuous ground if we overlook, depreciate, or fail to imitate (without the miraculous elements of course) this facet of His ministry. In other words, I believe it is the duty of the church and every Christian to see the multitudes, be moved with compassion, and to meet human needs both temporal (when possible and appropriate) and eternal (by pointing them to Christ).

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ *Worship with Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43, 105–112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸ Of course, the Paedo-baptist has a way to circumvent this difficulty. He can “add” to the church via procreation. This option is closed to the Baptist, however.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

¹³ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994): 75.

¹⁴ *Worship with Reverence and Awe*, 44.

¹⁵ “Ministers All?”; accessed April 14, 2009 from the Internet: <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2007/12/15/ministers-all/>.

¹⁶ “Missional Monday: Should Evangelism Happen Only in the Church?”; accessed April 14, 2009 from the Internet: <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2008/02/25/missional-monday-should-evangelism-happen-only-in-the-church/>. James Renihan also warns against the “every-member-ministry” view, calling it “the triumph of Plymouthism,” which, “in its worst application ...

obliterates any distinction between members of the church and promises a kind of egalitarianism. Churches become like huge shopping malls,” says Renihan, “full of stores with ‘Help Wanted’ signs. Choose your place, find a position, and do it! The work of ministry is yours to do.” “The Ministry and the Church, Part 1,” *The Banner of Truth* 491–492 (Aug–Sept 2004): 41.

¹⁷ Part 2 will be printed in the Spring 2010 issue of the *Founders Journal*.

¹⁸ See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition (United Bible Societies, 1988, 89), § 35.19 [p. 460].

¹⁹ John Calvin limits the speaking gift here to the pastoral office and includes the ministry gift as a function of the pastoral office. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (reprint, Eerdmans, 1989), 12:305–06. John Brown thinks the text is referring to “the two offices of teaching and ministry,” but he allows that “the principle in the text reaches beyond the limits of the official station; it is applicable to every member of the Church.” *Expository Discourses on the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter* (reprint, The Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), 3:126–27. Albert Barnes confines the speaking gift to the office of pastor but extends the ministry gift to all believers. *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (reprint, Kregel, 1962), 1430–31. See also Robert Leighton, *An Obedient Faith: An Exposition of 1st Peter* (reprint, Calvary Press, 1995), 432–36. Edmund Clowney thinks the text is primarily addressing pastor-teachers and deacons. *The Message of 1 Peter* (IVP, 1988), 185–86.

²⁰ *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 2nd edition (Evangelical Press, 1995), 326–27.

²¹ *1 Peter* (Moody Press, 1992), 276.

²² The similar list in 1 Corinthians 12:4–31 does include some gifts related to office-bearers (e.g., apostles, prophets, teachers). But laypeople are not excluded.

²³ *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 109.

²⁴ It's important to note that the author of Hebrews doesn't single out a select few from this audience whom he had hoped would have attained to the office of teacher by this time. Rather, he's addressing his entire audience. Philip Hughes is correct to observe, "This should not be taken to mean that they ought all to be in official teaching positions in the church, but rather that they ought by now to be sufficiently advanced in their comprehension of Christian doctrine to be able to instruct and edify those who are still young in the faith." *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), 190.

²⁵ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, The Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright (Doubleday & Co., 1960), 479–82; Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians* (United Bible Societies, 1982), 102; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Eerdmans, 1984), 349, n. 77; G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 76; Ronald Y. K. Fung, "The Nature of Ministry according to Paul," *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (1982): 141; William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Ephesians* (Baker Book House, 1967), 198; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2002), 547–51; Richard Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Wartburg Press, 1937), 530; Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Baker Books, 1994), 127; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans, 1999), 301–05; Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Paternoster, 2006), 118–19; Edwin D. Roels, *God's Mission: The Epistle to the Ephesians in Mission Perspective* (Eerdmans, 1962), 192–95; Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians in The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Terry Muck (Zondervan, 1996), 204; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (InterVarsity, 1991), 167–68; Brooke F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint, Eerdmans, 1950), 63; A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1978), 58. See also James Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock: A Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling, and Leadership* (Zondervan, 1974, 75), 339–44.

²⁶ These are the primary arguments advanced by T. David Gordon in his article "'Equipping' Ministry in Ephesians 4?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994): 69–78. Gordon draws from arguments advanced by some earlier commentators as well as one modern commentator, Andrew T. Lincoln,

Ephesians, vol. 42 of *The Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 253. Earlier commentators who favor the “clerical” view included John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (reprint, Eerdmans, 1965), 11:180–81; John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (reprint, Banner of Truth), 6:284–85; and Charles Hodge, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint, Banner of Truth, 1991), 162–65. To these one may add the more recent studies of John J. Davis, “Ephesians 4:12 Once More: Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry?” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24 (2000): 161–76; J. C. O’Neill, “‘The Work of the Ministry’ in Ephesians 4:12 and the New Testament,” *Expository Times* 112 (2001): 338–40; James M. Renihan, “The Ministry and the Church, Part 1,” *The Banner of Truth* 491–492 (Aug–Sept 2004): 37–45; Sydney H. T. Page, “Whose Ministry? A Re-appraisal of Ephesians 4.12,” *Novum Testamentum* 47.1 (2005): 26–46.

²⁷ Louw and Nida, § 75.5 [p. 680].

²⁸ “‘Equipping’ Ministry in Ephesians 4?,” 77.

²⁹ “Ministers All?”; accessed on April 14, 2009 from the Internet: <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2007/12/15/ministers-all/>.

³⁰ “Missional Monday: Should Evangelism Happen Only in the Church?”; accessed on April 14, 2009 on the Internet: <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2008/02/25/missional-monday-should-evangelism-happen-only-in-the-church/>.

³¹ This is the title of Bridges’ excellent treatise on the office and work of the pastor.

³² Some use the example Phoebe as a basis for women deacons or deaconesses. On the basis of a consideration of all the data related to the diaconate, I’m inclined towards the view that women served as assistants to the deacons but did not occupy the office itself. For a more lengthy discussion of this question, see William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Baker Book House, 1981), 2:499–501; *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Baker Book House, 1957), 130–35; Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church’s Minister of Mercy* (Lewis & Roth, 1992), 69–79.

When Faith Doesn't Seem to Work

Studies on the Life of Gideon

Roger Ellsworth

As a pastor, I read my Bible and my people, and I sometimes see my people having trouble when they read the Bible. The Bible calls us to faith in God, but our circumstances often call us away from that very faith. This article arises from the pastoral concern of helping believers to be believers when their circumstances seem to make faith very difficult, if not impossible.

These studies, while based on the life of Gideon and truly reflecting what Scripture says, are not meant to dot every “i” and cross every “t” of exposition. They are rather intended to get very quickly to the problem that is so vexing—faith that doesn't seem to work. Those who desire the in-depth exposition will need to go elsewhere, but those who are grappling hard with the issue will find, I trust, help and encouragement here.

Gideon's Vise (Judges 6:1–14)

Gideon was a man of faith. There can be no doubt about that. But he was also a man whose faith was in crisis. He would make that clear when the Angel of the Lord appeared to him (v. 13).

What was the reason for this crisis? There were two sides to it. One was the Midianites! For seven long years they had made life miserable for the people of Israel. Verse 2 says it all: “... the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel.” Verse 6 adds: “So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites”

The other side to it was the Lord. Gideon thought that the Lord should have done something about the Midianites, but He had not. After all, the Lord had delivered Israel from her enemies on previous occasions, and He had promised to deliver Israel from her enemies (Leviticus 26:7–8; Deuteronomy 28:7). So Gideon was upset because the Midianites were doing lots of things and the Lord was doing nothing! Gideon must have felt that he was in something of a vise—the activity of the Midianites and the inactivity of God.

Gideon is not the only person in the Bible to be in this vise. Job found himself in it. Problems galore on one hand and the distance of God on the other! Asaph certainly felt himself to be in it when he looked at how the wicked were prospering while he was barely scraping by (Psalm 73). Many believers have been in Gideon's vise at one time or another.

What are we to do when we find ourselves surrounded by the cruel Midianites of life and God seems not to care? To put it another way, what are we to do when our faith seems not to be working? Gideon can help us. He rises from the pages of Scripture to teach us valuable lessons about faith.

The importance of understanding faith

First, we must examine our faith to make sure that we are not trying to obligate God to do something that He has not obligated Himself to do. Do we understand faith? It is not believing that God will do whatever we want done. It is not positive thinking. It is believing that God will do what He has promised to do in the time and way that suits Him. In other words, we cannot have faith apart from the Word of God (Romans 10:17).

Gideon was in a crisis of faith because he had been expecting God to do something about the Midianites. Gideon wanted them removed from the scene, and he seems to have convinced himself that God was obligated to do. But it was God who had sent those very Midianites!

The people of Israel were in a covenant relationship with God. One part of that covenant, as noted above, was God's pledge to give the Israelites victory over their enemies. This is evidently the part that Gideon had in mind, but there was another part to that same covenant, namely, the responsibility of obedience. In other words, God was not obligated to keep the promise to deliver Israel from her enemies if she did not obey His laws.

Furthermore, God had made it particularly clear that Israel must not go after other gods. Doing so would lead, not to Israel having victory over her enemies, but being oppressed by them (Deuteronomy 28:25). So the very Midianites who were so vexing to them were not proof that God had failed. They were rather proof that God keeps His Word! Gideon's mistake was to separate God's blessings from Israel's responsibilities. We often do the same. We want God to bless us regardless of the way we live, and when we don't get the blessings we want and expect we conclude that God has failed. Gideon also teaches us—

The importance of not giving up on God

For seven long years the Midianites had oppressed the people of Israel. It is probably safe to say that Gideon and other people of faith spent much of those seven years wondering why God did not do something. But now Gideon finds himself in the presence of the very God that he had been wondering about. And the Lord announces that He is ready to deliver Israel from the Midianites. This shows us that it is always too early to give up on God.

The experience of Gideon warns us to be on guard against snapshot theology. God's work in this world is like a movie. We oftentimes want to look at one clip from God's movie and start making our pronouncements. We see the clip, and we wonder why God has done this and why He has not done the other. And we are so sure that we are seeing everything and that we are right in our conclusions.

But we are looking only at a single snapshot. Meanwhile God tells us to watch the whole movie, and He assures us that everything will make perfect sense at the end of it all.

These lines express it so well:

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Him.
One glimpse of His dear face
All sorrow will erase.
So let us run the race
'Til we see Christ.

A third lesson for us to consider is —

The importance of feeding our faith with the faithfulness of God

The Lord had work for Gideon to do: “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?” (v. 14). God is here appointing Gideon to the office of mediator. He is to be God’s instrument to achieve God’s purpose. He is to be God’s man for achieving victory over the enemy. He is to secure that victory on behalf of all God’s people.

We have established that the people of Israel were in a covenant relationship with God. The centerpiece of that covenant was God’s promise to send a Mediator. That Mediator would be God’s own Son, and He would come to this earth to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:23). He would come to secure victory over Satan on their behalf.

People of faith in Israel held to this belief. Yes, there were times when their faith in that promise would diminish. The seven years of Midianite oppression was such a time. But then God would raise up a man like Gideon to deliver Israel, and the people of faith would see in that deliverer a reminder of the great Deliverer who was to come. And their faith would be rekindled and renewed.

I am not saying that Gideon saw himself as a picture or type of the Messiah. But I am saying that others in Israel saw him in that way and we should as well. What does this have to do with us when we feel that our faith is not working? It gives us something with which to feed our faith so that it will work. I am saying that God kept His promise to send His Son. This demonstrates God’s faithfulness.

When we feel that our faith is not working, we should think about that faithfulness. And think about it in this way in particular—the sending of His Son to be our Savior is God’s big promise. If God was faithful in keeping His big promises, we should never doubt that He will keep all His lesser promises. Faith always lets the greater thing govern the lesser things.

Does it seem to you that your faith is not working, that it is all pointless and vain? Let Gideon help you. Look at his life and be reminded that true faith does not try to obligate God to do what He not promised, true faith doesn't give up on God on the basis of what it sees at the moment and true faith looks to the redeeming work of Christ as proof that God will never fail to keep His promises. With these truths our faith can forge ahead in a world that makes it seem pointless.

Focusing Faith (Judges 6:11–35)

We find Gideon in Judges 6:11 threshing his wheat in a winepress. A poor place for the job, it was necessary in order for Gideon to hide from the marauding Midianites who were making life miserable for the Israelites.

Gideon was in more than a winepress (or was it his “whine-press?”). He was also in a crisis of faith. He could not understand why God was not doing something about the Midianites (v. 13). It all seemed so simple to him. The same God who had delivered Israel from Egypt should do the same for them with the Midianites. It appears not to have occurred to Gideon that those very Midianites were sent by God! (v. 1). Why would God do such a thing? As a punishment on His people for worshipping other gods! (v. 10). What can Gideon's experience teach us about what we are to do when our faith does not seem to work?

Our focus is on the word *focus*. So much depends on it! If we focus on the wrong things, we are discouraged. If we focus on the right things, we are encouraged. So when faith seems not to work, we must focus on the right things. One thing these verses show us is—

The need to focus on God and not on the Midianites

The whole problem with Gideon is that he became so focused on the Midianites that all he could see was Midianites! We must not be too hard on him. If we were in his situation, we would be much inclined to do the same.

The big thing that happens in the verses before us is that God shifts Gideon's focus away from the Midianites to Himself. He does so by appearing to Gideon as the Angel of the Lord. We are to understand that God temporarily took human flesh to appear to Gideon. This is nothing less than a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself!

After a few minutes, Gideon realized that he was in the presence of the very God that he had been questioning. Verse 22 says: “Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord. So Gideon said: ‘Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face.’” The subject has now changed! At the beginning, of this chapter the subject is the Midianites. When Gideon realized he was in the presence of the Lord, the subject shifted to the awesome majesty of God and how he, Gideon, could stand before such a God! We might say the Midianites got lost in the glory of the Lord.

All of this is of immense importance for us. We have our own Midianites. We have problems and difficulties, and sometimes they are so severe that they take over all of life. We cannot think about anything else except our burdens and difficulties. With Midianites swarming all around us, it is hard to see anything else. And the more we look at the Midianites, the more there are and the bigger they are. The urgent need for us in the midst of the Midianites is to look to God. Let's try to get this message to soak into our minds and hearts by re-working some words of a familiar hymn:

Turn your eyes on Jesus,
Look full into His wonderful face;
And the Midianites of life will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Simon Peter can serve us as an example on this point. We recall that the Lord Jesus came walking to the disciples on a storm-tossed sea. Before He reached the boat, He commanded Simon to join Him on the water. And Simon began to walk toward Him. As long as he kept his eyes on the Lord, he succeeded, but when he took his eyes off the Lord and began to take note of the wind and waves, he began to sink (Matthew 14:22-33).

Let's take this lesson away from that account—when we take our eyes off the Lord and look at the Midianites, we begin to sink. The Lord gave Gideon no choice about this matter of focusing on Him and His glory. He graciously accommodated Gideon's request for a sign by causing fire to burst from a rock and consume Gideon's meat and bread! (v. 21). We are tempted to come away from this saying something along these lines: "If the Lord would do something like that for me, I would be able to shift my focus away from my problems to Him and His glory."

Are you prepared for this? The Lord has done even more for us than He did for Gideon! We have even greater signs! The Lord who appeared only briefly to Gideon came again as a babe to Bethlehem. He came to dwell among us for an extended period of time. He came to die on the cross for our sins. And He came to rise again from the grave and ascend to the Father who sent Him. The glory of the redeeming work of Christ is greater than the glory of fire leaping from a rock! And we have a full and accurate account of it in Scripture!

When the trials and adversities of life mount up all around us, the very best thing we can do is to look at that redeeming work until we are once again "lost in wonder, love and praise." That look will not make the Midianites go away, but it will surely make them shrink in size before our eyes, and it will make them much more manageable.

A second truth these verses urge us to consider is—

The need to focus more on the enemy within than on the enemy without

Prior to the Lord's visit, Gideon was aware of only one enemy—the enemy without. Those Midianites! The Lord's appearance turned his attention to a much more dangerous and sinister enemy—the one within! And what was the enemy within? It was devotion to idols!

After departing from Gideon that day, the Lord returned that evening to say: "... tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it; and build an altar to the Lord your God ..." (vv. 25b–26a).

Gideon had a problem a lot closer to home than the Midianites! So we have Gideon saying to God: "Why don't you do something about these Midianites?" And we have God saying to Gideon: "Why don't you do something about those idols?" The idols caused the Midianites, and the idols had to be removed before the Midianites could be removed.

The major idol of Gideon's day was Baal—a nature god who was supposed to insure good crops. We don't call him "Baal" today, but this god is still with us. He was the god of affluence and comfort, and we still worship those things.

An idol is anything that receives from us what properly belongs to God. When we give to anything the time that belongs to God, we have an idol. When we give to anything the money that belongs to God, we have an idol. When we give to anything the love and affection that belongs to God, we have an idol. How very easy it is for us to go about blaming the Midianites, while we refuse to address our own idolatry!

Let someone ask why the world is in its present condition, and we point to political leaders, the judicial system and to Hollywood. Meanwhile the Lord is telling His church to look at the idolatry in her midst. When their land needs healing, God's people are called, not to sign petitions and organize politically, but rather to humble themselves, pray, seek God's face and turn from their wicked ways (2 Chronicles 7:14).

We are so very much like Gideon! We ever want God to do what we think He should do, but we are never quite as eager to do what we should do. James B. Jordan writes: "Before any of us weak Gideons can be effective for God, we must fight our own Baals, and tear down our own altars."¹

What, then, are we to do when our faith seems not to work? Gideon rises from the pages of Scripture to tell us to focus on God and on our own sins instead of on the Midianites. Faith always works when it is lubricated with the glory of God and when its gears are free from the sand of sin.

Resisting the Temptation to Fleece God (Judges 6:36–40)

These verses bring us to the best-known incident in the life of Gideon. They tell us that on successive nights he put out a fleece of wool for the express purpose of determining whether God had truly spoken to him.

On the first night, Gideon asked God to cause dew to fall on the fleece alone, leaving the ground around it dry (v. 37). On the next night, he reversed it by asking God to send dew upon the ground and causing the fleece to be dry (v. 39). On each night God did as Gideon asked.

This has been hailed by some as a great act of faith on Gideon's part, but it was really a great act of doubt. I call it that for this reason—in putting out the fleece, Gideon was asking God to make clear something that He, God, had already made clear. Gideon wanted confirmation that the Lord would use him to deliver Israel from the Midianites (v. 37). But he already had God's promise to that effect (v.16), and he had received confirmation of that promise. After being told he would deliver Israel, Gideon asked for a sign (v. 17), which was graciously granted by the Lord causing fire to shoot out from a rock (v. 21).

We can find even further confirmation in the Lord protecting Gideon from the mob that wanted to kill him after he, Gideon, tore down the altar of Baal (vv. 28–31). The Lord had commanded him to do this, and the Lord had seen him through. There was yet another confirmation. Verse 34 tells us that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. Gideon had to know that God was stirring in him in a most unusual way. But with it all, he still had his doubts. He had a sure word from God, but he desired more.

The episode before us is of particular interest because it deals with something that we are inclined to do when our faith appears not to be working, namely, put God to the test. Many do this. They often speak about “putting out the fleece,” and they commend the same to others.

It is doubtful that we should employ this approach even in gray areas, that is on matters on which God has not spoken. In such cases, we should ask God for guidance (James 1:5), seek counsel from spiritual people, and trust God to lead us in the way He would have us to go (Proverbs 3:5–6). But we should never ask God to confirm through some sign what He has already clearly revealed in His Word. Here is an example: a Christian should not put the fleece out to determine whether he or she should marry an unbeliever. Why? Because God has already clearly pronounced on the matter (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Here is another example: we should not put out a fleece to determine whether we should forgive a brother or sister in Christ because God has already revealed His will on this matter (Matthew 18:21–22; Ephesians 4:32). Let's be honest about it. The putting out of a fleece on matters on which God has already spoken is nothing less than an attempt to get around what God has said! Gideon and his fleece speak to us, then, about—

Our confidence in the Word of God

For us the Word of God is found in the Bible, which is a sure guide and a sufficient guide. The need before is to simply believe that Word, to be believing believers.

Gideon was a believer in God before the Angel of the Lord appeared to him. The Angel of the Lord did not appear to Gideon to make a believer out of him,

but to call him to believe in the message that he came to deliver. Gideon was called to be a believing believer, but he was a doubting believer.

For faith to work right, it has to be fed. And the food for faith is the Word of God (Romans 10:17). If we want faith to work right, we must believe that Word and act upon it. We must not be questioning it and disputing with it. I can tell you from years of experience in the pastorate that the happiest Christians are those who believe most firmly the Bible. They trust its promises, accept its teachings and obey its commands. Things are different for those who harbor doubts about the Word of God. Their worship is muted. Their performance is spotty. Their sense of blessing is small.

My conclusion is this: those who believe most are blessed most. I come again to these words from Charles Spurgeon: “Brethren, be great believers. Little faith will bring your souls to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your souls.”² The crying need of the hour is that unbelievers should be able to look at the church and see people who have heaven in their souls. And this can only happen if the people of God believe the Word of God without dispute and debate. We can fall into the trap of believing our doubts and doubting our beliefs. We must learn to believe our beliefs and doubt our doubts.

The testimony of Jesus

There are many, many reasons that we should firmly believe in the Word of God. I will mention only two. The first is that Jesus Himself firmly believed in it and demonstrated that belief again and again.

First, He flatly affirmed that Scripture is the Word of God (Matthew 5:17–18; John 10:35). And He went out of His way to especially affirm those portions of the Old Testament that are often challenged (Matthew 12:39–41; 19:4–5; 24:37–39; Luke 17:28–32). He also demonstrated His confidence in it by using it to fend off the temptations of Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). He also regarded it as the final court of appeal in His various controversies with the religious leaders of the day (e.g., Matthew 22:23–33).

Fulfillment of prophecies

A second major reason for us to believe the Bible is the astonishing fulfillment of its many, many prophecies. The probability that one man in history would fulfill just a few prophecies of the Old Testament are staggering. And Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies!

In very practical terms, Gideon’s doubt in putting out his fleece tells us that we should never question anything that God has revealed in His Word. We are not to invent some kind of test for God to demonstrate that His Word is true. We are simply to believe it and rejoice in it.

By the way, the main message of the Word of God is the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be clear on that! Perhaps we can even see in Gideon’s fleece a small picture of that work. The fleece was wool from the sacrificial animal,

the lamb. On the cross, Jesus, the Lamb of God, had the dew of life wrung out of Him so that dew could fall on undeserving sinners! But we must go on to yet another matter and say that Gideon and his fleece speak to us about —

Our consolation in the God of the Word

How blessed we are to be able to close with this consideration! Here is something that helps our faith tremendously—God understands our weakness in faith and does not write us off for that reason. Think of what God could have done with Gideon. He could have rebuked him for his evident lack of faith, set him on the shelf and found someone else to do the job. But God graciously endured Gideon’s weak faith and took the opportunity to strengthen it.

Every Christian struggles with his faith at one time or another. John Calvin rightly observes: “... in the course of this present life it never goes so well with us that we are wholly cured of the disease of unbelief and entirely filled and possessed by faith ... unbelief which reposes in the remains of the flesh, rises up to attack the faith that has been inwardly conceived.”³

But let us not despair because our faith is weak. Weak faith is still faith! And the God who loves His children so much that He nailed His Son to the cross for their sins will not abandon them in their weakness. With the tender love of a father, He patiently endures their weakness and works to bring them to greater faith.

What Faith Must Keep in Mind (Judges 7)

This chapter begins with God preparing Gideon to face the Midianites and ends with God giving Gideon victory over them. But there is something here of even greater significance, namely, insight into those things that cause faith to work well. I would go so far as to say that this chapter provides us with pictures of three things that we must keep in mind for our faith to work.

For faith to work it must keep in mind the big picture (vv. 2–8)

This picture is supplied for us by the Lord commanding Gideon to reduce the number of his soldiers. Gideon had managed to muster an army of 32,000. This number must have seemed to him to be the bare minimum against the 135,000 of the Midianites. But just as Gideon was assuring himself that victory might very well be possible with his 32,000, the Lord showed up to tell him to send all the cowards home.

After his initial shock, Gideon may very well have consoled himself with the thought that only a hundred or two would fall into that category. He would still have an army of over 30,000. Get this—22,000 got up and went home! This shows us how little faith there was in Israel at that time. How could an army of 10,000

succeed against the Midianites? We can imagine Gideon furiously scratching out a plan of battle on the back of an envelope. Maybe it could still work! But God is not through. He shows up again to say: “The people are still too many; . . .” (v. 4).

Too many! Had the Lord lost His mind? But by this time Gideon had learned enough of God to obey even though questions and objections must have screamed within. If the Lord wanted a further reduction, there would be a further reduction. How was this reduction to be achieved? The Lord gave the answer. Gideon was to take his 10,000 down to the water for a drink. Those who put their faces down into the water were to be sent home. Those who scooped the water and drank from their hands were to stay (vv. 4–5).

Can you imagine Gideon’s consternation as he watched these men drink! Thousands put their faces into the water. When all was said and done, Gideon had an army of 300! He probably thought that he would be far better off with 22,000 cowards than 300 crack troops, but that is what he had.

We must be careful that we do not give these 300 men too much credit. Most commentators seem to think that God wanted them because they were more watchful and alert. But God did not separate the soldiers in this way because the 300 were superior to the others. How do we know this to be true? Because God Himself was determined that Israel would not take any credit for the forthcoming victory. All the glory would go to God alone (v. 2). So the method of separation was entirely arbitrary. God could just as easily have told Gideon to keep those who squeezed their tubes of toothpaste at the bottom instead of in the middle! We have come, then, to what I have called “the big picture.” It is the glory of God! (v. 2).

What does this have to do with us? Let’s be honest. When our faith does not seem to be working, it is often because we have lost sight of the big picture. We have lost sight of what God is working toward. We want to believe that He is constantly at work to make our lives comfortable and easy. And when they are not, we persuade ourselves that God is not doing His job and faith is not achieving anything.

I come back to what I have so often said before—if you begin with the wrong job description for God, He will always fail in your eyes. What is God’s job description? It is to glorify Himself! Does this seem to be a selfish motive to you? Remember this: God is perfect in every respect. As a perfect being, He must seek His own glory. To fail to do so would make Him imperfect!

In the pursuit of His own glory, God sometimes brings difficult circumstances into our lives. How do these circumstances bring glory to Him? Here is a believer who is stricken with serious illness. Unbelievers look at him and say: “Now we will see what comes of his faith in God” or “Now he will abandon God.” But that believer continues to love, trust and serve God in the midst of his affliction. And now the unbelievers around have to say something quite different. They have to say: “What kind of God is this that inspires such love and trust from one whose circumstances are so difficult.” And God is glorified!

The truth is that we Christians are called to be more interested in God than in ourselves. We are to be so interested in God that we say of our most difficult circumstance: “If God gets glory from this, it is okay with me.”

Here is an example. The apostle Paul was in prison. A difficult circumstance! But he could see God using that imprisonment to further the gospel. So Paul was able to say: “... in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). Some will say: “I’m sorry, but I just don’t love God that much!” But you should, and so should I! Why? Because God, the supreme being who has been supremely good to us, is worthy of supreme love! Strong faith interprets its circumstances in light of the glory of God, and faith is most satisfied when God is most glorified. By the way, God has determined the same thing about our eternal salvation that He determined about Israel’s deliverance from Midian, that is, that we will not be able to say: “My own hand has saved me” (v. 2). Salvation is the work of God, and we receive it only by His grace.

For faith to work it must keep in mind the hidden picture (vv. 9–18)

And what is the hidden picture? It is that God is always at work in unusual places and in unusual ways. Faith falters when we think that we are seeing the whole picture, and God is nowhere to be found in that picture.

When we first encounter Gideon, he is quite discouraged because God did not appear to be doing much (6:13). And now, standing there with what is left of his army, God still did not appear to be doing much! But Gideon was about to get a different perspective. God commanded him to go that very night into the camp of the Midianites (vv. 9–11).

When Gideon got there, he was in for a quite a surprise. One Midianite was talking about a dream in which he had seen a barley cake tumbling into the camp of Midian, striking a tent and knocking it to the ground (v. 13). The man with whom the Midianite shared his dream had no doubt about its meaning: “This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; for into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp” (v. 14).

The barley cake—the common cake eaten by common men—was Gideon. The tent was Midian. The barley cake destroyed the tent. Gideon would defeat the Midianites! The interesting thing is that the very same God who had been working with Gideon was also working on the other side of the fence. While He was encouraging the one, He was demoralizing the other. Gideon had been totally unaware of this until his trip to the Midianite camp. It had been hidden from him! What a blessed lesson there is for us here! God is always doing more than we think, and His doing is always for our good and for His glory (Romans 8:28).

For faith to work it must keep in mind the final picture (vv. 19–25)

After visiting the camp of Midian, Gideon must have returned to his little army with the utmost confidence. God would indeed give them the victory! And

God did in a most unusual way! Armed with nothing more than trumpets, pitchers and torches, the army of Israel prevailed. The trumpets were blown, the pitchers were shattered, the torches glowed and the soldiers cried: “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!” (v. 20). The Midianites, completely bewildered were put to flight!

God delights in using unlikely instruments to achieve enormous things. Outside the city of Jerusalem stands a cross and on that cross hangs a carpenter turned rabbi. The world laughs at that cross, but God used that unlikely instrument to bring eternal salvation to all who believe. God will continue to use that cross to bring salvation, and all those who are saved will finally come into the glory of His presence. Satan will be defeated, and the Lord of glory will triumph. When your faith does not seem to work, look beyond the present to that time of triumph. Faith always prospers when it keeps the final picture in mind. 🍷

Notes:

¹ James B. Jordan, *Judges: God's War Against Humanism* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1985), 125.

² cited by Ernest W. Bacon, *Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 114.

³ cited by Paul Helm, “John Calvin’s Position on the Atonement,” online article: www.the-highway.com

What is true faith?

TTrue faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in His Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.

(John 17:3, 17; Hebrews 11:1–3; James 2:19; Romans 4:18–21; 5:1; 10:10; Hebrews 4:14–16; Matthew 16:15–17; John 3:5; Acts 16:14; Romans 1:16; 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Romans 3:21–26; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–10; Galatians 2:20; Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:10)

— Question 21 from *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Baptist Version*

Contents

Doctrine Rightly Held	1
<i>Tom Ascol</i>	
Handling Truth and Error in the Church	2
An Interview with Tom Ascol	
<i>Martin Downes</i>	
Giving Proper Due to the People in the Pew (Part 1)	6
<i>Bob Gonzales</i>	
When Faith Doesn't Seem to Work	22
<i>Roger Ellsworth</i>	
News	5