

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS A MEANS OF PASTORAL CARE
AT LAGRANGE BAPTIST CHURCH,
LAGRANGE, KENTUCKY

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PREFACE

Too many people to thank individually have helped me to the completion of this project. Three groups of people have been most significant through this journey that has taken me far too long. First, I cannot say enough about the patience and encouragement of the members of LaGrange Baptist Church. They have prayed for, supported, and encouraged me through the entire process. Second, my extended family have put fuel back in my tank every time I was ready to quit. There is no way to measure the power of an encouraging family. The third group is the most significant of all: my wife and our children. Our children have been arrows in my quiver and have helped me contend with my enemies at the gate. There were times when they provided the inspiration I needed to write another page or re-write another page. Above all, my wife, Joie, has been my spiritual encourager and confidence builder. When I thought I had no business pursuing any kind of post-graduate degree, she helped clear my head and get me back on track. The Scriptures are indeed true when they say, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov 18:22).

Four other people must be named. Dr. Chuck Lawless has been relentless in his gracious determination to help me complete this project. Dr. Robert Vogel has provided detailed analysis of my writing and offered countless helps along the way. Dr. Jim Orrick has been a friend, closer than a brother, pushing me to get the project done. Finally, Dave Crater, my typist, served and encouraged me with a continual Christ-like spirit through some very difficult times.

I am genuinely grateful to God for the people with whom He has surrounded me. I would be nothing without them. The work of this project has had a deep effect on my thinking about pastoral ministry, and I pray it results in lasting fruit in the people I serve.

Tony Rose

LaGrange, Kentucky

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to investigate the use of expository preaching of the gospel as a means of pastoral care for the Christian soul. The New Testament reveals that God's plan to care for His people involves providing them pastors. The Lord Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep (John 21:17). Years later, the apostle Peter instructed elders to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Pet 5:2). The writer of Hebrews speaks of leaders in the church who are "keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (Heb 13:17). It is evident that pastors are called to be shepherds of souls. This involves leading them through unseeable territory, through an earthly life full of unexpected surprises and difficulties.

I have been observing the operations of the Christian soul closely for twenty-five years. I have been the pastor of LaGrange Baptist Church for fifteen years. During this time I have observed that many Christians live with deep agony in their souls and seem to have no cure for their ailments. My intent in this project is to learn how preaching the gospel can heal these wounded Christian souls. Much of the preaching I heard growing up as a Southern Baptist was focused on preaching the gospel for the purpose of evangelizing the lost. This was good and led to my salvation. However, the benefit of most of the preaching I heard stopped there.

When I entered college I faced questions and difficulties that surprised me

greatly. I began to doubt my salvation and to have seemingly unanswerable questions about God. The basic advice I was given in order to deal with my doubts was to “get saved,” or pray a simple prayer for assurance. Through three years of college and three more years of seminary I seldom heard anyone significantly deal with the gospel and the Christian suffering through doubts. I did not yet know of John Bunyan’s “Doubting Castle,” and it seems no one else did either.¹ I felt like an outcast and a failure as a Christian, and I could find no one who understood the depth of my dilemma.

Through that difficult experience of doubting, combined with over twenty-five years of ministry experience, I realize there are many Christians whose souls are haunted by doubts. Doubts are not the only disturbance of the Christian soul. I have witnessed believers struggling deeply with guilt, forgiveness, worry, and other soul issues that greatly dampen their Christian zeal. The gospel must be preached in such a way as to care for these hurting souls.

The aim of this project was to discover how expositional preaching of the gospel to believers can lead to and sustain the health of their souls. Many people are convinced the gospel is sufficient to get them to heaven; but when earthly life is hard, some believers do not seem to know how to find their present help in the gospel. Expositional preaching of the gospel is obviously nothing new, yet evidence in my pastorate is convincing me that God’s people do not understand how to apply gospel truths to their daily living. Is it possible that the gospel is not put to its full use in preaching to the church? How can a pastor use the preaching of the gospel to care for the

¹John Bunyan, *The New Pilgrim’s Progress: John Bunyan’s Classic Revised for Today* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1989), 136.

desperate souls in his congregation? These are the questions that drove me to the work of this project.

Goals

This project aimed at accomplishing five goals.

Goal 1

The first goal of this project was to find a way to assess the knowledge of the gospel possessed by the members of LaGrange Baptist Church, as well as their practice of applying their knowledge in daily life. If I could gain a better understanding of their gospel knowledge and their application of it to daily living, my preaching could be more beneficial to the health of their souls.

Goal 2

The second goal was to establish a biblical and theological foundation for preaching the gospel to believers. This sounds quite unnecessary, but I do not think it is. There are many indicators that the gospel preached in our contemporary churches does not stand on solid theological and biblical ground. Chapter 2 addresses these issues.

Goal 3

The third goal was to examine the preaching and writing of three Puritans, Richard Baxter, Christopher Love, and Samuel Rutherford, to learn how they used the gospel as a means of caring for the souls of their church members.

My choice of material from the Puritans had to be limited because the amount of writing they produced is overwhelming. Many Puritan writers could have been used in

this project. I chose Richard Baxter and Samuel Rutherford because they had been long-term companions in my own Christian growth. Their writings were profound in their abilities to directly, yet tenderly, address the needs of my own soul. My assumption was that if their writings helped me, their works would prove to be a valuable resource with which to help others.

I stumbled onto Christopher Love. In researching Puritan writers for this project, I discovered three volumes of Love's sermons. He spoke with the same pastoral directness and tenderness as Baxter and Rutherford did. Love is not as well known as are Baxter and Rutherford, but I chose him because he demonstrated a consistency in the Puritan approach to preaching and applying the gospel.

Goal 4

The fourth goal of the project was to discover whether the contemporary professionalization of pastoral ministry has affected pastoral soul care. Specifically, I was trying to discern if it has affected how a pastor preaches the gospel to his church.

Goal 5

The fifth and final goal was to analyze the results from a church discussion and survey group in light of my biblical and theological research and the contemporary complications created by the professionalization of pastoral ministry. If the discussion group revealed common and recurring struggles among group members, the analysis would provide me with specific information with which to better preach the gospel to God's hurting children.

Context

LaGrange Baptist Church is located in LaGrange, Kentucky, the Oldham County seat. The city of LaGrange is easily accessed from Interstate 71 and is located twenty-two miles from downtown Louisville, Kentucky.

Oldham County

Oldham County's location has been the key factor determining its demographic makeup. The county borders the northeast side of Jefferson County, where the city of Louisville is located. In 1975, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) began a federally-mandated integration plan which served as the catalyst for what many people called "white flight." Many Jefferson County residents moved into neighboring counties to avoid the JCPS integration. The residents of Jefferson County's east side were predominantly upper middle class families, and Oldham County became the recipient of a large influx of these well-to-do families. Current demographic data show the trend begun in 1975 is still in effect. The median household income for the state of Kentucky is lower than the national average of \$52,029.² The median household income for Oldham County is \$84,884.³ Presently Oldham County is quite homogeneous in its cultural makeup. Most people are white, and they generate an above-average income. This produces a general perception that people who live in Oldham County are successful.

Oldham County may be home to many people who are successful by the world's standards, but money and possessions do not necessarily indicate a prosperous

²Oldham County, Kentucky census data [on-line]; accessed 16 September 2010; available from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/21000.html>; Internet.

³Oldham County, Kentucky census data [on-line]; accessed 16 September 2010; available from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/21/21185.html>; Internet.

soul. I have discovered that the soul cannot be protected by material prosperity or physical health. Working with the people at LaGrange Baptist Church has helped me realize no one is exempt from troubles of the soul.

LaGrange Baptist Church is made up of typical Oldham County residents. The vocational success of some of our people has put a misleading veneer over the real condition of their lives. There are times when some people are living in confusion. Most things on the outside of their lives look good, while they feel like they are falling apart on the inside. I hope to see the gospel penetrate the successful surface and reach the core of their souls.

LaGrange Baptist Church

The Lick Branch Baptist Church was founded in 1802. In 1826 the congregation moved to LaGrange and reconstituted themselves the Baptist Church of LaGrange. In 1895 Bettie DeHaven, the widow of a local judge, financed the purchase of a piece of property at the corner of Third and Main in LaGrange. She also paid for the construction of a new church facility. The property and building were provided to the church on the condition that the membership rename the church DeHaven Memorial Baptist Church. This change was made, but it upset some church members. The distraught members believed that Judge DeHaven had gained his wealth from gambling. The church thus experienced a split in membership. The division, however, lasted for just a short time, and the dissenting members returned to the fellowship of the church.

The church continued in the same location for the next 110 years. During that time it grew, acquired some of the surrounding properties and built additional facilities. The last building at the DeHaven site was completed in 1986.

The church was already having two Sunday morning services when I became the pastor in 1993. We first moved the eleven o'clock service into the gymnasium in order to increase seating capacity. This change was drastic, as the church had held the main morning worship service in the same sanctuary for over a century. The next adjustment for growth was to add a second Sunday School hour and a third worship service. It soon became evident that these measures were insufficient to meet the need of our growing membership. The church responded to this challenge by voting on November 3, 2002, to begin the process of relocation. We completed the relocation and moved into our new facilities the first Sunday of May, 2005.

We are greatly blessed of God to have these new facilities. Our capacities for numerical growth are now exponentially greater. Numerical growth, however, is not my only goal. As the shepherd of this flock, I am deeply concerned that our growth in size be matched by our growth in spiritual health and maturity. The present project was designed to help me learn more about leading the church into spiritual health.

Rationale

Working with the members of LaGrange Baptist Church for fifteen years is what defined my hope for this project. In one-on-one meetings, I would often find I was talking with a dear Christian who knew the gospel but had a big gap between his knowledge of the gospel and his experience of the gospel. Individuals who believed the doctrine of eternal security were continually struggling with their own assurance of salvation. Other church members who knew that Christ offers full forgiveness of sin through his death were in an ongoing battle with guilt. Discovering these and other issues made me examine my preaching. I was confident the gospel was sufficient for the

soul struggles of God's people, but somehow they were unable to get the gospel's truth to the experiential level of their everyday lives. I acutely felt the need to discover how to help them know the comforts of the gospel they already believed.

Weakened Christians in this trying age make poor evangelists. If the God they trust to take them to heaven cannot get them through earthly life, then lost people have the right to question the power of our God—or of our faith. If believers clearly understood all that God did for them in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, we would have many more believers with healthy, sturdy souls. The problems and challenges for Christians would remain the same, but solutions to those problems could come out of the certain truth of the gospel of Christ. A genuine place of safety could then be found in the gospel to maintain security of soul during the storms of life.

When life's difficulties demand more of a believer than his gospel knowledge can support, the soul of the believer is wounded and the testimony of the believer is weakened. If the gospel is God's tool to heal the hurts of the Christian soul, I want to know how to use it. The results would be a more healthy church that does more effective evangelism.

Definitions

A few terms require definition as to their use in this project. The first term is "gospel." When I refer to the gospel I chiefly have in mind the Apostle Paul's expression in I Corinthians 15:3 "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scripture." This objective work of God in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is what the apostles gave witness to and what our faith rests upon. However, out of this work of God flows a

host of effects. I am speaking of things such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and sanctification. Things such as these are part of the gospel proper, but in this project they are viewed as the effects of the gospel that God worked in the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. Explaining the work of God in the gospel and the effects of that work are both necessary to effective preaching of the gospel.

A second term is “soul.” Eugene Peterson offers a helpful definition that comes in the context of an explanation he offers on the work of pastoral ministry.

Until about a century ago, what pastors did between Sundays was a piece of what they did on Sundays. The context changed; instead of an assembled congregation, the pastor was with one other person or with a small gathering of persons, or alone in study and prayer. The manner changed; instead of proclamation, there was conversation, but the work was the same: discovering the meaning of Scripture, developing a life of prayer, guiding growth into maturity.

This is the pastoral work that is historically termed the cure of souls. The primary sense of *cura* in Latin is ‘care,’ with undertones of ‘cure.’ The soul is the essence of the human personality. The cure of souls, then, is the Scripture-directed, prayer-shaped care that is devoted to persons singly or in groups, in settings sacred or profane.⁴

Theology offers three different views of the human soul: trichotomism, dichotomism, and monism. The views differ with regard to whether the essential nature of man is three-part, two-part, or singular. My view in this project is that man is dichotomous, created by God as body and soul. These are two distinct yet inseparable parts. Though the soul and body are distinct entities, one cannot be addressed without consideration of the other. The condition of the body affects the soul, and the condition of the soul affects the body. This understanding is crucial to the work of this project.

⁴Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL SUPPORT FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL

Establishing New Testament support for preaching the gospel might seem unnecessary. The focus of this project, however, is preaching the gospel to believers. In the contemporary culture of the United States, “preaching the gospel” is equivalent to doing the work of evangelizing the lost. This assumption is proper, but not complete. The gospel is God’s saving message to the lost world, but it is also God’s keeping message to His people. This project aims to explore the second part of the gospel’s purpose. To begin, a simple but often overlooked fact must be established: the chief audience of the New Testament was believers. This is a readily accepted truth, but its implications are usually overlooked.

The church has been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ to preach the gospel to all nations. We are to incarnate Christ’s mission of coming to seek and to save that which is lost. In the owning of this responsibility, the church may have lost the full aim of the gospel. The gospel may be viewed as a one-time fix. Once you have it, you have it, and it then is your responsibility to pass it on to someone else. With this oversimplified and yet widely accepted view of the gospel, we truncate its God-given purpose and miss the full application of the gospel to God’s people. This misconception has disguised the New Testament to the eyes of the church and has diluted its powerful message to the believer.

The New Testament was written to believers because they had been made citizens of heaven and were now pilgrims on the earth. They needed a guide for safe passage. It was also written to believers because they were God's ambassadors, responsible for delivering the gospel to the world, and God wanted them to deliver an accurate gospel.

A brief look at the epistles of the New Testament reveals that the recipients of these letters were Christians. In these letters the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is most fully explained. Paul is clear in his letter to the Romans that he is addressing Christians. He sent the letter to "all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom 1:17). The letters of the New Testament are all addressed to a Christian audience. The authors, under the inspiration of God, were explaining the gospel to the church.

The authors of the narrative sections of the New Testament do not make the identity of their audiences so clear. D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris say of the gospel of Mark that "extrabiblical sources point to a Gentile Christian audience."¹ They also remark that Mark's translation of Aramaic expressions as well as his explaining of Jewish customs demonstrate he is writing to Gentile believers.² These same authors, commenting on Luke's two-volume work of Luke and Acts, offer this perspective about Luke's audience: it was written "to give valuable information to the Christian public about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus."³ Commenting on the book of Acts they write, "We agree with a growing number of scholars who think

¹D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 99.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 118.

that Luke wrote with a variety of specific purposes, and these purposes are part of a larger general purpose—the edification of Christians.”⁴ Others agree with this position. Darrell Bock writes, “Luke’s gospel is pastoral, theological and historical. The reality of God’s plan impacts how individuals see themselves and the community to which they belong.”⁵ R. A. Guelich expresses his understanding of Mark’s purpose in writing his gospel: “We conclude that pastoral concern was foremost in Mark’s mind as he wrote the ‘gospel concerning Jesus Messiah, Son of God.’ He wanted to address a community under duress, a duress that may well have given rise to questions about who Jesus really was and the nature of the kingdom he had come to inaugurate.”⁶

The gospel of John differs a bit in offering its own clear statement of purpose. John says, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). The gospel of Matthew is the only remaining book in the narrative portion of the New Testament. In his commentary on Matthew, Craig Blomberg writes, “It is usually assumed that all the Gospels are first of all addressed to Christian communities. Since the earliest days of Christian testimony that is where these documents are read.”⁷

That the New Testament was chiefly addressed to believers establishes two important perspectives. Simply stated, the gospel is to be lived and the gospel is to be

⁴Ibid., 198.

⁵Darrell Bock, “Luke,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), 509.

⁶R. A. Guelich, “Mark,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 524.

⁷Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 34.

told. The first perspective on the gospel highlights the following truths. Through the gospel a believer has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son (Col 1:13). Presently the believer is a new creation whose citizenship is in heaven (2 Cor 5:17; Phil 3:20). Until heaven becomes the permanent residence of the believer he is in exile here on earth and needs help and protection to make it to the end safely (1 Pet 1:17; 1 Cor 9:27; Matt 24:13). The gospel is God's message to believers, enabling them to succeed through their trials on their way to heaven. The gospel is an eternal message.

The work of the gospel in the earthly life of the believer is always done with eternity in mind. This perspective keeps the use of the gospel in the church directed toward its divinely intended purpose of bringing glory to the God who saves by doing genuine good for His children. We too often remove the eternal perspective of the gospel. Instead of seeing it as God's means of saving and keeping us, we tend to see it as God's means of providing for us a comfortable and successful earthly life. When the eternal perspective of the gospel is lost it is robbed of its real power to heal the hurts of the believer's soul.

The second perspective on the gospel, that it is to be told, then becomes clear. When the church understands the gospel and lives by it, that church then is equipped and excited to tell a lost world of its real power to save fully.

The New Testament writers made many specific applications of the gospel to care for the souls of their readers. One of these applications was the apostle John's using the gospel to help believers gain the assurance of their salvation. It is not easy for some contemporary believers to understand the struggles of early Christians. We have been

taught that assurance is something that automatically comes with true conversion. This is a faulty understanding and has led to faulty remedies to help believers gain full assurance. The assumption that assurance automatically accompanies true conversion has not historically been held by the believing community.⁸

In his first letter, John dealt with a number of significant issues, but it is obvious his overall concern was for the assurance and faithfulness of this group of believers. In dealing specifically with his readers and their Christian assurance, the apostle describes a believer's standing in Christ with four favorite expressions. First, we know "that we . . . know him" (2:3; cf. 5:20). Second, we know "that we are in him" and "that we live in him and he in us" (2:5; 4:13; cf. 3:24). Thirdly, we know "that we are children of God" (5:19; cf. 3:19, belong to the truth). Fourth, we know "that we have passed from death to life" and that therefore we "have eternal life" (3:14; 5:13).⁹

One of the intensely focused uses of the gospel in John's letter is in 1:5–2:2. John is dealing with claims of false teachers who have bred confusion in the minds of believers about dealing with sin in their lives.¹⁰ Without a clear understanding of how the gospel dealt with present sin in their lives, these believers were left to wonder about the security of their relationship with God through Christ.

John, as a shepherd, longed for their security and for the truth of the gospel to be known. He guided them directly to the core of the gospel. He told them God would

⁸Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 2:911-12.

⁹John Stott, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 58.

¹⁰Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 74.

be faithful and just to forgive their sins (1 John 1:9). The phrase “faithful and just” demonstrates both the character and the work of God. He is faithful. That is the character of a God who cannot lie. He is just. What He does in forgiving sins is not simply because He is love but because He performed an actual work in His Son whereby He maintained His justice and yet became the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

John urged his readers on to a holy life, asking them to make it their aim not to sin. He knew because of their flesh they would at times sin. Therefore they needed a way to deal with present sin and have their hearts and minds reassured of their certain standing in Christ. Going directly to the core of the gospel, in two verses John offers a powerful remedy for the soul of a believer that is afflicted with doubts because of personal and yet confessed sin. Because of the death of Christ, God’s wrath toward sinners (that is, those who have placed their faith in Christ) has been satisfied.¹¹

God will not strike a believer in eternal judgment because of his sin. God has already struck Christ, and His holy wrath is satisfied justly. John also takes his readers to Christ’s ascension. He now is at the right hand of God, and one of his heavenly ministries is to be an advocate there for all believers. Christ’s continual presence at God’s right hand, because of his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, is the believer’s assurance that neither our sin nor Satan can destroy our eternal relationship with God.

One way John uses the gospel in his ministry to struggling believers is to go right to the central meaning of the gospel and make direct application in their lives.

¹¹I am aware of interpretive differences concerning propitiation or expiation in this verse. I hold that *hilasmos* is properly translated “propitiation.” See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, Stott, *The Letters of John*, and Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

Obedience to the commands of Christ is then put in proper perspective. The obedience of a believer is not some effort toward sinless perfection but a reflection of the nature of the God of light who inhabits his soul. A continual life of sin, John teaches, is a sign that the life of God has never entered one's soul. Here is where true assurance is found.

Believers are not left to some introspective emotional exercise to remember if they were sincere when they asked Christ to save them fifteen years ago. Instead they are led to look at the objective work of the gospel of Christ and then to the objective outworking of proper obedience in their lives.

A second application of the gospel to heal the hurting soul is found in Hebrews 9. The author is dealing with Jewish believers who are in the middle of serious challenges to their faith. Some of the challenges are obviously external (Heb 10:32-36). These Christians were being publicly reproached and afflicted. Some of them were thrown into prison and others had their property plundered (Heb 10:32-34). The challenges we will focus on are internal. These believers had made a drastic change in outward worship. They at one time worshipped in a temple with a priest they could see. Now they have become the temple of God and worship Him through the great high priest, Jesus the Son of God, whom they cannot see.

The outward trappings of their former faith seemed more concrete than the gospel walk of faith. The writer of Hebrews uses the core of the gospel to demonstrate to them that the Old Covenant was only a shadow of the New that has now come. Through a comparison of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, he demonstrates the effective reality of the New Covenant to do its promised work even to the depth of cleansing the conscience. The writer chooses to deal with guilt of conscience, both for the truth of the

gospel and the good of believers. Guilt is seen as a function of the conscience. In contemporary culture, the conscience is treated as an unpredictable and unreliable disturber of personal peace. Freud saw the conscience “as the super-ego developed in the individual in childhood whereby we internalize the prohibitions imposed on us by those who parent and educate us. For Freud it was a repressive force, capable of doing great damage to the psychological health of a person.”¹²

Freudian influences have taught people to take the threatening of their conscience as something subjective, inhibiting the expression of our true self. The Bible teaches a far different view of the conscience.

There are three basic biblical principles in understanding conscience: 1. Conscience is universal and is given to us by God (Rom. 2:12-16). This explains why those who have no knowledge of God’s law may still obey its requirements. Those who have no other guide should obey their conscience. 2. Consciences have been affected by the sinfulness of human nature. Although the conscience is a gift of God, it is not perfect and may be corrupt (Tit. 1:15). Thus it may accuse where there is no reason for accusation and remain silent when it ought to speak. 3. The saving work of Jesus cleanses guilty consciences (Heb. 9:14). The blood of Jesus can both cleanse us from the blight of a guilty conscience and also liberate us for the service of God.¹³

The writer of Hebrews treats the conscience as a God-given and concrete part of man’s makeup. Therefore, if the gospel is true, it must be able to cleanse the conscience, and a believer must be able to objectively know that cleansing.

An overview of Hebrews 9 reveals the author’s strategic use of the gospel. The writer hangs his entire argument on the death, resurrection, ascension, and return of

¹²J. W. Gladwin, “Conscience,” in *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson et al (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 251.

¹³Ibid.

Christ.¹⁴ The author develops a beautiful picture and a tight argument through his close comparison of the Old and New Covenants. He begins by making a direct connection with his Hebrew audience by displaying a detailed understanding of their worship under the Old Covenant. A description of the structure and contents of the Tabernacle showed the readers that the author was quite aware of the environment of their worship (Heb 9:1-5). The author skillfully used this historical connection with his readers as a base to connect with their present soul troubles. From a tender pastoral heart, he put himself in a position to address their longing for forgiveness of sin (Heb 9:7).

The groundwork is now laid for the point of his argument. All of the past means of worship were incomplete (Heb 9:8). What the readers hoped for in the Old Covenant was promised but not presently realized. The old arrangement of worship was insufficient to cleanse the conscience (Heb 9:9). Christ, however, has come and accomplished what the Old Covenant could not. Nothing of Christ's work of the gospel was a shadow. It was all actual. Christ entered the presence of God by means of the sacrifice of himself. He secured an eternal redemption and purified the consciences of his followers (Heb 9:11-14). The strength of the argument is that the author is dealing in objective realities, not subjective feelings. If one's conscience is guilty by objective reality, then the gospel cleanses it by the objective work of Christ. Raymond Brown says, "The reader with a disturbed conscience is likely to find more help in Hebrews than almost anywhere in Scripture."¹⁵

Brown draws out the drastic difference in the author's comparison of the two

¹⁴On Christ's death see Heb 9:12-18, 26. On Christ's resurrection, ascension, and return, see Heb 9:15, 24, 28.

¹⁵Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 154.

covenants to show the real work of the gospel. He magnifies the temporary Old Covenant contrasted with the eternal New Covenant, the blood of involuntary animals with the voluntary sacrifice of God's Son, the repetitive sacrifice contrasted with the single perfect sacrifice of Christ, an annual reminder of sin contrasted with the promise of God forgetting our sin, and the priests who continued to stand and perform their unfinished duties to the Priest who sits because his work of redemption is done.¹⁶ These all stand as objective evidence for the work of Christ to cleanse the conscience.

F. F. Bruce brings in another perspective on the literal nature of the work of Christ within the believer. He points out that the dwelling place of God is not the temple, but the people of God. Because of this, "They need inward cleansing, not only that their approach to God may be free from defilement but that they may be a fit habitation for Him."¹⁷ This truth brings to the believer's mind not only great confidence in the work of Christ, but comfort in the presence of God. John Brown shines another ray of light on the application of the gospel to a guilty conscience with this pastoral advice:

The effects of the sacrifice of Christ may be considered either in reference to God or in reference to the sinner. The blood of Christ, viewed as shed, renders the salvation of the sinner consistent with the perfections of the divine character, the principles of the divine government, the declarations of the divine Word. The blood of Christ, viewed as sprinkled on the believing sinner, relieves his mind from the constraints and terrors and jealousies and illusions of guilt and enables him to serve God without fear, with filial love and holy joy.¹⁸

The readers of this epistle had to be helped by the author's effective use of the basic gospel to give them such a clear understanding of how the death and resurrection of

¹⁶Ibid., 155.

¹⁷F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 228-29.

¹⁸John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 403.

Christ were the means and the eternal guarantee of a truly cleansed conscience.

One of the key issues of gospel ministry in the New Testament was teaching believers to have an eschatological perspective on life. Times were hard on believers, and their earthly difficulties were causing them to despair. The apostle Paul's guidance was to teach believers how to see their troubles in light of the gospel's eternal perspective.

The core concept is held in Romans 8:32. Paul's argument is that since God did not spare His own Son, proved in Christ's crucifixion, then God certainly would not hold back anything else from His children. This is hard to understand when one is going through extreme suffering. Paul freely admits to his own earthly trials and to the trials of his readers, but because of the death and resurrection of Christ, he has hope and offers them hope. He tells both the Romans and the Corinthians that the sufferings of this world, no matter how difficult, do not compare to the glory that will be revealed (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Cor 1:8-9, 4:16-18). When a believer loses sight of the eschatological promises of the gospel, earthly hardships can cause him to doubt God's goodness. Maintaining an eternal perspective through the gospel is the key to getting through earthly suffering. Just as the cross stands as a reminder that God's Son suffered unjustly by human hands, it also stands as a reminder that Christ's followers will suffer. The cross being the central symbol of the Christian faith, it is amazing that contemporary Christians can somehow believe that the gospel is meant for them to have an easy and prosperous earthly life.

The resurrection of Christ, however, stands right beside the crucifixion of Christ to remind believers that after suffering comes glory. Christ, the living Lord,

promised to return and establish an eternal kingdom in which suffering will be no more. Though the apostle Paul suffered many things in his earthly life, his perspective was not that God saves us from our troubles, but that God saves us through our troubles. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul sums up the gospel's eternal perspective on suffering as he practiced it in his own life. "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim 4:18).

The gospel is the New Testament's remedy for hearts troubled by false teaching (Gal 1:6-9, 3:1-6, 12-14; 1 John 4:1-3). Paul confronted what he called a "different gospel" in the churches of Galatia (Gal 1:6). Paul had at least three major concerns. First was the honor of God. There was a group of men that came to Galatia from Jerusalem. They were teaching that believers in Christ still needed to follow Old Testament law (Gal 2:12, 21; 5:1-6). Paul knew that adding works of the law to the gospel of grace destroyed the true gospel. This dishonored God because it made the sacrifice of Christ insufficient to save men. Paul used the strongest of terms to condemn this false teaching (Gal 1:8-9).

Paul's second concern was the individual Galatian believer. Experiencing the comforts of the gospel is inseparable from a correct mental understanding of the gospel. The false teacher's mixture of law and grace robbed the Galatian Christians of their freedom in Christ, and they found themselves in a double bondage to works and pagan superstitions (Gal 3:1-3, 23; 4:8-11; 5:1-6).

Paul's third concern was the spread of the gospel to those who had not yet heard it. Just as the comforting power of the gospel is bound up in a right understanding

of the gospel, so the converting power of the gospel is bound to a right proclamation of the gospel. God had promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham. Paul knew the gospel of Christ was God's plan to extend this blessing to the Gentiles. He even expressed that the Scripture "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Gal 3:8). The letter to the Galatians reveals that Paul's zeal to maintain the purity of the gospel was driven by both a pastoral and a missionary heart. Paul believed that as God's children grew in the grace and knowledge of the gospel the church would then faithfully spread the gospel, "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal 3:14).

Theological Understanding and Confidence in the Gospel of God

Keeping the gospel at the core of preaching is not for the sake of evangelism only; it is the key to effectively caring for the souls of believers. The biblical authors sought to explain the gospel to believers for the health and strength of the soul. Too many pastors and church members see the gospel as nothing more than God's message to get people saved. Once the new birth occurs, it is time to leave the gospel and go on to deeper issues of the Christian life. This perspective weakens the understanding of salvation as a continued process as much as an event occurring at a particular time. This viewpoint has fostered the apparent belief that the gospel work is complete at conversion and that life transformation is not needed for evidence that the gospel has done its work of converting.

I call this an apparent belief because of the large number of people who claim to be Christian but whose lifestyles contradict their confession. This apparent belief is

somewhat confirmed by the membership rolls of many Southern Baptist churches. It is common for a church to have as much as one half of the official members never attend a service. To me, this statistic may indicate a lack of conviction and concern for our members who lack evidence of a life that is being transformed by the gospel. No doubt some of our members are physically unable to attend, but many do not attend simply because they choose not to. Michael Horton bluntly confronts this false idea of a gospel that saves but does not transform: “You cannot claim to have been ‘saved’ (justified) unless you are being sanctified. Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord.”¹⁹ Horton is claiming that true justification always leads to a continual growth toward Christ-likeness that results in noticeable life changes, such as loving the Word of God and the people of God. Regular church attendance is one of the most basic signs of Christ’s life in the soul. This contemporary perspective thus weakens the gospel’s use as a tool in caring for the souls of believers. It forces the assumption that there must be a further remedy for the hurting souls of God’s people and causes us to look beyond the gospel for our help.

Salvation is the free and eternal gift of God. Indeed, one of the most certain teachings of the New Testament is the eternal security of the believer. Some interpret eternal security to mean, “once saved, always saved,” which is a cheapened way to express the blood-bought eternal security of the child of God. It is as if we have forgotten the persevering side of eternal salvation. The Lord Jesus said, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13). The New Testament, which is addressed chiefly to believers, is full of exhortations to persevere (2 Pet 1:5-10; Jas 5:19-20; Heb

¹⁹Michael S. Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 152.

6:9-12, 10:39). The point is that a believer never outgrows the gospel. The ongoing work of the gospel can never be set aside. It is God's work in the gospel that saves us and that keeps on saving us. Each believer has ongoing work to grow his faith in the gospel and to deepen his daily experience of the gospel. The apostle Peter told his readers to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18). The results in the life of a non-growing Christian are drastic. When a Christian ceases the pursuit of gospel transformation he becomes ineffective in his faith and can even forget that God has forgiven his sins (2 Pet 1:8-9). Growth is the normal, expected outcome of becoming a Christian.

When a person is converted, he becomes a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). His body has been bought with a price and has become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20). It is a biblical impossibility to have experienced such a magnificent transaction and not have the on-going, visible effects of the work of God in one's life.

The souls of men and women are innately insecure. They are created beings estranged from their Creator. Whether they are conscious of this fact or not does not keep them from experiencing a longing for more than this earthly life has provided them. The gospel explains how man can have a relationship with God that grants the security the human soul longs for.

This security entails far more than the work of evangelism. Christian people are described in the Bible as being in a race, in a wrestling match, and in a war (1 Cor 9:24; Eph. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:4-5). These metaphors show there is continued preparation, engagement, and restoration for anyone who is a believer. The great danger from life's

difficulties is that they can cause believers to doubt the promises and goodness of God. A more complete understanding of the gospel is God's remedy by which weary believers can keep from losing their faith and hope.

The gospel becomes the believer's strength as it teaches about the nature of God. The gospel magnifies two significant aspects of the character of God: His justice and His love. For the gospel to have its full healing effect on a person's soul, these two aspects of God's nature must be understood. Romans 3:21-26 is the core passage of the New Testament expressing the justice and love of God in relation to saving sinful people. John Calvin wrote of this passage, "There is, perhaps, no passage in the whole Scripture which illustrates in a more striking manner the efficacy of His righteousness."²⁰

In Romans 3:21-26 the foundation is built for understanding the problem that the gospel solves. Man has fallen out of relationship with God due to sin. The Creator/creature relationship was marred and became the core cause of all of creation's problems. Romans 3:21-26 reaches to the heart of mankind and exposes the root and the totality of his terminal sickness. The words of this text define the righteous character of God and expose the immeasurable gulf between the righteous God and sinful man. Then Paul demonstrates how the righteousness and the love of God performed a work through Christ that not only reaches the darkened heart of man but shines light and life into it.

This work of the gospel is for evangelism, but it is also the daily balm that God uses to heal and strengthen the believer's soul. A look at three key words in this passage, justified, redemption, and propitiation, shows how a sinful person comes into a relationship with a holy God, and it reveals why these verses are foundational to caring

²⁰John Calvin, *Romans*, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 10 (Waco, TX: Baker, 2003), 141.

for the believer's soul.

The work of God in the gospel is an objective work that a Christian is not only to believe but also experience. As a believer continues in this earthly life and encounters hardships along the way such as sin, temptation, grief, guilt, emotional dilemmas, and relational difficulties, his soul becomes disturbed. The Scriptures acknowledge earth's hardships and all the subjective feelings that go with them (Gen 3:6; Isa 50:10; Luke 7:18-23; Heb 2:14-15, 4:15-16). The gospel offers the believer a strong place of objective truth to constantly return to for strength in times of weakness, temptation, and trouble.

Temptations come to every believer as a normal part of earthly life. Due to weakness or difficulties a Christian might succumb to a particular temptation and act sinfully. The Spirit of God will convict him of that sin. Guilt is sensed and the believer is to confess and forsake his sin. The work of God in the gospel is what provides the sure forgiveness of the wrong done. However, the reality of the forgiveness may not be subjectively experienced by the believer. The result is a Christian who is in fact forgiven but who in experience lives under the weight of false guilt and feels miserable. The soul-healing power of the gospel becomes effective in the Christian as he grows in his understanding of the gospel and specific aspects of it, such as redemption. A clear understanding of the work of the gospel is what leads to an experience of the work of the gospel in the Christian's daily life. The three key terms of Romans 3:21-26, justified, redemption, and propitiation, are the theological framework for genuine soul care that enable a pastor to help a child of God apprehend the effective work of the gospel in his soul.

There is one thing necessary to understand before these terms take on their full meanings and, in turn, have their due effects upon the troubled Christian soul. The meaning of these words and the work they describe are founded upon the unchangeable nature of God. The context of Romans 3:21-26 is the explanation of how a holy God made His righteousness known in a sinful world. Righteousness as an attribute of God asserted in Romans 1:17 and 3:21-26 is the foundation upon which the functions of God's righteousness stand. How can God act in righteous judgment if He is not righteous? How can God bestow righteousness if He does not possess it to give? Understanding that the work of the gospel is founded upon the character of God is the foundation for the believer's sense of the unchanging and personal nature of his salvation.

Now we can look at the key terms. Douglas Moo gives a succinct definition of the verb "justify":

Paul uses the verb "justify" for the first time in Romans to depict his distinctive understanding of Christian salvation. As Paul uses it in these contexts, the verb "justify" means not "to make righteous" (in an ethical sense), nor simply "to treat as righteous" (though one is really not righteous), but "to declare righteous." No "legal fiction" but a legal reality of the utmost significance, "to be justified" means to be acquitted by God from all "charges" that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins.²¹

This justification is offered "by His grace as a gift through redemption that is in Christ Jesus." This redemption has been bought with the price of Christ's death. The fact that justification is offered as a gift and was bought through the personal sacrifice of Christ demonstrates that a Christian's redemption comes at great cost.²² Here the word

²¹Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 227.

²²Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Waco, TX: Baker, 1998), 190.

redemption means “liberation through payment of a price.”²³

Propitiation deals with not only the forgiveness of sins but also the satisfaction of God’s wrath. There are two things revealed in the first chapter of Romans: the righteousness of God (1:17) and the wrath of God (1:18). God’s wrath is His righteous response to evil. God’s wrath is not like man’s, in that God does not fly off the handle in fits of unpredictable rage. His wrath toward man is nothing more than the just response to sin in the lives of His rebellious creatures. We learn from Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” a verse that clearly places all people under the wrath of God. Such wrath presents a great problem that demands a clear remedy if a real salvation is to be offered to mankind. Romans 3:21-26 explains how God is righteous, acts righteously, and gives righteousness through justification, redemption, and propitiation.

The wrath of God, as stated previously, is God’s righteous response to human sin. God’s required holy response to evil cannot simply be ignored by Him or by His human creatures. His wrath, flowing out of His perfect righteousness, must be satisfied. This human rebellion that so provoked God must be justly punished. When God put Christ forward as a propitiation to be received by faith, He intended that the faith would be in the fact that His righteous wrath was fully satisfied and His children would no longer need to fear His wrath. If the propitiation offered through Christ’s death does not deal with a righteous satisfaction of the wrath of God, then God has not acted righteously in forgiving sins that have never been given due punishment. God cannot remain just and at the same time offer a salvation to man that leaves any sin unpunished. Such salvation

²³Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 229.

would be a kind of halved salvation that neither satisfied God's just demands nor fully justified the believer in God's sight. A mere expiation of man's sin is not enough to satisfy God, nor is it enough to grant the believer a clear conscience. The sin of man must be paid for, and the wrath of God for that sin must be satisfied if God is to be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26).

All of this work of the righteousness of God is set over against the fact of man's sinfulness. This passage shows us the actual character of God at work maintaining His own righteousness, actually purchasing forgiveness for sinners and pronouncing guilty people righteous forever in Christ. This work is all God's, offered freely as a gift to all who believe (Rom 3:22, 24). Douglas Moo summed this up nicely with the statement, "God's justifying verdict is totally unmerited."²⁴

One other issue needs to be brought out, though it has been hinted at throughout this chapter. The justification in this passage of Scripture does not deal with sinful people alone. There is a sense in which God is justified. There are three areas in which God's justice must be seen. First, God is just in His wrath toward sinful humanity because He is judge of all the earth.²⁵ Second, He is just in that "He passed over" (Rom 3:25) former sins and postponed full judgment to a future time and place in Christ on the cross. Third, God is just in pronouncing sinners righteous because Christ took His wrath for them on the cross.

The upshot is not only the gospel that saves the lost but the necessary foundation of all a pastor's preaching, teaching, and care-giving to the souls of believers. The problems faced by the Christian can cause him to doubt, feel guilty, be envious, fall into

²⁴Ibid., 228.

²⁵Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 40, 47-48.

deep grief, or even fall into gross sin. A proper understanding of the gospel equips shepherds of God's people with what is needed to heal their wounds, confront their sin, or calm their doubts.

The gospel operates like a corrective lens for the Christian. It reorients a believer to a God-centered life-view instead of a self-centered life-view. A helpful way to see the soul-healing operation of the gospel is to consider the Christian who walks under the weight of the guilt of past sin, someone who understands the gospel and has genuinely trusted Christ for salvation. This person cognitively understands that Christ's death was for the forgiveness of his sins, but he daily lives under a dark cloud of guilt feelings for his past sins.

Romans 3:22-25 explains that God put Christ forward for our justification, redemption, and as a propitiation to be received by faith. One of the first steps in helping any malady of the believer's soul is to aid him in gaining a proper focus, and Christ is to become the focus of the believer's gaze. In the case of the man suffering under the weight of his guilt, Christ is not his focus; his sin is. Many believers are deceived into thinking that the way to fix their spiritual problem is to focus on their problem. This is just a spiritual form of self-centeredness. God put Christ forward to be the object of our faith. The gospel-grounded pastor gently guides the gaze of his troubled brother away from himself and toward his Savior. He does so by clearly explaining the work of God in the gospel. The pastor lays out the objective work of Christ before God, on behalf of this man, and teaches him the use of faith. Faith is the eye of the soul that perceives the work of the gospel. The more a believer looks in faith upon Christ, the stronger his faith grows. He learns to rest in the justifying, redeeming, satisfying work of Christ in the gospel.

No matter how well-meaning Christians may be in their spiritual efforts, any time their faith is not focused on Christ, daily experience in Christ will be harmed in some way. In the case of one who is plagued by guilt, his focus is his sin and not his Savior. Deep inside the source of such a focus is not humility but a sneaky pride. The pride is manifest in a continual effort to gain God's favor through feeling guilty over his sins. In truth this does not please God, but greatly disappoints Him. Though the man suffering from guilt does not realize it, he is actually offending God because he has formed an experiential belief that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient to forgive him of his sins. Somehow he has become convinced that once he has felt guilty enough, God will then be satisfied with his repentance and his guilt will go away. He stays in a sense of guilt because his focus in life is his own sin. His faith in Christ's forgiveness cannot grow when sin is his constant focus. The depth of the believer's experience of the gospel is in direct proportion to his faith being focused on Christ, the only proper object of our faith. The experience of guilt is inescapable for a believer who is constantly concerned about his past sins. His sins have been forgiven, and he will experience this forgiveness in daily life as he learns to focus on Christ and his objective work in the gospel instead of his own subjective feelings of guilt over past sins.

The gospel-grounded pastor's effectiveness as caregiver comes from the gospel's secure foundation, one that offers an objective and genuine cure for what ails the believer's soul. Only the gospel shines a light bright enough to illumine the darkest cavern of human sinfulness. This light causes great alarm in the soul, but until the source of sickness can be found, the proper cure cannot be applied. In turn, this enables a believer to see himself for what he is. It takes away any need for rationalizations of

wrong behaviors or attitudes, because the Christian now knows he is a sinner who has been saved by the objective work of God in the gospel.

Though pronounced righteous in Christ before God, believers have not yet been made actually righteous. The pastor as caregiver is involved with a believer in the process of sanctification. Sanctification is the ongoing work of the Spirit of God in the life of one who has experienced the gospel as “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). This work of God’s Spirit in the life of a believer to make him holy is a work that will not be complete until glorification occurs at the consummation of God’s kingdom (Rom 8:30). Sanctification must not be confused with God’s work of justification. Justification is an event. Sanctification is a process.²⁶ Douglas Moo wrote, “While ‘sanctification’ and ‘justification’ are inseparable, they are distinct; and Paul is badly misread if they are confused or combined.”²⁷

What good does this understanding offer a believer? What hope does it give? Much in both cases. Every Christian fails in many ways in the process of sanctification. When a believer stumbles in faith by doubting his salvation or fails by sinning and incurring guilt in his conscience, there is a real and ready remedy. First, there is no need to make excuses; the believer knows the darkness of his soul and admits to having a genuine capacity to sin, but he also recognizes there is a real and objective remedy that can take away the guilt of sin and restore his faith.

Guilt is objectively removed by Christ’s sacrifice. God’s wrath has been satisfied in Christ’s propitiation. Meditation on and the daily practice of living according

²⁶Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*, 151.

²⁷Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 75.

to these truths is the path to a growing faith and a subjective sense of a healed soul in appropriate feelings of forgiveness, freedom, and joy founded upon the gospel. The faith of a doubter is strengthened as the believer is led to the objective and effective work of Christ's death and resurrection. Genuine assurance is found in the objective truth of the gospel, not in the subjective experience of a decision. The believer then learns what it means to cast himself on Christ for a sure salvation.

This process of sanctification is no easy thing. The New Testament uses various metaphors to prepare the believer for the path ahead of him. The writers use vivid images like athletic contests, wrestling, and war as analogies to express the difficulty in the fight of faith (I Cor 9:24-27; Eph 6:10-18). These metaphors demonstrate that sanctification involves far more than a mental understanding of the gospel. The metaphors were chosen to show that obedience to the gospel must accompany one's understanding of the gospel. The transformational effect of the gospel takes place as the believer grows in his understanding of the objective gospel truths and lives according to them. Romans 3:23-26 is the pastor's theological foundation and reason for using the gospel as a means of soul care. However, this is no simplistic process of throwing this passage of Scripture at a struggling believer and expecting it to work its magic. Using the gospel to nurture and heal the hurts of believers demands hard work in understanding the gospel and the people God's gospel has saved.

The gospel itself goes counter to the nature of man's thinking. To the Jews the idea of a crucified Messiah was a huge stumbling block. It made no sense to their human wisdom. To the Gentiles, the idea of a crucified God was downright foolish (I Cor 1:21-25). Man cannot grasp the concept of the free and unmerited grace of the gospel. He is

incurably addicted to doing something for his own salvation. This human perspective does not go away at conversion. It lies deep within the flesh of all men, and it is a root issue to be dealt with in soul care. The Christian is transformed through the renewing of his mind (Rom 12:2). This transformation takes place as a believer grows in his understanding of the mercy and grace of God in the gospel. It literally changes one's view on God, life, and self. The gospel is the lens through which a human can begin to see life as God sees it, but the correctional process to his spiritual sight is continual and sometimes difficult. The pastor must always be aware that both he and his people have this built-in conflict with the idea of grace. The core of soul care is helping the Christian believe God instead of his own ideas and thoughts concerning the state of his soul.

Understanding the gospel is the foundation of pastoral soul care. In relation to the loss of a biblical understanding of the gospel, John Piper writes, "It seems to us that the full glory of Christ is at stake as well as pastoral ministry to trembling sinners and imperfect saints."²⁸ If we lose the gospel as the foundation of soul care, Christ will not be honored because sinners will not know they can look to him in saving faith. Without the gospel, the church has no real hope to offer hurting souls. Understanding the gospel is not enough for effective soul care. We must learn how to apply it to the real life experiences of Christians.

To find an historical example of such work I turned to the pastoral preaching of the Puritans.

²⁸John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 51.

An Historical Model of Preaching the Gospel to Believers for the Purpose of Soul Care

The Puritans offer an excellent historical model of gospel soul care for two reasons. First, they pre-date both modern psychology and Christian counseling, so they operate in an atmosphere clear of these influences. This serves as a safeguard against contemporary prejudices. Second, the Puritans were extremely biblical in their approach to life. They looked to God's Word for guidance in all areas.

The work of three men will be used for this look into history: Samuel Rutherford, Christopher Love, and Richard Baxter. Before examining the work of these three men, it is important to realize that Puritan pastors had a consistent pattern in how they observed the souls of men. This pattern was more clearly seen in their personal care of souls than it was in their preaching, but it did provide the grid through which they saw the people to whom they preached.

The Puritans were a practical and realistic people. They were well aware of the pitfalls of earthly Christian living. It was common for members of the local church to consult with their pastor for direction in life. Much of the help sought was spiritual help for their struggling souls. When someone came to a Puritan pastor with soul troubles, it appears the pastor worked according to a well-defined system.²⁹ He would first try to determine if the person coming to him was truly converted.³⁰ If the pastor could find no sorrow for sin accompanied by love for God, he assumed the ache of the person's soul was the need of conversion.

²⁹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, ed., *Puritan Papers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000), 1:32.

³⁰*Ibid.*

This probing into a person's soul was not a search into their conversion experience, but into their present state.³¹ If the pastor became assured of an individual's real faith in Christ, he would proceed to diagnose the soul's troubles by exploring two specific areas. The pastor would seek to determine if the believer's troubles were due to genuine spiritual distresses or to non-spiritual causes, which were labeled "melancholy." Melancholy, as the Puritan pastor used it, could refer to a wide range of emotional or physiological problems.

G. A. Hemming says, "It is at this point that the Puritans display that shrewdness and robust common sense which are ever needed as a complement to spiritual understanding."³² The Puritans drew a distinct line between melancholy (something they believed had a physical cause) and spiritual distresses that were directly related to sin, Satan, or the Holy Spirit of God. Christopher Love described the effects of melancholy as follows:

Melancholy in a man darkens the understanding and troubles the fancy. It disturbs the reason, saddens the soul, and clothes it in mourning weeds. And when these meet together, it must cast the man down and suspend the sense of God's favor from him. Melancholy is the mother of discomfort and discontent; it is the nurse of doubts.³³

Richard Baxter expressed the following perspective on treating melancholy:

To those that find that melancholy is the cause of their troubles, I would give this advice. Expect not that rational, spiritual remedies should suffice for this cure; for you may as well expect that a good sermon, or comfortable words, should cure the falling sickness, or palsy, or a broken head, as to be a sufficient cure to your melancholy fears; for this is as real a bodily disease as the other.³⁴

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 34.

³³Christopher Love, *The Dejected Soul's Cure* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2001), 70.

³⁴Baxter, *The Practical Works*, 2:888.

In writing to those who suffer from melancholy, Baxter closes his directions with this advice:

My last advice is to look out for the cure of your disease, and commit yourself to the care of your physician and obey him; and do not as most melancholy persons do, that will not believe the physic (medicine) will do them good, but that it is only their soul that is afflicted . . . till the body be cured, the mind will hardly ever be cured, but the clearest reasons will be all in vain.³⁵

The second aim of probing the troubled soul was to determine if the distress was truly spiritual and, if so, what the cause of the distress was. To make their work strategic, Puritan pastors had three areas of spiritual focus: sin in the believer's life, direct attack of Satan, or a specific work of the Holy Spirit of God.³⁶

The Puritan pastor's preaching seems to have been guided by this same grid of caring for souls. Though they saw melancholy as a physical issue, Puritan pastors realized that it had effects upon the spiritual lives of their people. Some melancholy Puritan believers would become convinced they were "forsaken of God."³⁷ Pastors would address the issues of melancholy from their pulpits because their aim was to help their hearers discern the origin of their troubles. If the emotional and mental distress was caused by melancholy, the pastor suggested physical remedies. Like true physicians of the soul, they would cut a distinct line in their preaching between melancholy and genuine spiritual problems so that they might skillfully use the gospel to attack sin or to comfort the soul. Though Puritans viewed melancholy as a physical disease, they readily admitted how the devil might use it to increase the particular temptations of the

³⁵Ibid., 1:267.

³⁶Lloyd-Jones, *Puritan Papers*, 38-42.

³⁷Baxter, *The Practical Works*, 1:262.

melancholy individual.³⁸ Addressing the experiences of melancholy was a small part of the Puritan pastor's preaching, but he felt it necessary to address it because it was common among certain people and affected their lives in such a drastic manner. The gospel was their medicine for the soul, but the Puritans knew every soul dwells in a body. The practical-minded Puritan pastor simply wanted to help his parishioners discern the real cause of their problems and seek the proper remedy.

The sermons of Samuel Rutherford and his letters written during his captivity are witnesses of his skillful use of the gospel in caring for souls. In writing to a friend to encourage him through times of trial, Rutherford said,

Suffer we must; we were born, God decreed it; and it is easier to complain of His decree than to change it. It is true terrors of conscience cast us down; yet without terrors of conscience we cannot be raised up again; fears and doubtings shake us; yet without fears and doubtings we should soon sleep, and lose our hold of Christ. Tribulation and temptations will almost loose us at the root; and yet without tribulations and temptations we can no more grow than herbs or corn without rain. Sin and Satan and the world will say, and cry in our ear, that we have a hard reckoning to make in judgment; and none of these three, except they lie, dare say in our face that our sin can change the tenor of the new covenant.³⁹

Here Rutherford displays his keen ability to describe and admit the hard realities of Christian life on this earth while at the same time showing that no external reality or internal feeling changes the greater reality of God's New Covenant in the gospel. He faithfully teaches his struggling church members to put their weak hopes in a strong Christ.

In a sermon defining living in grace through sin and stumblings, he said,

³⁸Ibid., 1:263.

³⁹Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1973), 26-27.

I had rather say with Scripture that all the justified saints must take down their top-sail and go to heaven halting, and that they carry their bolts and fetters of indwelling sin through the field of free grace, even to the gates of glory, Christ daily washing, and renewing pardons, and we daily defiling, to the end that grace may be grace.⁴⁰

Rutherford wanted his hearers to understand the struggle with sin was a daily part of the believer's life and was no sign of weakness or of being without grace. Though he taught strongly that we should always fight against our flesh, he wanted his hearers to know our weakness in sin serves to magnify the greatness of God's grace, which in turn increases our love for the Savior. It was the objective gospel Rutherford used to help weak and stumbling saints.

In offering a list of helps against doubtings, Rutherford offers these clear statements: "Your heart is not the compass Christ saileth by. He will give you leave to sing as you please, but he will not dance to your daft spring." To a young man with troubling thoughts he said, "Your thoughts are not parts of the new covenant; dreams change not Christ." And, "Doubtings are your sins, but they are Christ's drugs and ingredients that the Physician maketh use of for the curing of your pride."⁴¹

Rutherford was a man steeped in the gospel and one who deeply loved his church members. He was aware of their life struggles and offered compassionate yet direct counsel from the Scriptures. He offers a model of care worth imitating.

Christopher Love was another Puritan pastor, though one not as well known as Rutherford and Baxter are today. His sermons display his thorough understanding of the Scripture and the souls of men. Love preached a series of seventeen sermons on the first

⁴⁰Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith* (Choteau, MT: Old Paths Gospel, n.d.), 196.

⁴¹Ibid., 87.

verse of Psalm 42. Throughout the seventeen, there is a rich display of accurately and tenderly applied gospel truth to the downcast Christian soul. Though it is an Old Testament text, he uses it to show that a believer's soul can be cast down, and to indicate how the objective work of God in the gospel is the key to dealing with life's difficulties.

His preaching follows the same approach to dealing with souls as a Puritan pastor would follow in private. He aims first to help his believing hearers discern the cause of their troubles. Love spends four full sermons opening the text, explaining the doctrine in it, and answering basic questions about being cast down for sin. In his fifth sermon, he attempts to answer the question, "Why are the people of God cast down?"⁴² He offers four general causes. There is something within the man himself. There is a reason from God. There is an attack of the devil. Finally, it could be something done to an individual by other men.⁴³

His first cause coming from within the man is melancholy.⁴⁴ Periodically throughout these sermons, Love reminds his hearers that their downcast souls may have a physical and not a spiritual cause. The correct cause must be discerned so a right remedy can be applied. His preaching reveals a detailed knowledge of Scripture and the nature of man. After he defines the issue of being cast down in soul as a believer, he offers instruction and comfort to the downcast. In his seventh sermon, Love offers "nine rules for a Christian to follow if he would not be cast down under a continued suspension of God's

⁴²Love, *The Dejected Soul's Care*, 69.

⁴³Ibid., 70.

⁴⁴Ibid.

love.”⁴⁵

I refer to only three for the sake of brevity. Rule One is this:

If you would regain a comfortable assurance of God’s love, keep a holy and conscientious care to live in grace throughout the course of your lives; let it be the chiefest of your care to live in grace, and I promise you that it will not be long before you have comfort.⁴⁶

He then quotes 2 Peter 1:5-10 and adds this explanation:

These verses tell you how to get your assurance of election: add grace to grace. Let it be your care to live in grace, and it will be God’s work to give you comfort...O beloved, the actings of grace are the inlets to inner peace. Many men say they know they shall be justified, but never make conscience of their ways. They never order their cause. . . . O beloved, if you will have a due sense of the knowledge of justification, order your cause well; order your lives well. ‘To him that orders his conversation aright will I show the salvation of God’ (Ps 50:23).⁴⁷

Another of Love’s comforts displays the Puritan approach to the objective work of the gospel to anchor and guide believers through the subjective experiences of earthly living. He said, “Let your comforts be grounded upon an immutable covenant rather than upon your feelings.”⁴⁸

One other rule he gives is both a comfort and a warning. “Be more industrious in doing duty than in getting comfort. It is the fault of many Christians that they spend more time in fruitless complaints that they want comfort than in holy endeavors to perform duties.”⁴⁹ Love is not explaining gospel content to his people with this rule, but gospel conduct. He is reminding his people that the comforts of the gospel are real, but

⁴⁵Ibid., 105.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., 106.

⁴⁸Ibid., 109.

⁴⁹Ibid., 111.

they are not the purpose of their Christian faith. The aim of their faith is Christ, and the followers of Christ suffer in this life just as their Lord did. The way to find comfort in their troubles is to seek the person of Christ and trust his promises, not complain about how difficult life is.

Two more pieces of advice from Christopher Love need to be heard. His sixteenth sermon in the series is devoted to practical instruction. He dissects and diagnoses the souls of his hearers. He is able genuinely to hurt with them and accurately help them. Two examples of his practical instruction demonstrate this.

Beg a share in the blood of Christ that merits your peace. Colossians 1:20: ‘And (having made peace through the blood of His cross) by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things in earth or things in heaven.’ There is peace with God and peace in your conscience. Peace with God and peace in your conscience are the certain results of Christ’s personal treaty with God the Father in heaven.⁵⁰

Love skillfully takes the truth of the gospel, personalizes it, and applies it to the reality of their troubled souls. One final word from Love lays the work of the gospel onto the wounds of sin to once again heal the soul of God’s downcast child.

Consider that God’s mercy and Christ’s merit in pardoning the guilt of sin you have committed are far greater than the greatness of your own guilt. Romans 5:15: ‘But not as the offense, so is the free gift. For if through the offense of one, many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, by one man Jesus Christ hath abounded to many’ . . . Beloved, the Red Sea of Christ’s blood can as well cover an army, a host of sins, as it can a single sin.⁵¹

I now turn to Richard Baxter. The four volumes of his *Practical Works* are thousands of pages in double-columned small type, in which he said much that is genuinely helpful. I can offer only a few references to his work, but any work on Puritan soul care

⁵⁰Ibid., 234-35.

⁵¹Ibid., 237.

must attend to Baxter's contribution.

One great irony about Baxter must be noted. The doctrine of justification is the root of proper soul care in private and in the pulpit, and Richard Baxter is one of the best Puritans to read on these matters. However, one cannot study Baxter's life and ministry without realizing he developed an errant view of justification. J. I. Packer said of him, "Baxter was a great and saintly man; as pastor, evangelist, and devotional writer, no praise for him can be too high; but as a theologian he was, though brilliant, something of a disaster."⁵²

Despite his theological weaknesses, two things kept Baxter's counsel sound. One, he was saturated in Scripture. He believed it to be the Word of God. The second is that he knew his people. Though his views of justification caused some problems, when it comes to applying the gospel to the troubled souls of men and women, he was a physician of the soul from whom we can learn. Baxter's actual work in ministry almost always found its way to the printed page through his pen. "Baxter authored about 150 books, of which several were folios of more than a million words. If his entire works were ever to be printed, they would amount to more than double the size of Owen's."⁵³ Baxter had a seventeen-year pastoral ministry in the town of Kidderminster, England that "with the Spirit's blessing, resulted in numerous conversions."⁵⁴ Kidderminster was known to have a rather corrupt and crude population. Through his practical and passionate preaching and his in-home visits, the entire town was deeply affected.

⁵²J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 159.

⁵³Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 68.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 62.

The congregation kept overflowing its meeting place so that five galleries had to be added. When Baxter came to Kidderminster, scarcely one family on each street among the 800 families honored God in family worship. By the end of his ministry in 1661, there were streets on which every family did so.⁵⁵

Baxter also exercised a ministry to fellow pastors. One of his best known works, *The Reformed Pastor*, represents this ministry. The word “reformed” in the title of this work is not a reference to Reformed theology but to a revived pastor whose life was reshaped by the Word of God. This work provides a good look into Baxter’s philosophy and practice of ministry. Very few books so clearly explain the seriousness of the pastoral ministry and offer practical helps at the level of Baxter’s writing in *The Reformed Pastor*.

At least three themes recur throughout this book. First, Baxter continually reminds pastors of the needed urgency in preaching the gospel to the lost. He does this with intense and serious language. He tells his fellow pastors that

[o]ur work requireth greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, than any of us bring to it. It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation, and to deliver a message of salvation or damnation, as from the living God, in the name of the Redeemer.⁵⁶

Secondly, Baxter repeatedly challenged his fellow pastors about their personal authenticity. In Baxter’s mind it was unthinkable for a pastor to expect things of his flock that he did not do himself. He was careful in his confrontations to include himself along with the pastors he was addressing. He wrote, “Indeed, we may here justly begin our confessions; it is too common with us to expect that from our people which we do little or nothing in ourselves. What pains do we take to humble them, while we ourselves are

⁵⁵Ibid., 64.

⁵⁶Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 117.

unhumbled!”⁵⁷

Baxter’s third recurring theme was the pastor’s ongoing responsibility to help his flock continue to grow in grace. Baxter told pastors, “We must study to build up those who are already truly converted. In this respect our work is various, according to the various states of Christians.”⁵⁸ It was in this vein of ministry that Baxter provides an example of preaching the gospel so ably to believers in caring for their souls. He faithfully reminds his fellow pastors of the necessities of knowing the Scripture and knowing their flock so that their ministry would consist of applying the proper truth of the gospel to the actual need in a person’s soul in the most fitting manner. He said, “Ministers, therefore, must be observant of the case of their flocks, that they may know what is most necessary for them, both for matter and for manner.”⁵⁹

This philosophy and practice of ministry enabled Richard Baxter to write with a clarity about the workings of the human mind and emotions that is second to no writer today. His writings and sermons offer a great balance to the extremes on both ends of the counseling/psychological spectrum of views of the human soul in today’s church culture. His *Practical Works* are full of practical advice on almost every area of Christian life imaginable.

In volume 2, two lengthy pieces aim at helping weaker believers. The name of each work tells a great deal of the content in a colorful way. The first is titled, “The Right Method for a Settled Peace of Conscience and Spiritual Comfort, in Thirty-Two

⁵⁷Ibid., 133.

⁵⁸Ibid., 97.

⁵⁹Ibid., 114.

Directions.”⁶⁰ The second, a compilation of some of his sermons put into print, is titled “Directions for Weak, Distempered Christians to Grow Up to a Confirmed State of Grace, with Motives Opening the Lamentable Effects of Their Weaknesses and Distempers.”⁶¹

Two quotations from the second work illustrate Baxter’s care for souls even as he ministered from his pulpit. In clarifying for his people that our earthly pilgrimage to heaven is filled with difficulty, he painted this picture:

Consider also how much of the work of your salvation is yet to do when you are converted. You have happily begun, but you have not finished. You have hit off the right way, but you have your journey to go. You have chosen the best Commander and fellow-soldiers, but you have many a battle yet to fight. If you are Christians indeed, you know yourselves that you have many a corruption to resist and conquer, and many a temptation yet to overcome, and many a necessary work to do.⁶²

He instructs and encourages these weak believers to rest on Christ and his objective and finished work, not their feelings. He says, “Exercise yourselves daily in a life of faith upon Jesus Christ, as your Savior, your Teacher, your Mediator, and your King; as your example, your wisdom, your righteousness, and your hope.”⁶³ Baxter knew that the deeper and more accurate knowledge a believer had of the Savior and his gospel, the healthier and more lively his faith would be. The key to his and other Puritans’ soul care was to help the Christian focus on the eternal work of God in the gospel, so his faith would rest on that alone and not on subjective experiences and emotions in life.

⁶⁰Baxter, *The Practical Works*, 2:884.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 982.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 989.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 1010.

Baxter said, “The affections follow the understanding’s conceptions. If you think of God as one that is glad of all advantages against you, and delighteth in His creature’s misery, it is impossible you should love Him.”⁶⁴ It is easy to misunderstand God when our belief about God is guided by our feelings and not by the truth of Scripture. Baxter was convinced that the affections—that is, the feelings—of the Christian’s soul would in time be guided and controlled by proper theological conceptions in the mind. Thus he labored diligently to establish a clear gospel understanding in the minds of his people. Richard Baxter knew that a proper understanding of the gospel led to a proper experience of the gospel. Baxter and his fellow Puritans teach us that gospel truth must be clearly taught to the believer or else the believer’s vision of God will become blurred and his experience of God’s love dulled.

**Biblical, Theological, and Historical Insights that
Promote Preaching of the Gospel to Believers
in Order to Care for Their Souls**

The gospel was used by the apostles in caring for the members of first-century churches. From their letters written to the churches we learn how to use the gospel for the health of believers today. The Puritans provide an excellent historical example of how this work is done. The gospel is not time-bound or culture-bound. The same gospel can be used in any culture because the nature and needs of men never change. The gospel was for believers in the New Testament days, it was for believers in the days of the Puritans, and it is for believers in our day.

The preaching of the gospel to the church is the key to the church’s health.

⁶⁴Ibid., 890.

Believers learn to rest on the Christ they have received. They find their spiritual safety in his finished work. As believers grow in grace and deepen in dependence upon the gospel, they are prepared to take a saving gospel to the lost world. Unhealthy Christians deliver an unhelpful gospel. The church presently nurtured through strong gospel preaching to believers is the church that will grow through effective evangelism. The future growth of the church is dependent upon the health of the present church. Therefore, the health and growth of the church depend upon the preaching of the gospel to believers.

CHAPTER 3
CONTEMPORARY COMPLICATIONS FOR
PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS A MEANS
OF CHRISTIAN SOUL CARE

In the late 1970s I sensed God’s call to Christian ministry. I was a student at a state university, and I shared this news with one of my academic counselors. His response was positive and genuine but unintentionally misleading. He smiled and said, “This is wonderful. You have chosen one of the three genuine professions in life: law, medicine, and theology.” It was the word “profession” that proved to be misleading.

The professionalization of Christian ministry has caused some disruptive issues in pastoral work. My academic counselor, in one sense, was being proper to call theology a profession. At one time it was “assumed that what distinguished a profession from a mere occupation was the presence of an altruistic motive.”¹ Louis Brandeis addressed the students at Brown University in 1912 and called their attention to something he saw as a modern phenomenon. He argued that other vocations were striving to be recognized along with law, medicine, and theology as professions. Brandeis offered three defining characteristics of a profession: it requires training that is intellectual in nature, it is pursued chiefly for the sake of others, and a profession’s

¹David Wells, *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 222.

success is not measured in monetary return.² As other occupations moved into the realm of the professions, the understanding of what a professional was changed.

David Wells speaks of three marks that accompany the contemporary understanding of what it means to be a professional. Wells thinks that one part of being a professional is simply the ability to do some task with skill. When a plumber fits two pipes together well, we might say his work was done “very professionally.” The second mark Wells identifies is the loss of an altruistic motive in the work. He contends that today’s professionals do not stand apart from the capitalistic enterprise of our economy, but are at the core of it. The third mark that Wells sees of the new professional is that many Americans equate being in the middle class with being a professional.³ It is this idea of professionalism that I see as harmful to pastoral ministry. Such contemporary professionalism affects almost every area of the ministry, and, predominantly, the effects are negative. Pastors forget they are servants and see themselves as professionals. We take on the trappings of the executive, and most of our people like it because we gain a new appearance of importance. The process robs us of a ministry having to do with God and man’s desperate need of Him. Professionalization of the ministry can render the pastor and his calling powerless in the spiritual realm.

Such professionalization has been felt deeply in the area of soul care. The responsibility for the care of souls and the aim of preaching both have been changed because of it. As for soul care, both the responsibility for it and the realm in which it occurs have been changing. Soul care as a responsibility of the pastor and as a function of

²Ibid., 222-23.

³Ibid., 223-24.

the local church is slipping away.

When a pastor is seen as a professional, he can become a specialist in vision-casting and communication to large groups of people. The ministry of one-on-one preaching of the gospel to needy believers is left to another profession. David Powlison has said, “Psychiatry and psychotherapy displaced the care of souls. . . . Hospital, clinic, and office displaced the church and community as the focus of care.”⁴ A pastor’s primary responsibility is to feed his flock through the public preaching of the gospel. The need for personal knowledge of individual members in the church, however, and the ability to offer personal soul care rooted in gospel truths remain critical. With a professional status, it is easy for pastors to quickly refer the needy and troublesome individuals in their churches to a professional counselor, producing some strange and unhealthy results.

One of these unhealthy results is that the focus of caring for souls has changed from eternal and spiritual matters to temporal and psychological matters. The Puritan pastor dealt much with psychological issues. These all fell under the label of melancholy. However, considering the whole of their soul care and their preaching, the time they spent dealing with psychological matters accounted for about one-fifth of their work.⁵ The focus remained on spiritual and eternal matters.

According to Harry Shields and Gary Bredfeldt, “The assumption is that care giving has to focus primarily on psychological issues.”⁶ Thomas Oden is “alarmed that since about 1920 Christian writers on pastoral care have let modern psychotherapies

⁴Harry Shields and Gary Bredfeldt, *Caring for Souls* (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 302.

⁵D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, ed., *Puritan Papers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 1:31-43.

⁶Shields and Bredfeldt, *Caring for Souls*, 299.

inform their work far more than the classic Christian tradition.”⁷ A visit to any Christian bookstore in a search for a good book on pastoral counseling written by a pastor will prove to be quite disappointing. Pastors are moving away from pastoral counseling, and professional pastoral counselors are taking on that role. E. B. Holifield said, “There has been a serious lack of fresh pastoral theological labor among Bible believers since the mid-1800’s. Pastoral counseling has largely been a subset of secular psychologies and liberal theologies.”⁸

Seminary training tends to support this professional view of caring for souls. Specialization is a dominant element of the new professional.⁹ The need for specialization seems to grow with the increasing complexity of a technological world. Specialization is not a bad thing. In some sense, every field of knowledge needs its specialists. David Wells argues that specialization, however, diminishes the ability of university and seminary graduates to think about their world in an interconnected way.¹⁰ He is not singling out specialized soul care. His focus is the danger of overly-specialized training for the pastor that might actually limit his ability to effectively address the whole church with the whole gospel. Wells’ concern is that the new driving factor behind seminary training is whatever the present culture demands of its ministers instead of what a biblical and theological understanding demands of gospel ministers. Wells fears the

⁷Robert Roberts, “A Christian Psychology View,” in *Psychology and Christianity*, ed. Eric Johnson and Stanton Jones (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 154.

⁸David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View,” in Johnson and Jones, *Psychology and Christianity*, 210.

⁹Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 225.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 241.

result will be professional specialist ministers with a “profound increase in knowledge but often an equally profound loss in understanding what it all means, how it is all interconnected, how knowledge in one field should inform that in another.”¹¹

I do not share all of David Wells’ concerns or conclusions, but he makes us aware of the inherent dangers of a professionalized pastorate. My concern in relation to this project is that a biblical and theological understanding of preaching the gospel will be separated from a biblical and theological understanding of the people to whom we preach. An undue separation of the public preaching of the gospel to care for souls and the pastor’s personal work of applying the gospel in individual soul care can present some serious problems in ministry. The specialization inherent in training church pastors who preach and pastoral counselors who counsel opened the door for two different approaches to training. Pastors are trained from a theological foundation while in most places pastoral counselors are trained from a psychological foundation. Shields and Bredfeldt comment, “We are aware of the fact that many of our training institutions do not prepare pastors for the everyday work of caring for people in need. Training in ‘counseling’ is often reserved for those who enroll in specialized degree programs.”¹²

Jeffrey Boyd, writing about the biblical concept of the human soul, fears there is no consistent and biblically accurate view of the human soul. He writes,

My own reading has led me to believe that theologians have resigned from the task of writing about theological anthropology. It is as if theologians have said, “We’ll leave that subject to the counseling department.” Have you ever gone to a bookstore to try to buy a recent book on theological anthropology? There are none in print. The secular mental health movement publishes a thousand books per year

¹¹Ibid., 245.

¹²Shields and Bredfeldt, *Caring for Souls*, 298.

promoting a totally secular view of human nature, while theologians publish fewer than one book every ten years on theological anthropology.¹³

Mark McMinn contends that “from a historical perspective soul care was once primarily the domain of the church and clergy, but it was wrestled away during modern times, and it has largely been relegated to a secular profession.”¹⁴

The separation of soul care from the pastoral office, along with the professionalization of ministry, has caused a confusing tension. This tension exists at two levels. First, there are several Christian viewpoints in the world of professional pastoral counselors. In the mix of modern psychology, a therapeutic culture, and a professional ministry, highly specialized approaches to caring for souls have developed. To put it mildly, great tensions arise between these differing perspectives. Each perspective claims to be Christian and biblical, and persons in each field spend a great deal of their time defending their perspective while degrading other points of view. Their conflict is captured well in Jeffrey Boyd’s statement, “The most urgent task inside Christian counseling today is considered to be the battle against Jay Adams and the biblical counselors.”¹⁵ As a result, much of the professional research in the realm of Christian counseling has been done from a defensive posture.

The second level of tension is in the pastoral ministry itself. When a pastor looks at the world of Christian counseling and seeks to better prepare himself for ministry, to whom does he turn for help? Which perspective is the right perspective?

¹³Jeffrey Boyd, “Self-Concept: In Defense of the Word Soul,” in *Care for the Soul*, ed. Mark McMinn and Timothy Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 115.

¹⁴Mark McMinn, “Introduction: Psychology, Theology & Care for the Soul,” in McMinn and Phillips, *Care for the Soul*, 15.

¹⁵Boyd, “Self-Concept: In Defense of the Word Soul,” 111.

Biblical counseling? Christian psychology? The integration view? Though there are many genuine believers in each perspective, and all of them want to help the church, they are still professionals.

At this point I am not criticizing the counselor for being a professional. There is a place for the professional Christian counselor. However, this professionalization plays a part in moving basic soul care away from the pastor who is not a specialist. Almost every author on the subject of Christian counseling, soul care, or spiritual direction is a professor or a professional with a private practice. Virtually none of them are pastors. My chief concern is not that we have professional counselors, but that we may be losing pastors who confidently provide effective gospel soul care for the members of their churches.

Eugene Peterson stands almost alone as a pastor writing today about caring for souls.¹⁶ Most of the literature and training offered to pastors comes from a professionalized view of ministry that has little understanding of a pastor's work. This tension leaves the pastor feeling and appearing inadequate. A clear picture is offered in Gary Moon and David Benner's book *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*. A case study is given in chapter 12 of their work. Amazingly, the individual coming for counsel is a pastor. It is not amazing that a pastor should seek or need counsel. What is amazing is that this case study magnifies the fact that the book was not written to or for pastors but

¹⁶Eugene H. Peterson has written a number of books to pastors. His writings provide a good perspective for today's pastor in this specialized age. Not every pastor will agree with parts of his theology, and some may not like his constant use of adjectives to illustrate what he is saying, but his books are saying things to pastors that no one else is saying. Books related to this paper would include Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); idem, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); idem, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and idem, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

for professionals. It is the pastor who needs the help of a professional, not only in his ministry but also in his personal life. Such help is not an inherently bad thing, but it could fuel a false perception that most of the human soul's needs must be handled by a professional.

The case of the pastor in this book is given to three different professionals, and each of them explains how she would handle this pastor in need. One is a psychologist, one a spiritual director, and one a pastoral counselor. The caregivers are all female. The psychologist is a professor, the pastoral counselor is a professor, and the spiritual director has an M.A. in Pastoral Theology and is program director, spiritual director, and retreat leader at a spiritual life center.¹⁷

The pastor is described as a “fifty-year-old Caucasian male who presents with systems of depression and sexual dysfunction. This is his first time seeking any form of treatment.”¹⁸ He has had a successful ministry for twenty years but has recently transitioned to a smaller church in a poor community. For six months he has had sexual difficulty in his marriage. He says he is feeling sad and somewhat confused about being a pastor. In the course of treatment, he admits to having an affair with a member of his previous church.¹⁹

The treatment each caregiver offers is a colossal failure from a biblical and pastoral perspective. Terminology is used by each caregiver that few people outside these professional fields understand or speak. The objective problems the pastor has are

¹⁷Gary Moon and David Benner, *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 247-49.

¹⁸Ibid., 222.

¹⁹Ibid., 222-23.

basically left unaddressed. It is as if each caregiver lifts the fallen pastor right out of his life and attempts to set him down into life as they have learned to experience it through their specialized training. Theological and biblical foundations are either nonexistent or highly deviant from an orthodox Christian view. The psychologist and the pastoral counselor both reference the DSM-IV as their tool to diagnose the state of the pastor's depression and sexual dysfunction. The spiritual director references both Thomas Merton and Ignatius of Loyola. There might be helpful information in the resources used by these caregivers, but if the case studies accurately reflect their soul care practices, it would be an extreme stretch to call what they do "pastoral counseling" in the Christian sense.

The most obvious omission is that none of the counselors uses Scripture. The real needs of the human soul cannot be addressed fully when the Maker of the soul is not allowed to weigh in with His truth. Scripture is merely a secondary source for each of these caregivers. Biblical ideas are referenced by each of them, but the Scriptures are never used as the foundational source of their counseling. Their professional and specialized studies have led them away from the antiquated text of the Bible and into more sophisticated tools to deal with the complexities of the pastor's soul in his contemporary setting.

This professionalized view of ministry has greatly muddied the waters for effective Christian counseling. A psychological view of the nature of man, the professionalization of the ministry, and the therapeutic age in which we live are the makeup of the soil in which these tensions grow. Pastors feel themselves to be inadequate to care for souls, and the culture makes them appear inadequate.

Professionalization of Counseling and Separation of Soul Care from the Pastor's Work

The professionalization of pastoral ministry has drawn a distinct line between the work of the pastor and the work of the counselor. Modern complexities of leading a church in a highly mobile and technologically advanced culture have presented many pastors with more responsibilities than one man can handle. The demands for multiple skills increase the need for specialization in training and a division of responsibilities for those who would serve the church. In many churches today, the senior pastor must become something of a specialist in corporate communication and vision casting if he is to be an effective corporate leader. The issue of caring for souls can understandably become the responsibility of another specialist. These two responsibilities were at one time handled by the pastor. Richard Baxter said, "A minister is not merely a public preacher, but to be known as a counselor for their souls, as the physician is for their bodies, and the lawyer for their estates: so that each man who is in doubts and straits may bring his case to him for resolution."²⁰

Where the work of the pastor and the work of the counselor are seen as specialized, the training for each position is often separate from the other. Though the training is separate, however, both fields share the common goal of effective life change. Because they share a common goal and a combined past, these two specialized fields continue to influence one another. The pastor and the counselor want to help troubled people. The pastor performs his service to people from a theological understanding. The counselor often performs his service to people from a psychological understanding. In

²⁰Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 96.

our culture, theology has been limited to the sphere of the church while psychology has penetrated many areas of life. Psychological terminology, at some levels, is common to the general public. Theological terminology is chiefly limited to the seminary and the church. The more popular nature of psychology has produced pressure on pastors to learn to speak theological truth in a more contemporary manner. Sometimes the result is not the development of a contemporary language to communicate theological truth, but an adoption of psychological terminology.

Jeffrey Boyd wrote,

We live in a therapeutic age. Theologian Rodney Clapp told me of evangelical experts who have advised preachers to avoid theological language and to use only secular psychology language in their sermons. The reason is people experience psychological language as providing a practical, down to earth description of everyday reality, while they experience theological language as abstract and difficult to understand.²¹

Much preaching for practical Christian living has lost its theological base and gained a psychological base. John Piper calls attention to this phenomenon:

Samuel Johnson said of Isaac Watts, “Whatever he took in hand was, by his incessant solicitude for souls, converted to theology.” I take this to mean in Watts’ case that everything was brought in relation to God because he cared about people. Today, Johnson would, I believe, say of much contemporary preaching, “Whatever the preacher takes in hand is, by his incessant solicitude for relevance, converted to psychology.” Neither the great aims of preaching nor the worthy place of psychology is honored in this loss of theological nerve.²²

These things are indeed strange, since pastoral training has little or no psychological education in it. It would seem, then, that it is at least possible that what comes from a contemporary pulpit would be neither good preaching nor good psychology.

²¹Boyd, “Self-Concept: In Defense of the Word Soul,” 106.

²²John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 21.

The psychological influence on pastoral ministry has adjusted the focus of much preaching. Understanding the work of preaching as a theological work to guide believers through an earthly pilgrimage to safe arrival in the heavenly city can be threatened by the more immediate focus of psychology. Preaching can then become an effort toward effective psychological communication aimed at teaching practical ways for enjoyable earthly living. An undue psychological understanding of life can eat away at the eternal perspective of preaching. The outcome of such a change in focus is that the Scriptures are used by pastors as a guide to teach practical life skills. These skills in turn help listeners improve their quality of life, marital intimacy, or leadership potential. Yet a genuine tragedy takes place if the gospel is chiefly perceived as a means to a more productive and satisfying earthly life. It has indeed become a hybrid gospel.

The cross-fertilization in the fields of psychology and theology has contributed to the development of two anomalies. First, we now have a large number of trained professionals called pastoral counselors. Many of these pastoral counselors, however, have never been pastors. The name causes the people pursuing counsel to assume that the counsel they will receive from a pastoral counselor is the same counsel they would receive from their pastor if he had time to see them. However, the professionalization of pastoral ministry and the specialization of training have produced two separate schools of training for these two professionals and, therefore, two different ways of caring for souls. Over time, two significant problems might develop. First, those getting counsel from pastoral counselors could end up with conflicting ideas in their minds if the language of their counselor and the language of their pastor do not match. Second, two ministries that were intended to help one another might end up conflicting with one another.

The second, and far stranger, anomaly is atheological preaching. What is preaching if it is not theological? Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.”²³ The work of preaching demands the strategic use of language to communicate eternal truth to people in contemporary society. When we borrow language from our culture to explain eternal truth, great caution must be exercised to make sure that we are not also adopting our culture. As Jeffrey Boyd notes,

The problem in a nutshell is that American culture, not theology, is defining the way in which we talk. Our day is the first and only time in the history of the earth when the dominant viewpoint is that human nature is entirely secular. Theologians have lost the vocabulary to say otherwise.²⁴

Psychology’s influence can threaten the focus of preaching and move it from preparing souls for eternity to teaching practical paths to an enjoyable earthly life. This approach has evidently met with great success in western culture. Douglas Groothuis writes, “A recent study claimed that over half of evangelicals agreed with this statement: The purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.”²⁵

The gospel is being threatened as the basis for Christian soul care in public preaching and private counsel. Many contemporary pastors work hard at making their messages relevant to the lives of their church members. With the influence of psychology, some preaching tends more to the practice of behavior modification than it does to spiritual transformation. The psychological approach combined with striving for practical relevance can steal the churches’ spiritual power. The Scriptures become distorted and misused. Instead of being God’s unified, unfolding revelation of Himself to man, the Scriptures are

²³D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 97.

²⁴Boyd, “Self-Concept: In Defense of the Word Soul,” 114.

²⁵Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 22.

treated as a book of unconnected prescriptions for how to feel better about yourself and live a more fulfilling life.

Eugene Peterson clears the distortion with a quotation from Erich Auerbach: “The Scripture’s stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”²⁶ Lost to the preaching and soul care ministries of the church is the ability to speak from the outside, with an eternal and objective voice, to the real needs of mankind. Jeffrey Boyd captured what is at stake when he wrote,

As long as the American people have a secular self-concept, they care about keeping their jobs, paying for health care, saving for retirement, and enjoying the good life. But if they began to think of themselves as souls [think of themselves from a biblical perspective instead of a psychological perspective], suddenly they will be confronted with a future after death when they will have to face a judge.²⁷

The pursuit of relevance and psychological appeal in preaching the gospel can erode the gospel’s theological foundation and eternal perspective. This, ironically, renders contemporary preaching irrelevant and ineffective in meeting the real needs of the human soul. The gospel is lost as a basis for Christian soul care.

Preaching the Gospel to Offer Genuine Christian Soul Care In the Face of These Complications

Preaching the gospel to believers is necessary in order to care for their souls. The contemporary culture of psychology has affected the private and public work of pastoral soul care, but foundational issues concerning preaching make it clear that preaching is a God-given means to care for the souls of His children.

²⁶Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 132.

²⁷Boyd, “Self-Concept,” 114.

Keeping the foundational issues always at hand keeps the preacher of the gospel effective according to God's purpose. First, preaching that has an origin other than the Bible is not Christian preaching, and therefore cannot offer genuine care for the eternal soul. John Stott says we must believe God has spoken. He says this is a

fundamental conviction about the living, redeeming and self-revealing God. It is the foundation on which all Christian preaching rests. We should never presume to occupy a pulpit unless we believe in this God. How dare we speak if God has not spoken?²⁸

Preaching to the converted is not a process of discovering something new to give to the congregation that will help them along in their contemporary lives. Preaching to God's people is the work of understanding what God has already said in His timeless Word and proclaiming that truth effectively to God's children, believing it has the power to sustain their souls. It is not that the preacher does not want to be contemporary or relevant; he must be both of these. The only way to do this, however, is always to speak out of the revelation of God.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "My whole argument is that it should be clear to the people that what we are saying is something that comes out of the Bible."²⁹ When we preach in this way we not only teach the truth, but by example we show God's people where to find the truth. We may find many other sources of fine things to say, "Yet if we want to know the full facts of the birth and life, words and works, death and resurrection of Jesus and God's own authoritative explanation of them, we can find them only in the Bible."³⁰

²⁸John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 95-96.

²⁹Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 75.

³⁰Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 98.

Preaching out of the Bible insinuates that the preacher understands the Bible from which he preaches. Taking a text of Scripture and developing a message is not necessarily Christian preaching. The preacher must understand the whole and united message of the Scriptures, so that each passage used in preaching is given its true meaning. Simply put, the pastor must be a theologian if he is to preach effectively.

Theology is not a study only for the halls of academia. Influenced by contemporary thinking, too many have become convinced that theology will make the preacher irrelevant and hard to understand. What is theology but the study of God? And what do hurting souls need to know more than the God who can heal them with His gospel? The only preaching that is effective in caring for the souls of God's people is preaching that is biblically based and theologically sound.

It will take discipline to stay the course of biblical and theological preaching. The contemporary culture of counseling and relevance is bearing influence on how pastors are prepared for ministry, directly and indirectly. Michael Fabarez writes, "Preparation to think doctrinally has largely given way to more 'practical' courses."³¹ David Wells supports this argument by making a comparison of practical training to doctrinal training.

In the one model, theology is foundational, and in the other, it is only peripheral. In the one, theological truth explains why there is a ministry at all, what it is about, and why the church without it will shrivel and die. In the other, this reasoning is marginalized so that what shapes, explains, and drives the work of ministry arrives from the needs of the modern profession.³²

The people a pastor preaches to must always be kept distinct from the God he

³¹Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 149.

³²Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 218.

preaches for, as the pastor works to develop a sermon that speaks for God to the people. Preaching is always from the revelation of God to the people of God. When this order is reversed the pastor loses his ability to be a physician of souls. Only the Creator can see into the human soul and know its true needs. Therefore, the only way effectively to offer remedies in preaching is to explain and proclaim what God has revealed about us and to us in the Scriptures. Michael Fabarez asserts that a “needs-based mind-set has had an eroding effect on pulpit ministry. Many preachers abandon doctrinal thinking and drift hopelessly upon a sea of pragmatism.”³³ Keeping a biblical and theological foundation in preaching is imperative if a pastor intends to reach the souls of God’s people with his preaching.

This brings up the second obvious element in facing these contemporary complications in preaching the gospel. Preaching is always to people. In fact, preaching (that is, live preaching) is always to a particular people in a particular time and place. It is obvious that preaching must be understandable and applicable or it will do the people no good. In the preaching ministry, the pastor must keep the perspective that God is the center of the gospel, and people are the focus of the gospel. God is the source of and reason for the gospel. The plan of the gospel is founded upon and fueled by God. People are the recipient of the gospel. John Piper calls for a God-centered gospel in this way:

Unless we begin with God in this way, when the gospel comes to us, we will inevitably put ourselves at the center of it. We will feel that our value rather than God’s value is the driving force in the gospel. We will trace the gospel back to God’s need for us instead of tracing it back to the sovereign grace that rescues sinners who need God.³⁴

³³Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, 149.

³⁴John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 19.

The gospel is always preached to people. The pastor, if he is to be effective in preaching to soothe the Christian soul, must know his people. Preaching is not a biblical or theological lecture. Preaching is not simply a corporate address motivating the congregation to accomplish its mission. For the pastor, preaching is part of his pastoral work. Warren Wiersbe believes the preacher's effectiveness is built upon his knowledge of his people. He writes, "This is where pastoral work comes in—getting to know your people, how they think, what they need, and what they want God to do in their lives."³⁵ If the people addressed in preaching are forgotten, it ceases to be preaching.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones told young men preparing for ministry, "Let me sum it up in modern terms by asserting that it is always our business to be contemporary; our object is to deal with the living people who are in front of us and listening to us."³⁶ In using the word "contemporary," Lloyd-Jones is not arguing for a shallow relevance. He is urging upon pastors the necessity of taking biblical truth and speaking to the specific people in front of them in such a way that they may hear God's Word. "What is the chief event of preaching? I like to think it is this. It is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence."³⁷

Preaching the gospel as a means of soul care makes great sense in the light of the nature of the gospel, the Christian life, and God's design for preaching. The gospel is God's eternal message and means of saving sinners. The Christian life is the work of the

³⁵Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 30.

³⁶Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 138.

³⁷*Ibid.*

gospel in the earthly life of the believer. The gospel includes both the justifying and sanctifying work of God in the believer (Rom 3:26; Phil 1:6). The preacher is God's instrument to remind the believer of his or her justification, which becomes the ground of the soul's health. The preacher is also God's instrument to urge the believer on in sanctification.

The gospel comes from the God who made us. He knows the real needs of the human heart. When the pastor addresses God's people through exposition of the gospel, he will be offering effective care for the needs of their souls.

CHAPTER 4

PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO LAGRANGE BAPTIST CHURCH AS A MEANS OF CARING FOR SOULS

This chapter is written chiefly in relation to the accomplishment of Goal One. I offer here an overview of the process designed to reach this multi-level goal. The overview is followed by a synopsis of each of the sermons in this project. The project was designed to assess the level of gospel understanding among the members of LaGrange Baptist Church and was conducted in four stages.

The first stage was the administration of an information gathering instrument to a cross-section of church members. Two different groups participated in the survey. The members of the first group were randomly selected church members who took the survey instrument, listened to a series of ten sermons, and then re-took the survey to see if the sermons had influenced or informed their knowledge of the gospel in any way. The second group of people chose to participate in the survey and a discussion group that met throughout the series of project sermons. The second group also took the survey twice, once before the sermon series and once after. This group, however, participated in weekly discussions concerning the content of the sermons and the application of the content to daily living.

The second stage was the preaching of ten sermons from the book of Romans that focused on the meaning of the gospel and the application of the gospel to daily life. These sermons were delivered during the morning and evening services over a period of

six weeks.

The third stage of the project was a six-week discussion group. I chose to hold a discussion group to see if such an exercise would have any measurable impact on participants as compared to people who only heard the sermons.

The fourth stage was to see if the surveys yielded any evidence of growth in gospel knowledge as a result of a focused series of sermons. I also wanted to see if the surveys taken by the discussion group yielded different outcomes than those taken by the at-large group.

The process began by informing the church of the project. I wanted them to feel included as an important part of the work. I also wanted the church to see that this work could greatly benefit us all. Promotion for the sermon series and for the discussion group was handled like any other ministry promotion in our church. The body was informed of the series of messages to come and of the opportunity to be involved in a six-week discussion group. Members of the discussion group were not hand-selected, but were formed through open sign-ups. I informed the church sufficiently as to the intent of the sermon series and the discussion group and was confident people who sensed some kind of need related to the topic would sign up for the discussions. This proved to be the case.

The church had been informed about the survey instrument some of our members would take before and after the sermon series. A group of fourteen volunteers from the church at large took the pre-test instrument along with twelve people who signed up to be in the discussion group. After the survey had been given, a series of ten sermons, preached over a period of six Sundays (four of which included both morning and evening sermons) was delivered to the church. Each Sunday at five o'clock in the

evening, the discussion group would meet and consider the sermon or sermons they had most recently heard. Sometimes the discussions followed the content of the sermons, but at other times they were consumed by a personal need that was exposed by the sermon or the discussion.

At the end of the sermon series and discussion group sessions, the same instrument taken prior to the series was given to the at-large group and the discussion group as a post-test. The discussion group participants were asked to sign their names to both of their instruments. The at-large group took both instruments anonymously. The same individuals participated in the at-large group each time.

This concluded the practical work of the project. The results of the survey were ready to be compiled and analyzed in light of the research that had already been done.

Synopsis of Sermons

This series of sermons was preached to enhance the knowledge and application of the gospel at LaGrange Baptist Church. I did not know if gospel knowledge could be measured by the use of a survey evaluation instrument, but I was convinced that gospel knowledge and application could improve by the means of preaching. Each message in the series stood on its own, but there was an intended progression in the series. The first four messages explained the gospel. The next six sermons focused on applying the gospel to believers in their walk of faith.

Sermon 1

The first sermon sought to lay a foundational understanding of the gospel by

giving an overview of Romans 1:1–3:20. My aim in this message was to clear away muddied views of the gospel. Cultural Christianity runs strong in our area. Traditional beliefs often carry more weight in the minds of church people than biblical facts. The proposition of the message was that *man needs the gospel and the gospel can meet man's need.*

The early chapters of Romans paint a stark reality of the state of man. This hardly matches the contemporary view of man among our church people. Romans 1, understood properly, enables people to know they need a powerful gospel. This should be preached to the unconverted, but for this message I wanted my people to understand this was written to believers. Our faith is greatly dulled when we lose the sense of our great need of the gospel.

As Paul did in his letter, I aimed to show the universal need of the gospel because of the universal reign of sin. This was to help our people in two ways. My first aim was to help them know the gospel is personal in nature and is for the individual. Second, it should inspire the church to take the gospel to the whole world.

One of my basic aims in the series was to help the church understand that a healthy church spreads a healthy gospel. The better a pastor communicates the gospel to his flock, the better the flock can apply it to their own souls. When believers are healthy in the gospel they present a clearer picture of the gospel to the world. Therefore, the more we know and live the gospel, the better we will be at the work of evangelizing the world. Evangelism was not the aim of the project—soul care was—but I have become convinced that evangelism is one of the natural outcomes of the gospel rightly preached to the church. This message was concluded with the intent to leave the people with a

strong personal impression of its basic truth; man needs the gospel and the gospel can meet man's need.

Sermon 2

The second sermon, taken from Romans 3:21-24, was quite theological in its orientation. In our atheological day we often hear a truncated gospel that is packaged to be pleasing to the hearer. The motive behind this may be good—getting people into heaven—but the practice is deadly. My aim in this message was to teach a better understanding of justification.

Today people are often offered forgiveness of their sins when there is little understanding of their sin and no understanding of their need for righteousness. We offer forgiveness without any real explanation of how we are able to offer it. This often leaves believers in a weak state of faith. Many people who have trusted Christ struggle with being certain of their forgiveness. I think it is because they have a shallow understanding of justification and do not know how to apply Christ's sacrifice to their daily lives. For reasons unknown to me, our contemporary Christian culture has put our gospel emphasis on forgiveness and left the need for righteousness relatively untouched. This truncated explanation of the gospel leads to believing in a new birth by grace and a Christian life by works.

The proposition for this second message was that *justification is by grace and offers more than forgiveness*. At the core of the message were two emphases. First, one is forgiven fully through the redemption of Christ. Second, one is also justified in the righteousness of Christ. The point was that the gospel is not only about forgiveness, but also about righteousness. I wanted our people to know it took more than being forgiven

to get to heaven. Anyone who would enter heaven must also have perfect righteousness. This was only available through the gospel by the act of justification. With this level of understanding, the believer can make proper and powerful application of the gospel to his or her soul. Learning that the gospel grants a believer both forgiveness and righteousness becomes the foundation for the believer's faith to grow into the proper sense of having been forgiven by God.

If forgiveness is all one needs to get to heaven, then what does one do with his or her sins after conversion? Yes, there is confession of sin, but does that mean one's righteousness depends upon being constantly up to date in confession of sin? I wanted my people to know they are forgiven of their sins, but they need more than that to go to heaven. They need righteousness. This they have through Christ.

Their assurance of forgiveness is not based on their incessant ability to confess, but upon Christ's perfect redemption and righteousness. The gospel then brings health to their souls and assurance to their minds by bringing a rest in Christ's work and righteousness, not in their own. This message sparked one of the key points in the discussion group. It became the catalyst that made the group members want to learn how to translate the objective work of God in the gospel into their individual subjective experience of the gospel.

Sermon 3

The third sermon was the hinge-pin for the entire series. Romans 3:23-25a was the text for this message. The outline of the sermon was kept simple to help the people stay focused on the main truths of the gospel. It continued some of the thoughts of the previous sermon, but sought to offer a fuller picture of the gospel's objective work.

The proposition of this message was that *redemption and propitiation are in Christ's work.*

Part of the work of this message was to get hearers to recognize the terrible nature of the wrath of God. I was fully aware that this idea does not set well with contemporary views of God. I am convinced, however, that the gospel can never fully benefit the believer until he realizes its power and effectiveness in satisfying the wrath of God.

The sermon was a focused effort to help believers understand that both their sins and the wrath of God toward them were rightly dealt with in the work of the gospel. Justification and redemption were again examined to show how God fully deals with the believer's sin. Propitiation was then considered to teach how God's wrath is satisfied in Christ's crucifixion and will never be poured out on God's children.

The application of this message was intended to help listeners know that understanding and applying these truths to one's life is the foundation for a healthy Christian soul. This was the foundation the following sermons would build upon. The rest of the series would focus on teaching the believer how to deal with doubt, forgiveness, guilt, fear, and many other daily struggles he or she might face. Once again, the key was learning to apply the objective work of the gospel to the subjective experience of the believer.

Sermon 4

Sermon 4 was a transition sermon. It finished the first section of explaining the gospel and opened the second section of applying the gospel to specific problems in earthly Christian living. The sermon's proposition was that *God's holy love is our*

ground of assurance.

Though this message was more explanation of the gospel than application, it reached the core Christian confusion of the soul: doubt. In this message I sought to show that God's accomplishment of our salvation, the combined full expression of His wrath and love, was done with no compromise of His holy character. I wanted them to understand that God did not come up with some trick to make our sins go away while He was not looking. I tried to urge upon them that God needed to be "justified" in His forgiveness of sins.

Most of my people never wrestled much with the issue of a holy God being righteous in the forgiveness of sinful people, but many of my people have wrestled with whether or not God has really forgiven them. I knew if they understood better the meticulous plan of God to preserve His own righteousness and at the same time forgive sinners and declare them righteous, they would become confident of their own forgiveness.

The sermon explained from the text of Romans 3:25-26b how the work of God on the cross demonstrated that God was righteous in the past when He passed over former sins, and righteous in the present when He forgave sinners. Because of these truths, it was made plain that God is both just and the justifier of anyone who places his or her faith in Jesus Christ. My hope was that the people of our church would come to find their assurance in the objective, perfect work of Christ. Too many people in our day are taught to find their assurance in the nature of their conversion experience. I have seen many believers left to the whims of their emotions and memories (neither of which are trustworthy) for the strength of their assurance. This message was aimed at helping my people ground all their gospel assurances upon Christ and his work and not upon their

subjective feelings and memories.

Sermon 5

This sermon and its text, Romans 3:27–4:25, began a definite transition in the series. The series from this point forward focused on the application of gospel truth for daily Christian living. The proposition of the fifth sermon was that *faith eliminates all boasting*.

The focus of the message was not to define what faith is, but to describe how the believer exercises his faith. With a clear knowledge of the gospel, the object of our faith was now clear. This is an absolute necessity for living by faith. Faith cannot exist without an object, and proper saving faith cannot exist without the proper object, Christ.

This message focused on two truths. First, living by faith is productive. As the believer begins to strengthen his faith-grip on the gospel, he becomes more aware of the grace and love of God that saved him. This produces a life of praise-fueled works. These works are the kind Paul spoke of in Ephesians 2:10, that God had before ordained that His children would walk in them. It was made clear that these were works produced by grace through faith in God, not works accomplished to gain God's grace.

When the believer's life is so impacted by his faith, it becomes an internal reminder of the holiness of the God who saves. This reminding occurs because the believer has learned to have no confidence in his own works, but total confidence in the work of God in the gospel. This great confidence is in the fact that God's work in the gospel does indeed forgive sinners and does not compromise His holiness. The cycle of faith and remembrance brings assurance to the believer's heart and praise to his lips.

The second truth in focus was the picture of Abraham living by faith. My aim

here was to help my people see the two sides of faith: the believing side and the behaving side. Too many Christians have an understanding of faith that is relegated only to the mind. Biblical faith is definitely an intellectual thing, but it is also a volitional thing.

Believers must act on their faith. James 2:26 tells us faith without works is dead. In the text for this message, Romans 3:27-4:25, Paul used Abraham as an example for all believers in order that we may learn how to act on the faith we have. Faith, then, becomes the reason, the motivation, for the Christian's behavior. The walk of faith, then, is founded upon what God has done in the gospel and promised because of the gospel. This is how God prepares His children to live according to what He has said is true instead of what the circumstances of their lives may indicate is true.

At this point in the series there was an observable repetition of material. I began repeating the same issues because it had become clear that repetition was the biblical method of teaching Christians how to live by faith. There is only one gospel, and it never changes. Believers are to be in the constant practice of deepening their understanding of this gospel that they may better live by it.

Sermon 6

Sermon 6 sought to establish that the doctrine of justification by faith is the root of Christian assurance and the fountainhead of genuine soul care. In Romans 5:1-11 Paul is masterfully weaving his instruction about the gospel into the real lives of his readers. He now talks of their suffering, endurance, character, and hope. The proposition of this message was that *assurance of salvation comes from confidence in present grace and future glory.*

I wanted the hearers of this message to recognize that the message was built upon the facts of the gospel. I wanted them to once again realize that the gospel we had learned was a real and objective work of God that happened in time and space. Therefore, the results promised by the work of the gospel were also real in time and space.

Three specific issues raised from the text were peace with God, the grace of God, and the hope of the glory of God. I aimed to move my people out of the realm of feelings and into the realm of the facts of our faith. Peace, grace, and hope are not primarily things we feel but things we possess. The key to turning these issues to fact and not feeling is to meditate on the demonstration of the love of God in the crucifixion of Christ.

A believer can look into history and see that there is undeniable proof that God loves him or her. This objective work of God, then, becomes the platform upon which all the promises of the gospel stand. Every promise of the gospel is as real as the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is. The argument of the passage was clear. If God demonstrated his love for you when you were His enemy, do you not think God's love freely and certainly flows to you now that you are His child?

Sermon 7

The text for the seventh sermon was Romans 6:1-14. The proposition of the sermon was that *grace is not only pardon for sin but power over sin*. The eighth sermon was closely connected with this message. They both dealt with an area of great struggle for the contemporary Christian soul.

Many believers live with internal confusion because of the relentless

temptation and even desire to sin. An insufficient understanding of both the gospel and the nature of man make up the soil out of which this confusion grows. A clear understanding of the gospel helps the believer understand both his ongoing battle with sin and the greatness of the grace of God in his life. Some people get confused about grace and think it gives them permission to sin. The seventh message was aimed to help hearers realize that to best enjoy the pardon of grace they need to experience the power of grace in daily life. Romans 6 offers a simple picture of how this is done.

Three significant issues are at stake. First, the believer must clearly know and rightly apply general gospel truth. Paul is addressing the Romans concerning specific deficiencies in their understanding of the gospel. There were two facts that he made clear. One is that a person cannot sin for the purpose of getting grace. The second is that one cannot live in a world to which he has died. The objective reality of a new birth always leads to the objective reality of a new life.

The second issue at stake here is having the mind transformed by the wonders of what the gospel actually does in the believer. A believer's life is based upon the truth of the gospel. I yearned for my people to understand that they had died in Christ and now live in him. This is true of every believer, but it takes a lifetime of meditating on this truth to reckon it to be objectively true of one's self.

This then led to the third crucial issue for gospel living. Gospel faith must be acted upon. I urged my people to know they must live as if these things are true about them, because they *are* true. These facts are based upon God's work in Christ, not upon their feelings. It is at this point many believers fail. They have not been given enough background to know that the promises of the gift of salvation in earthly living are

experienced through the fight of faith.

I wanted to help my listeners realize clearly that salvation is a free gift of God by grace through faith alone, but the experience of living that faith this side of heaven is a fight. Somehow knowing there is a fight in the Christian life disarms the paralyzing effect of the fight we all face. My hope for this message was that my flock was finally learning what was true about them as children of God and now would begin the fight to live accordingly.

Sermon 8

The eighth message came out of the difficult passage of Romans 7. There are multiple viewpoints about this passage and its meaning, yet a simple following of Paul's train of thought displays the meaning plainly. In the previous chapters Paul has been explaining the gospel to the Roman Christians that they might better know and live it. It seems clear that he is doing the same thing in chapter 7. He is simply writing to believers of the everyday fight of faith that every believer will experience until he or she is in heaven. The proposition of this message was that *dealing with sin is a normal part of Christian living*.

Paul begins with an explanation of the believer's relationship to the law. He honors the law of God by explaining its true purpose. He humbles the believer by explaining that without Christ the law only reveals our sin which condemns us. Then Paul encourages the believer by showing that, since we have died in Christ, we now are dead to the law. The believer objectively has new life and can serve in the Spirit. The law can still convict of sin, but sin can never condemn. Herein lies the battle for the believer. The believer has been given a new nature, but as long as he is in his earthly

body in this fallen creation, he will battle with his indwelling sin. Because of this indwelling sin the Christian is still capable of sinning. When he sins, the law, his quickened conscience, and the Spirit of God all bring conviction. At this point the believer will either despair or turn in delight to the gospel of grace. Without adequate teaching of the gospel, however, a believer can grow confused and weakened in this fight with the flesh and sin.

This is the beauty of true gospel preaching. It admits to all of life's realities, the struggles, doubts, temptations, sins, and hardships, but it offers an objective way to deal with them all. A preacher of the gospel never needs to paint the Christian life in rosy colors. The only view of life that can face its ugly realities of sin and death, and at the same time offer an objective solution to them, is the gospel of Christ.

Sermon 9

The next message, from Romans 8:1-17, was aimed at helping the members of LaGrange Baptist get a clear picture of living as a believer on this side of glory. From the text it was easy to see that God knows His children deal with guilt, doubt, and fear. The text speaks specifically of no condemnation for those in Christ, the witness and leadership of the Spirit, and of believers not having a spirit of fear. The strategy has been consistent in each message. It is an effort to help the Christian translate the objective truth of the gospel into their subjective daily experience. The proposition of this message was that *guilt is best dealt with through experiential assurance*.

Guilt is the thief of Christian assurance. It leads the way for the troubles of doubt and fear to creep into the believer's soul. This message explained that there are two things a believer must do in his walk to progress toward a confident faith. I first

briefly reviewed what we had learned up to this point, to confirm that the believer must clearly know the truth of the gospel and found his belief on God's work in Christ. I then enlarged the scope to include truth about the believer's daily experience. Every believer must know the gospel to face properly the fight of faith in this life.

The second point of this message was that gospel truth must be acted upon. Christian faith is a faith that works. This was a repetition of many things already said, but repetition was the biblical writer's way of teaching God's people the gospel. Believers need to hear the gospel repeated so that they remember the truth they have learned and experience it daily in their lives. This is what Paul was after for the Romans, and this is what I was after in this sermon series on the gospel for the members of LaGrange Baptist Church.

Assurance that a believer is no longer guilty comes only through knowing and living the gospel. The objective fact of our having no condemnation is not usually experienced until there is the daily experience of fighting the flesh by living in the Spirit, following hard after God by being led by the Spirit, and then being assured we are God's children through the fruit born by the Spirit in our daily living. This path works the same in the believer's battle with guilt, doubt, or fear.

Sermon 10

The final message in the series came from Romans 8:18-29 and gave an overall perspective for Christian living. Many believers are dismayed by suffering and hardships in this life. It makes them wonder if their faith is real. This message offered the proposition that *the gospel is our hope that gets us through earthly suffering*.

The first hurdle to overcome with my church was to get them to see the truth

that suffering is a normal part of Christian living. Faulty teaching and contemporary culture have done a good job convincing the American believer this is not so. I strongly desired to help my church understand the biblical perspective of creation, fall, and redemption. Creation was perfect but then was marred by sin in the Fall. Until redemption is complete, creation and Christians will groan in this earthly existence.

The truth of the gospel then defines three things for the Christian. First, a believer on earth will always be living in the atmosphere of anticipation. A longing that there has to be more to life than what is here is a natural sense for a true believer. Second, in this journey of difficulties believers are supplied by Divine intercession. The Holy Spirit of God intercedes for us, knowing both the mind of God and our own mind. Third, because of the eternal nature of the gospel the believer daily lives in the confidence that God's purpose of salvation will be accomplished in his life.

Conclusion

The experience of preaching this focused series of messages, combined with the work of the discussion group, proved to be fertile soil out of which grew several helpful observations for future ministry. I will address what I learned from this process in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF THE INFORMATION

The analysis of information gained from the pre-test and post-test was divided according to the two groups who took the tests. The nature of the instrument and the process prevents mixing the data. One group took the pre-test, heard the sermons, and then took the post-test. This group was allowed to take the test anonymously. The results from this group provided only a bit of general information.

The second group took the pre-test, heard the sermons, was involved in a weekly discussion group, and then took the post-test. This group was asked to sign both tests. This made both group and individual analysis possible. The instrument had two categories of questions. There were questions concerning doctrine and questions concerning Christian life experience.

Initial Observations

The survey instrument was composed of thirty questions (see Appendix 1). I tried to develop questions that would enable me to gain an understanding of two things: the participant's knowledge of the gospel and the participant's application of that knowledge in daily life. I found the work of formulating the instrument to be frustrating. This was the first instrument I authored. The most difficult questions for me to formulate were the ones related to experience. I tried to build my questions around five specific themes: assurance, justification, grace, suffering, and growth. I chose these themes

because they were the most common issues that I had seen believers struggle with through the years of my pastoral experience.

The At-Large Group

I was able to gather only general information from the at-large group who took the test and only heard the sermons. I hoped for more useable data from this group, but I made some mistakes in administering the questionnaire. Two things in particular limited my data collection. First, I did not require the participants in the at-large group to sign their names to the questionnaire. This eliminated the possibility of measuring an individual's growth from one survey to the next. Second, when the surveys were returned to me, there were four fewer surveys turned in for the second administration of the instrument than there were for the first administration. Without names on the instruments I had no way to know who had turned in both instruments and could not go to individuals to find out why they had not completed the second questionnaire.

I did make four general observations from the at-large group. First, I was pleased that the pre-test demonstrated there was a solid knowledge of the gospel among this representative group of church members. Twenty-one of the thirty questions on the instrument were related to doctrinal understanding. Only one of the doctrinal questions proved problematic for the majority of my people in the pre-test. It was Question 23, which stated, "When I became a Christian God forgave my sins and infused me with righteousness (made me righteous)." Question 23 was related directly to Question 13, which read, "When I became a Christian God forgave my sins and imputed Christ's righteousness to me (looks upon me in Christ's righteousness)."

Second, I was disappointed that the instrument showed little had changed in

the post-test. Some of the changes were actually from a correct answer to an incorrect answer. A table in Appendix 1 displays the data from the at-large group. The instrument was chiefly designed to measure growth, so the table includes only questions that had differing answers between the first and second administrations. I was not able to discern any reasoning behind the changes because I could not compare each individual's first and second questionnaire.

It is possible my preaching was ineffective. If it were not for the discussion group, I may have drawn this conclusion, but the discussion group provided a useful comparison for evaluating the at-large group. Based on findings from the discussion group, I concluded that six weeks is a short time frame over which to expect measurable change. Our discussions revealed that there is a big difference between being familiar with a Bible doctrine and having a clear understanding of what a doctrine means. The discussions also showed that there is an even greater difference between knowing a Bible doctrine and living according to that doctrine. A measurable improvement in doctrinal knowledge may have occurred in six weeks, but preaching aims for life change. It is not a classroom lecture preparing people to take a written test. A six-week series of sermons may not offer enough time to accurately measure change in those who simply heard the messages preached.

The third observation was that people need follow-up to complete tasks. The at-large group was left without accountability to attend the services and hear the messages. A group of 14 people took the questionnaire the first time, and only 10 took it the second time. I assumed that since they completed the questionnaire they would make the effort to be in the services. I believe that if I had taken attendance for the 14

participants and required that they put their names on the instrument, I would have seen better results.

The fourth observation provided a helpful piece of information. I had two questions on the instrument related to justification and how God makes His children righteous before Him. I referred to these questions above under my first observation. The answers revealed that my people knew God did something to make them right in His presence, but they could not define exactly what that was. Finer points of theology may be hard to grasp or seem unimportant to the average church member. This appeared to me as a significant finding as to why a pastor repeatedly needs to clarify the gospel in his preaching to believers.

The Discussion Group

The instruments taken by the second (discussion) group yielded more specific information (see Appendix 1). This is evident for two reasons. First, I spent six weeks with this group in focused attention on each sermon. Second, each member of the group put his or her name on both tests they took. This allowed me to see changes in an individual's understanding and application of the gospel by comparing his or her pre- and post-test responses.

I carefully read each instrument and noted any question that registered a significant change. A significant change was moving from the agree side of the question to the disagree side, from disagree to agree, or from undecided to either agree or disagree. Slight changes such as a move from lightly agree to agree were not measured. In the entire group, there were seventeen of the thirty questions on which at least one person made a measurable change in his or her answer.

There were twenty-two changes made on doctrinal questions. Eighteen of those changes were from an incorrect to a correct understanding of the gospel. The Christian life experience questions were all directed toward the nature of experiential assurance of salvation. There were eleven responses that showed measured change. Ten of these revealed growth toward assurance. The most notable change in doctrinal understanding in the instruments taken by the members of the discussion group was related to their understanding of justification and the necessity of righteousness to enter heaven. I found it interesting that there was also a measured change toward a greater sense of assurance in the experiential questions. These two issues, justification and assurance, dominated our time in the discussion group also.

Analyzing the dynamic of the discussion group was encouraging and helpful. Two issues are worth noting about the discussion group. First, the common urgency among the members of the group was to learn how to be more consistent and effective in transferring their knowledge of the objective work of the gospel into their subjective life experiences. Simply put, they wanted to learn how to know and feel that these truths of the gospel were true of them.

Second, there were two common and repetitive issues related to Christian assurance in the discussions. The group, or certain individuals in the group, seemed to continually re-direct the topic of discussion back to doubts or guilt. I comment on these issues in my theological reflections.

Some Conclusions

The combined data from the pre-tests, post-tests, and discussion group reveal three basic things. One is that the church needs pastor-teachers. This is clearly God's

revealed will. This project gives practical evidence as to why this is true. Finer points of doctrinal belief are not easily grasped by the typical church member. They must seem too difficult or unimportant. God has given His churches pastor-teachers to help His people understand the meaning and importance of such doctrinal issues. Pastors need to realize the health of the souls of their church members, to some extent, rests on their shoulders.

A second personal observation is the benefit of the pastor doing the work of individual and small group discipleship in the local church. The Bible tells us to encourage one another daily, and some type of small group is an excellent way for the pastor to model such a ministry (Heb 10:24-25).

The third issue of importance revealed by the discussion group was the help that a relational small group brings to the pastor's ability to preach. I gained a much clearer insight into the specific nature of the personal struggles some of my people were having. My time with this group helped me to personalize my preaching. The group process also reminded me that most church members need plain and clear language in sermons. Church members do not have the theological vocabulary of their pastors. At times the group discussions revealed that a biblical doctrine that was plain to me might be incomprehensible to them if it were not accompanied by simple and thorough explanation. I constructed my survey instrument to measure knowledge and daily application of the gospel. The relational nature of the discussion process provided insights about my church members and their thinking processes. These insights became helpful in thinking through how to most clearly express the gospel and its application to their lives.

Evaluation of Project Goals

This project was directed by five goals. An evaluation of the achievement of the goals demonstrates the nature of their helpfulness to the project. Overall, the combined goals kept the project on track and, I believe, aided me in coming to some helpful conclusions. Two of the goals, Goals 1 and 5, were practical and functional goals. The other three goals, 2 through 4, were research goals. These three were necessary to the project in offering biblical, historical, and contemporary perspectives for proper interpretation of the data gained in the practical goals.

Goal 1

Goal 1 was clear in its aim, which was two-fold: to assess the knowledge of the gospel among the members of LaGrange Baptist Church and seek to improve it. The means used to accomplish this goal were a written survey instrument, a series of sermons from the book of Romans, and a six-week discussion group. This goal contained all the practical work of the project.

Setting a goal of this nature produced some positive effects upon our church life. For one, it gave me, as the pastor, an intense concern for my people and their spiritual growth. The people of the church had a sense of mission because of our focused efforts toward knowing the gospel. This sense of mission was a result of having an intentional focus. For several weeks prior to the sermon series and during the series, I was addressing the church through several avenues about learning and applying the gospel. As the members heard the repeated announcements, their interest grew. There was a sense of anticipation among the membership because we were all looking forward

to the same focal point. During the sermon series the church members began to think more clearly about the gospel, and having to clarify their thoughts about it on paper increased the sense of personal involvement. The discussion group became a great opportunity for specific instruction. The group also provided me a more detailed understanding of my people and an unexpected relationship-building time.

The written survey instrument did prove helpful, but I learned much caution should be used in trying to measure spiritual growth on a piece of paper. This concern was brought to mind when I began to analyze the results of the instrument. I have no training or expertise in analyzing the results of such instruments. This obviously could skew the conclusions I, or someone like me, may draw. My lack of experience with surveys was quickly exposed when I did not provide a way to identify the individual participants in the at-large group. Had I done that, some more insights could have been gleaned from the results.

Goal 2

The second goal was to establish a biblical and theological foundation for the practical work of this project, preaching the gospel to believers to care for their souls. Many things coming out of twenty-five years of gospel ministry were driving factors behind this goal. I have counseled many believers who struggle with doubt, guilt, and sin, and who seem to be getting little help from their church's ministry. I have read throughout my years of ministry that there is little difference between the moral lives of Christians and those of non-Christians. Things such as these drove me to want a clarified position about what must be taught in the church to help these struggling and wayward people.

The effort to accomplish the second goal was fruitful. It became clear that the New Testament itself was written primarily to and for the believing community. This was done so the church would have a clear witness to gospel truth and gospel living that could be accurately delivered to the world. This practice is to continue to the end of the age. The gospel is to be preached by the church to the world, but it is to be preached first to the church. It is the continual preaching of the gospel to the church that increases her theological understanding and practical application of its saving truth. This, then, serves as an anchor and fuel to the pastor's ministry. It anchors him in and to the gospel, and yet fuels him as a man on a mission to present every member of his church fully mature in Christ (Col 1:28-29).

Goal 3

The third goal was to find an historical example of preaching the gospel to believers. The Puritans were the men of history I found, but the material was so extensive that I limited the research to three men. Learning from these men of the past was worth the effort and profitable to the project. The Puritans were a meticulous and methodical people. Their mannerisms and verbosity can prove quite irritating in our day. However, they are a gold mine of study for a pastor who desires to learn how to care for his people through the ministry of the Word.

The historical period of the Puritans is so far removed from ours that it is clear of our present-day presuppositions about life and faith. This is the benefit of historical study. The gospel is the same. The real needs of souls are the same, but cultural influences are different. Historical research allows us to observe gospel ministry in a different setting and develop a more keen ability to see the flaws of our own work due to

contemporary influences that cloud our perspective.

The second goal sought to clear the air biblically and theologically. This third goal sought to clear the air historically. The Puritans proved extremely helpful for two specific reasons. First, they were great students of Scripture. All of life was observed while asking the question, “What has God said about this?” Second, Puritan pastors worked hard at having an intimate knowledge of their individual church members as well as the common workings of the human soul. The study of the Puritan perspective became even more fruitful as I entered the work of Goal Four.

Goal 4

The fourth goal was to examine the contemporary effect of the professionalization of pastoral ministry upon soul care and preaching of the gospel to believers. Moving from the study of the Puritans to these contemporary issues was like making a quantum leap. Immediately I realized a door had been opened far too wide for me and for this project.

The discovery of tensions in the world of Christian counseling and the influence of modern psychological thought and practice on preaching were both issues large enough for an entire project—plus much more. Though I felt overwhelmed in the work of Goal Four, I was also greatly helped. I was made aware of how much contemporary issues can affect the preaching of the gospel to God’s church. The findings in the research for Goal 4, combined with Goals 2 and 3, gave me a much better-informed position for evaluating the findings of Goal 1.

Goal 5

The fifth goal was to analyze the gathered data from Goals One through Four. The practical work and information gained was to be analyzed in the light of the research done. The outcome hoped for was an increased understanding of how to preach the gospel to God's hurting children. I believe I learned at least four significant things.

First, the Puritans offer our day a piece of golden information: the necessity of discerning between a physiological and a spiritual problem. I am fully aware that such a statement can set off a fiery debate. I tend to agree with the Puritans in this perspective. The fact that they predated modern psychology by a couple of centuries kept their minds clear of what complicates our thinking today.

This particular subject revealed the need for much more research before I could articulate a fully formed position. At this point I can at least see how the Puritan perspective can offer profitable information in our contemporary debates. Today many Christians have a negative view of psychology. I think it is possible, however, that some current Christian understandings of human nature are formed not primarily from the Scriptures but from opposition to psychology. Research that is fueled by a predetermined negative position has a tendency to blind the researcher. The Puritan perspective may gently remove some unnecessary prejudice against modern psychology and allow us to benefit from current research in that field. The Puritans believed that, due to the fall, our entire human makeup is tainted. Every part of our physical body can malfunction due to the effects of sin—not an individual act of sin, but the broader reality of living in fallen flesh that is dying. The Puritans believed one's psychological makeup—that is, the function of the brain—was affected like the rest of the body. This revealed itself in what

they called melancholy.

Puritan pastors were almost uniform in the belief that spiritual remedies such as repentance, Scripture reading, prayer, and the like would do the melancholy no good and that these remedies might even complicate the problem. They believed the cause of melancholy to be physical, and therefore the remedy should be physical. If the Puritans are correct, a pastor who continually offers spiritual remedies for physical problems could play a part in weakening or confusing a believer's faith in God and the gospel to change his life. This perspective on soul care would necessitate the proper integration of help from trained individuals in the areas of medicine and psychology.

The second, and I believe most valuable, thing learned from the fifth goal is to labor hard at helping one's people know the gospel as a real, objective work of God that produces real and objective results. The gospel of Christ is an historical act of God. The truth of the gospel stands and is verified by no one's belief. When people are convinced of the objective reality of the gospel, they then can be taught that the results of the gospel in their lives are equally objective, whether they feel them or not. This is the key in gospel preaching that helps the pastor lead his people to maturity in Christ.

The third point of analysis was realizing the necessity of teaching the biblical view of the nature of man. When people misunderstand themselves they will then easily misunderstand the application of the gospel. A simple biblical self-understanding of man as created, fallen, and now in need of redemption becomes the foundation upon which real soul care can be offered. This biblical understanding must also include what man is like as a new creature still living in sinful flesh. A clear biblical understanding of man equips the pastor to speak to the real dilemmas of earthly Christian living and offer

genuinely helpful solutions.

The fourth observation is the necessity of a pastor being with his people in teaching opportunities other than corporate worship. Being with people is more than going to church and Sunday School fellowships. I am talking about situations in which the pastor has time and opportunity to get to know individual members and speak specific biblical truth to their particular need. One can pastor a church without doing this, but I believe his preaching will never reach its full potential if he does not engage in such personal work. When a pastor is with his people in one-on-one or small group settings, it increases his understanding of the operations of the human soul. In turn, he learns to teach the Scriptures publicly in such a way that they penetrate deep into the individual and cause him to receive it as if God were speaking to his personal need.

I am aware that these observations do not represent any significant new discoveries, but the combination of them has left a deep impact on me directly related to the preaching of the gospel to God's people. It seems to be in our nature always to be on the lookout for something new. Even in church life we pastors are in constant pursuit of a new worship format or evangelism program that will help our churches be more effective in their mission. Our pursuit of the new may be one of the root reasons that our people are not able to hold on to a clear understanding of gospel basics and effectively apply them in their daily lives. What I observed in my people was the stubbornness of human flesh to receive the truth of the gospel of grace. The majority of the members in my discussion group were mature believers, but several of them struggled regularly with discouragements related to their daily experience of the promises of God in the gospel. These people had a considerable intellectual grasp of the gospel. Several of them could

articulate the gospel in clear, understandable terms, but their daily experience was not a reflection of their knowledge.

The difficulties these people were experiencing puzzled me. I could not figure out why mature believers, who demonstrated much outward fruit, fell so flat in their experiential sense of the gospel in their own souls. Several of them said it made them feel like hypocrites. Some other folks repeatedly went through intense periods of doubting their salvation. Their doubts were driven by their own lack of an experiential sense of the love and forgiveness of God. If these had been new believers, their experiences would not have been so puzzling. What I came to realize is the utter necessity not only of the centrality of the gospel but of the repetition of gospel truth. The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak. I see now that the flesh is far weaker than I ever realized.

My desires as a pastor to lead the church into new things may contribute to the instability of church members in their daily experience of the gospel's blessings. Learning to repeat the same truth over and over and yet say it in ways that keep the church people engaged is hard work. This may be why I have a tendency to pursue new ideas. It does not demand such intense labor as finding new ways to teach an unchanging message. When church leadership is in the habit of presenting new programming to the membership year after year, I think this can increase the tendency of our people to be looking for a new blessing of God instead of discovering all the blessings that are already theirs in the gospel.

My observations then led me to see what probably should have been obvious. There is an inestimable stubbornness in the flesh toward willingly receiving and living by

the great promises of the gospel. Therefore the most effective preaching of the gospel is that which intentionally and creatively repeats the gospel to God's people year in and year out. I also see that the pursuit of what is new can create a false sense of progress. New programs are not a sign of progression. Growth in the daily experience of God's grace in the gospel is progression. I am convinced that the more the gospel is personally experienced by the people of God, the more they will naturally express it in their world.

Evaluation of Process

The process of the practical work of this project combined two simultaneous activities: the preaching of a series of sermons and a weekly discussion group. Both activities focused on the same subject. This process seemed to have a number of positive effects. The overall benefit was that the church body had clarity of purpose through the entire process. Everything we did in ten straight worship services shared the intended focus of learning and applying gospel truth to our lives. The process made a topic that sounds quite general take on distinct and helpful functions. The gospel was taken apart piece by piece or word by word. Each word was defined and then the whole was put back together. As church members learned the definitions of words like justification, redemption, and propitiation, their understanding of God's work in the gospel took on new dimensions.

The discussion group allowed me to get a close-up view of how individual members were processing the material and learning to apply it to their individual lives. One of the most obvious benefits was hearing people from the discussion group tell me how they had gained a deeper level of Christian assurance through better understanding the nature of the gospel. Their dependence had transferred from their subjective feelings

and life experience to the certain work of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Theological Reflection

The process and research of this project left two distinct issues of pastoral theology stamped on my mind. They are both issues that call for patient and clear pastoral instruction to the church. First, the church needs better biblical instruction about the perseverance of the saints. Second, it appears the contemporary church member is no longer stunned at the idea of sinful man having an opportunity for relationship with Holy God. Therefore, the church needs to be lovingly helped to see the radical nature of the work of the gospel in reconciling sinners to God.

First Issue

I have been a Southern Baptist all my life. This is the only denominational environment I have ever known. Eternal security or the perseverance of the saints was typically explained to me by that well-known phrase "once saved, always saved." The emphasis of eternal life was always put on the beginning of it at conversion, not on the end of it as "obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet 1:9). It was made clear that the only thing one needed to be sure of reaching heaven was a one-time experience of praying the sinner's prayer. If one had made a decision for Christ, then one could conclude that heaven was indeed his eternal home.

Such teaching was mainly fueled by a fervent evangelistic desire, but when results rather than revelation drive the teaching of the church, we will always err. This perspective on conversion has opened the door for some unsound preaching in the church. If getting conversions becomes the goal of the pastor's preaching, salvation at

times is taught as the climax and not the beginning of the Christian life. If conversion becomes the final goal, the preacher and the church can lose perspective on the full purpose of the gospel and be seduced into preaching distortions of the gospel. It is at this point the pastor may turn to focusing his preaching on such things as moralistic practices, emotional experiences, or social activism to provide his people evidence that they and their church are growing in Christian maturity. The gospel should produce moral transformation, emotional experiences, and social action, but these are not the gospel. It is the true preaching of the gospel and the true experience of the gospel that produces such things in the lives of God's children. The more clearly and frequently the gospel is preached to the church, the deeper the roots of faith can grow. As Christians are strengthened in their faith, the fruit of their faith will become more abundant and healthy.

I am not certain many people have rightly connected the way these two issues have opened the door for so much of today's horizontal, earth-bound, psychological preaching. If conversion is the ultimate goal of preaching the gospel, then what resource does the pastor have for equipping his people to endure earthly hardships or possible persecution? Making conversion the ultimate goal of the gospel instead of the beginning of the gospel's work blurs the focus of the gospel. The conversion of lost souls to saving faith in Christ is a gospel imperative. However, in our fervor to see lost people avoid God's wrath and receive God's mercy, we can neglect the preaching of the gospel to believers and leave them floundering in the difficult battles of Christian perseverance.

It is the pastor's responsibility to preach the gospel with the aim of converting souls. It is also the pastor's responsibility to take a flock of God's sheep in their present condition and patiently lead them to maturity through the continued exposition and

application of the gospel. Weakened minds and souls need gospel truth, and a wise pastor will feed it to them at the proper pace. The New Testament writers had to help God's first-century believers along in the same way. It would be most helpful to our people if we followed their example.

The apostle Peter taught his readers how to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:5-11). The apostle John patiently yet pointedly taught his readers of the necessity of persevering in the faith if they were to reach heaven (1 John 2:9, 2:28-3:1). The writer of Hebrews demonstrates great pastoral skill in his balance between offering warnings of eternal judgment and comforts of eternal life as he shepherded his readers along on their journey to heaven (Heb 3:13, 4:1-3, 11, 6:9-12, 9:24-28).

In reflection upon this issue, I see an urgent need for the contemporary church to hear the biblical perspective on perseverance. This cannot be done well until pastors understand the gospel in its biblical structure. I believe as the church matures in her understanding and application of the perseverance of the saints, her members will increase in genuine gospel assurance and in Christian witness to this dark world.

Second Issue

The second issue this project left implanted in my mind was that the typical church member is no longer stunned at the idea that sinful man can have a relationship with Holy God. Our cultural version of Christianity has come to believe that saving people from hell is God's duty. We have lost the ability to be shocked that God would actually forgive someone's sin and reconcile him to Himself. We act as if gaining a right relationship with God is no big deal; it's just the kind of thing that happens at church.

I think this has been allowed to occur in part due to good but ungrounded

motives behind contemporary preaching. Relevance and results are contemporary driving factors in preaching. Biblically, God is the foundation and goal of preaching. The aim of preaching is the conversion of sinners, but that is not the ultimate aim. The ultimate aim is the glory of God through the justification, redemption, and glorification of His children through Christ (I Cor 15:20-28).

Every ounce of good and glory the believer gains in salvation is turned to the glory of the One who saved them by His grace. In our effort to be relevant we have lost our theological nerve. We have forgotten how to digest the wonders of theological truths, and then translate them through preaching so that people can “see” the radical nature of a Holy God who saves sinners. An undue pursuit of relevance can dilute the drastic nature of the gospel, minimize the holiness of God, and belittle the necessity of Christ dying in our place. The New Testament is clear about man’s condition apart from the gospel. Humans are dead and hopeless (Eph 2:1-2; Col 3:13). The biblical gospel establishes the immeasurable gulf between sinful man and Holy God so that we can marvel at the incarnate One who reconciled us who were in fact irreconcilable (2 Cor 5:18-21; 2 Thess 1:10).

If pastors recover the wonders of true theological understanding and the skill to preach those wonders to God’s people, the results will be manifold. At the very least, grace would once again amaze the people of God. Faith in Christ alone would be seen as a delightful necessity. Humility, holiness, and happiness would once again become distinctive marks in the lives of God’s people.

Conclusions

Many conclusions have been drawn at different points in this project. For

some final conclusions, two important issues must be noted. First are the biblical parameters of gospel preaching, and second are gospel preaching and the health of the church. The strength of gospel preaching is derived from being kept within its biblical parameters. Three parameters are discussed here.

First, gospel preaching must be done with an eschatological perspective. The New Testament record of the gospel is eviscerated without such a perspective. Many arguments for hope and many calls to exercise faith in the New Testament were based on the life to come. The Lord Jesus and the apostles addressed the church multiple times with the New Heaven and Earth in view.¹ The gospel is a whole message. Its parts can be distinctly defined, but they cannot be separated. The preaching of a gospel that merely applies to earthly living is not the real gospel. Leaving out the eschatological perspective of salvation robs the gospel of its power to call for holy living and for enduring hardship. Teaching God's people to live with heaven in mind is part of gospel preaching.

The second biblical parameter for gospel preaching is that it has a corporate purpose. The gospel has clear individual and personal purposes. Each Christian's name is written in the Book of Life (Rev 21:27). Each believer was individually brought from death to life by the Spirit of God (Eph 2:1-5). Each believer is to be filled with the Spirit of God and is personally gifted by the Spirit (Eph 5:18; 1 Cor 12:7).

Contemporary preaching seems to have a grip on the individual and personal nature of conversion, but has virtually lost the corporate nature. God's aim is not merely

¹See Christ's parables or His continued call to repent or perish. See also Luke 18:28-30, Rom 8:18, and 2 Cor 4:16-18.

to save people but to save His people, to have His nation, His priesthood, His family, as He intended for it to be (Eph 2:11-22; 1 Pet 2:9-10). By individualizing the gospel and moving away from its corporate parameter, we dishonor the purpose of God. There are also the contemporary repercussions in the church of selfishness, lack of desire to give to others, and a deep need for self-expression instead of an aim of unified corporate expression through worship and evangelism.

The third biblical parameter of gospel preaching is the work of the Holy Spirit. My experience in this project was a clear reminder of my need of God's Spirit. I preached ten straight sermons about understanding and applying the gospel. I met with a discussion group for six consecutive weeks to deliberate about these messages. There were many indicators of spiritual progress being made, but there were also indicators that some folks just did not understand God and His gospel. No matter how hard I tried, I could not open their understanding. It was a clear reminder that the real results of preaching are due to the work of God's Holy Spirit.

The second conclusion is that the church's proclamation of the gospel to the lost is rooted in the proclamation of the gospel to believers. Since evangelism was not the focus of this project, I cannot here address this effect on evangelism as the separate issue it is. However, my research and experience in the project uncovered the inseparable link between healthy gospel exposition to the people of God and effective gospel proclamation to the world. When the gospel is clearly taught to the church, members of the church grow in assurance of their salvation. Members learn from a gospel-grounded reasoning how to pray and why they can pray to Almighty God and expect that He hears them. As church members suffer in life, the pastor can effectively use the gospel to tell

them that they have a High Priest who sympathizes with the realities of their suffering (Heb 4:15). The pastor can assuredly tell them of their sovereign Savior's presence with them in their suffering (Heb 13:5-6). According to the gospel, the pastor can confidently tell them their Savior has purpose in their suffering (Rom 8:28-30).

When believers are strengthened by the gospel to face the realities of earthly living, the hope in their lives becomes visible. If the gospel has been thoroughly taught to them, believers can stand ready to give a reason for their hope (I Pet 3:15). My conclusion is that effective, gospel-grounded soul care for believers in the church lays the foundation for gospel-grounded evangelism outside the church. Joel Beeke expresses the same concept by saying,

The church should take a fresh look at Scripture, the Puritans, and church history, which all show that God is pleased to work conviction through His Holy Spirit using men whose hearts He has broken and led to Christ, and who then go out to preach with hearts full of compassion for Christless sinners.²

It thus is fair to say that preaching the gospel is caring for souls. Sometimes the preaching is chiefly aimed at believers in Christ whose souls are saved but suffering. Sometimes the preaching is aimed at lost souls who need to repent and believe. Either way the souls of the people preached to are being truly cared for. My position is that the church body is made far more effective in evangelism as her members thoroughly understand and apply the gospel to the realities of their daily lives.

Preaching the gospel clearly to the church, helping believers to grow in their faith, is what enables them to live with hope through difficult times. As a Christian learns to rest upon the objective truth of the gospel through doubts, fears, financial crises,

²Joel Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 21.

and health problems unbelievers can observe a noticeable difference in the believer's life. This kind of healthy, hopeful Christian living is the tap root of effective evangelism. Being strengthened by the gospel in this way, the early Christians became effective witnesses in their surrounding cultures. Effective preaching of the gospel to God's people today would bring the same result.

Implications for Further Study

There are two subjects that continued to pull my attention away from the focus of this project. I will mention them as two potential areas for further study. First is the Puritan perspective of a distinction between physiological and spiritual problems. I was alerted to a potential blind spot in contemporary thought when comparing my reading of the Puritans themselves with what contemporary writers in the counseling field say about the Puritans. I can only note a potential blind spot because this was incidental to my work and not the focus of it.

It appeared to me that some contemporary authors, in developing and defending their position in the Christian counseling world, used the Puritans' works. The blind spot appeared to be that the Puritan writings were used as proof texts to support a personal view rather than legitimate texts to inform a contemporary view. Gary Almy's book, *How Christian Is Christian Counseling?*, is an example of this. The book is informative and written by a well-qualified man. A clear problem arises, however, when he praises the Puritan approach to soul care without recognizing that he actually espouses

a directly contradicting view.³

A second area of potential research might be a focused inquiry into the future of pastoral soul care. What I mean by “pastoral soul care” is the one-on-one ministry of a local pastor helping his church members through the struggles of earthly living. I believe this to be a necessary part of pastoral ministry, but I wonder if it will soon be extinct. Three things stand against its survival. First, it is not popular. Pastors, at least in my experience, are seldom encouraged to do this work. More likely than not, the contemporary comments about this work in relation to a successful pastoral ministry will be, “Don’t do it; it wastes your time.”

Second, losing our theological grip on the gospel has the unsuspected effect of making the pastor’s private counsel irrelevant to real needs. The pastor has given up his best tool for dealing with guilt, temptation, doubts, and sin. We are left with no option but to send our people to a professional. Pastors need to develop a theological understanding of the human soul and the ability to articulate gospel-grounded solutions for their church members who are struggling. Jeffrey Boyd records that Stanton L. Jones captured this thought in a recent theology panel discussion: “Theologians have not developed a theology of the soul. It is a disaster for a pastor to refer a Christian layperson to a secular psychologist when the layperson wants to find a deeper

³Gary Almy, *How Christian Is Christian Counseling?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 205-11, 293. Almy seems to draw conclusions about the Puritans that are unsupportable, as well as make his own conclusions that are in direct contradiction to Puritan thought. On p. 211, he contends the Puritans strove to “care for souls without influence from human sources of wisdom or insight.” I do not believe this to be accurate. Further research, I think, would reveal to Almy that the Puritans did much reading of philosophers and other thinkers. Almy also shows a potential blindness to Puritan thinking through his statement, “Contrary to what the public is allowed to believe, no disease called depression, manic-depression, or schizophrenia has ever been discovered.” The Puritans, a couple of centuries before the fog of modern psychiatry, clearly believed melancholy to be a physical disease.

understanding of his or her life—or soul.”⁴

The third thing that is having continual effects on pastoral soul care is the professionalization of ministry. We are now in a day when few pastors write about soul care. The books that are available, even if they are written to help pastors, are written by professionals who know little or nothing about being a pastor. A whole new vocabulary and practice has been developed by the Christian counseling world, which is a natural result in any field when it takes on the trappings of professionalism. This, as stated in the project, makes a pastor look and feel inadequate for the responsibility of counseling.

I believe a careful study of these things may help us answer some important questions. What is the pastor’s role and responsibility today in soul care? What training does the pastor need? These and many other questions await an answer.

⁴Jeffrey Boyd, “Self-Concept: In Defense of the Word Soul,” in *Care for the Soul*, ed. Mark McMinn and Timothy Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 114-15. Boyd reports that Jones’ statement was made at the Wheaton Theology Conference.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE AND DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire had 30 questions. After administering the questionnaire and talking with the participants, it was determined that Questions 1 and 7 were not constructed properly to gather consistent, objective answers.

There were two categories of questions. One category (Questions 2, 3, 5, 6, 9-11, 13, 15, 18-23, 25, and 27) dealt with doctrinal knowledge and understanding. The other category (Questions 8, 12, 16, 17, 24, 26, and 28-30) dealt with Christian life experience in daily application of the gospel.

One interesting parallel between the two groups of people taking the questionnaire is that the same eleven questions showed no measurable change from the first administration to the second. These questions were 2, 5, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25-27, and 29. Questions 2, 5, 11, 14, 18, 25, and 27 were doctrinal, and everyone answered these questions correctly. Questions 12, 16, 26, and 29 were experiential, and everyone's answers were correct. I was pleased with this because it demonstrated a consistent understanding of the gospel among our church members.

Below are the questionnaire, tables displaying the results from the at-large group, and a table showing the specific changes observed in the discussion group.

Questionnaire

Instructions: Please read each statement and circle the response that most accurately represents your agreement or disagreement with the statement.

SA	=	Strongly Agree
A	=	Agree
LA	=	Lightly Agree
U	=	Undecided
LD	=	Lightly Disagree
D	=	Disagree
SD	=	Strongly Disagree

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. A person becomes a Christian by praying the sinner's prayer. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 2. When someone has doubts about his faith in Christ, it is an indicator he is probably not saved. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 3. All someone needs to go to heaven is to have his sins forgiven. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 4. When a person accepts Christ for salvation, it demonstrates he or she had greater spiritual ability than those who do not trust Christ. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 5. Christ's crucifixion demonstrates that God is not angry with people but that He loves them. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 6. If a person has truly been converted, he can never lose his eternal life. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 7. You become a genuine believer by asking Christ into your heart. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 8. There are times I have doubts about my salvation. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 9. When Christian people suffer, it is a sign they have disobeyed God. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 10. God could have forgiven sins the same way He created the world – by the word of His mouth. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 11. Since Christians are under grace, the law is no longer necessary in the church. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 12. Mature Christians no longer deal with doubts. | SA A LA U LD D SD |

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 13. When I became a Christian God forgave my sins and imputed Christ's righteousness to me (looks upon me in Christ's righteousness). | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 14. When people become Christians God will see to it that there is less suffering in their lives. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 15. Christians who are mature do not have to deal with feelings of guilt. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 16. If you cannot remember the specific time of your salvation, you cannot be sure you are a Christian. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 17. I am ashamed to talk with anyone about doubting my salvation. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 18. A person who becomes a Christian no longer has strong impulses to do sinful things. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 19. As a Christian I am saved by grace and will go to heaven if I live a good enough Christian life. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 20. When a Christian feels guilty it is a sure sign he or she has committed a sin that must be confessed. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 21. Suffering comes to the Christian due to sin in his or her life. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 22. Assurance of salvation comes to the believer at conversion. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 23. When I became a Christian God forgave my sins and infused me with righteousness (made me righteous). | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 24. When you doubt your salvation, your doubts are best dealt with by remembering the specific day of your conversion. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 25. God loves me the most when I do my best for Him. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 26. New Christians may battle with sinful thoughts, but mature Christians seldom do. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 27. All a person needs to know to be saved is that Christ was crucified to forgive his sins. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 28. I would like to be more certain of my salvation. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 29. If there was a way to increase my faith in God's promises, I would do it even if it was difficult and demanding. | SA A LA U LD D SD |
| 30. I long for more freedom in my Christian life. | SA A LA U LD D SD |

From the at-large group there were 14 completed questionnaires on the first administration. There were 10 completed questionnaires from the second administration.

The discussion group turned in a total of 12 questionnaires for both the first and second administrations. Three of the participants chose not to place their names on the instruments, so for measuring purposes, in tallying changed responses I only used the 9 matching pairs with names on them.

Table A1. At-large group, first administration

First Administration					
Question	Subject	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Correct Answer
3	Doctrine	2	1	11	Disagree
4	Doctrine	0	0	14	Disagree
6	Doctrine	13	0	1	Agree
8	Experience*	8	1	5	
9	Doctrine	0	1	13	Disagree
10	Doctrine	4	0	10	Disagree
13	Doctrine	13	1	0	Agree
15	Doctrine	0	0	14	Disagree
17	Experience*	1	3	10	
19	Doctrine	1	0	13	Disagree
20	Doctrine	2	1	11	Disagree
21	Doctrine	2	0	12	Disagree
22	Doctrine	5	1	8	Disagree
23	Doctrine	10	1	3	Disagree
24	Experience	0	0	14	Disagree
28	Experience*	7	0	7	
30	Experience*	8	1	5	

Table A2. At-large group, second administration

Second Administration					
Question	Subject	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Correct Answer
3	Doctrine	4	0	6	Disagree
4	Doctrine	3	1	6	Disagree
6	Doctrine	10	0	0	Agree
8	Experience*	7	0	3	
9	Doctrine	0	0	10	Disagree
10	Doctrine	5	1	4	Disagree
13	Doctrine	9	1	0	Agree
15	Doctrine	1	0	9	Disagree
17	Experience*	3	0	7	
19	Doctrine	3	1	6	Disagree
20	Doctrine	3	0	7	Disagree
21	Doctrine	1	0	9	Disagree
22	Doctrine	5	1	4	Disagree
23	Doctrine	6	1	3	Disagree
24	Experience	1	0	9	Disagree
28	Experience*	6	1	3	
30	Experience*	5	0	5	

* These experiential questions were designed to observe growth in a person's assurance of salvation. Question 8 was specifically asked to determine if an individual was struggling with doubts. Questions 17, 28, and 29 were asked to measure growth in assurance. Movement from agree to disagree represented improvement in Question 17. Movement from disagree to agree represented improvement or growth in Questions 28 and 30.

Table A3. Discussion group, statistical changes

Question	Subject	Incorrect	Correct to	Growth	Decline
		to Correct	Incorrect		
3	Doctrine	3			
4	Doctrine	1			
6	Doctrine	1			
8	Experience			2	1
9	Doctrine		1		
10	Doctrine	2	1		
13	Doctrine	1			
15	Doctrine	1			
17	Experience			3	
19	Doctrine		1		
20	Doctrine		1		
21	Doctrine	2			
22	Doctrine	2			
23	Doctrine	5			
24	Experience			1	
28	Experience			3	
30	Experience			1	

In the discussion group each participant put his or her name on the questionnaire, giving me the opportunity for direct individual comparison. The table above represents the significant changes made by the participants from the first to the second administrations of the instrument. Changes in the doctrinal questions are listed in two ways. The first is from incorrect to correct. This type of change represents an increased doctrinal understanding. The second listing is from correct to incorrect. This type of change represents a decline in the participant's doctrinal understanding.

Changes in the experiential questions are also listed in two ways. The first is called "growth." This type of change represents realized growth in the participant's assurance of salvation. The second listing is called "decline," as it represents a decline in the participant's sense of assurance.

APPENDIX 2
PROJECT SERMONS

SERMON 1
DO WE STILL NEED THE GOSPEL?
ROMANS 1:1–3:20: AN OVERVIEW

Proposition: Man needs the gospel and the gospel can meet man's need.

- I. A Personal and Powerful Opening (1:1-17)
 - A. Personal introduction
 1. Unity of the Scriptures (1:1-6)
 2. The recipients (1:7)
 3. Personal remarks (1:8)
 - B. The theme of Romans: The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel (1:9-17)
 1. The core of the letter is the gospel.
 2. The letter is written to believers.
- II. The Universal Reign of Sin
 - A. Why we need the gospel – the Gentiles
 1. The wrath of God is revealed.
 2. Mankind suppresses the truth.
 3. Mankind exchanged the truth of God for a lie.
 4. God gave them up to a debased mind.
 - B. Why the Jews need the gospel (2:1-29)
 1. The Jewish people are accountable to God for their sin.
 - a. A presumption of national privilege critiqued (2:1-5)
 - b. A proof of impartial judgment (2:6-11)

c. Understanding judgment and the law (2:12-16)

2. The Old Covenant had its limitations.

a. The Law (2:17-24)

b. Circumcision (2:25-29)

C. God is faithful in judging His people the Jews (3:1-8).

III. The Guilt of All Humanity (3:9-20)

Conclusion: God has shut up all humanity in sin and under sin's power and penalty. If the book of Romans stopped here, man would be doomed to utter and eternal doom.

God, in His grace, told us of our true state without Him so that we may be made to see the wonder of being saved by Him out of our sinful state. The gospel shows us we need God, and the gospel shows us God can and will meet our need.

SERMON 2
 FORGIVENESS IS ALL I NEED TO GO TO HEAVEN, RIGHT?
 ROMANS 3:21-24

Proposition: Justification is by grace and offers more than forgiveness.

Introduction: Many have learned there is a forgiveness God available to all who will believe. Many have been taught that if your sins are forgiven, you can go to heaven when you die. These things are true, but is this all the truth of the gospel? Why do so many believers struggle with knowing whether or not they are forgiven?

We learn in this passage that God's gospel offers much more than forgiveness, and knowing the gospel more fully gives the believer confidence in his or her standing before God.

- I. God's Righteousness Is Revealed in the Gospel (3:21).
 - A. All people need the gospel because all have sinned (3:23).
 - B. All who believe the gospel are justified (3:24). There is no distinction in people, because all have sinned. There is no distinction in people who are saved because the gospel is available to all who believe. There is no advantage by any means to any group of people. All are sinners, but all can be saved who will believe. This salvation is by grace through faith alone.
- II. God's Righteousness Is Received Through the Gospel (3:24).
 - A. The provision of the gospel is righteousness.
 - B. The price of the gospel is redemption.
- III. God's Righteousness Produces Results by the Gospel (3:24).
 - A. You are declared righteous.
 1. Understanding justification
 2. There are three possible ways to righteousness.
 - i. Living a perfect life
 - ii. Having righteousness infused into you
 - iii. Having righteousness imputed to you
 - B. You are set free by redemption.

Conclusion: Understanding that I am declared righteous by God in Christ is the root of real worship. Knowing that my standing before God is Christ's righteousness that can never fail is the root of security. It is not forgiven people who are in heaven. Receiving forgiveness only does not necessarily grant you righteousness. People who reach heaven have both forgiveness and righteousness. Redemption purchases our forgiveness, and justification provides our righteousness. The believer who knows and meditates on these truths is both humbled and made secure.

SERMON 3
WHAT IF GOD REALLY IS MAD AT ME?
ROMANS 3:23-25a

Proposition: Redemption and propitiation are in Christ's sacrifice.

Introduction: I think this passage holds the key to understanding the whole of the Bible. It is in my mind the most central text of Scripture. It holds in a few short words the truth of how a holy God can be in right relationship to sinful man. Our approach and outline will be a bit different today. Though this text is thick with truth and has a weight that could never be measured by the mind of man, it is not difficult to understand. We will simply take a look at the major truths held here and apply them to our lives. Much of our effort will be simply defining the key words in the passage.

- I. Man Has Sinned, and God Is Angry About It (3:23).
 - A. What does "sinned" mean?
- II. What Can Be Done About My Sin and God's Anger? (3:24-25a).
 - A. God deals with my sin through:
 - 1. Justification
 - 2. Redemption
 - B. God deals with His anger through propitiation.

Conclusion: In Christ's death on the cross God demonstrated the awesomeness of both His wrath and His love. This great work of God is full of power and purpose. It demonstrates and offers God's love to sinful man. It demonstrates and satisfies God's wrath toward sinners. This gospel then saves all who will believe.

SERMON 4
IN WHAT WAY DOES GOD NEED TO BE JUSTIFIED?
ROMANS 3:25b-26

Proposition: God's holy love is our ground of assurance.

Introduction: We are still deepening our understanding of the gospel. As we look at Romans 3:21-26 in detail, our understanding should lead to better application of the truth of the gospel.

Many Christians struggle deeply with doubting their salvation. Many have been wrongly taught to find their assurance in having a time of conversion or re-commitment of that conversion that is clear in their memory. For many this produces more hurt than it does help. The main problem with this approach is that it has no biblical root. There is a place to go when one needs to gain assurance of his salvation, but it is not in a past conversion experience. This literally limits the strength of my faith to the strength of my memory.

It is proper to go back in time to find assurance, but the place to which we are to go back is the work of God on the cross, not our time of conversion.

Assurance is brought to the mind of the believer when he or she realizes not only the work God did through Christ on the cross, but also why He did it the way He did it.

- I. God Did a Great Work for Us That We Can See.
 - A. God demonstrated His past righteousness.
 - B. God demonstrated His present righteousness.
- II. God Did a Great Work for Us in Which He Was Satisfied.
 - A. God fully expressed His love.
 - B. God fully satisfied His wrath.
 - C. God fully saved His people.
- III. God Did a Great Work for Us in Which We Can Be Sure.
 - A. God is just – He did His work without compromising His holy character.
 - B. God is the justifier – God's work fully satisfies Him and fully saves all who believe.

Conclusion: The ground of the believer's assurance is not in his subjective experience of salvation, as wonderful as it may have been. The ground of assurance is in the objective work of God on the cross.

His wrath is fully appeased. God is not angry with His children. He loves them. God did not compromise in any way to get sinners fit to go to heaven. Believers are justified and redeemed by Christ's perfect work on the cross. We are as secure in our salvation as Christ is as the Son of God, because we are in Him. God has declared us righteous, in Christ. We can no more lose that righteousness than Christ could lose His.

Understanding salvation by grace through faith is the root of our assurance and of our true worship.

SERMON 5
THE UNIQUE EFFECTS OF LIVING BY FAITH
ROMANS 3:27-4:5

Proposition: Faith eliminates all boasting.

- I. Praise Is the Product of Living by Faith (3:27-31).
 - A. Faith sees the great grace of God (3:27-28).
 - B. Faith savors the great love of God (3:29-30).
 - C. Faith shows the great holiness of God (3:31).
- II. The Patriarch's Picture of Living by Faith (4:1-25)
 - A. Abraham demonstrates the believing side of faith (4:1-15).
 - 1. Faith eliminates work (4:1-4, 9-12).
 - 2. Faith is the conduit of justification (4:5).
 - 3. Faith results in great blessing (4:6-8).
 - B. Abraham models the behaving side of faith (4:13-25).
 - 1. By receiving the promise of God (4:13-17)
 - 2. By renouncing all confidence in human ability (4:18).
 - 3. By recognizing the real problems of life (4:19).
 - 4. By resting on God's faithfulness (4:20-25).

SERMON 6
DOES GOD REALLY LOVE ME?
ROMANS 5:1-11

Proposition: Assurance of salvation comes from confidence in present grace and future glory.

- I. Learning to Grasp the Benefits of the Gospel (5:1-7)
 - A. Peace with God (5:1)
 - B. The grace of God (5:2)
 - C. The hope of glory (5:2)
- II. Learning to Gaze at the Demonstration of God's Love (5:8)
- III. Learning to Rest In the Hope of God's Love (5:9-11)
 - A. The reasoning behind your present state (5:9-10)
 - B. Resting on His future promise (5:11)

SERMON 7
I AM SAVED: WHO CARES HOW I LIVE?
ROMANS 6:1-14

Proposition: Grace is not only pardon for sin but power over sin.

Introduction: What we have learned over the last few weeks is stunning indeed. To think that God loved us and demonstrated that love by sending His Son to die for us, even while we were yet sinners, is amazing. Understanding that in Christ's crucifixion God did a work through which He declared us righteous, He purchased our redemption, and He satisfied His own wrath against sin is the ground of truth out of which the believer develops a healthy and contented soul.

This free gift of God's grace is beyond measure. It at times seems too good to be true, but it is rooted in real history and is the center of God's plan for man to have a right relationship with Him. Because of the riches of God's free gift, it can be misapplied. Many people in Paul's day (as well as ours) seemed to want the pardon of sin from God but not the power over sin. The dangers of misapplication are high in this great truth of justification by faith. The apostle Paul had to deal with it in his day, and we must deal with it in ours.

- I. Truth, No Matter How Great, Must Be Known and Rightly Applied (6:1-2).
 - A. You cannot sin for the purpose of getting grace.
 - B. You cannot live in a "world" that you have died to.
- II. Understanding the Truth About You (6:3-10)
 - A. You have been baptized into Christ Jesus.
 - B. You have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection.
 - C. Your old self has been crucified with Christ.
- III. Applying the Truth About You (6:11-14)
 - A. Consider yourself dead to sin.
 - B. Do not let sin reign in your body.
 - C. Do not present your body to sin.

Conclusion: We are commanded to do these things in application of the truth we know. But we are not left with a command. We are left with a statement of truth about every

one of us who have been transferred out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son.

It is true of you that sin will have no dominion over you. Why? Because it is true of you that you are not under law but under grace. This truth becomes our experience as we know and apply it.

SERMON 8
WHY DO I STILL THINK AND FEEL THIS WAY IF I AM A CHRISTIAN?
ROMANS 7

Proposition: Dealing with sin is a normal part of Christian living.

Introduction: I must make you aware that this chapter has caused scholars and theologians troubles for centuries. It is true that it is a difficult passage of Scripture. There are several different positions held as to the interpretation of Romans 7. We are going to take a simple approach to this difficult text and keep it in the flow of the context that we have studied to date. Paul has written this letter to believers in Rome. He has been explaining the gospel to them and is teaching them how to live by the gospel. We are staying on the same track with chapter 7 and will explore the Christian's battle with sin.

- I. Your Relationship With the Law (7:1-6)
 - A. You died to the law through the body of Christ.
 1. You were united in his death.
 2. God is your Master.
 3. This is so that you may bear fruit for God.
 - B. Once you were dead to Christ while alive in the flesh.
 1. In this condition you bore fruit for death.
 - C. You are now released from the law.
 1. You have died to that which held you captive.
 2. You now serve in the new life of the Spirit.
- II. The Law Serves to Convict of Sin, but It Is Sin That Condemns Us (7:7-13).
 - A. The law is good.
 - B. The good law is what shows bad in me.
 - C. This work of the law shows me my need of a Savior.
- III. The Law Still Convicts of Sin, but Sin Can Never Condemn (7:14-25).
 - A. The believer is in a battle as long as he is in this earthly body.
 - B. The fight of faith is to know and trust the gospel to be true.

Conclusion: Every believer has his or her struggles. Many believers stumble over the fact that they are having troubles. The life of a Christian is a great life indeed, but it is a life of reality. Our forgiveness is real. Our eternal life is real. Our earthly living is real. There is a real devil that is our enemy. Our fleshly bodies are real, and its lusts wage war against our soul. The key to victory is not escape from the battle but engagement in it. It is the fight of faith that makes faith grow strong.

SERMON 9
I FEEL GUILTY: WILL IT EVER GO AWAY?
ROMANS 8:1-17

Proposition: Guilt is best dealt with through experiential assurance.

Introduction: We live by definitions. It is imperative that our definitions be accurate or we will live misguided lives. Two significant things ill defined by many believers are deity and humanity. When we see God as less than He is and ourselves as more than we are, our lives will never get on the right track. Christian maturity displays itself in those who recognize the limits of their own humanity and the grace of God that meets all our limits. These limits are not just simple facts of our physical life but, more importantly, of our spiritual and moral lives. Getting our definitions correct helps us deal with some of life's great dilemmas such as guilt, doubt, and fear.

I. Our Assurance Comes From a Faith Founded Upon Truth.

A. Founded upon the truth of the work of God

1. God fulfilled all righteousness in Christ.
2. God placed us in Christ.
3. God changed our lives.

B. Founded upon truth about people

1. There are lost people.
2. There are saved people.
3. There are no other kinds of people.

C. Founded upon truth about you

1. You are in the Spirit.
2. You will have battles in this life.

II. Our Assurance Comes Through a Functioning Faith.

A. We are to live in the Spirit. We are in a fight.

B. We are led by the Spirit. We are to follow.

C. We have the witness of the Spirit. We are to bear fruit.

Conclusion: You are guilt free before God. This is a fact of the faith that every believer must fight the fight of faith to believe and know. It is an objective truth worked by the gospel of God.

To know the gospel truth of how God has dealt with our sin, guilt, doubt, and fears, we must experience the gospel. Standing on the foundation of God's truth, we must walk based on that truth. A life of fighting, following, and bearing fruit by the Spirit of God is what translates the objective work of the gospel into the subjective experiences of our Christian living.

SERMON 10
IF THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS, WHY DO PEOPLE STILL SUFFER?
ROMANS 8:18-29

Proposition: The gospel is our hope that gets us through earthly suffering.

Introduction: It is strange indeed that many believers are still convinced that their Christianity will grant them an easier earthly existence. This faulty belief is a stumbling block for many believers. Their daily experience is in contradiction to their basic belief. They are always fighting to find which is wrong, their experience or their belief. In light of biblical records of the lives of God's children, it seems impossible that we would ever think becoming a child of God would make earthly life easier. We now look into Romans 8 to find a better understanding of living as a Christian this side of heaven. Three things will help clear our thinking.

- I. We Are On a Journey In the Atmosphere of Anticipation.
 - A. All creation groans.
 - B. Hope is not needed if we have nothing to anticipate.
 - C. Living with a bit of dissatisfaction is normal and healthy.
- II. We Are On a Journey Supplied by Divine Intercession.
 - A. Our weakness is the nature of being human. We need God.
 - B. The Spirit's knowledge of God and of us is our strength and supply on the journey.
- III. We Are On a Journey That Ends In Glorification.
 - A. Christ got what He paid for.
 - B. We are in the plan of God. It will not fail.

Conclusion: The gospel is good and necessary for the Christian's soul. Without it we die. The gospel is what saved us and keeps us saved. The truth of the gospel is what the believer stands upon and lives by. The more we know the gospel, the more we rest on Christ alone. We learn to enjoy the anticipation. We learn to depend upon the Spirit's intercession. We learn to grow in confidence in reaching the end.

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ABSTRACT

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS A MEANS OF PASTORAL CARE AT LAGRANGE BAPTIST CHURCH, LAGRANGE, KENTUCKY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011
Chairperson: Dr. Robert A. Vogel

During the years of my pastoral ministry, I have observed many Christians who were unable to find comfort in the gospel when they encountered troubles in their lives. This became a deep concern in two ways. First, my people were hurting, and I could not seem to offer them sufficient help in the gospel. My second concern was where the members of the church might turn for help. Chapter 1 outlines the project goals, context, rationale, and definitions that grew out of these concerns.

Chapter 2 grounds the task of preaching, which is central to this project, in the New Testament. It provides relevant theological and historical insights that establish the nature and importance of gospel soul care, drawing heavily on the example of the English Puritans.

As Chapter 3 explains, the Puritans' keen insight into the human soul forced me to face some contemporary complications in gospel soul care, especially our modern professional and therapeutic approach to ministry.

This research was combined with practical work at LaGrange Baptist Church in LaGrange, Kentucky, as described in Chapter 4 and evaluated in Chapter 5.

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