

JASON K. ALLEN

# LETTERS

— *TO MY* —

# STUDENTS

— VOLUME 3 —

*ON LIFE AND DOCTRINE*





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With deep appreciation, this book is dedicated to  
Kevin Shrum, Dwight Blankenship, Ken Parker,  
John Mathena, Lee Roberson, and Chad McDonald.  
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past twelve years, each one of these men have helped  
me guard my life and doctrine. For that and  
so much more, I remain eternally grateful.



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us with—Anne-Marie, Caroline, William, Alden, and Elizabeth—are a daily source of joy and pride. There is no happier husband or father on planet Earth. These six dear people have made that so. Their presence and encouragement strengthen my broader ministry, including writing projects such as this.

Most of all, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:12–14).

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## Series Preface

Good books are like good friends. Both bring with them words of instruction and counsel. They are companions on life's journey, providing insight and encouragement along the way.

For the Christian minister this is doubly true. To be a minister is to be a reader. You read books to know the Bible and to mature as a teacher of it. And, like a friend, God often brings a book into our lives at just the right time. That's exactly what God did for me.

In my earliest days of ministry, while still processing God's call and exploring what a life of ministry would entail, a friend gave me Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. Spurgeon walked into my life at precisely the right time. *Lectures to My Students* proved not only helpful but also transformative. I would come to learn that *Lectures to My Students*, and the man who authored it, had equipped and inspired generations of ministers like me. I was hooked.



## Who Was Charles Spurgeon?

In the words of Carl F. H. Henry, Charles Spurgeon was “one of evangelical Christianity’s immortals.”<sup>1</sup> Henry so labeled Spurgeon due to the expansiveness of his ministry and its continued reverberation after his death.

Spurgeon was a phenom. He preached in the largest church in the Protestant world situated in the most powerful city in the world, London; yet his ministry stretched even farther, coursing through the expansive tentacles of the British Empire. He embodied all that is right about biblical ministry and all that the contemporary church must recover in the twenty-first century: biblical faithfulness, evangelistic fervor, self-sacrificial ministry, power in the pulpit, social awareness, and defense of the faith.

As a preacher Spurgeon pastored London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle, where he ministered for nearly forty years to a congregation of some six thousand members. Spurgeon is commonly ranked, along with George Whitefield, as one of the two greatest preachers in the English language. In 1858, he preached to a crowd numbering 23,654 at London’s Crystal Palace, and by the end of his ministry, he had preached to more than ten million people without the aid of modern technologies.

As an author Spurgeon wrote with an unstoppable pen. By the time of his death, he had published

approximately 150 books. His sermons, which were edited weekly and distributed globally, sold more than fifty-six million copies in his lifetime. In Spurgeon's day they were translated into more than forty languages and now total more than sixty-two hefty volumes. Additionally, Spurgeon wrote for various magazines and journals, including his *Sword and Trowel*.

As a humanitarian Spurgeon hurled his might at the great social ills of his day. He founded two orphanages and a ministry for "fallen women," was an ardent abolitionist, started a pastors' college, and began a book distribution ministry for undersupplied pastors. Spurgeon launched clothes closets and soup kitchens for members and nonmembers of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. By the age of fifty, he had started no fewer than sixty-six social ministries, all of which were designed to meet both physical and spiritual needs.

As an apologist Spurgeon ardently defended his Baptist, evangelical, and reformed convictions. He attacked hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism, Campbellism, and Darwinism. Most especially, Spurgeon defended the person and work of Christ and the comprehensive inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. Spurgeon's apologetic efforts were most clearly witnessed through the prism of the Downgrade Controversy, where he challenged and ultimately withdrew from his own Baptist Union for their equivocation over these same issues.



As an evangelist Spurgeon relentlessly preached the gospel and consistently won sinners to Christ. He remains an unsurpassed model for clinging tightly to both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in evangelism. In fact, one is hard-pressed to find any sermon Spurgeon ever preached that does not conclude with a presentation of the cross. By the end of his ministry, Spurgeon had baptized nearly fifteen thousand believers.

Spurgeon's ministry is still shrouded in a certain mystique. This is, in part, because he was a genius. But it is also due to his indefatigable ministerial work ethic, which prompted David Livingstone to ask of Spurgeon, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon, referencing the Holy Spirit, replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us."

### ***Lectures to My Students***

Central to Spurgeon's legacy is his classic work *Lectures to My Students*. This volume developed organically, as the natural outflow of Spurgeon's Friday interactions with his pastors' college students.

Since these men had spent the week in rigorous study, Spurgeon styled his Friday sessions as more informal. He dealt with the practical aspects of preaching and pastoral ministry. Over time the counsel Spurgeon gave in those sessions was recorded and compiled into book

form. Thus, Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* is brimming with biblical and practical advice for the minister. He covers everything from the call to ministry to calling on church members. He swerves back and forth from the theological to the practical, from the convictional to the preferential, from the mundane to the spiritual.

In so doing, Spurgeon gave his students a near-comprehensive text on the full range of issues related to preaching and pastoral ministry. *Lectures to My Students* has proven to be a timeless work, benefitting most every minister who reads it.

### ***Letters to My Students***

Thus, this volume—and entire series—is written in the venerable tradition of Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. I know how much he helped me, and I want similarly to help you.

I'm inquisitive by nature; and as a new minister, I was especially so. Thankfully, I had a couple of mentors who answered my queries and pointed me to others who could do the same.

I now find myself on the other end of such questions and conversations. As a seminary president, I teach classes on preaching, pastoral ministry, and leadership. On a near daily basis, I converse with pastors and students about these topics.

Herein are my best answers. Over the years I've kept up with my correspondence, some in the form of literal letters, others in emails, classroom lectures, phone conversations, or conference sermons and presentations. These answers have found their way into my class lectures, and still others have migrated all the way to my website, where I often write on preaching and pastoral ministry.

In my role as a seminary president, I'm giving my life to equipping those called by God for more faithful and effective ministry. While that preparation is essential, it doesn't end when one walks across the graduation stage. Growing in ministry is a lifelong pursuit, and growing as a preacher is to be the same. The book in your hand is intended to help you toward these ends.

*Introduction*

## On Life and Doctrine

**F**or every gospel minister, the New Testament letters of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are to be lifelong companions. The Pastoral Epistles are letters we return to again and again, guiding us on our journey of life and ministry. Indeed, I know of no better way to ensure ministerial faithfulness than for the minister to live in these three books.

For a quarter century, these books have been just that for me. Over the years, I've read through the Pastoral Epistles once a month on average. And every time I do, my faith is strengthened, my ministry is sharpened, and my calling is renewed.

The Pastoral Epistles are the apostle Paul's words of instruction and encouragement to his son-in-the-faith Timothy and his ministry colleague Titus. But these three letters speak beyond these two men—they speak to all, in every time and place, who've entered the ministerial ranks.



Most ministers are familiar with the broad contours of these three books, and many of us can point to key verses for inspiration and accountability. I presume that's the case for you too. Like me, you likely resonate with Paul's call to "preach the word in season and out of season," to "fight the good fight of faith," and to "finish the course" of ministry (2 Tim. 4:2–5; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7).

Similarly, we periodically return to the qualifications for pastoral ministry as found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, and well we should. In these passages, we find God's enduring qualifications for ministers, qualifications that remain regardless of one's generation or context of service.

Yet there's one, often overlooked, verse that has captivated me more than any other. I reflect on it often, returning to it again and again as a compass for my life and ministry. I do so because of the stark warning and promising reward this verse contains. First Timothy 4:16 charges us to "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you."

This verse ties together an entire section of apostolic admonition that runs from 4:6 through 4:16. And it's pregnant with ministerial promise. Let's carefully reflect on this verse's every word, and note its every

component. As we do, we'll see where we're going in the chapters ahead.

First, notice the close link between the inward and the outward, the private and the public. The minister's internal life validates and strengthens his external ministry. The sequence is essential.

“**Pay close attention to**” means to be mindful of or to be attentive to. It carries the idea of focus, of fixed concentration. It's not that the minister thinks of nothing else; it's that he thinks on what follows above all else. If he gets nothing else right, he gets his life and doctrine right.

Ours is an age preoccupied with self. One's self-image, visible appearance, public identity, and one's self-expression are all focal points of our time. But that's not the point of this text. Our text refers to your *inner person*. Man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart.<sup>1</sup>

“**Yourself**” refers to one's heart, one's inner person, one's true spiritual man. We can think of one's personal holiness, one's Christlikeness, one's godliness. The importance of one's inner person is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. And that's because who one is inwardly is who one really is. That is why Proverbs 4:23 insists the reader “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for *from it flow* the springs of life” (emphasis added).

“**Your teaching**” means one’s doctrine, that which one believes and espouses. Paul uses this word some nineteen times in his New Testament letters and fifteen times in the Pastoral Epistles. Doctrine is the lifeblood of the minister and of the church, thus it recurringly appears in the Pastoral Epistles.

By “your teaching” the apostle is not personalizing it to Timothy, nor to any other minister. It’s not *our* truth, it’s *God’s* truth. Thus, the minister’s goal is to be faithful to the full array of Christian truth as found in Holy Scripture. Indeed, the minister is a workman, studying so that he might rightly divide the Word of God.

“**Persevere in these things**” indicates the minister’s life and teaching must be of ongoing concern. It is not enough for the minister to have been found faithful in this regard. The minister is to *be* faithful. As the minister does so, he verifies his fitness for ministry. Not just in the future, but in the present. To borrow an example from the medical field, we aren’t to settle for an annual check-up. We need a daily evaluation.

As we persevere in these things, we “**ensure**,” or give evidence of, what is unseen—that our lives and ministries are approved by God. Though our calling to Christ and to the ministry—from start to finish—is from the Lord, Paul charges us to steward our lives and teachings as though our ministerial legitimacy depends on *our* faithfulness. Paul isn’t conflicted, rather he’s a compatibilist. The apostle sees no conflict between God’s sovereignty

and the minister's responsibility, both are compatible in the mind of God.

By “**salvation**” Paul gets to the heart of the matter. He does not mince words. To be saved means to be saved from God's impending wrath. The goal for every Christ-follower is to be saved from that wrath, and for every minister to shield his congregation from that wrath. For those in Christ, God's justice has been satisfied through Christ's payment, thus no need for our own.

The way—the only way—to ensure this goal is through *faithful* gospel ministry, which is upheld by guarding your life and doctrine. This ensures salvation for “**yourself**” and “**for those who hear you.**” Note, it's not one's *followers*, but one's *hearers*. This reminds us of the minister's central task—to preach and teach the Word of God.

Gospel proclamation is God's chosen means of converting the lost. As Paul argued elsewhere, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the “word of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Rightly knowing, believing, and proclaiming the gospel is essential for salvation, on both the teaching and receiving end.

Thus, you see how rich this one verse truly is. It is indeed pregnant with ministerial promise. It comes with a stark word of warning, but also a rich word of reward. It behooves every minister to guard his life and his doctrine. It behooves you to guard yours.



In the pages that follow, that's exactly what we'll seek to do. Together, we'll zero in on *five key doctrines and five essential disciplines* that must remain front and center in our lives and ministries. And we'll do so in that order because sound doctrine always precedes sound living.

Let me be clear, I'm not arguing, objectively speaking, that these five doctrines are the most important ones. In fact, careful readers will note what we're not covering. For instance, there's not a dedicated chapter on the doctrine of the Trinity or other cardinal truths.

That's because in this book, I'm targeting our current ministry moment and the challenges before those who serve Christ's church. These doctrines are key for a faithful ministry and for our own faithfulness in this present ministry age.

As we'll see, there's both a seasonal and a perennial aspect to these specific disciplines and doctrines. All followers of Christ should pay attention to their lives and doctrine in every generation, but for ministers of the gospel, it's doubly important. Because, as we do, we'll ensure salvation for ourselves and for those who hear us.

I want that for my life and ministry, and I want that for yours as well.

## *Chapter 1*

# **Biblical Inerrancy**

**T**he first doctrine every minister must guard is biblical inerrancy. Biblical inerrancy is, simply put, the belief that the Bible is without error. It's an argument that the Bible is indeed God's Word; it was divinely inspired by Him and is comprehensively truthful—and, thus, authoritative for life and doctrine. It's from this inerrant Word that we can know our inerrant Savior, Jesus Christ.

Biblical inerrancy isn't just an important doctrine, it's an indispensable one. As we shall see throughout this book, biblical inerrancy supports every other key doctrine. A theological framework without biblical inerrancy is like a house without a foundation—both will collapse under the weight of their own superstructure.

In the context of the late twentieth-century “Battle for the Bible,” Norm Geisler famously argued, “The inerrancy of Scripture is the foundational doctrine in which all other doctrines rest, and the psalmist rightly

said, ‘If the foundation be destroyed, then what can the righteous do?’”<sup>1</sup> Geisler was right—virtually every other doctrine rests on the inerrancy of Scripture.

A life and ministry not built on the unshakable foundation of God’s inerrant Word is a life and ministry built on sand. That’s why Don Carson argues that inerrancy isn’t just a doctrine to hold, but a theological place to live:

Inerrancy is not an isolated belief that one can carve off or tack on to an otherwise robust Christian faith. Rightly articulated and worked out in our lives, it shapes how we think about God, it forms a huge part of our epistemological structures, it determines where we go to hear the voice of God, it calls us back to the gospel and its promises both for this life and for the life to come, it establishes common ground with believers in other cultures and other centuries, it impels us to worship—in short, it is a place to live.<sup>2</sup>

I believe this is absolutely correct, therefore, our commitment to inerrancy is no small matter. What one believes about inerrancy will affect how they construct every other aspect of their life and doctrine.

## A Closer Look at Biblical Inerrancy

So, what *exactly* is biblical inerrancy? I've already said it simply means that "the Bible is without error." This is an accurate definition, but, for our purposes, we should flesh it out more. We must drill down deeply.

Albert Mohler defines inerrancy as,

An affirmation of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible . . . as a whole and in its parts, [it] contains nothing but God-breathed truth. . . . When the Bible speaks, God speaks. . . . [T]he affirmation of the Bible's inerrancy comes from the history of the church. . . . God's trustworthiness underlies the personal nature of God's gift of his own self-revelation. . . . Our trust in the Scriptures is entirely dependent upon our trust in God.<sup>3</sup>

More technically, Walt Kaiser argues,

The Inerrancy of the Bible seeks to represent the claims of the Biblical text that all it says is true and accords with the actual and the real in life and history as it was intended by the writers of Scripture. The total truthfulness of Scripture is claimed because this is what Scripture teaches and



without it, we are left to our own devices to try to figure who God is and what he has said.<sup>4</sup>

For our purposes in this book, we can simply define biblical inerrancy as the belief that the Holy Spirit superintended the biblical authors as they wrote so that the original autographs were free from error. As they wrote, the Holy Spirit inspired the original authors such that they expressed exactly what God wanted expressed, as He wanted it expressed, and they did so without error.

Note our primary concern is the original autographs or the original manuscripts. If a modern printer overlooks a typo in the publishing process, that doesn't mean Scripture has erred, it means the publisher has erred. Purity at the source is essential. Impurity downstream doesn't negate purity upstream.

Think of it this way. If a mountain-top, artesian well springs forth pure water, it may well become less pure as it flows down the mountain due to hikers or other contaminants further downstream. But if the artesian well was impure at its source, the water stands no chance of being pure. It's contaminated from start to finish.

However, the Lord has preserved His Word. As it is written in Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever." And as Jesus states in Matthew 24:35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." Unlike the

artesian well with impurities at its source, the Scriptures come from the purest of all sources, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Through God's kind providence and with the help of faithful scribes and scholars throughout the ages, even in the twenty-first century we enjoy sound translations of Scripture. Even those untrained in the biblical languages can read their Bibles with confidence that what they read is the very Word of God.

### **Inerrancy in Confessional Terms**

A bit more elaborately, my own denomination's confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, states: "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, for a fuller treatment we must go to the gold-standard document itself, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. Convening some 200 evangelical leaders in the city of Chicago in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy gathered to define and defend biblical inerrancy. The gathering was occasioned by the broader "Battle for the Bible" that had raged throughout American Protestantism and had now made

its way squarely within American Evangelicalism. From that gathering, the Chicago Statement emerged.

The Chicago Statement includes couplets of affirmations and denials, making crystal clear what biblical inerrancy is and what it isn't. No wonder it has stood the test of time and that it remains the most important confessional formulation on biblical inerrancy.

Let's consider these three articles from the Chicago Statement, each of which helpfully describes biblical inerrancy.

- God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer, and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
- Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.

- Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

From these articles, we get a sense why the Chicago Statement is the gold standard on biblical inerrancy, and, more importantly, you get a fuller understanding as to what we mean by biblical inerrancy.<sup>6</sup>

### **Inerrancy, an Essential Word**

If inerrancy requires such careful definition, is it needed? In fact, some have argued against using the term *inerrancy* for this very reason. Others have argued that it's politically fraught, too charged with emotion left over from theological controversies of the twentieth century.

If you avoid a word because it needs careful definition, there will be precious few *important* words left—in theology or any other discipline—that matter. The words that matter the most must be defined the clearest.

Still others have argued the term *inerrancy* is nothing more than a shibboleth—a theological “password”

one must embrace and use—to be counted as doctrinally sound. This accusation was common in my own denominational context, the Southern Baptist Convention, in the 1980s.

Yet, the fact that the term itself, and all it represents, has been so hotly debated is why we *should* cling to it, and why we must retain its usage. And the fact that it's been so clearly defined, with such care and so many caveats, means it's understandable and enduring.

But it's also *appropriately* divisive—biblical inerrancy as defined by the Chicago Statement—is so airtight, it's impossible to affirm it with full integrity while holding to a slippery, weak doctrine of Scripture. Indeed, inerrancy is not just a helpful term, it's an indispensable one. Why? Because it is more difficult to nuance away or to play fast and loose with. There's less elasticity to it and, therefore, less opportunity for wiggle room.

I acknowledge that a layering on of labels like *inspiration*, *infallibility*, *authority*, *inerrancy*, and *sufficiency* might strike one as a bit much. But when carefully considered, one must conclude that each term is essential, and each term builds on the other.

## **Inerrancy in Historical Perspective**

Looking at this doctrine from a historical perspective, the truthfulness of Scripture has been a consistent belief of the confessing church throughout history. As

Augustine reflected to Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate in 405:

I confess . . . that . . . I believe most firmly that only the authors of the canonical books of Scripture were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me contrary to the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, John Woodbridge's book *Biblical Authority* convincingly argues for the confessing church's embrace of inerrancy, both in concept and terminology, throughout church history.<sup>8</sup>

Within the Baptist tradition, Tom Nettles and Russ Bush carefully documented inerrancy throughout Baptist history in their landmark work *Baptists and the Bible*.<sup>9</sup> Over the past few decades, *Baptists and the Bible* has become a classic, providing irrefutable evidence of Baptists' persistent commitment to the total truthfulness of Scripture.



# A BIBLICAL, ACCESSIBLE GUIDE

## FOR MINISTERS AND MINISTERS-IN-TRAINING.

Few books have more influenced those called to gospel ministry than Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. The influence of this book, like the Prince of Preachers himself, reverberates to our present age.

Carrying forward this tradition is Jason Allen's *Letters to My Students*. Dr. Allen serves as president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Spurgeon College, the former ranking as one of the largest and fastest growing seminaries in North America. His passion to serve the church by equipping a generation of pastors, missionaries, and ministers for faithful service is reflected in *Letters to My Students*.

*Letters to My Students* is a three-volume series that aims to be a biblical, accessible guide for ministers and ministers-in-training. This third volume brings focus to the way doctrine must inform the life of the minister.

**JASON K. ALLEN** is the fifth president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. Since coming to Midwestern Seminary, he has led the institution to become one of the largest and fastest growing seminaries in North America. In addition to his role as president, Dr. Allen serves as an associate professor for preaching and pastoral ministry. More broadly, he serves the church through his preaching and writing ministries. He is the author or editor of several books, including *The SBC and the 21st Century*, *Discerning Your Call to Ministry*, *Being a Christian*, and *Portraits of a Pastor*. Dr. Allen regularly posts essays on his website, [jasonkallen.com](http://jasonkallen.com), and hosts a weekly podcast, "Preaching and Preachers." He and his wife, Karen, are both from Mobile, Alabama, and have five children: Anne-Marie, Caroline, William, Alden, and Elizabeth.

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