

Journal of the  
**GRACE**  
Evangelical Society

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"Faith Alone In Christ Alone"



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# **HOW TO LEAD PEOPLE TO CHRIST, PART 1:**

## **THE CONTENT OF OUR MESSAGE\***

**ZANE C. HODGES**

Dallas, Texas

The title of my two-part article may lead you to expect a discussion on how to do personal evangelism. Hopefully you will get some ideas about personal work from these articles, but this is not my major objective. Instead I want to discuss how grace theology should affect the way we present the gospel, whether to individuals or to groups.

Nevertheless, before I address my subject, let me say this. I do genuinely enjoy talking to people about their eternal salvation. I have done so with many, many individuals over the years.

A close friend works with me in my office. When I first met him, he did not understand the way of salvation. But over a period of years, after many conversations on the subject, he became a believer. He understands that salvation is absolutely free even though most of the people he knows do not. The salvation of this friend is one of the most highly valued results of my years of service to Christ. It is an immense joy to know that our friendship will continue eternally in the kingdom of God.

What I am saying is this. I am a teacher by spiritual gift. But I enjoy doing the work of an evangelist as much, or more, than I enjoy teaching. So as I talk today about putting good theology into our soul-winning, I am talking about a most important issue. And I also try hard to practice what I am preaching to you today!

The question I am raising is a simple one: Have we allowed solid grace theology to properly affect the way we proclaim and share the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

I propose to address this question under two headings: (1) The content of our message and (2) Our invitation to respond to it. I will consider the first of these topics in this article, and the second, in Part 2.

\*Part 2 of this article will appear in the Spring 2001 issue of the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*.

## I. THE DESERTED ISLAND SCENARIO

Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable.

On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. But the only readable portions are: "Jesus therefore answered and said to them" (v 43) and "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life" (v 47).

Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus' words in John 6:47. Is he saved?

I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn't know enough. For example, he doesn't know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day. Needless to say, there is a lot more he doesn't know either, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus or the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus' words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term. Our Lord's exchange with Martha in John 11:25-27 demonstrates this clearly.

You remember it, don't you? "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?'" (John 11:25-26). Her reply is a declaration that she believes Him to be the Christ. Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (11:27).

Notice here that to believe that Jesus is the Christ means to believe that He guarantees resurrection and eternal life to every believer. But now let us look at John 4. In that famous passage we have the Samaritans saying to the woman who had encountered Jesus, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).



Observe that the common denominator to both passages is the term "Christ." On Martha's lips He is "the Christ, the Son of God," and on the lips of the Samaritans He is "the Christ, the Savior of the world." This is not an accidental or insignificant difference.

In Jewish prophecy and theology the promised Christ was also the Son of God—that is, He was to be a divine person. Recall the words of Isaiah: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given...and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6-7). But in Samaritan theology, the Messiah was thought of as a prophet and the woman at the well is led to faith through our Lord's prophetic ability to know her life. Her words, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (4:19) are a first step in the direction of recognizing Him as the Christ. There is no evidence that she or the other Samaritans understood the deity of our Lord.

But they *did* believe that he was the Christ. And John tells us in his first epistle that "whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (5:1)! A full theology of His person is not necessary to salvation. If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved.

Years ago, as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I washed dishes in the dining hall to pay for my meals. Often after I had finished this chore I hung around and talked theology with another student who swept up the kitchen every night. One night this student made a statement to me that I have never forgotten. He said something like this, "I know that I trusted Christ for salvation before I realized that Jesus was the Son of God." I was surprised because I had never heard anyone say this before.

But I did not quarrel with that statement then, nor would I quarrel with it now. It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being. We are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus.

That's why the man on the deserted island can get saved with only the barest minimum of information. When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ.

## II. WHAT ABOUT THE CROSS?

But what about the cross of Christ? Is it not essential for a man to know about that in order to be saved?

This leads to a question about the eleven apostles who believed in Jesus before He died. Did they understand the cross or the significance of His death? Did they understand the necessity of His resurrection? Of course they did not, as John 20:9 makes perfectly clear.

You recall that text. In recounting how the unnamed disciple came to believe that Jesus had risen, it is said of Peter and of himself that “as yet they did not know the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead.” The eleven disciples had believed in Jesus long before they understood that He must die for their sins and rise again. As Peter says so emphatically in John 6:68-69, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The disciples of Jesus were saved without knowledge of the death and resurrection of their Master. However, some people today would say, “But it’s different now that the cross is behind us. Now we have to believe in that as well.” Do we? Where does this idea come from? Certainly not from the Gospel of John.

Let us think a moment. The events described in John’s Gospel occurred before the cross. But the entire book was written afterward. In my view, it was written before 70 AD, but if we prefer a later date in the 80s, my point will be even more forceful. At the time of writing, the cross was years ago, and if belief in the work of the cross was by then necessary for salvation, John definitely gives us the wrong impression by stressing the way the cross dumbfounded even His most intimate disciples.

Let me put it to you this way. The Gospel of John is the only book in our New Testament canon that explicitly declares its purpose to be evangelistic. Of course, I am thinking of the famous theme statement found in John 20:30-31, where we read: “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord’s substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John’s



Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so.

Inasmuch as the key figures in John's narrative *did* believe in Jesus before they understood His atoning death and resurrection, it would have been even more essential for John to state that the content of faith had changed. But of course he does not do this. The simple fact is that the whole Fourth Gospel is designed to show that its readers can get saved in the same way as the people who got saved in John's narrative. To say anything other than this is to accept a fallacy. It is to mistakenly suppose that the Fourth Gospel presents the terms of salvation incompletely and inadequately. I sincerely hope no grace person would want to be stuck with a position like that.

Let me repeat. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!

What is my point? That we should not preach the cross of Christ to men? Not at all. I will make it emphatically clear a little later on that I think we should. Instead, I am arguing that we need to focus on the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life. What is that core issue?

Very simply it is this: We want people to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. Of course, we would like them to believe a lot more than this, but this at least must be believed. Our failure to clearly define our goal in evangelism can have a negative or impeding effect on our efforts to lead people to simple faith in Christ.

### III. ADDING TO THE GOSPEL

Most of us deplore the efforts made by Lordship people to add provisos to the message of faith in Christ. According to them, true faith has not occurred if it is not accompanied by surrender or by a commitment to live for God. We rightly reject such ideas.

But in our own circles, there is a tendency to add theological information to our message of faith. Some people even regard belief in the virgin birth as essential to salvation, and in the absence of such belief they would not admit that a person is saved. They do this despite the fact that the Gospel of John makes no effort to present this doctrine. In fact, in John 1:45, Philip announces to Nathaniel that he has found

the Messiah and he refers to Him as “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” John never bothers to set the record straight, since in any case Jesus was legally Joseph’s son. But no doubt Philip thought of Jesus as the naturally born son of Joseph and Mary.

I have also just finished pointing out that the disciples who did believe in Jesus did not understand the significance or necessity of His death and resurrection, according to John 20:9. And this was true despite the fact that John the Baptist announced Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). If we require an understanding of these truths before faith in Christ can be valid, we are obviously requiring more than the Gospel of John does.

Let me say this: All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires, are flawed. Evangelism based on such premises will also be flawed, because we will be tempted to test professions of faith in terms of the doctrines we think must be believed. Instead we should be focusing on whether an individual believes that Jesus has given him eternal life.

Evangelism, therefore, is intended to bring men and women to the place where they believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. If a person does this and we insist on more than that, we will be guilty of seeking to invalidate the simple exercise of faith that really does bring salvation.

Even in the grace movement, we are sorely tempted to make the gospel more complicated than God makes it. We can hardly bring ourselves to believe that a man who is largely ignorant of evangelical theology, yet genuinely trusts Christ for his eternal well-being, is truly saved. We have every reason to be embarrassed by this tendency on our part.

According to the apostle Paul, God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Moreover it will be “at the name of Jesus” that “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess” (Phil 2:10). The name of Jesus therefore is a mighty and exalted name, compared to which all other names in our age or in any other age are inferior and weak. No one has ever trusted in that name for his or her eternal well-being who has not been saved by doing so. And this is true no matter how little they might have known about the One whom that name represents.

I think we need a renewed emphasis on the power of Jesus’ name. As Peter declares in Acts 4:12, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for



there is no other *name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." If there is one salient fact about the proclamation of the gospel in this present age, it is that God saves all those, but only those, who believe in this name for eternal salvation.

Another way of saying this is that the name of Jesus is the one and only way to God. "No one comes to the Father, except through" Him (John 14:6). Naturally this eliminates the idea that a pagan person who has never heard the name of Jesus can be saved by believing in something like the light of creation. Therefore, that is why we must always have missionaries and witnesses to the saving power of Jesus' name. Without the name of Jesus there is no salvation for anyone anywhere in our world.

But the flip side of the coin is this: Everyone who believes in that name for eternal salvation is saved, regardless of the blank spots or the flaws in their theology in other respects. Another way of saying the same thing is this: No one has ever trusted that name and been disappointed.

In other words, God does not say to people, "You trusted my Son's name, but you didn't believe in His virgin birth, or His substitutionary atonement, or His bodily resurrection, so your faith is not valid." *We* say that, but God's Word does not.

Suppose I am in some deep financial trouble and a stranger named Sam, let us say, tells me he will get me out of my trouble if I will just trust him to do it. Perhaps Sam strikes me as a reliable and honest type person and I am convinced that he can and will do what he says. So I leave the matter in his hands and sure enough, he comes through and saves me from my financial problem with a generous infusion of cash. Did I believe in him? Sure.

But suppose after trusting him, I find out that he is a corporate CEO and a multi-millionaire. Would he later come back to me and say, well you didn't know enough about me when you trusted me, so I'm afraid I can't help you? Our deal is cancelled.

I hope you think this illustration would be an absurd way for this CEO to act. If he invites my faith and I give it to him, why should he deny the reality of that faith on the basis of my ignorance about his vast resources? On the other hand, is it not true that knowing these things up front would make it a whole lot easier to trust him to help me in the first place? I will say more about this in a moment.

Suffice it to say, however, that Jesus never fails anyone who trusts Him for everlasting salvation. No one on earth will ever possess more than a rudimentary understanding of our Savior's person and work. But if I know I can believe on Him for salvation, and I do, He is too great to fail me. It is this conviction that ought to arm us for the work of sharing the gospel with people.

In the final analysis, therefore, salvation is the result of believing in Jesus to provide it. Salvation is not the result of assenting to a detailed creed. Salvation does not even require an understanding of how it was provided for or made possible. All it requires is that the sinner understand the sufficiency of the name of Jesus to guarantee the eternal well-being of every believer. Thank God, salvation is so wonderfully simple!

#### IV. PREACHING THE CROSS

In the light of what we have just said, should we preach the cross of Christ? The answer to that is emphatically yes. And the most obvious reason for doing so is that this is what Paul and the other Apostles did.

According to Paul's own statement, when he came to Corinth to preach, he was "determined not to know anything among [them] except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Later in the epistle, Paul describes his gospel as one that declared "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3).

I need hardly tell you, do I, that the Greek word for "gospel" (*euangelion*) as well as the word for "preach the gospel" (*euangelizō*) are both words found frequently in Paul. Peter also uses these words a total of 4 times in his first epistle. Luke uses the verb many times in Luke and Acts, the noun twice in Acts. Matthew and Mark have both words.

Are you ready for this? John never uses either word in his gospel. Why? Because, as I have already suggested, John makes the Person of Jesus, not a set of doctrines, the object of the faith that brings eternal life. Fundamentally he is trying to get people to believe in Jesus for their eternal salvation.

But this is precisely where preaching the cross becomes so important. Why should men trust Christ for eternal life? The gospel gives us the wonderful answer. They should do so because Jesus has



bought their salvation at the cost of His own precious blood. And God has placed His seal on the work of the cross by raising Jesus from the dead. As Paul states: He “was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom 4:25).

The preaching of the cross greatly facilitates the process of bringing men to faith in God’s Son.

## V. DEALING WITH SOULS

This brings us to the bedrock issue of leading people to Christ. After all, that’s the title of this article and I mean by it just what the title says. We need to lead men to *Christ!* Winning souls is a matter of leading people to a Person to whom they may safely entrust their eternal destiny. We are not leading them to a *message*, but to Jesus Christ as the object of their faith.

But more often than not, we have difficulty leading them *to* Christ, unless we lead them *through* the full gospel message. The gospel message is normally the avenue through which men and women come to understand why they can trust completely in the Savior. To be sure, trust in Christ *can occur* without a knowledge of the cross, but more often than not it doesn’t. The message of the cross clarifies God’s way of salvation.

On a very practical level, when I am dealing with an unsaved person, I find that if I simply tell him he only needs to believe in Christ, this usually doesn’t make sense to him. Why should it be so easy? Why are not works required? To the unregenerate American mind, it doesn’t sound reasonable.

So I find it not only useful, but indeed essential, to explain that the Lord Jesus Christ bought our way to heaven by paying for all our sins. In recent years I have liked to emphasize that He paid for all the sins we would ever commit from the day of our birth to the day of our death. This serves to stress the completeness of the payment He made. It is usually only in the light of so perfect a payment that people can come to see the reasonableness of a salvation that is absolutely free.

I say to people, “Jesus paid it all” and there is nothing left for you to do or to pay. All you have to do is believe in Him for the free gift of everlasting life.

One of my favorite illustrations goes like this: If a friend bought you a Rolls Royce and paid for it in full and offered it to you as a free

gift, wouldn't he be hurt, or even insulted, if you insisted on paying for it yourself? In the same way, if we try to do or pay something to go to heaven, even though Jesus paid it all, aren't we insulting His great sacrifice and treating it as if it were not enough?

Most unsaved people can understand that point, even if they don't believe its true. The Savior's work on the cross thus becomes a powerful argument that He should be trusted for eternal life.

And apart from the cross, for most modern Americans, the offer of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, just doesn't compute. Even after hearing it, it still may not compute. But by offering the truth of the gospel to people, we give the Holy Spirit something to work with in their hearts. And in the final analysis, it is only the Spirit of God who can sweep away the blindness of the human heart so that the glorious light of the gospel of Christ may shine into unsaved hearts.

Nevertheless, let it never be forgotten: If anyone has faith in Jesus as the One who secures his or her eternal destiny, that person is born of God. Jesus has never yet failed anyone who trusted in His name for eternal salvation. And He never will.

# DID THE RICH YOUNG RULER HEAR THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS?

HAL M. HALLER

Lithonia, Georgia

The gospel according to Jesus has been a hot topic since the first century (cf. Gal 1:6-9). A book by that name was published a decade ago. Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler was used prominently by the author in defense of his thesis that to be saved one must yield everything to the Lord Jesus.

Did the rich young ruler (RYR) hear the gospel according to Jesus? Did he hear the "good news" of the gospel, or did he receive nothing but "bad news"? Did he hear the message of grace, or did Jesus minister the law to him so that he might be prepared to receive the message of grace at a future date?

This article will also explore two alternative interpretations: that Jesus was merely demanding proof from the young man that he was truly saved,<sup>1</sup> or that Jesus showed the RYR that he fell short of God's standard and that He showed the disciples that sacrificial discipleship results in eternal rewards.<sup>2</sup>

This presentation is based primarily on parallel accounts in the Synoptic Gospels of a certain incident that took place as Jesus was entering Judea for the last time and heading towards the cross (Matt 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-22; and Luke 18:18-27).<sup>3</sup> A man ran to Jesus

<sup>1</sup>"Obedience to Christ would *demonstrate* faith in the person of Christ and faith alone could bring the man to a righteousness that would admit him to the Messianic Kingdom" (J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981], 360). This view holds that the RYR was hearing the results of the gospel message as a test as to whether or not he believed.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom* (Miami Springs: Conley & Schoettle, 1978), 127-41; Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 186ff; Arlen Chitwood, "The Rich Young Ruler," in *The Heavenly Calling* XV, No. 1 (Norman, OK: The Lamp Broadcast, Inc., January 1989), 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>These passages contain special details, some of which are found only in one or two of the accounts. This is in keeping with the unique purpose of



and knelt before Him (Mark 10:17). Both actions speak readily of his enthusiasm and sincerity. Matthew alone mentions him as young; only Luke states that he was a ruler;<sup>4</sup> but all three Synoptic Gospels recognize that he was wealthy. Hence, he is typically referred to as the Rich Young Ruler.

## I. THE VIEW THAT JESUS PRESENTED THE GOSPEL TO THE RICH YOUNG RULER

A number of writers and commentators particularly identify the following words as a clear presentation of the gospel by Jesus which, if followed, will result in the hearer obtaining eternal life.

If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Matt 19:21, NKJV).

One thing you lack...Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me (Mark 10:21).

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writing for each Gospel writer. However, when these passages are taken together, they present a fuller picture of what actually took place. The reader is referred to Gleason L. Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 330-31 for an interpretive harmonization of the Synoptic accounts. For those who object to Archer's procedure as too simplistic, the reader is urged to consult Kelly Osborne, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Gospel Interpretation: A Test Case" in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 289-316. See also Robert L. Thomas "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics" in the same work, 356-60.

<sup>4</sup>Was the RYR a religious leader or a civic leader? The traditional understanding is that he was a religious leader, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin. If a civil leader, he is possibly a magistrate or official of the high priest. If religious, he is possibly a synagogue official or leader of the Pharisees. See Darrell Bock *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 2:1476.



You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me (Luke 18:22).

In commenting on Matthew 19, John F. MacArthur, Jr., states:

There we read of a young man who asks in the clearest possible terms how he can lay hold of eternal life. If there was ever a place to look for a *straightforward presentation of the gospel according to Jesus*, we would expect it here.<sup>5</sup>

MacArthur's understanding of the gospel according to Jesus is as follows:

If we could condense the truth of this entire passage into a single statement, it would be Luke 14:33: "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

Our Lord gave this young man a test. He had to choose between his possessions and Jesus Christ. He failed the test. No matter what points of doctrine he might affirm, because he was unwilling to turn from what else he loved most, he could not be a disciple of Christ. Salvation is only for those who are willing to give Christ first place in their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Walter J. Chantry sees the account of the rich young ruler as "a vivid instance of the elements essential to Gospel preaching which are found everywhere in the New Testament."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to paraphrase Jesus' challenge to the young man:

<sup>5</sup>John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, 1994), 84-85.

<sup>6</sup>MacArthur, 85. Darrell Bock, who also believes Jesus spoke the gospel to the RYR, states regarding Jesus' call to him, "God is to be trusted and to have first place," *Luke*, 1483 and "To obey Jesus is to give first place to Him," *Luke*, 1475.

<sup>7</sup>Walter J. Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 16; But, see D. A. Carson's comment in *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 110-11.

I will give you eternal life if you come and follow me. You become my servant. Submit your mind to my teachings; for I am the Great Prophet. Bow your will to my commandments; for I am your King. Only on these terms do I offer any salvation or life.<sup>8</sup>

The gospel according to Jesus as understood by MacArthur and Chantry, as well as a host of other commentators, is that Jesus framed the gospel message in a call for committed discipleship, surrender to the Lordship of Christ, and repentance of (turning from) sin.<sup>9</sup> Chantry even goes to the extent of equating the gospel and law. He asserts:

When Jesus said, "Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor" he was preaching the tenth commandment in an applicatory fashion. Christ was using God's word, "Thou shalt not covet," as a knife to lance the festering sin of greed in the man's soul.<sup>10</sup>

First, Chantry points out the young man's particular sin of covetousness to measure the depth of his greed. But then he maintains that "it was also an essential demand of the Gospel that he forsake his wealth."<sup>11</sup> This demand he equates with repentance, a change of mind entailing a turning from sin. Thus, Chantry apparently regards the

<sup>8</sup>Chantry, 60.

<sup>9</sup>Ernest C. Reisinger, *Lord and Christ: The Implications of Lordship for Faith and Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), 67; Robert Lescelius, *Lordship Salvation: Some Crucial Questions and Answers* (Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 1992), 108; Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Great Option: A Study of the Lordship Controversy," *Baptist Reformation Review* 5:61 (Spring 1976), 75; Arend J. ten Pas, *The Lordship of Christ* (n.p.: Ross House, 1978), 5; Jim Wallis, "Few to Belief...Few to Obedience," *Sojourners* 5:3 (March 1976), 21, 22; Frank Stagg, "Matthew," *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 190; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 368; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 424; James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 82; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18 Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 33B:558.

<sup>10</sup>Chantry, 44.

<sup>11</sup>Chantry, 47.



demands of the law and the demands of the gospel as essentially one and the same. He sees the law as a diagnostic tool to expose the sin of the sinner, but he also sees it as "a condition of having eternal life."<sup>12</sup> The commands to "go, sell, give, come, and follow" are the equivalent of "repent and believe."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Chantry, 21. MacArthur seemingly backs away from this in saying, "To suggest the law is a means to eternal life clouds the issue of faith." At the point at which Jesus advises keeping the commandments, MacArthur states, "Our Lord revealed nothing of himself or the facts of the gospel. He did not invite the man to believe," (MacArthur, *Gospel*, 90). MacArthur indicates that Jesus was using the law as a means to indicate to the RYR "how far he fell short...Evangelism must measure sinners against the perfect law of God so that they can see their deficiency" (MacArthur, *Gospel*, 91). So far, so good. MacArthur does a commendable job in describing the proper function of the law, but then he "turns around and calls this the gospel, as if the man could have been saved by following Jesus' instructions." (Rick Ritchie, "The Law According to Jesus" in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992], 76). According to MacArthur the real problem was not that the RYR did not keep the law at all and should have fled to Christ; "the problem was that he did not keep the law enough and, therefore, should have sold his possessions." (Michael Horton "Introduction: Don't Judge a Book by its Cover" in *Christ the Lord*, 46-47.) It is of note that Horton is here contrasting MacArthur's exegesis with that of John Calvin as expressed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John Martin seems to come to a similar conclusion as MacArthur. After stating that one must keep the law perfectly for eternal life and that no one can obtain eternal life by following the law, he turns around and says, "The only course of action left to an individual is to follow Jesus in order to obtain eternal life." ("Luke" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* ed. By John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], II New Testament Edition, 250.) James Montgomery Boice states, "The rich young man was unwilling to give up his possessions. He loved them more than he loved Jesus, and he could not be saved without loving God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength" (*Christ's Call to Discipleship*, 152). Thus Boice believes that the keeping of the first and greatest commandment (Matt 22:38) is required for eternal life. Glasscock comments, "Unquestionably, to make keeping the commandments a requirement for eternal life would be considered heresy" (Glasscock, 390).

<sup>13</sup>Chantry, 47; See also William Hendriksen, *The New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 396. He believes the commands of Jesus are the equivalent of "trust completely in Me." Bock also, *Luke*, 1482.

In their view, it is generally acknowledged that the command given to the rich young ruler for obtaining eternal life is a special command not enjoined upon all. Jesus may alter the demand, depending upon what sin is most binding upon the person.<sup>14</sup> What is held in common, according to this view, is the need for wholehearted commitment to Christ, that of giving Him first place and being willing to forsake sin.<sup>15</sup> The demand is costly, to be sure, but the reward of eternal life is worth the cost and necessary to enjoin upon the sinner, lest he get the impression that God encourages antinomianism in His eternal kingdom.

The meeting of such stringent requirements for committed discipleship, although humanly impossible because of an inherited sin nature, is presumed to be doable because of the grace of God which enables one to accomplish what the rich young ruler was incapable of doing.<sup>16</sup> Proponents of the above view shun the notion that Jesus was requiring sinless perfection or that a decision for Christ will result in a fully righteous life with no room for growth or occasional capitulation to sinful desire.<sup>17</sup> It is not perfection, but direction towards maturity

<sup>14</sup>Louis Barbieri, *Mark Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 227, 228; Lane, 367; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 299; Boice, 82; Lescelius, 108.

<sup>15</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 491. He uses the term "wholeheartedness" to describe the response called for by Jesus. Hagner uses the terms "absolute commitment" and "total uninhibited commitment" (Hagner, 558).

<sup>16</sup>MacArthur, 95: "Furthermore, repentance and submission are no more human works than faith itself. They are every bit the work of God—essential aspects of God's work in a believing heart." The introduction of the concept of grace (i.e., the work of God) allegedly provides protection from the charge that those who advocate this point of view are teaching salvation by works. Those who advocate grace producing the works that discipleship demands are vociferous in their denial that they are teaching salvation by works. Genuine faith will produce commitment. For instance, Morris, after acknowledging the need for "wholeheartedness" states, "This does not mean that getting into heaven is a matter of rewards for meritorious acts" (Morris, 492). Bock, however, calls eternal life a "reward." ("A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *BibSac* 146 [January-March 1989], 28.) A reward, as Morris correctly understands, is merited or earned. Cf. Romans 4:4-5.

<sup>17</sup>MacArthur, 95.



that is important. Perfect keeping of the commandments and the demands of discipleship is not enjoined, but *willingness* to follow Jesus, whatever the cost.<sup>18</sup>

## **II. THE VIEW THAT JESUS DEMANDED PERFECTION OF THE RICH YOUNG RULER**

In contrast, I believe that Jesus asked something of the rich young ruler that was absolutely impossible, because He was requiring perfection. Theoretically there are two ways to gain eternal life. One way is to earn that life by good works. The other is to receive it as a gift. The first option is impossible to achieve, since it would involve keeping the law continuously and perfectly, something that no sinful son of Adam could possibly do. The second option is possible since it involves a humble trust in God to provide in Christ what man cannot provide for himself—the perfect righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom. That man should be required only to believe for initial and ultimate salvation is indeed good news (Rom 1:16; 4:5).

This does not mean that good works are not to be expected between the two points of regeneration and resurrection. Man is saved for good works (Eph 2:10) and will give evidence of good works at the judgment (Matt 25:34-40; John 5:29) as a result of God's working in his life (Phil 2:13), but neither law-keeping nor radical discipleship is ultimately a requirement for salvation under grace.

### **A. KINGDOM ENTRANCE CONDITIONED UPON CHILDLIKE FAITH AND HUMILITY (MATT 19:13-15; MARK 10:13-16; LUKE 18:15-17)**

The first clue that Jesus is not giving the RYR the gospel is found in the incident that takes place immediately prior to the coming of the RYR to Jesus. In the preceding context in all three Synoptic Gospels, kingdom entrance is conditioned on childlike receptivity, trust, and

<sup>18</sup>MacArthur, 94. But see Ryrie's comment on *willingness* in Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 179.

humility (Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17).<sup>19</sup> One must receive the kingdom as a little child or he will not be permitted to enter it (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17).

There is a jarring contrast between the childlike way into the kingdom as described to the disciples and the way of entrance into the kingdom as prescribed to the RYR. In his play *King Richard II*, Shakespeare pictures the king in his lonely dungeon cell contemplating his inscrutable fate. One of the issues that remains unresolved in his mind is the difference between the way the Lord dealt with the children and the way He dealt with the RYR.

<sup>19</sup>Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 225-26. Caird identifies childlikeness with "receptivity" (G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* [New York: The Seabury Press, 1963], 204). Walter W. Wessel quotes with approval Rawlinson who agrees basically with Caird that the kingdom must be received as an undeserved gift from God. That is, the childlikeness Jesus emphasizes is one of receptivity to that which is offered and a dependency on the provision of others ("Mark" *Expositors Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 8:713). Rawlinson, however, downplays (denies?) the aspect of humility as a childlike quality although others such as Carson (422) and Summers do not. (Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* [Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1972], 212.) Note, particularly, Matt 18:3, 4 where childlikeness is definitely associated with humility. Trust (or receptivity) go together with humility. One humbles himself by realizing he must depend upon another for entrance into the kingdom. It is interesting that just prior to the account of the little children in Luke, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is told by Jesus (Luke 18:9-14). The contrast was between one who pridefully professed to be close to God and one who humbly cried out to God for mercy, admitting he was an undeserving sinner. It was the sinner, not the Pharisee who went home justified. Following this parable are recorded two real life situations where the contrast is repeated. The childlike might be said to be justified because they were humble, but the RYR was not because he was too self-confident. The childlike have no accumulated merit (18:9-14), no sense of greatness or self-sufficiency (18:15-17), no confidence in riches nor self-righteousness (18:18-30). If they depend upon God to provide what they cannot provide for themselves, their salvation is possible (18:27).



For no thought is contended. The better sort,  
 As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd  
 With scruples and do set the word against itself  
 Against the word:  
 As thus, "Come, little ones," and then again,  
 "It is as hard to come as for a camel  
 To thread the postern of a small needle's eye."<sup>20</sup>

Walter Lowrie calls attention to the "deep dissonance" between the two accounts by observing, "A good man who has kept all the commandments from his youth but shrinks from the extremest act of heroism cannot enter where the children go so easily."<sup>21</sup> Such tension evaporates, however, when the interpreter recognizes that both messages cannot possibly be the gospel.

The second clue the RYR did not hear the gospel is provided in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee is self-congratulatory, as is the rich young ruler. He has confidence in his own righteousness. The tax collector, on the other hand, acknowledges his sin, deeming himself to be unworthy in God's presence. He simply and humbly pleads for mercy. For this he is justified before God, whereas the Pharisee is not. Jesus contrasts the Pharisee's self-righteous pride with the tax collector's humility (v 14). The Pharisee needs a knowledge of sin that only an honest look at the law can give. As long as the Pharisee thinks God accepts him, he cannot receive the good news that his acceptance is secured.

## **B. KINGDOM ENTRANCE CONDITIONED UPON PERFECTION (MATT 19:16-22; MARK 10:17-22; LUKE 18:18-23)**

In the account of the RYR, we see that Jesus was attempting to correct some faulty understandings that formed a barrier to a true understanding of the gospel message. Jesus' attempt may be properly

<sup>20</sup>"King Richard II," *The Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., n.d.), 380.

<sup>21</sup>Walter Lowrie, *Jesus According to St. Mark* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1929), 383. The author identifies the difference between the two accounts as one of "the contradictions of the Holy Scripture."

described then as pre-evangelism. Until these barriers were removed, there was no sense in giving the RYR the gospel. As far as we know from the text, the RYR never made it past these barriers.<sup>22</sup>

The first misunderstanding relates to the RYR's concept of goodness; the second to his view of Jesus; the third to who he was in the sight of a holy God; and the fourth to what was required for obtaining or inheriting eternal life.

### 1. Misunderstanding goodness.

The RYR approached with a salutation and a question that contained the word "good." He addressed Jesus as "*Good* [Mark, Luke] Master." He asked, "What *good* [Matt] thing shall I do, that I may obtain [Matt] (or: inherit [Mark, Luke]) eternal life?"<sup>23</sup> The young man does not define the word "good," but Jesus, who can plumb the depths of the human heart knew that he was using it in a casual manner, perhaps in thoughtless flattery which would expect a congratulatory reply in kind.<sup>24</sup> This explains why Jesus asked why the RYR applied the word "good," to Him. Although this was a scripturally sanctioned term that could conceivably be used to describe people in a relative sense,<sup>25</sup> it was

<sup>22</sup>"So Jesus never did give the gospel to the young man. The entire account consists of Jesus exposing the youth's sinfulness...Jesus never got to the stage of evangelism. He remained at the 'pre-evangelism' stage of making the young man face his sinfulness." (Keith A. Shearer, "Implications on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone for Evangelistic Terminology," Unpublished M. Div. Thesis: Grace Theological Seminary [May 1983], 86.) Also, Gordon Franz, "Greatest Fish Stories Ever Told" Unpublished paper (September 1992), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup>Archer, 330.

<sup>24</sup>"...in addressing him as 'Good Teacher' the ruler is engaged in a word game deeply rooted in concerns with status. According to this linguistic system, one commendation deserves another." (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997], 655.)

<sup>25</sup>Used in Judaism of a good person. See Prov 12:2; 14:14; T. Sim. 4:4; T. Dan. 1:4; T. Asher 4:1; b. *Ta'an.* 24b; Matt 12:35=Luke 6:45; 1:6-7 (Bock, 1476).

most appropriately used for God who was the standard and source of all goodness.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus reminds the RYR that this God is uniquely good. He has no peer. He is perfect (cf. 1 John 1:50) and reveals His moral perfection through His law (cf. Rom 7:12).<sup>27</sup> When one needs to know *how good one must be* to spend eternity in fellowship with a holy God, there is only one standard against which goodness can be measured: the character of God as revealed in the will of God. To be a good man, as Jesus was in the truest sense (e.g. sinless, Heb 7:26; 1 Pet 3:11; 1 John 3:5), the RYR needed to be fit to dwell with a holy God for all eternity. This required total, unequivocal, continuous, flawless, and unsullied goodness that could be tested by full conformity to God's will, that is, to His law. The RYR had sought to honor Jesus by ascribing to Him goodness, but he received a rebuke instead, because he had not thought through the full meaning of "good" for Jesus, for God, and for himself. E. Earle Ellis is correct in saying, "The man's casual use of 'good' reveals the poverty of his moral perception."<sup>28</sup>

## 2. A misunderstanding of the person of Christ.

The RYR did indeed come to the right person to find the answer to his question regarding his eternal destiny, but he had a defective understanding of who that person was. When Jesus asked him, "Why do you call Me good?"<sup>29</sup> the RYR revealed that he thought of Jesus as

<sup>26</sup>"True goodness belongs to God, as the OT testifies (Pss. 106:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1; 1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13)." (I. Howard Marshall *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978], 684.) "One of the titles given God in Jewish writing was: 'The Good One of the world.'" (J. W. Shephard, *The Christ of the Gospels: An Exegetical Study* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1957], 458.)

<sup>27</sup>In Matt 19:17 the "good" is to be understood as a reference to the Torah... "Torah is defined as 'good' in m. 'Abot 6:2; b. Ber 28b... God has given the commandments precisely to define righteousness, and Jesus, loyal to the law, stands behind them" (Hagner, 33B:557).

<sup>28</sup>E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), 219.

<sup>29</sup>Rabbis were typically not addressed as good (Marshall, 684). Only a fourth century example can be cited from the Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit*



just another human rabbi, albeit a particularly moral one. There is no evidence that he regarded Him as the Son of God.

Jesus is not denying His sinlessness nor His deity. The exclusivity of Jesus' claim clearly implies that every human being is sinful, including the RYR. But Jesus as a human being is not sinful, nor is He just a man, according to the New Testament. He could have legitimately accepted the RYR's accolade with this deeper understanding of goodness in mind, since He was sinless deity and since He had kept all of the Father's commandments from his youth (cf. Luke 18:21). But, He wished the young man to reflect on the way he was applying the term both to Him and the good things he supposedly thought he could perform in order to merit eternal life. Since only God has the right to be called good in the absolute sense, if the young man continued to apply that term to Christ, he could do no less than to recognize Him as God! It was essential that the RYR have some perception of Christ's supernatural nature as the Son of God in order to be saved (John 8:24; cf. Rom 10:9, 13). This Jesus did not explicitly divulge to him anywhere in the account, unless an implicit claim is recognized in Christ's command to sell all and follow Him.

### 3. Misunderstanding concerning himself.

The RYR's understanding of himself was also defective. He did not recognize that he was a helpless and hopeless sinner in need of a Savior. When Jesus stated that goodness was exclusively a quality of deity, "humanity's sinfulness is implicitly acknowledged."<sup>30</sup> This calls

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24b (in H. L. Strack und P. Billerbeck 2:24f). However, David Bivin ("A Hebraic Nuance of *lego*: Key to Understanding Luke 18:18-19" *Jerusalem Perspective* [January/June 1994], 41) disputes this example as a direct address. While he contends that no one is ever addressed, "Good man," "Good sir," "Good teacher," or the like, he does cite examples from ancient Jewish literature, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, demonstrating that men in general may be called, "good," (37, 41). Certainly the Bible does use the word "good," in a relative sense in the passages he cites, such as Prov 12:2 and Matt 5:45 and 12:35. But in the RYR pericope the term is most properly used by Jesus not to describe the general pattern of one's life, but absolute goodness.

<sup>30</sup>W. D. Davis and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* vol. III (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 43. John J. Pilch, however, states that Jesus' response does

into question whether anyone can do the good things required to please a holy God. The RYR was not fully appraised of how sinful he was in comparison to the absolutely good God from whom he wished to secure such a priceless treasure as eternal life. Until he recognized that he was spiritually bankrupt, he would not know that he could not pay the cost necessary for eternal life. We are reminded of Paul's assessment of mankind drawn from Old Testament Scripture, "There is *none* who does *good, not even one*" (Rom 3:12; see Pss 14:3 and 53:3). If no one is good, including the RYR, how can anyone possibly qualify to dwell with a holy God forever?

#### 4. Misunderstanding the way to eternal life.

The fourth misunderstanding the young man had was in thinking he could perform something exemplary enough to ensure God's acceptance of him into His kingdom. He falsely assumed that he could merit or earn eternal life.<sup>31</sup> It was a common belief that eternal life could be merited,<sup>32</sup> and many Jews believed that a specific act of

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not imply that humankind is evil and is simply manifesting "the cultural humility expected from anyone who is paid a compliment" ("Sickness and Healing in Luke-Acts" in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* ed. By Jerome H. Neyrey [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 189). One must ask, however, if the observance of cultural niceties is a sufficient explanation for Jesus' response in light of the subsequent context and the extent to which it depends on showing the RYR that he is not as good as he thinks he is. And, certainly, humility for Jesus would not require anything that was a denial of His innate goodness.

<sup>31</sup>"Irrespective of what 'good' refers to, the man approaches Jesus with a question showing how far he is from the humble faith that, as Jesus has just finished saying, characterizes all who belong to the kingdom (vv 13-15). He wants to earn eternal life; and in the light of v 20, he apparently thinks there are good things he can do, beyond the demands of the law, by which he can assure his salvation" (Carson, "Matthew," 8:422).

<sup>32</sup>William E. Brown, "The New Testament Concept of the Believer's Inheritance" Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984, 34-40 provides a full discussion of this common Jewish belief citing numerous Jewish sources.



goodness could win eternal life.<sup>33</sup> The young man no doubt held these beliefs in common with many of his contemporaries. "If one is going to earn eternal life, then acts of righteousness are required."<sup>34</sup> But the RYR was mistaken in thinking that a sinful person such as himself could merit the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.<sup>35</sup>

### III. JESUS' STRATEGY IN DEALING WITH THE RYR'S FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

Jesus could have used a frontal approach by lecturing the RYR on the four misconceptions that were obstructing his entrance into the kingdom. Instead, He used a more subtle approach—one intended to promote self-discovery. He raised two questions regarding the use of the word "good," with regard to His own person and the nature of goodness itself. His strategy was to show that the RYR was overconfident about his desire and ability to accomplish something good enough to earn eternal life.

If God is absolutely good, so is His will that flows from His very nature. Therefore, Jesus directs the young man to the commandments, since they define what is good. He is especially clear about what is required to obtain eternal life, "You know the commandments [Mark, Luke];<sup>36</sup> keep them [Matt]."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 422. Carson makes reference to Strack und Billerbeck: *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, I:808ff, for specific historical examples.

<sup>34</sup>Bock, *Luke*, 1478. So also John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 2:128.

<sup>35</sup>The concept of eternal life that the RYR held was no doubt one reflected in current Jewish thought. Daniel 12:2 provided the concept's association with the resurrection of the dead in contrast to eternal punishment (cf. Matt 18:8; 25:41). See Rudolph Bultmann, "zaō" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. By Gerhard Kittel in German, trans. And ed. By Geoffrey W. Bromiley in English (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 2:856-57.

<sup>36</sup>"You know the commandments' (*entolē*, 1:6) is tantamount to an injunction to obey them" (Marshall, 684-85).

<sup>37</sup>Archer, 300.



Theoretically, a man could inherit eternal life by keeping the law (cf. Luke 10:28; Rom 10:5).<sup>38</sup> However, the requirement for keeping the law involved no less than perfect obedience.<sup>39</sup> To be saved by the law one would have to keep it continuously without interruption. And there were no exceptions—it applied to everyone. As Gal 3:10 says, “Cursed is *everyone* who does not *continue* to do *everything* written in the book of the law.” That is why Paul concludes, “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because ‘the righteous will live by faith’” (3:11).

“The reason for the Lord’s answer was to make the young man, and those around who could hear, understand that no one is capable of earning eternal life.”<sup>40</sup> But the RYR did not know this yet, even after Jesus told him of his sinfulness.

The young man, referring to the commandments, asks, “Which ones?”<sup>41</sup> Unsatisfied, he still believes he can do something to earn eternal life. Jesus answers him *as though his assumption were true*—that he can do something good enough to merit entrance into the kingdom.

<sup>38</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, (“The Law as God’s Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness” *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. By Wayne G. Strickland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993], 190) disputes this. Kaiser is answered by Douglas Moo on 219.

<sup>39</sup>“Perfect obedience to his law is the only condition upon which God will give any man eternal life (Matt 19:17). As Luther said, ‘The law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope.’” John Robbins, (“Ethics and Justification by Faith Alone,” by John Robbins. *The Trinity Review*, No. 127 [Sept 1995], 3.) One can imagine Martin Luther rolling over in his grave if he were to hear Donald Hagner’s comment: “The discipleship of the kingdom is not *simply* a matter of obeying commandments; it requires an absolute commitment...” (Hagner, 558, italics mine). Luther had about as much internal commitment that an unsaved man could have, but realized in great frustration that his keeping of God’s law was anything but simply and easily accomplished even in its external form.

<sup>40</sup>Ed Glasscock, *Matthew* in Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 390.

<sup>41</sup>“The man is not satisfied. Perhaps he knows the rabbinic debates about the weightier matters of the law or about how to sum up the law in a commandment or two. Perhaps he is looking for a loophole to avoid obeying certain less desirable commands” (Blomberg, 297). A parallel account in Luke

What Jesus does next is to focus on the young man's conscience to awaken it to the fact that the avenue of law-keeping for eternal life is closed for him because the standards are too high. He tests the RYR's claim to be capable of doing something worthy enough to earn eternal life. He moves from enjoining obedience to the commandments in general to specifying particular commandments in the second table of the law. "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother."<sup>42</sup> In Matthew, Jesus concludes by saying, "and, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love of neighbor is the summary statement encompassing the commandments in the second part of the Decalogue.<sup>43</sup> As Paul later comments, "He who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8).

So far the young man had learned nothing new. Rabbinic theology had taught him that the keeping of the commands of the Torah,

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10 shows that a lawyer used a question to hedge on his responsibility to love his neighbor after Jesus told him this commandment was necessary for eternal life (v 27). On the other hand the RYR may be giving Jesus a challenge to name a commandment he has not kept!

<sup>42</sup>Most mss. in Mark include "Do not defraud." Archer omits the command "Do not defraud" from the list of commandments given to the RYR. While some manuscripts do indeed omit this prohibition, the standard printed Greek texts such as Nestle and UBS retain *Mē apostrepēsēs* as the preferred reading. The UBS textual apparatus does indicate that there is significant doubt as to whether the preferred reading or the reading in the apparatus is the superior one. If the command is part of the original text, it is usually regarded by commentators as a variation on the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," or possibly a substitute for the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." See C. S. Mann, *Mark* in the Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 400; C. Marvin Pate, *Luke* in Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 226; Cranfield, 329; Hendriksen, 393. The basic rationale for coveting is "fraud being a manifestation of coveting" (Wessel, 715). However, stealing can be a form of fraud and may have particular relevance to a man of wealth as well. Osborne prefers believing that the command "provided a general summary of four negative commandments of the second table" (Osborne, 293).

<sup>43</sup>Robert L. Thomas "The Rich Young Man in Matthew" *Grace Theological Journal* 3:2 (Fall 1982), 257.



controlling the evil impulse by the good, was “the prerequisite for participation in the life of the future world.”<sup>44</sup>

The young man replies with a sense of self-satisfaction and relief that he has wholly kept the commandments. “If the eternal inheritance could be secured on so simple a condition as keeping of the Decalogue, it was his already.”<sup>45</sup> “All these I have kept, [Mark, Luke] from my youth up”<sup>46</sup>—that is, from the age of accountability, his early teen years.<sup>47</sup> This assertion is framed as a statement of *absolute compliance*. The language is perfectionistic in tone and does not allow for admission of failure. “The young man’s response is easily the most self-righteous boast to be found anywhere in the New Testament...how readily this man might have joined in the prayer of the Pharisee, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other men.’”<sup>48</sup> But indeed he was like other men. He was not the “good” man he boasted to be.

At this point the RYR still doesn’t get it! He is a sinner. There is none good but God. He is oblivious to his depravity. As Swete has said, “The deeper meaning and larger requirements of the Law were yet hidden from him.”<sup>49</sup> By comparison with others, the RYR must surely have been among the cream of the crop in his attendance to moral duty; yet, how could a holy God accept his flawed righteousness to grant eternal life with Himself? Would such a God give perfection in the resurrection for imperfection during this life?<sup>50</sup>

“What do I still lack?” he asked. Jesus could have cited numerous situations in the young man’s life where he had failed in thought, word, or deed to carry out each of the commandments He had cited. Still assuming, for the sake of argument, that the young man was correct in his assessment, He zeroed in on an area of weakness that would prove

<sup>44</sup>Walter Grundmann, “*agathōs*,” TDNT, 2:15.

<sup>45</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 225.

<sup>46</sup>Archer, 330.

<sup>47</sup>Bock, 1480.

<sup>48</sup>Zane C. Hodges *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 185.

<sup>49</sup>Swete, 225.

<sup>50</sup>The RYR no doubt agreed with contemporary Jewish understanding of the future life: “...the eschatological life is regarded as a life without sin” (Bultmann, 2:857).



to be a fatal stab wound to his conscience, shattering the self-assured myth that he had kept the law. Jesus advised the RYR:

If you wish to be *perfect* (*ei theleis telios einai*; cf. V. 17: *ei de theleis eis tēn zōēn eiselthein*) [Matt], go [Matt, Mark] and sell all the possessions [Matt] you have, and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come and follow Me.<sup>51</sup>

Perfection then is the standard necessary for obtaining eternal life. As Jeremias notes:

In later Judaism the basic meaning of “perfect” was “fully righteous,” one who keeps the whole Torah... It follows then that according to Jesus’ view, to give all one’s possessions for the poor is part of the complete fulfillment of the law.<sup>52</sup>

It was not uncommon for many Jews of Jesus’ day to assume that they were *sinless* in their complete keeping of the law.<sup>53</sup> Strack und Billerbeck notes:

“That man possesses the ability to fulfill the Commandments of God perfectly was so firmly believed by the Rabbis, that they spoke in all seriousness of people who had kept the whole Law from A to Z.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup>See Archer, 230.

<sup>52</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* trans by F. H. and C. H. Cave from the German (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 127.

<sup>53</sup>Davies and Allison, 48. While admitting the view of some ancient Jews that this word refers to sinlessness, for which they cite numerous ancient Jewish sources, the authors dismiss such a possibility. However, they do not give adequate reason for doing so in light of the context. This term must be understood in light of the way Jesus has used the word “good,” as perfection at the very outset of the conversation. Davies and Allison settle for “complete” as the meaning of the word, *teleios*, in this context.

<sup>54</sup>Strack und Billerbeck, 1:814. Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), 423: “That it was possible to keep the whole law is an idea which is frequent in the Talmud. Abraham, Moses, and Aaron were held to have done so. R. Chanina says to the Angel of Death, “‘Bring me the book of the Law and see whether there is anything written in it which I have not kept’ (Schoettg. I, pp. 160-61).”

The RYR believed he had surely attained this state. But he was still unaware of how far short he came of the perfect goodness of God.

Some take the word “perfect” to mean “mature” or “complete.”<sup>55</sup> Their implication is that Jesus was calling the RYR to mature discipleship which would allow for some failings. But the word should be defined primarily by its context; here Jesus is setting before the RYR the standard of absolute goodness which belongs only to God and is necessary to enter the kingdom. The only other time the word appears in Matthew is in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus states, “Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48). The standard of perfect love in that context is measured by the holy character of the Father. For the saved, this serves as an *ideal* to indeed strive for; but, it is *unattainable* in the sense described here, since it requires one to be as good as God. That is why the Sermon on the Mount is useful not only in instructing saved disciples, but also in helping the lost to see their need of a righteousness higher than their own in order to be saved (cf. Matt 5:20).

At this point Jesus could have told the RYR that what he truly lacked was childlike faith (Luke 18:17). He could have said that he lacked a dependence on God’s mercy which would bring about justification (18:13-14). However, his degree of self-righteous deception disqualified him from receiving such a straightforward answer. Regarding the commandments Cranfield says:

“They are the answer to the question about eternal life, not because a man can keep them and so have eternal life, but because, if he honestly tries to keep them, he will be brought to recognize his bankruptcy and prepared to receive the kingdom of God as a little child.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup>“Almsgiving and discipleship will make the man ‘perfect’ (*telios*), completely whole or mature (as in 5:48), and he will receive the promise of eternal life which he requested, described here as ‘treasure in heaven’ (cf. 6:20)” (Blomberg, 298). The meeting of these conditions is possible with the reception of a regenerate heart (300). Thus Blomberg seems to be saying that maturity presupposes external compliance that, in turn, presupposes a regenerated heart given as God’s gift. That almsgiving and discipleship in a mature sense is doable and expected for a true believer is not in question. The question is, “Can this level of maturity even begin to meet the stringent holy demands of the law for eternal life?”

<sup>56</sup>Cranfield, 328.



"If it is a command of perfection you desire,<sup>57</sup> if it is a heroic act you require, then here it is," Jesus says. "You do lack one thing [Mark, Luke]; if you wish to be perfect [Matt], *go* [Matt, Mark] and *sell* all the possessions [Matt] you have, and *give* them out to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, And *come* and *follow* Me."

Sensing for the first time that the way of salvation in which he was trusting was too hard for him, the young man became downcast and left very grieved "for he was one who had great possessions" (Mark 10:22). The command to perfection became a command of despair! "Having come to seek praise from this notable teacher because of his law-keeping, the young ruler left having been informed of some things he could not or would not do."<sup>58</sup> His quest that began with eagerness now ended in sorrow.

Jesus' requirement for the RYR did not go beyond the law; His words were actually a fulfillment of it.<sup>59</sup> To relinquish one's desire for that which God had seen fit to withhold was to keep the one commandment Jesus had not heretofore mentioned, "Thou shalt not covet," a part of the second table of the law which dealt with loving one's neighbor as oneself.<sup>60</sup> This commandment was the only part of the second table that put the emphasis on internal righteousness, on the motive and not the external act. Hence, Jesus *tested* him on his perfect obedience to the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." Jesus knew beforehand that he would fail the test.

<sup>57</sup>"The Romanists have erred here in their teaching of supererogatory goodness, with the teaching of the peculiar merit of voluntary property. They have regarded the teaching as counsel, but in the text it is a command." S. Lewis Johnson "The Rich Young Ruler or Salvation the Gift of God" *Matthew: Lesson 63* (Dallas: Believers Chapel, April 24, 1977), 4. See also Davies, 47.

<sup>58</sup>Glasscock, 392.

<sup>59</sup>Herman Ridderbos *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. By H. deJongste, ed. By Raymond O. Zorn (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962), 293.

<sup>60</sup>Ellis, 219. There is a parallel account in the Latin version of Origen on Matthew (Now called Pseudo-Origen) that shows Jesus specifically connecting the RYR's failure to give to the poor with failure to love one's neighbor as oneself. *The Apocryphal New Testament* trans. By Montague Rhodes James (London: Oxford, 1924), 6.



Not only did the RYR violate the second table of the law, but he violated the first and greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). Covetousness is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5). "He [the RYR] worshipped the god of money as well as the God of Israel (Exod 20:3). He certainly did not love the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5). His love of possessions kept him from a total love for the Lord."<sup>61</sup> The RYR made his decision in violation of the law in both love of neighbor and love of God (cf. 1 John 4:20).<sup>62</sup>

It has been argued that Jesus went beyond the law in requiring the RYR to love his neighbor more than himself, rather than himself.<sup>63</sup> But if one loves himself the way God intends, then he will desire for himself what God intends him to have. If he loves his neighbor, he will desire for them what God desires for them, as though it were for himself. In other words, love for neighbor is defined by the will of God. Jesus as God [or God's representative] reveals His specific will for the RYR; it is not necessarily incumbent on all rich men, but obligatory for this one because of his special need.

<sup>61</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 83. Cf. Matt 6:24.

<sup>62</sup>"By asking the man to follow him in radical discipleship, Jesus probes this man's whole-hearted love for God and self-giving love for neighbor. If one is not willing to follow Jesus in radical discipleship, then one does not love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul, and strength" (Thomas R. Schreiner *The Law & Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993], 233). It is interesting to compare the command to "go, sell, give, come, and follow" with Luke 10:25-28. There a lawyer asked the same question the RYR asked. Jesus set before him the twofold command of the law to love God supremely and one's neighbor as himself. Jesus is basically asking the same of the RYR. The story of the Good Samaritan given to the lawyer was to test him on how well he loved his neighbor. He pointed out that one's enemies were included in the definition of a neighbor and he was to be a neighbor to them. Jesus said, "Do this and you will live." When Jesus gives His command to the RYR He is saying the same thing: "Do this and you will live." He is asking the same impossible thing from him in applying the law as He did the lawyer. See William D. Lawrence, "The New Testament Doctrine of the Lordship of Christ," Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968, 109.

<sup>63</sup>Govett, 129.

Also included in Jesus' specific application of the first great commandment is a challenge to follow Him in radical discipleship, a discipleship that imitates Christ in the sinless keeping of the law. The invitation to such a discipleship is included in the answer to the question, "What good [Matt] thing shall I do, that I may obtain [Matt] (or inherit [Mark, Luke]) eternal life?"<sup>64</sup> It is more than one heroic act. It is *lifelong sacrificial* discipleship. Assuming this kind of discipleship is an application of the law, it would mean that once the treasure of eternal life<sup>65</sup> was secured, it could also be lost. Disciples have been known to defect (John 6:66). For successful obedience to the law to culminate in eternal life, it must be *continuous*. To fail at any point of keeping the law is to be guilty of *all* (James 2:10) and the RYR would come under the curse (Gal 3:10). Unless the RYR *flawlessly* followed *all* that Jesus taught by His precept and example, he would be doomed. *Assuming* that the RYR's premise was correct (which Jesus does for the sake of argument), that he could do something good enough to merit eternal life, this is what would be required.

Discipleship demands are normally delivered to believers who are given the spiritual equipment to produce at a very high level of performance. Nevertheless, God does not eradicate their sin nature upon believing (1 John 1:8-10). In this story, discipleship demands are given to an unbeliever from whom is expected perfection. Even if he were required to be *willing* to turn from the sin of covetousness, it could be

<sup>64</sup>Archer, 330.

<sup>65</sup>Some relate the word "treasure" to something beyond eternal life. See Fitzmyer, 1200; also Bock: "This treasure is fullness of blessing associated with eternal life and comes in this age and the next. The treasure contains 'the gifts' that accompany eternal life" (Bock, 1481); see Luke 14:13, 14; and especially Luke 12:33, 34 (=Matt 6:19-21) where the word "treasure" is referring to rewards. In teaching that is applicable to believers, "treasure" is an appropriate designation of rewards in addition to eternal life. In the RYR pericope it need not be taken that way. The whole passage is dominated by a discussion of salvation, not rewards. Note the four different phrases in Matthew 19, for instance, to express this singular idea of salvation: "obtain eternal life" (v 16); enter into life (v 17); enter the Kingdom (vv 23, 24), and be saved (v 25). Would Jesus be likely to introduce the subject of rewards to an unsaved man asking how he might earn eternal life, if he is not even prepared to accept the gospel of grace?



measured only by continuous perfection from that moment on. Also, how could this effort add to the perfect righteousness of God that would be provided for him if he would only believe?

#### IV. KINGDOM ENTRANCE IMPOSSIBLE THROUGH HUMAN EFFORT

After the RYR leaves, Jesus turns His attention to the disciples to teach them that entrance into the kingdom is not just difficult, but impossible by human effort: Three things indicate this is so. First, the illustration of a camel going through a needle's eye demonstrates impossibility. To think of the largest of animals in Palestine passing through the smallest of openings is a manifest absurdity. "The point...is clear: it is impossible for rich people on their own strength to gain entry into the kingdom (Michel, TDNT 3:592-94)."<sup>66</sup> Second, the disciples sensed Jesus' words described an impossibility, not just a difficulty. Their shock at what Jesus said is inexplicable otherwise.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Bock, 1485-86. "The Babylonian Talmud included a rabbinical saying that not even in a dream does a man see an elephant going through a needle's eye!" (Summers, 216). The point is that such imagery is impossible to conceive even in a realm where most anything can happen in contrast to real life. The elephant, the largest animal in Babylon, served the imagery of impossibility well. See John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint of 1859 ed.), 2:264-65. In the Koran (*Sura* vii. 38) it states, "The wicked find the gate of heaven shut 'till the camel shall pass through the eye of a needle" Jack Lewis *The Gospel According to Matthew Part II: 13:53-28:20* Living Word Commentary (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 1984), 2:72. The point is that the gate of heaven will forever be shut; it will be impossible to get in. For further discussion on historical attempts to make the figure less jarring in its effect see Fitzmyer, 1204. Hagner takes the figure as rhetorically hyperbolic. According to him it is not necessary to see here a literal impossibility, only exceptional difficulty (Hagner, 561). This, however, does not square with Matt 19:26, Mark 10:27, and Luke 18:27 where Jesus clearly speaks of impossibility.

<sup>67</sup>Bock, 1485. Mark uses a word in 10:24 to note the amazement of the disciples (*ethaoubounto*) upon hearing the difficulty of entering, but the words



“The implied thought is, ‘If even the rich (whose prosperity is generally regarded as a sign of blessing) cannot enter the kingdom, how can anybody else enter it?’”<sup>68</sup> Or, to put it another way, “If such a person cannot succeed in entering the kingdom, what hope have lesser persons?”<sup>69</sup> The disciples were startled and shocked to discover that the man they expected to enter the kingdom would not make it. Third, Jesus’ concluding statement is determinative, “With men this is *impossible*, but all things [Matt, Mark] are possible with God.” In Matthew we see a climactic progression: 1) the salvation of rich men is difficult (an example of understatement); 2) the salvation of rich men is as possible as a camel going through the eye of a needle (a strong figure of speech declaring impossibility); 3) the salvation of all men, not just rich men is impossible (a clear declaration of and an expanded application of impossibility).

“The disciples understood that the Lord was saying that it is impossible for anyone who trusts in riches to enter the kingdom—unless God intervenes and offers a way of salvation that is unrelated to human resources and abilities.”<sup>70</sup>

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used in 10:26 after hearing how difficult [i.e. impossible] indicates a higher sense of amazement (*perissōs exēplēsonto* meaning “were more amazed than ever”) indicating shock or being astounded (See Mann, 402); in the parallel verse in Matt 19:25 *exēplēsonto* is combined with *sphodra* (“exceedingly or greatly”).

<sup>68</sup>Marshall, 688. “[The disciples] shared the common view of the time that riches were a sign of God’s blessing (together with the righteousness of the blessed; cf. Deut 28:1-14) and provided the possibility of both deeds of charity (almsgiving) and leisure for the study of the Torah and the pursuit of righteousness” (Hagner, 561). Seeing wealth as a sign of God’s blessing for righteousness had some support in passages such as Deut 8:1-10; 26:1-9; 28:12-14; Prov 6:6-11; 10:4; 28:19. But it was not consistently associated with God’s blessing as Ps 73:12; Prov 28:6; 30:7-9; Jer 5:28; Amos 8:4-8; and Mic 2:1-5 bear out. The disciples were selective, like many today, in their application of Scripture.

<sup>69</sup>William Hersey Davis, *Davis’ Notes on Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 75.

<sup>70</sup>Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 86. If the reading of the Majority Text is correct in Mark 10:24 and the phrase “for those who trust in riches” is a part of the original text, then it is even clearer that Jesus is focusing on riches as the object of one’s trust and that this was the real obstacle to entering the

In the final analysis, it was *impossible* for *anyone*, not just a rich man to be saved by his own effort. The object of Jesus' lesson is that man can't save himself by giving God first place or by wholeheartedness as a disciples. He is incapable. Even with grace, he is not capable of consistently giving God first place, since Jesus' requirement is lifelong perfection.

With God, however, all things are possible, even the salvation of the rich. But they must relinquish their pride of accomplishment and accumulation that brought them a false sense of security and place their trust in Jesus Christ alone who can provide sufficient righteousness for them to be saved.<sup>71</sup> The righteousness the RYR could produce was both insufficient and unnecessary. It was insufficient in that he could not produce enough, even with accompanying grace, to permanently give up his wealth and follow Jesus in wholehearted service. It was unnecessary because in a few days Jesus would make a payment for sin so great in its provision of righteousness that the RYR would not need to fulfill the radical discipleship Jesus required of him.

If only the RYR had confessed his failure and simply cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" He would have been told, as the apostle Paul told the Philippian jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Some might say, "You mean that's all you have to do?" To whom the reply would be, "That's all you can do" because it is impossible any other way.

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kingdom. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to pay for all sin on the cross. Since all sin would be paid for, the only sin, practically speaking, that would stand between men and God would be the sin of unbelief (John 3:18; 16:9). It is this sin that must be repented of. Hence, the RYR was to repent of his sin of unbelief with regard to trust in riches along with belief in the four misconceptions mentioned in this paper and place his trust completely in Christ. He then would be receiving the kingdom as a little child by simple trust born of humility. Ultimately the "one thing" lacking was humble faith in Christ.

<sup>71</sup>As Keita Takagi has observed, the problem of the RYR was not ultimately failing to give up material possessions, but *pride*. His pride assumes a self-sufficient attitude that his riches and rigid observance of the law promoted. The real issue is whether he will trust in himself or in God who alone can save. "The Rich Young Ruler" in *Basic Theology Applied: A Practical Application of Basic Theology in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie and His Work* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 188-89.



## V. KINGDOM REWARDS ARE FOR THE SAVED

The disciples were no doubt relieved to be reminded of the grace of God which provides salvation as a free gift (cf. Eph 2:8-9). But the fact remained that Peter and the apostles had done exactly what the RYR had not done. They had left everything. Their sacrifice, however, was made not in order to be saved, but because they were already saved. Peter was reminded of that fact, but a new thought came to his mind. He reasoned that if salvation is not earned because God freely bestows it, what compensation will he and the other disciples' have in the future? "If salvation is free, why are we working so hard and doing without? What's in it for us?" (Matt 19:27; Mark 10:29-31; Luke 18:28)<sup>72</sup> It is here that Jesus introduces a gracious promise of rewards, in spite of Peter's bargaining spirit; but, He also issues a warning that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt 19:28-30; 20:16; Mark 10:29-31; Luke 18:29-30). The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matt 20:1-16 illustrates that God will be generous in giving rewards to those who don't bargain for them (see vv 13-15).

Peter is not looking for assurance of salvation—but for further compensation *in addition to* salvation. Jesus grants him his assurance in His promise of rewards both for here and hereafter. With the mention of eternal life in connection with rewards, He is simply giving Peter a promise that one gets all of this, rewards and heaven too. Rewards are being promised "in addition" to eternal life (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30),<sup>73</sup> but eternal life itself is not a part of the reward.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup>Clifton L. Fowler, "Our All for the Kingdom," *Grace and Truth* 12:2 (February 1934), 66.

<sup>73</sup>Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. By Professor Banks, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), 300.

<sup>74</sup>Brown, 75, gives several reasons for this interpretation as an alternative to the view that eternal life is an earned reward. Those who earn rewards are among those who freely inherit eternal life, but eternal life itself is not a reward. The RYR had asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life and Jesus indicated to him that it could not be achieved as a reward. One could not work for it. If that is true, then Jesus' answer to Peter regarding the inheritance of eternal life (Matt 19:29) cannot be seen as teaching eternal life is a reward unless the eternal life spoken of by the RYR is different from the eternal life Jesus speaks of to Peter.



## VI. CONCLUSION

The RYR did not hear the gospel according to Jesus. Jesus was holding him up to the perfect standard of the law as a test throughout, not as a standard that He actually expected the RYR to meet. Jesus did not break His stride in the midst of His drive to expose the RYR's sinfulness to explain how one can be saved by grace, how one can demonstrate he is saved, or how to obtain rewards. That would be answering a question that the RYR was not asking. The question was essentially, "How may I earn eternal life?" From start to finish Jesus sticks with the same theme of how one might obtain eternal life by that means.<sup>75</sup> The RYR had approached Jesus with a question that expected a meritorious answer and Jesus did not disappoint him. He was to keep the "good" commandments given by the absolutely "good" God in a sinless manner, a manner that would qualify him to dwell forever in fellowship with a holy God. Are we somehow to believe that in Jesus'

<sup>75</sup>Although W. E. Bell of Dallas Baptist University is an advocate of Lordship Salvation and directs his comments in defense of that issue, his following comments are perceptive as far as insisting the continuity of the passage be recognized: "The passage [concerning the RYR] has to do with salvation—not a second-step 'discipleship' decision. This is unmistakably clear from the young man's original question, 'What must I do that I may inherit eternal life' (v 17); from Jesus' response, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!' (v 23); and the disciples' response, 'Who then can be saved?' (v 26). Yet Jesus' demands included, 'Come, take up the cross, and follow Me' (v 21). According to the two-step agenda, Jesus' answer clearly fell into the 'discipleship' category—not the salvation area. Why would Jesus answer a salvation question with a 'discipleship answer'? Verses 23-25 make it clear that the young man was not saved" (W. E. Bell "Some Additional Thoughts on the Lordship Question," [Unpublished paper, n.d.]) Bell's argument for consistency is well taken. However, what Bell does not recognize is that Jesus requires perfection in law keeping all the way through for eternal life including perfection in the area of a discipleship demand that complies with the first and greatest commandment of the law. He mistakenly thinks that Jesus is consistently presenting a "commitment of life" type gospel. Dr. Bell takes the words in Mark, "take up the cross," as being part of the original text. It is generally not recognized as the best reading and is not included in the UBS *The Greek New Testament* 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. See Thomas M. Lindsay *St. Mark's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1883), 172.

application of the tenth commandment and the first great commandment that the RYR received a non-meritorious command that can legitimately be called the gospel?<sup>76</sup>

Note that Jesus does not mention faith as the condition for eternal life. He does not mention grace because there is no message of grace for those who believe they have no need of it. He is there to call a self-righteous sinner to repentance, one who needs to exchange his pride for humility and his self-sufficiency for *trust* in Someone who can do for him what he cannot do for himself. "But the ruler was not ready for the message of faith because he did not see his need."<sup>77</sup>

Jesus *did* require a response to His Lordship. As the Son of God, He gave the young ruler an authoritative application of the law. However, had the RYR been ready, Jesus would have called for a difference response—that of childlike trust which is a *non-meritorious* response. It is an appropriate submission to lordship under grace, since no works or promise of works are required to obtain salvation (cf. Rom 10:3). Jesus as Lord has the authority to demand faith alone in Him for eternal life.

Jesus *did* require repentance from the sin of covetousness. Such a requirement demanded compliance with the law since "sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). *Any* commandment Jesus told the RYR to keep would automatically require a turning from the sin identified by that commandment. But, keeping the law cannot bring the righteousness needed to live with a holy God forever. Human efforts will all fall short and add nothing to the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

<sup>76</sup>Thus, the following seems strange: "Jesus' promise 'You shall have treasure in heaven' refers to eternal life; and since that is a gift of God and cannot be earned, no saving merit must be attached to the action of giving all to the poor" (Walter W. Wessel, 716). But Jesus *does* attach saving merit to giving to the poor as an application of the tenth commandment! Eternal life *is* an earned reward unless one gives up law-keeping for salvation and trusts Christ alone apart from almsgiving or committed discipleship.

<sup>77</sup>Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response* (Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 146. See pp. 144-50 for his treatment of the RYR.

Jesus *did* require discipleship to be saved<sup>78</sup> but not the usual kind that allowed for failure without loss of salvation. The discipleship He required was flawless and continual until the RYR reached the completion of his goal—that of being good enough to merit eternal life.

Because Jesus demanded *perfection* in keeping the law, this requirement (which included the commands to go, sell, give, come, and follow) *automatically excluded* a commitment-of-life gospel, a call to evidence one's faith as a believer, and a call to service leading to rewards in the kingdom. It even excluded a free grace gospel, since the law's ministry is, practically speaking, one of condemnation rather than salvation.

<sup>78</sup>That is, to be confirmed in righteousness as Adam might have been, had he successfully obeyed.





# REGENERATION: A *CRUX INTERPRETUM*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In every “system” of theology there are certain doctrines so imbedded in that system that to uproot them would fell the entire tree. In his excellent work on epistemology, David Wolfe explains that good systematic theology requires four criteria to even qualify as a system.<sup>1</sup> He believes the adequacy, rationality, reliability, and suitability of a system of theology can be evaluated or validated on the basis of these four criteria. The failure of a system to meet these criteria indicates its weakness and the likelihood that theological reconstruction on a system-wide level is necessary or conversion to some other more suitable system is demanded for intellectual honesty. The four criteria are:

1. **Consistency**—the assertions, hypotheses, and opinions expressed by the system should be free from contradiction.
2. **Coherence**—the assertions and hypotheses should be related in a unified manner.
3. **Comprehensiveness**—the system should be applicable to all evidence.
4. **Congruity**—the system of assertions, hypotheses, etc. must “fit” all evidence. It must be accurate, adequate and precise to fit all data. In other words, the whole must equal the sum of its parts. If one part of the whole is out of sync with the whole, then the whole must be revised to include this part without throwing the other parts out of sync. We are searching for the interpretation which best “fits” all the data.

<sup>1</sup>David Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 50-55.

Another characteristic of any system of theology is what is called “ingression,” which simply means that some claims or hypotheses might be more deeply embedded or more crucially interconnected within a system than other assertions. We call this “depth of ingression.” Opinions that are not very deeply ingressed in a system may be relinquished or proven false without much change in the system. However, items that are more deeply ingressed are more dependent on the system, and the system is more dependent on them. The testing of these matters is thus more crucial to the system and must be conducted more carefully with a great deal of evidence before any changes in a system would be justified—or, at least, probably before they will be accepted by those committed to that system. For example, in Dispensationalism the doctrine of separation between Israel and the Church is deeply ingressive. Remove this separation and Dispensationalism dissolves faster than sugar in tea.

Likewise, in most Reformed theology the doctrines of Total Depravity and regeneration are deeply ingressed. As R. C. Sproul points out in his analysis of Lewis Sperry Chafer’s Dispensationalism, “When we turn to Chafer’s (and historic Dispensationalism’s) view of regeneration, we focus on what I believe is the most crucial point of the debate between Dispensationalism and Reformed theology.”<sup>2</sup> If the Reformed view of regeneration is in error, then their view of Total Depravity is also off center. And if their view of Total Depravity misses the mark, then the most “ingressed” of all their doctrines is uprooted, and the tree falls.

In the typical Reformed presentation of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), regeneration precedes faith. This understanding arises out of the Reformed view of Total Depravity, which argues that man has no part at all in the salvation process because a completely fallen person is incapable of doing anything to help effect his own salvation. To assert otherwise would be tantamount to teaching salvation by works. Once again, we call upon R. C. Sproul to explain this point of view:

The logical priority of regeneration in Reformed theology rests on the doctrine of total depravity or moral inability. Because fallen man is morally unable to incline himself by faith to Christ, regeneration is a logical necessity for faith to occur. If we were to

<sup>2</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 193.



posit that faith precedes regeneration, then we would be assuming that unregenerate people, while still in an unregenerate state, have the moral ability to exercise faith. If the unregenerate can exercise faith, then it follows clearly that they are not fallen to the degree of moral inability, as claimed by classical Augustinian and Reformed theology. This would involve an Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of the fall.<sup>3</sup>

And it would not be unfair to say that the other four points of Dortian Calvinism<sup>4</sup> (Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints) are an outgrowth of this doctrine of Total Depravity. We must remember that a “system” of theology must have not only consistency, it must also have coherence. Everything must hang together. Perhaps in our high tech world another way to describe “Systematic” Theology is “Spread Sheet” Theology. When one changes one item in a spread sheet, all the other items change as well. Coherence requires it. That is why when Augustine became amillennial (a change in the eschatological column), it changed his view of justification (a change in the soteriological column).<sup>5</sup>

Hence, we agree with R. C. Sproul: regeneration is one of the *crux* interpretations which distinguishes Reformed theology from Dispensational theology. Perhaps it would be helpful, then, to delve deeper into the background of the Reformed view of regeneration, especially in regard to the order of salvation. Where did their understanding of regeneration before faith actually originate? And what is their theological defense for such a view?

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>4</sup>We refer here to the brand of Calvinism which developed at the Synod of Dort (the city of Dordrecht) over half a century after John Calvin’s death in reaction to the tenets of Jacobus Arminius. There are many who believe the Calvinism which came from Dordrecht had moved a long way from that taught by John Calvin himself due to the influences of Theodore Beza’s supralapsarianism and William Perkins’ criteria for fruit inspecting (see R. T. Kendall, *Calvinism and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup>Augustine repeatedly uses Matt 24:13 as a proof text for his understanding of perseverance as a requirement for salvation and a proof of election (*Rebuke and Grace*, 10, 16; *To Vincentius*, 9).

## II. REGENERATION IN HISTORY

### A. AUGUSTINE

#### 1. His Background.

We begin many of our studies with Augustine since he was the first of the Church Fathers to seriously delve into grace and doctrines other than trinitarian issues. And it was his teaching which has affected the RCC, Lutherans, and Anglo-Catholics right up until today. And Augustine taught baptismal regeneration, but he was not the first.

A completely heretical but very influential document in the early church was *The Shepherd of Hermas*. The writer claims to have been a contemporary of Clement, presbyter-bishop of Rome (A.D. 92-101). Hermas is instructed by the “angel of repentance” dressed up as a shepherd. The call is for a lackadaisical church to repent. The writing is thoroughly legalistic and never mentions the gospel or grace. He speaks of the meritorious system of good works and the atonement of sin through martyrdom. There is no mention of justification by faith, but water baptism is indispensable for salvation.<sup>6</sup> And water baptism is the seal of repentance which “makes Christians into Christians... Asceticism and penal suffering are the school of conversion.”<sup>7</sup> Faith is the fruit of repentance and the baptism which seals it.<sup>8</sup>

Justin Martyr followed on the heels of Hermas and also saw water baptism as the work of regeneration. He said: “Those who are convinced of the truth of our doctrine...are exhorted to prayer, fasting and repentance for past sins;...Then they are led by us to a place where there is water, and in this way they are regenerated, as we also have been regenerated;...For Christ says: Except you are born again, you cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>9</sup> The importance of water baptism for Justin Martyr is underscored when he says “the laver of

<sup>6</sup>P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed. (N.P.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, 684-87.

<sup>7</sup>J. Behm, “μετανοέω,” in *TDNT*, 1967 ed., 4:1008.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 4:1007.

<sup>9</sup>J. Martyr, *Apol.* I., c. 61.

repentance...is baptism, the only thing which is able to cleanse those who have repented.”<sup>10</sup>

Irenaeus (d. 200) also linked water baptism with regeneration because of passages like John 3:5 and Titus 3:5. And Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) called water baptism the “chariot to heaven.” He believed the only way to get to heaven without water baptism was through martyrdom.

By the time of Augustine (d. 430) infant baptism was in full vogue. And at the baptismal font, “We are justified, but righteousness itself grows as we go forward.”<sup>11</sup> In the *ordo salutis* Augustine saw predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. But justification was the umbrella over everything from regeneration through sanctification.<sup>12</sup> And regeneration began at baptism. He actually called it “the saving laver of regeneration.”<sup>13</sup> Here the elect receive the external sign (the water of baptism) and the spiritual reality (regeneration and union with Christ). For Augustine “the sacrament of baptism is undoubtedly the sacrament of regeneration.”<sup>14</sup>

But unlike Hermas and other predecessors, Augustine did not view regeneration as a work of man. It was the unmerited gift of grace which wrought regeneration, faith, and repentance in the sinner.<sup>15</sup> But little children could definitely be regenerated through baptism, which “cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, elect children who had been baptized would inevitably go on to faith and repentance and growth in grace. All of these were elements of his understanding of justification. Since he was not familiar with Greek, he misunderstood *dikaioō* to mean “to make righteous” instead of “to declare righteous.”<sup>17</sup> This misunderstanding also led to the Catholic belief that justification is a life-long process. Of course, with this approach one could not know

<sup>10</sup>J. Martyr, *Dial.*, 14.1.

<sup>11</sup>Augustine, *Sermon*, 158.5.

<sup>12</sup>Demarest, *Salvation*, 351.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine, *Sermon*, 213.8.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, *On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism*, II.43.

<sup>15</sup>Demarest, 282.

<sup>16</sup>Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, 80.3.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 45.



whether he was elect or not until he died, which is exactly what Augustine<sup>18</sup> and the RCC teaches.

The non-elect may receive the external sign of water baptism, but there is no internal spiritual transaction. Augustine believed that infants are cleansed from original sin at water baptism. Unbaptized infants and baptized infants who are non-elect remain under the control of the devil. Baptized infants who are elect will inevitably go on to faith and repentance. So, although Augustine leaned on God's grace for salvation, water baptism was without question one means by which this grace was received.

Thus we can see that the historical background of water baptism is very important for understanding Augustine's view of regeneration before faith. But so is his logic.

## 2. His Logic.

Incredibly bright as Augustine must have been, his training was in rhetoric, not exegesis. His language was Latin, not Greek. We have already seen how his mishandling of the word *dikaioō* has had grave consequences in church history, at least from the Protestant perspective. Much of his theology comes from the sheer weight of his logic. He does little to defend his views of baptismal regeneration and infant baptism from the Scriptures. Like most of us, he filtered Scripture through his own experience. Realizing that he had been a slave of lusts before his conversion, from his experience he deduced that he was totally depraved, completely *unable* to extricate himself from his prison of passion.

Reasoning from his understanding of total depravity in opposition to Pelagius and his view of innocent until guilty, Augustine concluded that fallen man has no part at all in the salvation process, including faith. Fallen man cannot believe, he reasoned. Therefore, he must be born again (regenerated) in order to believe. Without a shred of biblical data, Augustine built his *ordo salutis* in the halls of logic, that is, human reason. With his understanding of total depravity (every area of man is affected<sup>19</sup>, including his reason), it is a wonder he put so much faith in

<sup>18</sup>Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 40.

<sup>19</sup>An understanding with which Dispensationalists agree, by the way.

his own logic. Nevertheless, it is important to see that his understanding of regeneration was born of a marriage between tradition and logic, not the Scriptures.

## B. ROMAN CATHOLICS

The RCC followed Augustine's lead. Thomas Aquinas said, "Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the baptized."<sup>20</sup> Aquinas was the first to write of the "baptism of desire" when he said of those who for one reason or another could not get to water for baptism, "Such a man can obtain salvation without actually being baptized, on account of his desire for baptism...whereby God...sanctifies man inwardly."<sup>21</sup>

At the Council of Trent (1545-63) the waters became murky. Whereas Augustine saw regeneration as instantaneous and justification as a life-long process, this council decided that regeneration only *began* at water baptism. They sort of ran regeneration, justification, and sanctification together into one gathering pool of God's grace. Of course, this pool was only accessible through the channels of the sacraments (water baptism, eucharist, etc.).

The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) required faith and baptism for salvation. However, the Vatican tower has tilted in the direction of inclusivism in which all of mankind can be oriented to the life of God and all men can be saved by the "baptism of desire." This baptism of desire is equivalent to the *implicit faith* possessed by uneducated people. Thomas Aquinas taught that this implicit faith would suffice for salvation.<sup>22</sup> And post-conciliar Catholics equate this implicit faith with the baptism of desire, thus opening the door for all men to go to heaven:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine

<sup>20</sup>T. Aquinas, *ST*, III, q. 69, art. 7.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, III, q. 68, art. 2.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.* II-II, q. 2, arts., 6-7.

providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.<sup>23</sup>

The same dogma has been confirmed by Catholic theologians like G. Baum who says, "One may seriously wonder whether baptism of desire is not the way of salvation for the great majority of men in this world chosen to be saved."<sup>24</sup> And from Notre Dame we read, "Everyone does not strictly 'need' baptism to become a child of God and an heir of heaven. Every person, by reason of birth and God's universal offer of grace, is already called to be a child of God and an heir of heaven."<sup>25</sup>

### C. LUTHERANS

It would appear to be a great contradiction, but Luther died still believing in baptismal regeneration for infants. He said God "himself calls it [baptism] a new birth by which we are...loosed from sin, death, and hell, and become children of life, heirs of all the gifts of God, God's own children, and brethren of Christ."<sup>26</sup> In *The Small Catechism* (1529) Luther wrote:

Baptism is not merely water, but it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's Word...How can water produce such great effects? It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water...When connected with the Word of God [the water] is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. (IV)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, II.16.

<sup>24</sup>G. Baum, "Baptism," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, K. Rahner, ed., (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 77.

<sup>25</sup>McBrien, *Catholicism*, 738.

<sup>26</sup>Luther, *Works*, 53:103.

<sup>27</sup>Melanchthon expressed a similar view in *The Augsburg Confession*, art. IX.



But not only does regeneration come with water baptism, but also faith and justification. This is the same justification which Luther so defended as occurring at a moment in time and that which declared a person righteous before God so as to effect forgiveness for all sins, past—present—future. (Of course, one has to wonder how on earth this view of justification is consistent with Luther's teaching that one can lose his salvation at some point after he is baptized.)

But if one asks how an infant can exercise faith, the answer is that regeneration occurs at the moment when the invoked Word of God unites with the water and the infant responds to the gospel with rudimentary faith. Baptism does not automatically regenerate (this would be the RCC concept of *ex opere operato*). It must be combined with faith: "In baptism children themselves believe and have faith of their own. God works this within them through the intercession of the sponsors who bring the child to the font in the faith of the Christian Church."<sup>28</sup>

Notice now the introduction of *sponsors* to the baptismal event. Notice also that God works faith into the infants through the "intercession" of the sponsors. Hence the great concern of parents that their children be baptized, not just for the significance of the event itself, but also because they become responsible for the salvation of their children if indeed they are the intercessors through whom God will effect faith within their little children. Luther definitely instigated a reformation which led to Protestantism, but at times it seems he was only a stone's throw from the walls of the Vatican. These baptized infants must ratify their regeneration and rudimentary faith as they get older through repentance, mature faith, and obedience.

So let's get the picture here. An infant or little child is water baptized. As he grows up he is told that at water baptism he was

<sup>28</sup>Luther, *What Luther Says*, comp. E. M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 51. So also with D. Hollaz (d. 1713) as cited by H. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, reprint, 1961), 463-64, who said, "In infants, as there is not an earnest and obstinate resistance, the grace of the Holy Spirit accompanying Baptism breaks and restrains their natural resistance that it may not impede regeneration; wherefore their regeneration takes place instantaneously"; D. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 206; and F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 3:264, 269-70.

regenerated and exercised an elementary faith in Christ because of the intercession of his sponsors, most likely his parents. Now, if he is truly elect, all this which occurred within him before he had any conscious awareness of what was going on will be confirmed by his repentance, mature faith, and obedience. Obviously, if he is not obedient, it proves that he is not truly elect and for some unknown reason his infant baptism did not “take.” But the fires of hell await such a one. Hence, be obedient to make your calling and election sure. It all goes right back to a works-oriented approach to salvation, especially since through certain egregious sins one can lose this hard wrought salvation. To fall back on Phil 2:13 at this point to try to prove that it is by God’s grace that one is able to work out his own salvation is pure exegetical sophistry.

The Church of England also teaches baptismal regeneration of infants. In *The Thirty-Nine Articles* (American Version, 1801) we read: “Baptism is...a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed” (art. XXVII). And the priest, as prescribed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, prays just prior to baptism thusly: “Give thy Holy Spirit to this child, that he may be born again, and be made an heir of everlasting salvation.” After baptism, the priest gives thanks that God was pleased “to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Sprit, to receive him for thy own child, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church.”<sup>29</sup>

#### D. COVENANT REFORMED

We must remember that many of the Reformed persuasion are determined to preserve their view of the sovereignty of God at all costs, even if that makes God directly responsible for sin and evil. As this relates to their soteriology, they are careful to argue for the position that God does everything in man’s salvation (monergism) rather than including man in the process at any point (cooperation or synergism). Thus it is very important in their system that regeneration precede repentance, faith, and justification.

Some of them believe in what we call *presumptive regeneration*, which says regeneration itself does not take place during infant baptism,

<sup>29</sup>*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1945), 270, 280.



but their baptism is a sign that they already possess the seeds of regeneration and faith. Their baptism is also a sign that God is dispensing grace in the covenantal community of the church. As such, the divine act of regeneration, which is not a conscious reality within the baptized, precedes the conscious response of faith and repentance.

Still others of this persuasion believe in *promissory regeneration* in which baptism is a sign and seal that future regeneration will come to the baptized.

Calvin himself defined regeneration as the entire process of new birth, repentance, faith, justification, and sanctification. Regeneration for him was the umbrella over all the others. It began at water baptism, but regeneration “does not take place in one moment or one day or one year.” Instead it was accomplished “through continual and sometimes even slow advances.”<sup>30</sup> He referred to the filling of the Holy Spirit in John the Baptist while the latter was still in the womb of his mother, thus proving that regeneration can take place in infants before they even hear the Word of God.<sup>31</sup> So he thought regeneration could take place in the womb or during early infancy. He paralleled circumcision and baptism, likening both of them to regeneration.

For the infants of believing parents, baptism connotes forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Infants cannot actually believe, but they can receive the seeds of regeneration and sanctification.<sup>32</sup> For Calvin, baptism “is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us.”<sup>33</sup> If all this is true of an infant, one surely wonders why an adult baptized as an infant needs faith or justification. Sounds like it was all accomplished at their baptism when an infant.

*The Scots Confession* (1560), which was the first Reformed standard in English, leans toward *presumptive regeneration* when it says, “We assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted” (art. 21). On the other hand, *The Westminster Confession* (1647) leans toward *promissory regeneration* when it says baptism is

<sup>30</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.9.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., IV.16.19.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., IV.16.17-20.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., IV.15.1



“a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his engrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (chap. 28.1). And W. G. T. Shedd (d. 1894) defended baptismal regeneration of infants from Luke 1:15, Acts 2:39, 1 Cor 7:14, and the parallel of OT circumcision with NT baptism of infants. “In the case of infant regeneration, there is an interval of time between regeneration and conversion...The regenerate infant believes and repents when his faculties will admit of the exercise and manifestation of faith and repentance.”<sup>34</sup>

Again, so much of this *ordo salutis* is an effort to make sure man has no part whatsoever in his salvation. In order to ensure this fact, regeneration as a sovereign and independent act of God in the individual must take place before repentance and faith. One is not regenerated because he believes; one believes because he has been regenerated. Shedd comments that “The Holy Ghost is not given as a converting and a sanctifying Spirit, until he has been given as a regenerating Spirit” (Matt 12:33; John 3:3).<sup>35</sup> J. Murray sums up the position of covenant theologians pretty well when he says, “Without regeneration it is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to believe in Christ, but when a person is regenerated it is morally and spiritually impossible for that person not to believe.”<sup>36</sup> And L. Berkhof says in no uncertain terms that “a conversion that is not rooted in regeneration is no true conversion.”<sup>37</sup>

In order to be fair, it must be stated that many modern Reformed theologians reject the concept of baptismal regeneration.<sup>38</sup> But they have retained the logic of saying that regeneration must precede faith. Once again R. C. Sproul is representative of this line of thinking:

Remember that in Reformed theology’s *ordo salutis* regeneration precedes faith. It does so with respect to *logical priority* not

<sup>34</sup>W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., reprint, n.d.), 2:508, n. 1.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:514.

<sup>36</sup>J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 106.

<sup>37</sup>L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 485.

<sup>38</sup>Allen Mawhinney, “Baptism, Servanthood, and Sonship,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (Spring 1987): 47-48.

*temporal priority*. Reformed theology grants that God's act of regeneration and the believer's act of faith are simultaneous, not separated, with respect to time. The *ordo salutis* refers to logical dependency. Faith logically depends on regeneration; regeneration does not logically depend on faith. Again, the *priority* is logical, not temporal. Regeneration is the necessary condition of faith; faith is not the necessary condition of or for regeneration.<sup>39</sup>

## E. SUMMARY

Often it appears that differences in theology or even theological systems hinge on the different ways key words are understood. Justification is a great example. It would seem that the Reformation hung on a difference in understanding of the meaning of "to justify." Regeneration is another term which is used in many different ways. Some groups want it to serve as an umbrella arching over the whole Christian experience. Others limit it to a two-tiered approach: presumptive or promissory regeneration at the water baptism of infants and full regeneration some time later in life. Still others narrow their understanding down to one instantaneous act of new birth which occurs at the moment of faith.

However, what is conspicuous by its absence in the foregoing discussions is a close look at the Scriptures themselves. We have seen that Augustine arrived at his conclusions primarily through the influence of tradition and his own powers of logic. The Reformers cried *Sola Scriptura*, but they too had difficulty escaping the tentacles of RCC tradition.

Yet without a solid foundation in the Scriptures themselves is the building secure? Another way to envision Systematic Theology is as mighty river. But this river has two branches which feed it: Historical Theology and Biblical Theology. If there is pollution in one of these branches, then the main river is polluted as well. This is another way of saying that one's Systematic Theology is only as good as his Biblical Theology, since the latter is a building block of the former. Though Systematic Theology does incorporate General Revelation in its fold, its primary source is the Special Revelation of the Scriptures. Thus solid exegesis of the Scriptures is paramount in developing Systematic

<sup>39</sup>Sproul, 193-94.



Theology which is comprehensive, consistent, coherent, and congruent. It only makes sense, then, to turn to the Scriptures to see regeneration in its biblical context.

### III. REGENERATION IN THE BIBLE

#### A. TITUS 3:5

The NT uses a number of different words and images to convey the doctrine of regeneration. The noun *palingenesia* is used just twice: Matt 19:28 and Titus 3:5. In Matthew Jesus is speaking of the regeneration which will occur at His second coming. He refers to setting up His kingdom, placing the twelve over the twelve tribes of Israel, and rewarding those who have sacrificed for His cause. But in Titus 3:5 we have a direct reference to the rebirth of the believer: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of *regeneration* and renewing of the Holy Spirit." Of course, it is this reference to washing which convinces so many that the actual physical act of water baptism effects regeneration. But the near proximity of the reference to the Holy Spirit combined with other passages on the same subject help us understand that this regeneration is a ministry of the Holy Spirit, not something directly connected with water.

#### B. 1 PETER 1:3, 23

Just as with the noun, the verb for regeneration (*anagennaō*) is used only twice in the NT: 1 Pet 1:3 and 23. The first verse says, "Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has *begotten* us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Here it is the Father who does the begetting. In 1 Pet 1:23 we read, "Having been *born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever." This time the focus is on the Word of God which is the tool used by God to give us new birth. But notice that in none of these four references (nouns and verbs) do we read about faith in connection with regeneration. Not that our faith is not involved, but there is nothing in these texts that would indicate that regeneration leads to our faith or that our faith leads to our regeneration.



However, in this final reference in 1 Peter there is mention of the tool used by God to accomplish this regeneration: the Word of God. This would suggest that until one hears and understands the message, one cannot be born again. Of course, it must be asked how an infant could possibly hear and understand the message.

### C. JAMES 1:18

James 1:18 uses another verb (*apokueō*) to depict the new birth: "Of His own will He *brought* us *forth* by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." The fact that this is not a reference to physical birth should be obvious from the instrument used: the Word of Truth. This is a spiritual birth, and it is accomplished through the agency of God's Word. Once again, we must ask how this would be accomplished in infants, since hearing and understanding are prerequisites for this rebirth if the agent of birthing is God's Word. It is passages like this which force those who practice infant baptism to reach out to far-fetched concepts like "seeds of faith" and the faith of the "sponsors" as explanations for how the new birth could be connected with God's Word in an infant.

### D. THE TENSES

Another aspect of the three verbs mentioned (1 Pet 1:3, 23 and Jas 1:18) is the tenses used. In Jas 1:18 and 1 Pet 1:3 we find the aorist tense. Though the aorist tense is really a non-descript tense as far as the aspect of a verb is concerned, it is generally not one of the tenses used to describe a process, an on-going action. The aorist tense in 1 Pet 1:3 is found in a participle dependent on the understood present copula ("to be"). When the aorist participle is dependent on a present tense main verb, the action of the participle is antecedent to the action of the main verb. In other words, these Jewish believers of the diaspora had already been born again as Peter writes. Their birthing had already taken place.

The entire image of birthing should convey something that is not a process. Though the gestation period can be described as a process, not so with birthing. Even though the event might take a day if we speak of a prolonged delivery, the birth itself is understood to be the consummation of the pregnancy, something that happens once at a particular moment in time. The aorist tense in the case of 1 Pet 1:3 just

says it happened, and it happened at a time prior to Peter's writing. This picture is incongruous with any understanding of regeneration which spans several years of development.

The verb used in 1 Pet 1:23 also mitigates against any concept of process in the birthing of believers. This time the verb is in the perfect tense, which speaks of completed, past action with on-going results up to the present. The point here is that the action is complete and in the past. There is no process still going on in the life of the believers which could be described by a verb for regeneration.

## E. JOHN

### 1. John 1:13.

Though we do not have the preposition on the front of *gennaō* used to indicate "again" (*ana*), we do have reference to spiritual birth in this verse: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who *were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Here it refers to people who already exist receiving Christ and thus having the right to become children of God. People become children by birth, so the verb for birthing is used. Again, it is in the aorist tense, not a tense we would use to indicate a process. And if this verse teaches us nothing else, clearly the regeneration work is a work of God. Men may "receive" Christ, but it is a passive picture on the part of man, although an active picture on the part of God. God becomes the divine obstetrician who very actively delivers the child. Is it pressing the imagery too far to say that babies are relatively passive in the event of being birthed?

### 2. John 3:3-8.

Of course, this is the best known passage for the concept of being "born again." Oddly enough, it has the least linguistic support for *rebirth* because the word for "again" (*anōthen*) probably means "from above" (3:31; 19:11, 23) as opposed to "again." Nevertheless, the same verb for birthing (*gennaō*) that we found in John 1:13 is used eight times in these verses. In each case either the aorist or perfect tense is used, again emphasizing the fact that this birth is not a process.



One thing these verses also make clear is the connection between rebirth and the Holy Spirit (vv 6-8). The Holy Spirit regenerates all who believe in Christ (vv 14-18).

## F. SUMMARY

We conclude that there is zero biblical support for placing regeneration before faith in the *ordo salutis*. And to say it takes *logical priority* without taking *temporal priority* is contradictory. The very word “priority” in this context speaks of time. It is a “temporal” word. Unless one switches the meaning of “priority” to “first in importance” (which is obviously not intended), then a statement about “logical priority” without “temporal priority” is non-sensical. And certainly in Historical Theology regeneration was seen to have *temporal priority* over faith, since infants were thought to be regenerated when water baptized. It was not until Reformed theologians realized how little biblical support there is for infant baptism that they began arguing for *logical priority* instead of *temporal priority*.

Sproul argues for *logical priority* because he sees the only other option as Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, or some form of what he calls *synergism* (God and man working together to effect salvation). “If we were to posit that faith precedes regeneration, then we would be assuming that unregenerate people, while still in an unregenerate state, have the moral ability to exercise faith...This would involve an Arminian or semi-Pelagian view of the fall,” he writes.<sup>40</sup> He cites writings from Chafer and Walvoord in which they eschew *synergism*, but accuses them of *red herring* argumentation by focusing on who effects regeneration (God alone—*monergism*; God and man working together—*synergism*). Rather he claims one is *synergistic* if faith precedes regeneration in the *ordo salutis*.<sup>41</sup> He accuses Walvoord and Chafer of being “vague” and “unclear” when they make statements like “regeneration is wholly a work of God in a believing heart.” He thinks this is unclear because he understands the issue to be whether faith precedes regeneration or vice versa: “Is the heart already believing, or is it believing because it has been regenerated? The answer to this

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 196.



question defines the difference between Calvinism and semi-Pelagianism.”<sup>42</sup>

The problems here are multitudinous. The first is with the word *synergism*. Coming directly from the Greek word *sunergeō*, which means “to work together,” the very definition of the word should be enough to cause any evangelical Protestant theologian to reject categorically a synergistic approach to salvation. Neither Chafer nor Walvoord would say that man and God work together to accomplish man’s salvation. How, then, can Sproul accuse them of that very thing? It is because in his understanding any *ordo salutis* which puts faith before regeneration is synergistic. How can this be, unless *faith* is understood to be a *work*? Of course, that is precisely what Sproul is suggesting, because he thinks if man can believe prior to regeneration, then man is *morally capable* of making a contribution to his own salvation. And if man is capable of making any contribution to the salvation process before regeneration, then his salvation is not all of God. Hence, it must be synergistic.

Is this biblical thinking? Absolutely not. This kind of ratiocination makes faith a work. Is that biblical? God forbid! The Scriptures contrast faith and works so often the concept hardly needs documentation. Can Eph 2:8-9 and Rom 4:4-6 be any more clear? If salvation is by faith, then works are nowhere to be found in the process. Again, to argue that faith precedes regeneration is synergistic would only be valid if faith = works.

But what can we say about the statement that faith precedes regeneration presumes that man is *morally* capable of making a virtuous choice? That this is what certain Reformed theologians contend is transparent from these words by the late John Gerstner:

According to the Reformed doctrine, total depravity makes man *morally* incapable of making a virtuous choice. While Dispensationalism seems to go along with this idea to a degree, this “totally depraved” man is nevertheless able to believe. We shall see that his faith precedes or is at least simultaneous with (and not based upon) his regeneration. As long as that doctrine is maintained, the nerve of total depravity is cut...If the

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

dispensationalist maintains, as he does, that man is *morally* able to respond to the gospel, then Dispensationalism does not believe that man is totally depraved after all.<sup>43</sup>

How can Walvoord and Chafer and Billy Graham, whom Sproul calls the most famous Dispensationalist of all, contend that man is totally depraved and that faith precedes regeneration? The key is that they do not believe that man is capable of believing in Christ apart from God's drawing.

So here is what it comes down to. Both Reformed thinkers of the Sproul/Gerstner ilk and Dispensationalists like Chafer and Walvoord agree that a totally depraved human being is incapable of making a moral choice on his own. But the latter would call the divine enablement which makes man capable of such a choice "divine persuasion," while the former would call this divine enablement "regeneration." But our biblical theology has demonstrated that there is no biblical support for putting regeneration before faith. That is why some systematic theologians with Reformed leanings switch the order.<sup>44</sup> Their biblical theology demands it. But what about this concept of "divine persuasion"? Is it biblical?

R. C. Sproul realizes the argument comes down to this single point, precisely. Does God, in fact, draw/woo men to Himself, as John 6:44 appears to teach, or does He drag/force them into His kingdom in order to prove it is all of Him and none of them? Sproul argues that God drags men into His kingdom against their will.<sup>45</sup> He interprets the key verb of John 6:44 (*elkō/elkuō*) to mean "drag, force, or coerce." His support seems biblical. The verb *elkō* occurs only twice in the NT (Jas 2:6 and Acts 21:30). In both cases believers are being dragged against their will into a hostile situation before and by unbelievers. The same is true of *elkuō* in its only non-Johannine use (Acts 16:19 where Paul and Silas are dragged before the authorities).

Sproul concludes that the use of *elkuō* in John 6:44 also means to "drag" in the sense of force. This is the exegetical fallacy known as the

<sup>43</sup>John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 109.

<sup>44</sup>Demarest, 291.

<sup>45</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Tyndale, 1994), 69-72.



“illegitimate totality transfer.”<sup>46</sup> Just because the word means “drag against one’s will” in James and Acts does not necessitate the same meaning in another context such as John 6:44. In Biblical Theology we seek to find John’s meaning for the word in the context where he uses it. Other uses of the word in John would be more helpful than uses from writers such as James and Luke.

John uses *elkuō* four other times in his Gospel. John 12:32 is a context very much like John 6:44, so it would be begging the question to determine the meaning of John 6:44 from John 12:32. In John 18:10 we find Peter *drawing* his sword from its sheath in order to cut off the ear of the soldier. And in John 21:6-7 the fishermen are *drawing* their nets with fish in them. The use of *elkuō* with inanimate objects or subhuman creatures will probably not be determinative. How, then, can one decide the meaning of *elkuō* in John 6:44?

Sproul appeals to an article in Kittel to support his understanding that the word means “to compel by irresistible superiority.”<sup>47</sup> We are not sure if this conclusion was a hasty reading on Sproul’s part or not, but the article concludes just the opposite in regard to John 6:44. Albrecht Oepke<sup>48</sup> refers to two readings from 4 Maccabees and one from Jer 31:3 to establish that in a familial context or a lover context *elkuō* means “to woo” or “to draw with love.” In Jeremiah it is God the Lover drawing His Love, Israel, with His lovingkindness, and in Macc 14:13 and 15:11 it is a Jewish mother as she watches her seven sons martyred for their faith. In both cases the verb is used in connection with strong cords of love drawing the beloved to the one loving. Once again we see that context is king. John 6:44 speaks of people coming to Jesus only if His *Father* draws them. This is not a hostile context. It is the familial context, a context of love.

Why is this so important? Because love precludes force. Does any groom wish to drag, force, or coerce his bride to the altar? I think not. He may have sovereignly initiated the relationship, but then a period of courting and wooing took place in which the future groom *persuaded* his future bride of his many virtues.

<sup>46</sup>M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 25-27.

<sup>47</sup>Sproul, 69.

<sup>48</sup>A. Oepke, *TDNT*, 1968 ed., VII:503.



We conclude that "divine persuasion" is exactly what the Bible depicts as the divine enablement necessary for a totally fallen being to believe in Christ for salvation. This is not *synergism*. God initiates the relationship, and God is the Persuader, the Wooer. Man is the responder. His ultimate faith is passive. He is a receptor, a receiver (John 1:12) of a divine gift. As Roy Aldrich argued long ago, *receiving* a gift can never be construed to be a meritorious work.<sup>49</sup> And never is this "divine persuasion" called "regeneration" in the Bible.

Millard Erickson came to this same conclusion in his study of Systematic Theology:

The conclusion here, then, is that God regenerates those who repent and believe. But this conclusion seems inconsistent with the doctrine of total inability. Are we torn between Scripture and logic on this point? There is a way out. That is to distinguish between God's special and effectual calling on the one hand, and regeneration on the other. Although no one is capable of responding to the general call of the gospel, in the case of the elect God works intensively through a special calling so that they do respond in repentance and faith. As a result of this conversion, God regenerates them. The special calling is simply an intensive and effectual working by the Holy Spirit. It is not the complete transformation which constitutes regeneration, but it does render the conversion of the individual both possible and certain. Thus the logical order of the initial aspects of salvation is special calling-conversion-regeneration.<sup>50</sup>

And Robert Pyne expresses a similar understanding when he writes:

Many theologians, particularly those who are more Reformed, would insert regeneration between calling and faith. While there is clearly a divine work that comes before faith and is directed only toward the elect, it seems better to restrict oneself to more specific terminology in the description of that work. It may be

<sup>49</sup>Roy L. Aldrich, "The Gift of God," *BibSac* 122 (July–September, 1965): 252–53.

<sup>50</sup>M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983–85), 3:933.

argued (persuasively, in the opinion of this author) that regeneration takes place through the indwelling of the animating Holy Spirit. Since that indwelling comes through faith (Acts 2:38; Gal 3:2), it seems appropriate to regard regeneration as a consequence of faith, not as its cause.<sup>51</sup>

## IV. CONCLUSION

We have grappled in this discussion with one of the crucial differences between what is called Reformed Theology and Dispensational Theology, that is, regeneration as it relates to faith in the *ordo salutis* and the impact this *crux interpretum* has on one's understanding of Total Depravity. Both Reformed Theology and Dispensational Theology are systems of theology. By definition a good system must have consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, and congruity. Some doctrines in any system are deeply ingressive, that is, if one of these doctrines proves faulty, then the entire system is faulty and needs revision, at the least, or rejection, at the most.

We have also explained that Systematic Theology is only as good as the Historical Theology and the Biblical Theology on which it builds. If aspects of a system conflict with clear biblical data, then the system will have inconsistency, incoherence, incomprehensiveness, and incongruity. By their own admission, Sproul and Gerstner tell us that their view of Total Depravity governs the other four points of their Five Point Calvinism. But essential to their view of Total Depravity is their doctrine that regeneration must precede faith in the elect. If this *crux* interpretation falls, their understanding of Total Depravity is deficient. And if their understanding of Total Depravity is deficient, their entire five point system is shaky, to say the least.

We have tried to demonstrate that the modern Reformed teaching that regeneration precedes faith developed in a world of infant baptism and baptismal regeneration. It was also more the result of human logic than biblical exegesis. Hopefully we have shown that there is no biblical data to support the doctrine that regeneration precedes faith.

<sup>51</sup>R. Pyne, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Conversion," *BibSac* 150 (April 1993): 215, n. 29.

We have also tried to explain that the use of the pejorative term *synergism* to describe Dispensationalism is a misnomer, since no Dispensationalist would even suggest that man "*works* together with" God to accomplish his salvation. Faith is not a meritorious work, by definition. In essence, the two are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, to speak of regeneration as the divine enablement required for a totally depraved being to believe for salvation is also a misnomer. It is using biblical words in an unbiblical way. Is it not more biblical to stick to the biblical terminology for the work of the Holy Spirit or the Father in this divine enablement: calling, convicting, wooing, persuading (Luke 14)? This kind of biblical data leads to good Biblical Theology. And good Biblical Theology helps build solid Systematic Theology.





# ***HOW WIDE THE DIVIDE? A MORMON AND AN EVANGELICAL IN CONVERSATION***

## **A REVIEW**

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One of the evident characteristics of the late-twentieth century religious scene, which has only intensified in the new millennium, is the desire of disparate confessions to find common ground. While the spirit of ecumenism has often been little more than a euphemism for the dissolution of any distinctiveness in theological expression, it need not be so. Some, to be sure, are interested only in finding the lowest doctrinal common denominator, a “peace at any cost” approach. But others have used an exchange of theological perspectives to better define where each stands.

Confessional clarity strengthens all of us for the tasks which lie before us, and provides the way to further dialogue by exposing our real differences. A debate on the basis of Scripture, which ends in disagreement, but which produces distinct statements on both sides, is far more fruitful than a document which is open to arbitrary interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

For those who are particularly attuned to the issues surrounding the doctrine of salvation, there is an added interest. Since the most essential and practical expression of any theological position is in its articulation of the way of salvation, we are progressively discovering more clearly who is truly allied with whom, and where basic distinctions lie. For example, recent joint declarations between Lutherans and

<sup>1</sup> Mark Seifrid, “‘The Gift of Salvation’: Its Failure to Address the Crux of Justification.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42:4 (December 1999), 688.

Catholics, and Evangelical–Roman Catholic statements such as “The Gift of Salvation”<sup>2</sup> have borne out the truth of Earl Radmacher’s warning over a decade ago that Reformed and Lordship Salvation teachings were “not paving the road back to Wittenberg but, rather, paving the road back to Rome.”<sup>3</sup> It has become a source of discomfort among some in the Lordship Salvation camp to discover that their evangelistic summations are indistinguishable from that of moderate Roman Catholics.

They now have a new source of agreement to rue.

In their book *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*,<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg, a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Stephen Robinson, a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, have published a wide-ranging dialogue on the agreements and differences between Mormon and Evangelical doctrine.

At the outset, it should be noted that Blomberg has been taken to task by some conservative evangelical reviewers for basically “giving away the farm” theologically.<sup>5</sup> Frankly, this writer finds it odd that the book’s conclusions have not been universally condemned in the evangelical community. Most galling are comments that seem to attack the attempts of Evangelicals to convert Mormons to a true faith in Jesus Christ. For example, in their joint conclusion, the authors write:

Might we look forward to the day when youth groups or adult Sunday school classes from Mormon and Evangelical churches

<sup>2</sup> “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation,” *Christianity Today* (December 8, 1997), 35–38.

<sup>3</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.” *JETS* 33:1 (March 1990), 40. It is noteworthy that John MacArthur, in a book predating recent agreements between Protestants or Evangelicals, and Roman Catholics, characterized Dr. Radmacher as a “radical” for this statement (John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993], 91). In light of recent events, might we expect MacArthur to recant his accusation and admit the prophetic nature of Radmacher’s assertion?

<sup>4</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Hank Hanegraaff, “The Mormon Divide,” *Christian Research Institute Newsletter* (December 1998), 4.



in the same neighborhoods would gather periodically to share their beliefs with each other in love and for the sake of understanding, not proselytizing?... Surely the God who brought down the Berlin Wall in our generation is capable of such things.<sup>6</sup>

That any evangelical would suggest such a thing, not to mention a highly respected teacher in a major evangelical seminary, is testament to the doctrinal vacuum in Evangelicalism today.

What many will find most interesting, however, is not Blomberg's obscure theological moorings, but the clear statements by Robinson. As evasive and self-critical as Blomberg is, Robinson is inversely lucid and succinct.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his discussion of Mormon soteriology. In a concise statement summarizing the Mormon position, he writes:

Christ invites *all* human beings, not just a select few, to enjoy the salvation he has prepared. In the LDS view, we accept the offered salvation by believing in Christ, repenting of our sins and being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21)... In accepting the gospel covenant we agree to make Jesus Lord of our lives and in our lives. To deny him his lordship and our subsequent obedience is to deny *him*, regardless of what we might profess to believe about him (Mt 7:21).<sup>7</sup>

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Reformed and Lordship Salvation teaching will immediately hear echoes in Robinson's statement.<sup>8</sup> It is enlightening, then, that in the ensuing discussion, Robinson declares that Mormon soteriology is in many points

<sup>6</sup> Blomberg and Robinson, 191-92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 145. Italics his.

<sup>8</sup> See R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 24-26, 155ff; John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, "Follow Me"?* Revised & Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 28-29, 36-39, etc., and *Faith Works*, 23, etc. Comments by Robinson like "In accepting the gospel covenant we agree to make Jesus Lord of our lives," and "To deny him his lordship and our subsequent obedience is to deny him" are virtually identical to Reformed-Lordship Salvation language.

thoroughly Arminian.<sup>9</sup> His candor in recognizing the reciprocity between Arminian and Reformed teaching in this area is actually quite refreshing.

Calvinist Evangelicals insist that a “backslider” was never really converted, while Mormons and other Arminians say that the backslider “fell from grace.” But both agree in principle that genuine Christian conversion must somehow be associated with Christian behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Having noted the similarity between Calvinist (Reformed) and Arminian approaches to the role of works in salvation, Robinson seeks to paint himself, and Mormons, as being part of the evangelical mainstream. In doing so, he makes it abundantly clear with whom he is allied, and where basic distinctions lie in Mormon theology. He writes:

The real sticking point between LDS and Evangelicals is not whether we are saved by grace (both affirm this) but whether we are saved by grace *alone*, that is, without individual, personal involvement or participation. Latter-day Saints find “salvation by grace *alone*” to be unbiblical and, borrowing C. S. Lewis’s analogy, like cutting cloth with only half of the scissors. We would agree with Bonhoeffer and MacArthur that one cannot “have eternal life yet continue to live in rebellion against God.” I would judge the terms “being saved,” “coming to Christ,” “accepting the gospel,” “entering the covenant,” “making Christ Lord in my life” and “serving Christ” as being roughly equivalent. It follows, then, that saying “I have come to Christ, but I refuse to serve him” is self-contradictory. How does one accept Christ without accepting Christ *as Lord*? And to accept Christ as Lord is to accept myself as his vassal, and vassals do the will of their Lord, not their own will.<sup>11</sup>

The endnote attached to the citation of John MacArthur reads as follows:

John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 15-16; but read the whole introduction—*with which the LDS would heartily agree*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Blomberg and Robinson, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 148-49. Italics his.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 221, italics added.



Even considering the problems with other areas of LDS theology, this statement is amazing! Of course, it isn't always fair to judge theologians or their theology by those who claim to agree with a portion of their doctrine,<sup>13</sup> but when the doctrine is so central to the faith, as soteriology is, and the connection so unambiguous, the endorsement is far more serious. MacArthur might argue (correctly) that the Mormon God and Jesus aren't the biblical God and Jesus,<sup>14</sup> but most Mormons I've talked with don't know this; they just follow the church's faith-and-works-will-get-you-there teaching.

No one is going to suggest that *all* Reformed or Lordship theologians are soft on Mormonism (even if Blomberg *is*)! But it should be disconcerting for these theologians, who loudly and often claim that they teach justification by faith *alone*,<sup>15</sup> to find that those who openly include works in the salvation formula enthusiastically endorse their writings.

<sup>13</sup> One example would be the way Jehovah's Witnesses echo parts of dispensational eschatology. This is of little concern to dispensationalists, however, since the differences between them and JW's in essential areas of doctrine (Christology, Soteriology, and Pneumatology) are so clear.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Mormon theology is bizarre in these areas. While the first Mormon "Article of Faith" says, "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost," this statement is intentionally written *not* to tell what Mormons believe, but to make Mormonism seem to be the same as fundamental Christianity (see John L. Smith, *Has Mormonism Changed...Now?* [Marlow, Oklahoma: Utah Missions, Inc., 1979], 45). Robinson similarly "sugar coats" Mormon doctrine with orthodox terminology in an attempt to proselytize Evangelicals "softened up" by Robinson's benign approach to LDS teachings. Mormonism actually teaches that God is a glorified man (hence their famous statement: *As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become*), and Jesus Christ was the first of the "spirit children" of Elohim (God the Father). For a thorough and accurate assessment of contemporary Mormon teaching, see James R. White, *Is the Mormon My Brother?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), and R. Philip Roberts, *Mormonism Unmasked* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> See Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 26, 155ff; MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 37, and *Faith Works*, 23-24, 87. Actually, these writings are not burdened with affirming justification by faith alone, since that is not in dispute. Indeed, it is the clear teaching of Scripture. Rather, their challenge is trying to explain the incongruent proposition that salvation is at the same time received



In his introduction to *Faith Works*, MacArthur notes some of the criticisms evoked by his earlier book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. The most grievous to him, he wrote, was the accusation that he was “a teacher of works-salvation.”<sup>16</sup> No longer can it be said that this “accusation” comes only from those who wish to criticize him. A Mormon who makes no bones about the necessity of works for salvation has embraced his writings with hearty agreement.

One wonders if MacArthur and others in the Reformed-Lordship Salvation camp don’t lay awake some nights in a cold sweat with the realization that Roman Catholic and Mormon theologians are using their writings to support their teaching!

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by faith alone *and* by “a faith that works.” Reformed and Lordship theologians have fused the “oil” of faith with the “water” of works in the syllogism, “You are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves you is never alone,” but the fusion doesn’t work, and it is the synergists themselves who are now making this clear.

<sup>16</sup> MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 13.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love.* By Zane C. Hodges. Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999. 312 pp. Cloth, \$17.95.

Those familiar with the writings of Zane Hodges have come to expect excellent scholarship combined with unusual insight and practical relevance. Readers of this commentary on the letters of John will find these expectations fully met and more. In this his most recent work, Hodges demonstrates seasoned skill in exegesis and a pastoral heart to apply it. Despite the handling of the technical literature and Greek syntactical/grammatical refinements, the work is reader-friendly for the average Christian. Scripture and subject indexes complement the book. Selective footnotes separate the technical material from the commentary per se, as is the pattern in the GES commentary series. The author has also penned the commentary on James (paper, 128 pp.) in the same series, but the added length of *The Epistles of John* has allowed for a more comprehensive treatment.

The interpretation of the Johannine epistles reflects the author's previous work on the same books in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. While only one or two interpretive changes have been made, the present commentary is much enlarged, allowing the author to interact more with alternative interpretations and especially with issues regarding grace, assurance, and erroneous evangelical perspectives of sanctification.

No one will be surprised that the Hodges/Farstad Greek text (*The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*, Thomas Nelson) is followed for exegesis. Since the author has worked extensively on the theories of textual criticism, interaction with these issues appears at pertinent places. Adhering to the majority text theory, Hodges argues for genealogical reconstruction where possible, a point misunderstood by many that oppose a majority text theory. Where genealogical reconstruction is not possible, any reading supported by numerous manuscripts is to be favored over a minority reading. In light of these principles, the originality of 1 John 5:7b–8a (unless otherwise noted, references concern First John) in the Textus Receptus is rejected, even though the New King James Version (the text of choice for the GES

series) is used throughout for exposition. If the careful student of this commentary will read the footnotes thoroughly, significant wisdom on textual criticism theory can be gained.

Unlike some scholars, Hodges works with the supposition that First John has a clearly defined literary scheme. An orderly arrangement of an epistle, which was intended from its origin to be *read* in public, is in line with what is currently known of Greek rhetorical style. Hodges applies this knowledge in analyzing the structure of First John. The epistle opens with a short preface (1:1-4) in which the apostle declares his theme of fellowship with God (1:3). A two-fold introduction follows, describing the fundamental principles of experiencing this fellowship (1:5-2:2) and the primary result—intimacy with (or abiding in) Christ (2:3-11). The 2:12-27 unit reveals the author's specific concerns in writing: the readers need to appreciate their spiritual advancements (2:12-14) while being fully aware of the dangers of the world and the teachings of the antichrists (2:15-27) or Revisionists (Hodges's label for these false teachers). The main body of the epistle runs from 2:28-4:19 and is marked out by an *inclusio* (the use of the same word[s] at the beginning and end of a unit). The Greek word for "boldness" (*parresian*, 2:28 and 4:17) becomes the key mark of the *inclusio*. At the beginning of the body (2:28), John gives a thematic statement for the book: the "abiding" relationship alone is capable of preparing the believer to stand in full confidence ("boldness") and without shame before the Judgment Seat of Christ. In the conclusion of the epistle (4:20-5:17) and its epilogue (5:18-20), the writer offers practical advice regarding an obedient life.

What did the Revisionists teach? Effort is made by some commentators to uncover heretical assertions behind John's instructions in 1:5-2:11. But as Hodges astutely observes, the Revisionists are not directly introduced until 2:18. Indeed, John has not even revealed the occasion for his writing until 2:12ff. Christians who are out of harmony with God can make all of the false statements that occur in 1:5-2:11. (One should not conclude from this that *no* hints of the antichrists' teachings are to be found in 1:5-2:11.) The false teaching, while not a developed form of Gnosticism, could have incorporated Proto-Gnostic beliefs. The clearest heresy of the Revisionists was their denial that Jesus was the Christ who had come in the flesh. Cerinthus, who according to early Christian literature was an heretical leader from Asia Minor and arch-enemy of the apostle John, held that the divine Christ descended on the human Jesus at His baptism, and left just prior



to his crucifixion. In Hodges's view, such an historical background nicely fits the mysterious reference in 5:6 to Jesus coming both by water (baptism) and blood (death).

The audience is not only Christian, but is commended for their high spiritual maturity as is substantiated by 2:12-14. Hodges defends the interpretation that all three designations there ("little children," "fathers," "young men") describe the *entire* audience rather than a two-fold or three-fold division of his readership. This conviction is supported by the fact that the two different words translated "little children" in 2:12 (*teknia*) and in 2:13 (*paidia*) are both used unequivocally in the rest of the epistle for all John's readers. Hodges concludes that the readers may well have been the spiritual leaders (i.e., the elders) at the church(es) to which the letter was originally sent.

Expositors and commentators often handle the Johannine letters as if they unfold a series of tests designed to help one ascertain his/her eternal relationship with Christ, i.e., gain assurance of or discover the lack of salvation. In Hodges's opinion, this defective perspective can be traced back to the 1914 publication of Robert Law's study of the epistles. But in stark contrast to the "tests of life" view, the letters are to be understood as tests that determine our intimacy with Christ, i.e. tests of fellowship and abiding in Christ. These epistles, especially First and Second John, must be interpreted in light of the principles Jesus laid down in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) written earlier by the same apostle in his Gospel (dated by Hodges, ca. A.D. 48-52).

Under the premise proposed by Law and others, numerous verses have been misread. Hodges counteracts these views time and again, showing that a straightforward reading of the text contradicts any form of assurance by works or sanctification. The well-known section of 2:3-6 has repeatedly been twisted to portray such an idea. First, Hodges justifiably criticizes the theological construct that one can believe in Christ without really knowing that he or she has true faith until fruit is produced. Second, he argues that the concept of knowing God or Christ is quite flexible, being used both of saving knowledge and of experiential knowledge. Finally, drawing from John's own Upper Room Discourse, Hodges shows that Jesus spoke of all the disciples apart from Judas as being born again (John 13:10-11) yet failing to "know" Him (John 14:7-9). This establishes John's intention to present in First John a test to establish our intimacy with Christ by our obedience to His commandments rather than a test to evaluate our salvation.

Traditional treatments of 2:9 (“He who...hates his brother is in darkness”) argue that John wished to expose the false Christians in his audience. But this viewpoint evidences a similar error. Hodges comments, “The word *his* is completely unnecessary, and even misleading, if a non-Christian is hating a Christian.” Later he reasons, “Once we have looked closely at verses [2:]12-14, it will seem absurd that John could be thought to regard his readers as possible ‘false professors’ of the Christian faith.” At each and every verse where “tests of life” presumably exist, Hodges offers a far superior alternative.

First John 2:19 has been consistently summoned as a proof text for the teaching that defection from the faith (“they went out from us”) renders faith illegitimate (“but they were not of us”). The commentary vitiates this argument. The repeated warnings of the epistle confirm that the Revisionists had definitely *not* departed from the church to which John was writing. Furthermore, the pronouns in First John invariably contrast the antichrists (“they”) over against the apostles (“we/us”) and the Christian readers (“you”). Verse 19 teaches that the Revisionists had left the apostles and the “mother church” at Jerusalem (“they [the antichrists] went out from us [the apostles]”), proving their false doctrines were not derived from the foundational and orthodox apostolic circle (“but they were not of us [apostles]”).

Another case in point is 3:6 and 9 where the present tense is frequently misconstrued as teaching that no true Christian can habitually sin. Hodges insists that this perspective is indefensible. Grammatically, the present tense can have a progressive nuance, but *by itself* cannot be manipulated to suggest habitual activity. Contextually, verses 6 and 9 are clearly absolute in light of such statements as in verse 5, “in Him [Christ] there is no sin.” In keeping with the epistle’s strong polarity between darkness and light, sin and righteousness, verses 6 and 9 detail the absolute inner sinlessness of the person born from God. While all Christians do continue to sin (even according to statements found elsewhere in the epistle; cf. 1:8). The innermost self of every regenerate person cannot and does not sin. The principle is simple: “like begets like.” Sin in any and all forms must find its source in something other than the new, divinely regenerate self.

Hodges sometimes breaks with other popular evangelical interpretations. Like most others who have been influenced by the commentary tradition, I must admit that I generally resist his interpretations at first. But his intractable logic and clear, precise handling of the text eventually convince me that his understanding is



correct. His view of the antichrist serves as an illustration. Since the antichrists (2:18) are obviously embodied in the many false prophets (4:1-3), the antichrist himself is best understood as the False Prophet of Revelation (13:9-14), rather than the beast of Revelation 13:1-8, i.e., the "man of sin" (2 Thess 2:3-4).

One area of interpretation I am still processing. In 2:23, John says, "whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either" (i.e., "*does not have the Father or the Son,*" italics added). Hodges takes the reference to apply equally well to a saved or an unsaved person. In his understanding, the concept of "not having the Son [or Father]" here and in 2 John 9 means the absence of divine involvement or cooperation, but not necessarily the absence of eternal life. On the other hand, he takes the similar phrase in 5:12, "he who *does not have the Son of God* does not have the life" (italics added), to compose a formula that equals the absence of eternal life. Hodges may be perfectly right when he argues that the verb "have" is flexible. While some questions still remain for me, I am convinced that Hodges's explanation is the best option among other alternatives.

The blend of the erudite with the down-to-earth makes this work enjoyable for all levels of readers. For the scholar, there are discussions (in footnotes) on technical matters (e.g., the role of anaphora and cataphora in First John). On the other hand, one can find penetrating wisdom into human nature: "It is a natural response, when people feel their guilt, to attempt to soften the extent of their failure by defining the responsibility away" (p. 212). Sensitivity to the struggling Christian is apparent as well: "Whatever we try to do in love, a sensitive conscience often condemns us for having done too little, or for not making up for past failures, or for any number of things. Our instincts, in our sinful flesh, are so selfish that we may even in the midst of acting in Christian love suspect ourselves of impure or unworthy motives" (p. 164).

It would be a flagrant disservice to merely recommend this commentary. No finer exposition on the Epistles of John can be found in print. If one aspires to a masterful understanding of these challenging NT letters, a choice regale awaits the reader of this volume.

**John F. Hart**  
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**Salvation.** By Earl D. Radmacher. Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000. 302 + xiii pp. Cloth, \$21.99.

*JOTGES* readers should rejoice in the publication of this important and influential work by a leading Free Grace proponent. This book is part of Dallas Theological Seminary's Swindoll Leadership Library series.

Dr. Radmacher does a masterful job of explaining salvation from a consistent Free Grace position.

The book contains seventeen chapters. My favorite chapters are *What Does Salvation Mean?* (Chapter 1), *What Is Faith?* (Chapter 9), *Is the Believer's Salvation Secure?* (Chapter 15), and *How Can a Believer Have Assurance of Salvation?* (Chapter 16).

Radmacher shows that biblical salvation is deliverance, and that it often is deliverance from something other than eternal condemnation. He demonstrates that faith is the persuasion that something is true. With excellent illustrations and scriptural support, he proves the doctrines of eternal security and absolute assurance of salvation by faith apart from works.

The book also contains two appendixes by guest writers. The first is by Dr. Roy Zuck. He deals with the question *Will Infants Who Die Go to Heaven?* His conclusion is yes. He gives eight proposed reasons for the salvation of all infants who die, without advocating any particular view. There is much helpful material here. Evidently Zuck extends this reasoning to children who die (what is the age of accountability?) and to the severely retarded who are incapable of believing. Unfortunately, he never discusses these issues, limiting himself merely to infants who die.

The second appendix is by me. I deal with the issue of repentance and salvation. It is a real privilege to have a portion of my book *Confident in Christ* reprinted in this major work.

I was particularly impressed by the clear distinction that is drawn again and again between eternal life as a gift received by faith alone and rulership and rewards as prizes won by faithfulness.

I highly recommend this fine book.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*  
Irving, TX

*Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649.* By R.T. Kendall (London, England: Paternoster, 1997. Originally published by Oxford Press, 1981.) 263 pp. Paper, \$35.00.

"Salvation (Justification/Reconciliation) is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." I have rarely met any Protestant who does not, in some way, affirm that phrase. Yet what one means by this varies widely. These words were proclaimed as part of the Reformation and affirmed in the creeds and are taught throughout the church to today. Yet, as early as Beza, Calvin's successors began to append to "faith alone saves" the phrase "but faith that saves is never alone."

*Christianity Today* rightly calls Kendall's republished Oxford doctoral dissertation "an epoch-making book." It examines the doctrine of faith from Calvin to Perkins to the Westminster Assembly to determine the degree to which Westminster theology is Calvin's theological legacy versus Perkins' legacy. After overviewing Calvin's doctrine of faith, Kendall traces the interactions of Theodore Beza, William Perkins, Paul Baynes, Richard Sibbes, John Cotton, John Preston, Thomas Hooker, Jacobus Arminius, and William Ames with Calvin.

Kendall claims that Puritanism's central figures, such as William Perkins and William Ames, drew their theology not from Calvin, but from Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva. Even J. I. Packer defends the Synod of Dort (1618–19) by putting words into Calvin's mouth that he did not say ["Calvin the Theologian" in *John Calvin* (Abingdon, 1966, p. 151)]. Specifically, he asserts that the Dortian formula of Limited Atonement says what Calvin "would have said *if* he had faced the Arminian thesis." Therefore, Kendall perceives a fundamental shift between Calvin and Beza. Consequently, the whole Puritan tradition, from Perkins to the Westminster Confession of Faith, followed the wrong (non-Calvinistic or anti-Calvinistic) track concerning the atonement and the nature of saving faith.

Paul Helms, *Calvin and The Calvinists* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982, p. 9) visually displays what he believes was Kendall's comparison of Calvin and the Puritans:

CALVIN	PURITANISM
General Atonement: Faith as a passive persuasion	Limited Atonement: Faith as an act of the will
Faith including assurance	Faith does not necessarily include assurance
The Gospel before the Law	Preparation for grace
Faith before repentance	Repentance before faith
Salvation by grace through faith	Salvation through good endeavors

Kendall's 1997 edition includes a new preface as well as an additional appendix extracted from Curt Daniel's Ph.D. thesis from New College, Edinburgh, 1983. Daniel sought to answer Kendall's critics concerning a single passage that Cunningham attributed to Calvin defending limited atonement. Daniel demonstrates that it was not Calvin's statement after all.

Paul Helms states the importance of Kendall's work when he said this: "No one can doubt the seriousness of the charge that Kendall levels against Puritanism. He [Kendall] makes the bold and controversial claim that the Puritans, the professed followers of Calvin and the Reformation doctrine, were in fact undoing the work of the Reformation. If this could be shown, then whole epochs of church history would have to be re-interpreted" (*Calvin and the Calvinists*, p. 9).

I agree with J. I. Packer as cited in the back jacket: "Dr. Kendall's exciting study...is a major step forward in the reappraisal of Puritanism...no student in the Puritan field can excuse himself from reckoning with this important contribution." I recommend this book, especially this edition, for any and all interested in the theology attributed to Calvin.

Theology ought not be derived from Beza's understanding of Calvin (nor from any other outside system), but from the Bible itself.

**Steve Lewis**

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*An Urgent Call to a Serious Faith.* By Dave Hunt. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2000. 272 pp. Paper, \$9.99.

According to the back cover, this book “fosters deeper trust in and commitment to God by defining the biblical gospel—and what it saves us from, clarifying the call to discipleship, articulating the faith for which we must earnestly contend, explaining the necessity of taking up the cross, developing what the Bible says about the Trinity, the incarnation, and the church, and confronting the challenge of living in the last days.” That is a fairly accurate description of what the book contains: *everything*. While this is not by any means a systematic theology, Hunt covers a lot of ground.

The title, *An Urgent Call to a Serious Faith*, probably does as good a job as possible in garnering interest and yet saying something about the contents. The problem is the book covers such a wide range of topics that it reads more like an anthology of sermons than as a single-topic book.

The author has a passion in this book for two things: putting one’s faith into practice and rejecting anything related to psychology, secular or Christian. The latter creeps up again and again (see, for example, pp. 101-112, 151-52, 203). Some of his statements in this regard are hard to prove or accept (e.g., “There are no *chemical* solutions to spiritual problems. Yet millions take drugs such as Prozac, Effexor, Valium, Ritalin, Zoloft, Paxil and so on to deal with spiritual problems” p. 203). He does, however, do a fair job of explaining why loving your neighbor as yourself is not a call to heightened self-love (pp. 151-52).

When it comes to the gospel, Hunt is fairly clear in the chapter by that title (What Is the Gospel?). He indicates that we are saved by faith apart from works (pp. 69-76). He is clear on the finished work of Christ. He shows that we must call people to believe on Christ *for salvation from hell*, not for happiness, success, marital restoration, or stress relief (p. 75).

Unfortunately, in his chapter on eternal security, he takes away much of what he said in the earlier chapter on the gospel. Immediately after speaking of the Judgment Seat of Christ and believers who are saved yet so as through fire, he asks, “Do we then, on the basis of ‘once saved, always saved,’ encourage Christians to ‘sin that grace may abound’?” I loved the question and was anxious to read his reply. His answer, once he gets past Paul’s answer, is disturbing.

He writes, "With Paul we say, 'God forbid!' *We offer no comfort or assurance to those living in sin.* We don't say, 'You're okay because you once made a "decision" for Christ.' Instead we warn, '*If you are not willing right now to live fully for Christ as Lord of your life, how can you say that you were really sincere when you supposedly committed yourself to Him at some time in the past?*' And to all, we declare with Paul, 'Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves' (2 Corinthians 13:5, italics added, p. 223)."

That is so far off from what he said earlier, one wonders if he used a ghost writer who inserted his or her own theology at this point.

I found this book to contain much good material. Unfortunately, it is not packaged well. There is little *flow* to this book. Each chapter is like a new booklet or essay only slightly related to what precedes or follows.

I recommend this book for those who like Dave Hunt's works, and for those willing to do a fair amount of sifting in order to find the gold buried within.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

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*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

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***The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission.*** By Rick Warren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995. 399 pp. Cloth, \$24.95.

It is easy to see why so many churches today are "converting" to the "purpose driven church" model for church growth. What makes this new model so interesting is that it allows each church to "market" their church having discovered what the purpose of their church is. It no longer desires to discover what the Bible says about the purpose of the church in general, but it is formulating a specialized model custom-fitted for your church.

"Our sanity and survival depended upon developing a workable process to turn seekers into saints, turn consumers into contributors, turn members into ministers, and turn an audience into an army. Believe



me, it is an incredibly difficult task to lead people from self-centered consumerism to being servant-hearted Christians" (p. 46).

Warren lists "myths" about growing churches and analyzes and responds to each of them (pp. 47-71).

Warren then discusses the matter of asking the question, "What drives your church?" Churches, he says, are driven by tradition, by personality, by finances, by programs, by buildings, by events, or by seekers. He sees the biblical paradigm as "purpose-driven churches." There are two essential elements of his paradigm. First it requires a new perspective and second, this paradigm requires a process for fulfilling the purposes of the church.

Warren does state correctly the importance of being purpose driven when he said that nothing precedes purpose (p. 81). When asked, "Why does the church exist?" Eighty-nine percent responded, "The church's purpose is to take care of my family's and my needs." Only eleven percent said, "The purpose of the church is to win the world for Jesus Christ." If the pastor and congregation can't even agree on why the church exists, conflict and disagreement on everything else is inevitable (p. 82). Do those answers reflect confusion in the pulpit or a state of mind in our affluent western civilization? Do these statistics prove true for the churches in Southeast Asia, or the former Soviet Union countries, or Latin America, or any place other than the United States?

Warren states that the foundation for a healthy church is determining its purpose. No disagreement here, assuming the gospel of grace is understood apart from works and that it is proclaimed simply and clearly [this matter will be addressed later in this review]. He believes that "When you've finished laying the foundation, the most critical work is behind you. You can never build larger than the foundation can handle (pp. 85-86)." A clear purpose builds morale, reduces frustration, allows concentration, attracts cooperation, and assists evaluation.

Warren elaborates on the process of defining your church's purposes. He says as one looks in the New Testament one should look at Christ's ministry on earth, the images and names of the church, the examples of the New Testament churches, and the commands of Christ. (i.e., "I will build my church.") He says, "It isn't our job to create the purposes of the church but to discover them."

Warren says when doing this research one should look for answers to four specific questions: 1) Why does the church exist? 2) What are we to be as a church? (Who and what are we?) 3) What are we to do as



a church? (What does God want done in the world?) And 4) How are we to do it? He believes “thoughts disentangle themselves when they pass through the lips and fingertips” (p. 99). If you can say it and write it, then you’ve clearly thought it through. No one would disagree with Warren when he says that what people remember are simple statements, slogans, and phrases. However, I am not sure Christianity can or should be reduced to such.

Most might agree with Warren when he lists five purposes of the church: 1) Love the Lord with all your heart; 2) Love your neighbor as yourself; 3) Go and make disciples; 4) Baptizing them and 5) Teaching them to obey (pp. 103-106). These purposes are more what a church does—the fundamental activities of a church. The purpose might be found in 1 Timothy 3:14-15. These activities Warren listed enable the church to fulfill the purpose of being the pillar and ground of the truth.

Four areas concern me.

One is the place of the Scriptures and the proclamation of the text and the role of the pastor as proclaimer of the whole counsel of God. An example would be found on p. 187 and his lack of care in handling the text of Matthew 10:5-6. This makes me wonder how much value he places on accuracy and truth.

The second area of concern is that nowhere is there any mention of the gospel of God’s grace proclaimed. The closest thing is found where Warren states that: “At the end of each service, I ask everyone to bow their heads and I lead in a closing prayer, during which I give an opportunity for unbelievers *to make a commitment to Christ*. Then, I’ll pray a model prayer as an example and ask them to let me know *about their decision on the commitment card*... We have had services where 100, 200, 300, and once nearly 400, unbelievers have *committed their lives to Christ* and indicated it on a card” (p. 303, italics added).

Where is the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sinless sacrifice? Where was the invitation *to believe in Christ alone for eternal life*? Where does the Bible say that *committing one’s life to Christ* saves anyone?

The third area of concern is that of “targeting” church outreach to specific groups in the community. This method can be distorted into a means of discrimination. For example, if a church desires to grow and a mile in one direction is a low-income government subsidized housing project and a mile in the other direction is an affluent, gate-guarded community, which will most likely be the targeted community? There

is a tendency to target the people that can contribute the most to the church. They are the ones with the most education, talents, and wealth. Therefore, there is the possibility that the community with the most deficits and needs, to say nothing of racial minorities, may be neglected.

The fourth area is that this model defines the Sunday morning meeting as "church" yet their services are structured to meet the needs of the unsaved (pre-believers) or unchurched as seekers. It may even become a place where the buyer (unreached) and the seller (church) exchange goods or services for some consideration, usually money. There ceases to be a place of worship, where they celebrate God's presence in worship, communicate God's Word, incorporate God's family into their fellowship, and educate God's people through discipleship. The morning church service ceases to be a place for expository preaching of God's Word.

Finally, I would not recommend this book to someone who is not already clear on the gospel of God's grace, nor someone who is not secure in his position of proclaiming the Scriptures expositively week after week (in season and out of season). There is a temptation to be carried away with the euphoria of "success" and a manifesto to all leaders to consider embracing this model. However, it does provide some very practical "ideas" about the organization, structure, and oversight of a large post-modern church.

**Dr. Stephen Lewis**

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***Becoming A Contagious Christian.*** By Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994. 221 pages. Paper, \$12.99.

Many have heard of Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburb of South Barrington, Illinois, with their attendance of more than 16,000, and their semi-annual church leadership conferences. Author Bill Hybels serves as senior pastor at Willow Creek and Mark Mittelberg is the associate director of the Willow Creek Association



and the evangelism trainer. One of the primary ideas promoted by Willow Creek and emphasized in this book is reaching “seekers,” the unsaved who are looking for something and need salvation.

*Becoming A Contagious Christian* contains much we can learn about living and sharing the gospel we say we believe. God’s grace of unmerited salvation should inspire us to be contagious in sharing the gospel with unbelievers. No matter who we come into contact with in our daily lives, each person that crosses our path may have that moment as their first or final opportunity to witness the life of Christ in us or to hear about salvation. No matter the situation, there is a way to eventually share the gospel with unbelievers. The goal of the book is “to give you practical steps toward becoming an effective carrier of God’s life-changing message. If we are authentic Christians, before we can become highly contagious Christians, we must first live in a way that convinces the people around us that we actually have the disease ourselves!” (p. 23). The expression of compassion toward others is important, because they “will recognize it as an earmark of authentic Christianity” (p. 69).

While the ideas for sharing the gospel in the book are sound, there is a problem with the so-called “clear communication” of the gospel. In Chapter 11, *Making The Message Clear*, the message imparted is anything but clear. It says that the only way to receive Christ’s forgiveness “is to humbly bow before Him, admit our waywardness, and say yes to His incredible offer” (p. 152). “Each of us has to receive the forgiveness and leadership of Christ individually” (p. 154). “To become a real Christian is to humbly receive God’s gift of forgiveness and to commit to following His leadership” (p. 156). “We must humbly admit to God that we’ve rebelled against Him and need His forgiveness and leadership” (p. 159). Are you confused yet? The clear gospel message is lost in Lordship Salvation. Nowhere in Scripture are we told to do anything but believe—faith alone in Christ alone. We are never told to bow humbly, receive His leadership, or commit to following Him.

The fresh and original approach in sharing the gospel of salvation so people hear and believe is great. However, the clouded gospel message presented in *Becoming A Contagious Christian* makes it impossible for me to recommend this book.

**Gary Veazey**  
San Antonio, TX



***What Angels Wish They Knew: The Basics of True Christianity.***

By Alistair Begg. Chicago: Moody Press, 1998. 207 pp. Paper, \$5.99.

The title of this book comes from 1 Peter 1:12, where the apostle states that the wonders of our salvation are things "which angels desire to look into" (NKJV). Begg has borrowed (and revised) this phrase to appeal to a modern audience which is, as he notes in the first chapter, obsessed with angels and angelic powers. For him it is little more than a springboard from which he launches into a discussion of basic Christian doctrine.

In a way, Begg seems to be writing his own version of Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. In the first chapter he writes that his purpose is "largely descriptive rather than defensive" (p. 22). His goal is to introduce agnostics and cynics to—and remind believers of—the fundamentals of the faith in a contemporary, non-threatening way. As such, the book is an easy read, filled with appeals to the logic of Christian faith *vis-à-vis* various philosophies and world views popular today.

In successive chapters Begg describes (and defends) mankind created in the image of God as a basis for meaning in life, the existence of original sin as the reason for evil in the world, the historicity of Jesus' death and resurrection, His deity, and His substitutionary atonement. From the seventh chapter on, Begg begins developing the practical aspects of the gospel. In "The Ultimate Scandal" and "Settling the Accounts," he explains the finality of Jesus' sacrifice for sin, made available to all who receive it—not to those who earn it with good works. The ninth chapter, "Forgiveness—Friendship—Focus," points to some of the wonderful results of salvation.

To this point, with a few exceptions where some would take issue with a specific interpretation or exegesis, Begg is right on target. But sadly, after scaling the heights, he stumbles badly at the summit. The tenth chapter, "Coming to Christ," is as confused and self-contradictory an explanation of the way of salvation as this reviewer has ever seen. Begg begins, "The question before us in this chapter is this: How do the benefits we've been considering become ours? Or, how does this 'true Christianity' become 'my' Christianity?" He begins his answer to this question with two stories, both excellent examples of the simplicity of faith, both testimonies of the life-changing reality of simply believing in Jesus Christ. But no sooner are we welling up with joy at this evidence of God's grace than Begg re-enters the discussion and

writes, "Faith involves more than just an assent to certain facts. It means accepting that the facts I affirm can be trusted. But it also means that I am prepared to act upon what I believe to be true."

Here, with the stroke of a pen, Begg re-injects works into the way of salvation. What he had affirmed in his discussion on the sufficiency of Christ's atonement, what his illustrations had evidenced so clearly, is suddenly reversed. What follows is an exegetical nightmare—equating Acts 2:38 and 16:31, and a few illustrations designed to show that believing isn't really enough after all. His salvation formula becomes a tedious succession of steps: Something to Admit, Something to Believe, Something to Consider—which includes Saying No to Sin (having "A sense of shame," a "humbling," and a "sense of sorrow and regret"), Self, and Secrecy, and Something to Do ("forsake everything and trust Christ"). In the end, he invites the reader to pray this prayer:

"Lord Jesus Christ, I confess that I am a guilty, lost, and helpless sinner. I want you to save me, to take Your rightful place as Lord of my life. I want to turn from my sin and trust only in Your atoning sacrifice. I give my life to You. Take charge of it all and help me by the power of the Holy Spirit so to follow after You that I may one day hear You say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

What the New Testament is able to describe with a single word, "believe," takes Begg 17 pages, and in the end becomes an insignificant part of a "prayer" which is more interested in what "I" will try to do than in what Jesus Christ has already done for me!

In the end, *What Angels Wish They Knew* is an example of the kind of amalgam of good and bad theology so prevalent today. There is much good in this book, especially concerning the condition of man and the solutions found in Christianity. But for the purpose for which it was written, to serve as a handy contemporary guide-book to lead people from the questions of life to the solutions of the Bible, it fails miserably in the end. My copy, in fact, was bought especially for this purpose, but has instead resulted in this review, which will, I trust, save others from giving it to those who need to know the *unencumbered* truly "good news" of eternal life by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

**Philip Congdon**

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*The Testament.* By John Grisham. New York: Random House, Inc., 1999. 533 pp. Paper, \$7.99.

This is yet another in a long line of novels by Grisham, who has become a fixture at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. Many of his previous titles have become blockbuster movies—*The Pelican Brief*, *The Firm*, and *The Rainmaker* immediately come to mind. Perhaps *The Testament* will follow suit, but if so, I suspect Hollywood will have a tougher time dealing with its content.

Grisham, who has called himself “a Christian writing popular fiction...I’m not writing Christian literature,” has included overt conversions to Christ in previous novels—*The Street Lawyer* and *The Chamber*—but I found the story in *The Testament* more compelling. I won’t commit the cardinal sin of revealing the plot—and will let Larry King’s assessment that “it has the best first 50 pages for pure storytelling impact that I have ever read” suffice for me. You will enjoy the *story*. Grisham’s gift, which he himself calls a “God-given ability,” will see to that.

Beyond this, however, you will enter a world where faith becomes real in a way you may have never experienced. Our fast-paced, distraction-cluttered lives too often eclipse the “still, small voice” that Elijah rediscovered in a cave at Horeb (1 Kings 19). The vast Pantanal region of Brazil is the “Horeb” for the unlikely anti-hero in *The Testament*, but the awakening and progressive *persuasion* that there is more to Christian faith than a set of creeds, and that in some mysterious way simply believing in Jesus Christ makes sense in a senseless world, comes through loud and clear. There is life-changing power in faith alone in Christ alone, even (especially?) for those whose lives are in the most desperate straits. The lessons of this book are a reminder that Christians, discouraged by a culture in turmoil, need to heed. Jesus Christ is the *only* answer for *every* person in the world.

As expected in a popular novel, the theology is vague at points, and confusing at others. Reading this book with a theologically critical eye would be a travesty. Still, in general, those who hold the grace position and keep faith uncluttered by Lordship theology’s addition of works will find little objectionable. For example, there is a suggestion that salvation involves not simply *saying* you believe, but *living* it. While this might be taken by some as an affirmation of the Lordship view, in the context I took it more as *pre-evangelism*.



Again, confession of sin is suggested as the way to be saved, and the “prayer of conversion” in the story is not far from a line in the Lord’s Prayer (“Forgive me of my sins, and help me to forgive those who have sinned against me.”). Considering the nature of the story, however, I was in a forgiving mood. The message that God through Christ could forgive sins, and *would* for those who believed that He would, was implicit. In actuality, the prayer seemed like a “first step” in coming to understand the wonderful grace of God. There is nothing flippant in the dialogue, however, and when it is over, the absolute assurance of salvation for those who receive it is made clear. “Your sins are forgiven,” the missionary says. “Which ones? There are so many,” he replies. “All of them,” she says. Later, when this initial awareness of grace has matured, there is another, simpler prayer to God: “Please help me.” If not always in the terminology, I still found in the spirit of the story a commitment to salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ, who alone can deliver us from our sins.

Finally, although this novel contains the normal disclaimer that “any references to real events, businesses, organizations...are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity,” Grisham himself acknowledges in a postscript note his indebtedness to Carl King, a Baptist missionary in Brazil. The mission in the story bears resemblance both in name and function to New Tribes Mission, an excellent organization which works throughout South America. It may be mere coincidence that the names of the two main characters are Nate and Rachel, evoking memories of Nate and Rachel Saint, the brother and sister who made first contact with the Auca Indians in the 1950s (Nate was one of the five men martyred by the tribe).

As one who resonates with the challenge of missions, this story is especially captivating. For the enjoyment of a good story, and the unexpected charge of spiritual awakening, I highly recommend this book.

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## PERIODICAL REVIEWS

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**“Remembering: A Central Theme in Biblical Worship,”** Eugene H. Merrill, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43/1 (March 2000), 27-36.

Eugene Merrill is right. Remembering is a central theme in biblical worship. What struck me most about Merrill’s article is that after an extensive and detailed presentation of remembrance as a central theme of Old Testament worship, he then comments on the narrow biblical focus of New Testament worship as follows:

“Remembrance as a constituent of NT worship is, not surprisingly, associated with (and limited to) the Lord’s Supper, for the Lord’s Supper was instituted as a New Covenant expression of the Passover-Unleavened Bread ceremony of the OT (Luke 22:7-8; cf. Matt 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-15). Just as that festival was to be celebrated as a memorial to the exodus redemption (Exod 13:14-16), so the Lord’s Supper was to be a perpetual reminder of the new and great exodus by which all sinners could find release from sin’s bondage and deliverance into new and everlasting life” (p. 35).

Merrill points out that in Old Testament worship, “The traditional rituals associated with these festivals suggest that memory of the events to which they attest is best achieved by reenacting or dramatizing them. This is particularly clear with respect to Passover” (p. 34). He then emphasizes the uniqueness and effectiveness of worship at the Lord’s Supper: “Both the eating of the bread and drinking of the cup are in remembrance (*anamnesis*) of Christ (1 Cor 11:24, 25). Whenever these are done properly, Paul says, ‘You proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (v 26). The symbolism or reenactment of the death of our Lord is a proclamation without words of the fundamental work of human redemption. It is ritual and drama that eloquently calls to mind the meaning of the gospel” (p. 36).

While Merrill’s paper is scholarly and thorough, it is also timely and relevant in the “Laodicean” days in which we live. Hopefully, his paper will touch the hearts of those who read it, that we might turn from our lukewarmness back to our first love by developing a greater

devotion and commitment to the Lord's Supper. Eugene Merrill is right. Remembering is a central theme in biblical worship and the Lord's Supper is the central place to remember.

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**"No More Sacrifice [Hebrews 10:26-27]: Parts 1 and 2,"** John Niemelä, *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* (October-December 1998 and January-March 1999), 2-17 and 22-45.

John Niemelä, Professor of Greek and Hebrew at Chafer Theological Seminary, grapples with a notorious problem passage. However, he does not really deal with the entire text of Hebrews 10:26-31. He deals specifically with verses 26-27 and the statement that "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin." He feels that a proper understanding of this simple statement helps unlock the passage and convert it into one that is easy to understand.

In these articles Niemelä traces four different interpretations of these verses which he personally has held over the years.

The first view he calls the "No Security View" (p. 3). This is the view that the one who sins willfully after having received the knowledge of the truth loses eternal life. John doesn't give much discussion of this view, evidently because it is so well known and because he realizes the readers of this journal already believe in eternal security.

The "Never-Saved View" (p. 3) again receives little attention. Niemelä mentions that he turned to it because he became convinced of eternal security, and this view allowed him to explain Hebrews 10:26-31 and yet maintain a belief in eternal security. The problem is, he came to realize that this view created "other unforeseen tensions."

The third view is the "Fellowship-Sacrifice View." While it is introduced on page 4 of Part 1 of these articles, it is not explained until 16 pages later, on the second page of Part 2 (p. 23). This is a bit confusing. However, once the outline is understood, it is relatively easy to follow.



Before discussing the third view, John shows that the readers of Hebrews were all believers, not a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. He does so because this is central to the third view. Indeed, showing that the readers were all regenerate is essentially the main point of Part 1.

In Part 2 Niemelä explains that the Fellowship-Sacrifice View sees Heb 10:26-27 as being related to 1 John 1:9 (pp. 23-29). The believer who confesses his sins receives fellowship forgiveness. The one who sins willfully, in this case by apostatizing from the faith, does not receive fellowship forgiveness, but raging fiery temporal judgment.

The fourth view, the one advocated by the author, is the "Change of Covenants View" (pp. 29-43). In this view, the issue is that Christ died once and for all. He never dies again. Hence there is no longer a sacrifice for sins. Niemelä argues that this is good news, even in a warning passage.

The bottom line in these articles is that Heb 10:26b, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins," is parallel to Heb 10:18b, "there is no longer an offering for sin." The author's point is that the Fellowship-Sacrifice View errs in seeing the reference in 10:26b as being tied especially to 10:26a, "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, [then] there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." Niemelä's point is that whether or not we sin willfully, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.

Niemelä's view is not at all inconsistent with the Fellowship-Sacrifice View. It is merely a refinement of it. And it is a refinement that makes a lot of sense.

These articles, while a bit technical and not always easy to follow, make a super point. Hebrews 10:26b is indeed parallel to 10:18b. The fact that there is no longer a sacrifice for sins is indeed good news, although, for the one who apostatizes, that good news becomes *de facto* bad news since he has offended God and is about to experience temporal judgment.

I recommend these articles.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

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**“The Nature of Faith,”** David R. Anderson, *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* (September-December 1999), 2-26.

Dave Anderson is pastor of Faith Community Church in The Woodlands, Texas and is an adjunct faculty member at Dallas Theological Seminary in Houston.

In this article Anderson covers history, theology, and exegesis. He answers common objections to the Free Grace view of saving faith, including dealing with James 2:14-26 and John 2:23-25.

*JOTGES* readers will like Anderson’s strong Free Grace stand, solid reasoning, and easy to follow writing style.

I had a minor reservation. Anderson tries to cover so much ground that I was left feeling that he barely scratched the surface in regards to historical positions or exegetical consideration of difficult texts and difficult theological objections. He did a masterful job in covering so much ground so well. However, in my estimation he would have done even better if he had been given more space. The resulting longer article could then have been divided into two or three separate articles (e.g., historical views of saving faith and tough texts regarding saving faith).

This is a very sound and edifying article. I highly recommend it.

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**“Living a New Life: Old Testament Teaching about Conversion,”** William D. Barrick, *The Master’s Seminary Journal* (Spring 2000), 19-38.

Many people, including many Free Grace people, use the term *conversion* as a synonym for regeneration. Thus when many speak of a person coming to faith, they don’t say, “He came to faith in Christ,” “He was born again,” or “He gained eternal life.” Rather, they say, “He was converted.”

This seems to be the approach of Barrick. I say *seems* because he never makes it absolutely clear in this article whether for him conversion equals regeneration.

He does say what conversion is. He says it includes a turning from one's sins to God, placing one's faith in God, and committing one's life to Him (cf. Pp. 37-38). He says that "A total change in one's life was the obvious outcome [of OT conversion]", (p. 35; see also p. 20).

The examples he cites include Abraham, Rahab, Ruth, the Ninevites under Jonah's preaching, the sailors on board ship with Jonah, Naaman, etc. Barrick covers a lot of important examples. While one may not agree with all of his conclusions (see the next paragraph), there is much helpful information given. For example, he details each person's or group's responses to God's prophetic word. Those responses included faith, repentance, prayer, and commitment of life. It is encouraging to be reminded how various Gentiles responded to God in the Old Testament.

There is no evidence given in the article that the Ninevites or the sailors on board ship with Jonah, for example, believed in the coming Messiah for eternal life. Of course, since Barrick does not see this as a condition for Old Testament conversion, then that is to be expected. However, while it is clear that the Ninevites and sailors repented and changed their ways, it is not clear they came to faith in the Messiah and were regenerated.

Barrick discusses briefly the role of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament conversion. He indicates that the Spirit did not *indwell* Old Testament saints. However, he does say that this does not mean that the Holy Spirit played no part in their conversion. He suggests that the Holy Spirit played a key role.

There are a few fallacies in modern day evangelism that are mirrored in this article. One is the notion that if people take a step toward God, they have been born again. However, people often turn toward God long before they ever come to faith in Christ. Indeed, people turn toward God who never end up coming to faith in Christ. Certainly Judas took a step toward God. But he never came to faith. Jesus had other unbelieving disciples as well (John 6:60, 64). While we can't be sure, it is likely that not all of them subsequently came to faith. They certainly didn't come to faith at the moment of turning to follow Christ.

A second fallacy is the idea that turning from one's sins is a condition of regeneration (assuming this is what Barrick means by conversion).



A third misconception is that a general sort of faith in God, rather than specific faith in the coming Messiah specifically for eternal life, is sufficient for an Old Testament person to be born again.

I recommend this article. It will give the reader an opportunity to think through Old Testament "conversion" and how it relates to eternal salvation in the Old Testament.

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