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**Should We Rethink the Idea of  
Degrees of Faith?**

EDITOR

3-21

**“Sons of God” and the Road to Grace  
(Romans 8:12-17)**

COL. KEN YATES

23-32

**The Gospel is More Than  
“Faith Alone in Christ Alone”**

JEREMY D. MYERS

33-56

**For Whom Does Hebrews 10:26-31  
Teach a “Punishment Worse Than Death?”**

J. PAUL TANNER

57-77

**Justification: A New Covenant Blessing**

ZANE C. HODGES

79-85

**Book Reviews**

87-110

**Periodical Reviews**

111-119

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# SHOULD WE RETHINK THE IDEA OF DEGREES OF FAITH?

**BOB WILKIN**

Editor

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## I. INTRODUCTION

We often call Christianity *the Christian faith*. We speak of people being *in the faith* and of people departing *from the faith*.

We speak of justification *by faith* apart from works.

Additionally we say that progressive sanctification is *by faith*, that we live *by faith* in the Son of God who loved us and delivered Himself up for us.

But I've found that in Free Grace circles there is some ambiguity about what faith is. That concerns me. This lack of precision about what faith is can be seen in the question of whether or not there are degrees of faith.

I will begin by defining the degrees of faith view which I am convinced needs to be abandoned. Second, I will show why I believe it is wrong. Third, I will show why passages purported to teach degrees of faith in reality do not. Fourth and finally, I will consider practical ramifications.

Before starting, a brief definition of faith itself is in order.

Faith is the persuasion or conviction that something is true. In Acts 17:4 Luke tells us concerning Jews at the synagogue in Thessalonica, "And some of them *were persuaded*." Then in the next verse he reports, "But the Jews who *were not persuaded*...attacked the house of Jason..." A few verses later Luke reports on the response of Jews at the synagogue in Berea: "Therefore many of them *believed*..." (v 12). Clearly *the persuasion* of vv 4-5 is synonymous with *the belief* of v 12. Faith is persuasion of the truth of a fact or proposition, in this case, that Jesus is the Messiah who guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him.

We can easily see this as well in John 11:25-27. After Jesus says that He is the resurrection and the life and explains what He means by that, He asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" Clearly He was asking her if

she was convinced or persuaded that what He promised is true. Her answer was “Yes, Lord I believe...” She was convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that as such He guarantees bodily resurrection and eternal security to all who believe in Him.

## II. DEGREES OF FAITH DEFINED

Most would say that the Bible teaches that there are degrees of faith. By that they mean that there can be varying degrees of confidence *in a given fact or proposition*. The words *in a given fact or proposition* are crucial to understanding the view with which I find fault.

Another view, one I am comfortable with, is that a person can grow in faith by increasing the number of biblical propositions which he or she believes. It is not that a person can have more or less faith in any single proposition. It is that a person can come to be convinced of additional truths found in Scripture.

To reiterate, the view I oppose is the one which says it is possible to believe a single proposition to greater or lesser degrees. In my view, each individual proposition is either believed or not believed. There is no such thing as growing in one’s belief of a single proposition.

A few illustrations might help. Consider three propositions: Two plus two equals four. Jesus’ tomb was empty the Sunday after His crucifixion. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. One is either convinced or not convinced those things are true. There are no degrees of faith in those propositions, because they are single propositions.

## III. WHY THERE CAN’T BE DEGREES OF FAITH

The concept of faith doesn’t allow for degrees. Either one is persuaded or he is not. There can’t be degrees of persuasion.

I realize in English we sometimes use the word *belief* to express our guesses and our desires as in “I believe the Cowboys will win the Super Bowl,” or “I believe we will have 500 people at our conference next year.” But the Bible never uses the word *believe* in that way. In the Bible belief is a conviction that something is true.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: there is a relatively rare use where *pisteuō* refers to entrusting something to someone (e.g., John 2:23). But in that case it is not translated as believe, because the context makes it clear another nuance is intended.

The only way we can accept the idea of degrees of faith is to abandon the idea that faith is the conviction that something is true. And if we abandon that understanding, we lose the biblical view of faith.

#### IV. EVALUATION OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES PURPORTEDLY TEACHING DEGREES OF FAITH

Obviously this is the heart of the matter. It is incumbent on me to show that no passage teaches this idea of degrees of faith. Of course, in one sense, this is impossible. Space doesn't permit going through every passage in the Bible to see if any might teach degrees of faith.

However, what can be done is an examination of the handful of passages that are commonly cited to prove that there are degrees of faith. If it can be shown that none of the strongest texts supposed teaching degrees of faith actually teach that, then it is reasonable to conclude that no other text does either. We begin with one that many consider an undeniable proof of degrees of faith.

##### A. LORD I BELIEVE, HELP MY UNBELIEF (MARK 9:24)

Without going into a detailed discussion of this passage, I believe we can be certain that the man didn't mean this: "Lord I believe; help me because I don't believe." Belief and unbelief do not coexist at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

Part of the answer as to what the man meant may be found in asking why Jesus said, "*If you can believe...*"? Why didn't He simply say, "If you believe..."?

Jesus' remarks in v 23 are in response to the man's statement in the previous verse. The man preceded his request if a statement of his uncertainty as to whether Jesus could heal his son: "*If You can* do anything,

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<sup>2</sup> I realize, of course, that according to Evangelical Postmodernism faith and doubt always coexist. According to Carl Raschke faith is existential, not rational. Faith is "a total surrender of one's heart" (*The Next Reformation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 168, 210). He continues, "A rational 'faith' is not really faith at all. Faith does not require any kind of unimpeachable demonstration. It is a passion for God amid the contingencies of experience and the messiness of life in general" (168). Concerning doubt Raschke says, "Postmodernity is all our doubts supersized" (174). See also James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 119. However, postmodernity is unbiblical and wrong on this and many other points as well.

have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus then turns the table on the man by telling him, “*If you can believe...*”

The man expresses his conviction that Jesus can indeed heal his son. No degree of faith in that proposition is possible. He was persuaded that Jesus could heal his son.

The word *help* in “help my unbelief” (v 24) is an advance on the man’s request in v 22, “*Help* us.” The same Greek verb is used in both places. Now he realizes that it is he alone who needs help, since it is his faith that is required for the healing of his son to take place.

The father meant something like this: *Lord, I do believe You can heal my son. Help my vulnerability to unbelief.*

The very fact that the man approached Jesus with the words, “If you can do anything” shows that he was tentative. Evidently the fact that Jesus’ disciples had been unable to heal his son had thrown him into doubt about whether even Jesus could.

Then, when Jesus spoke with authority to him, and put the ball back in his court and said, “*If you can believe...*,” the man had sufficient evidence to so that his doubts vanished and he believed that Jesus indeed could heal his son.

The man believed at that moment, but he realized that his belief was fragile and that he might fall into doubt once again.

This seems to be the view of John Grassmick in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. He writes, “The father’s response was immediate (*euthys*). He declared his faith (“I do believe”), but also acknowledged its weakness: “Help me overcome my unbelief!”<sup>3</sup>

Haven’t we all experienced this in times of crises? We may vacillate between confidence in what God has promised and lack of confidence.

Peter is the only man other than Jesus ever to walk on water. He believed Jesus would keep him atop the water when Jesus bid him to come join Him (Matt 14:28-29). But moments later he stopped believing that. When he took His eyes off Jesus and became alarmed by the terrible waves and wind, he ceased believing, began to sink, and cried out, “Lord, save me!” (Matt 14:30). Faith can sometimes be like that.

We must take care when we are explaining texts like this one that we don’t confuse our audience. The man’s confession expressed current

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<sup>3</sup> John D. Grassmick, “Mark” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983), 145, emphasis his.

faith: “Lord, I believe.” His request, “Help my unbelief,” expressed concern about possible loss of faith. That is far different from saying that a person can simultaneously believe and yet not believe something.<sup>4</sup>

#### B. INCREASE OUR FAITH (LUKE 17:5<sup>5</sup>)

Again, without getting into a detailed discussion of this difficult context, I believe we can see what is being asked.

“Increase our faith” may be a direct response to Luke 17:1-4, where Jesus told the disciples to repeatedly forgive those who sin against them and repent. If so, the disciples may be asking something like, “Lord, please help us to believe You about this.” It may have been hard for them to believe that acting in this way is a good idea. In that case they would be doubting the wisdom of what He said.

Or possibly they doubted not the wisdom of it, but their ability to do what He says. “Increase our faith” would thus be a cry for Jesus to change their thinking so that they see themselves as capable of doing this.

If “Increase our faith” is taken as an indirect response to Luke 17:1-4, then they are saying something like, “Lord, this is revolutionary teaching. We believe that what You are saying is what God wants us to do. Teach us more so that we can know and believe and do the will of the Father in even more areas of our lives.”

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<sup>4</sup> There is another way of understanding the man’s concern about unbelief here. He might have been confessing *current* doubts *about another proposition*. Possibly he didn’t yet believe that Jesus is the Messiah and he was asking Jesus to help him believe *that* (cf. John 4:10, “you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” [= the saving proposition]).

I find the view I express in the body of the paper more reasonable in light of the repetition of “If you can.” The man seems to have moved from doubt to belief and it is reasonable that this makes him fear he might slip back into doubt.

<sup>5</sup> Commentators tend to be quite cryptic as to what the disciples request for increased faith means. But concerning Jesus’ response they see either an indication that what they need is *true faith* (Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke, Rev. ed.* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 280), or an indication that what they need is “the right kind of faith” (John A. Martin, “Luke” in, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck [Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983], 248). However, neither of these suggestions makes sense. What would *true faith* be? What is *the right kind of faith*?

In that case, the apostles here weren't asking for a greater degree of faith in some single proposition. They were asking Jesus to expand their belief system so that His teaching in Luke 17:1-4 naturally fit their worldview.

C. O YOU OF LITTLE FAITH (MATTHEW 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; LUKE 12:28)

When many pastors preach on any of the five passages where Jesus rebuked the disciples for having "little faith," they choose not to comment on precisely what that expression *little faith* means. But that isn't the best way to explain the texts!

The word used here, *oligōpistos*, is one not found in classical Greek or in the LXX. It was evidently coined by the Lord Jesus. It is only used these five times in the NT: four times in Matthew and once in Luke.

Morris comments, "Wherever this term occurs in the New Testament, it is always applied to the disciples. More might have been expected of them."<sup>6</sup>

I believe Morris has the right idea. In each of the five occurrences of this Greek word, the issue is not a need for greater faith in some single proposition the apostles already believed, but the need for the apostles to believe things which they have not yet come to believe.

Due to space constraints, I only touch on one of the passage here. However, in Appendix 1 I discuss the other four passages as well.

In Matt 6:30 the issue is that the disciples needed to believe a new proposition: *God will take care of all our basic needs in life as long as we are seeking His kingdom and righteousness* (see 6:33). Their *little faith* was the fact that they did not yet believe that the Father would meet their basic needs as long as they served Him.

Barbieri evidently takes this view as he writes, "Worrying shows that one has 'little faith' in what God can do."<sup>7</sup> Beare, while not commenting on this exact expression, is a bit clearer as to what it means: "Jesus is not seeking to show that worry is useless, but that it is at bottom a token of

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 160.

<sup>7</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew" in John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983), 33.



lack of faith in God.”<sup>8</sup> Notice that he doesn’t speak of some lesser *degree of faith*, but of a *lack of faith*.<sup>9</sup>

Thus “little faith” in these passages doesn’t refer to some lesser degree of faith in a single proposition. It means that while the disciples believed many correct things about Jesus and the Father, they still had plenty more to learn and to believe. They needed to believe more truths, not increase their degree of faith in the truths they already believed.

#### D. GREAT FAITH (MATTHEW 8:10; 15:28; LUKE 7:9)

The reference to “great faith” is somewhat antithetical to “little faith.” Thus we should expect that it has a sense opposite to what we just discussed.

*Great faith* would mean believing things about Jesus and the Father that most people, even most regenerate people, do not believe.<sup>10</sup> It is not that people who believe such truths are more fervent in their faith, for example, in Jesus’ deity or in His granting of eternal life to believers. It is that they believe advanced things about God. Let’s look at one of the three places in the Gospels where this expression *great faith* occurs. The other two are discussed in Appendix 2.

*Matthew 8:10.* A centurion was a military leader in charge of a hundred men. This Gentile came to Jesus (first having sent his friends to ask Him<sup>11</sup>) and asked Him to heal his servant. When Jesus said, “I will come and heal him,” the centurion believed Him. But that is not what draws Jesus’ remark about great faith.

What would most people do at this point? They would go with Jesus to their house and watch Him do the healing. They wouldn’t think of

<sup>8</sup> Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 187.

<sup>9</sup> So also R. T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 141; J. C. Ryle, *Matthew* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Yet see Barbieri, “Matthew,” 37. Concerning Jesus’ reference to *great faith* in Matt 8:10, Barbieri writes, “Faith *such as this* made entrance into His kingdom possible, regardless of national, racial, or geographical residence” (italics added). Barbieri’s view here seems to contradict his explanation of Matt 6:30 (see above).

<sup>11</sup> See Zane C. Hodges, “The Centurion’s Faith in Matthew and Luke,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December 1964). Hodges harmonizes the Matthean and Lukan accounts.

suggesting anything else, for they wouldn't even conceive of the idea of healing from afar. But that is where this Gentile shows that he believes something great.

The centurion boldly tells Jesus that he knows Jesus can heal the servant from afar. He believes that Jesus doesn't need to see or touch the servant to heal him.<sup>12</sup>

This leads Jesus to respond, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel" (Matt 8:10). The *great faith* is the centurion's belief that Jesus can heal long distance, just by commanding it to be done!<sup>13</sup> That is evidently not something that even the apostles yet believed.<sup>14</sup>

Great faith is not some higher level of conviction. It is believing something that is harder to believe, something that is contrary to what most people believe.

France evidently agrees, saying, "[Great] *faith* should not be interpreted here in the light of later theological discussion; it is defined by vv. 8-9 as an absolute practical reliance on Jesus' power."<sup>15</sup> While I believe he introduces a bit of confusion by adding the adjective *absolute*, he clearly doesn't see this great faith as saving faith<sup>16</sup> or as a greater amount of faith in a given proposition.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Beare, *Matthew*, 208, in his discussion of v 9.

<sup>13</sup> Apparently this is the view held by Zane Hodges, "The Centurions Faith," 326-28, 330, 332.

<sup>14</sup> Contra Barbieri, "Matthew," 37.

<sup>15</sup> France, *Matthew*, 155, italics his.

<sup>16</sup> A number of commentators seem to think that this *great faith* refers to *saving faith*. For example, Ryle (*Matthew*, 58) says:

To believe Christ's power and willingness to help, and to make practical use of our belief, is a rare and precious gift: let us always be thankful if we have it. To be willing to come to Jesus as helpless, lost sinners and commit our souls into his hands is a mighty privilege; let us always bless God if this willingness is ours, for it is a gift. Many a poor converted heathen, who knows nothing but that he is sick of sin, and trusts in Jesus, will sit down in heaven while many learned scholars are rejected for evermore. Blessed indeed are they that believe!

<sup>17</sup> Morris similarly writes, "Faith is one of the great Christian concepts, but it is found only eight times in Matthew. It points to trust in Jesus and, in a con-

Some things are hard to believe. Some things are relatively easy to believe. Things which can be empirically proven or proven by a preponderance of eyewitnesses are easier to believe than things which hinge on a small number of witnesses or things which require careful analysis to understand and believe. Only an extreme conspiracy theorist, for example, doesn't believe we landed men on the moon. Other things, things with less evidence, are harder to believe. Great faith believes great things about our great God.

#### E. FAITH AS A MUSTARD SEED (MATTHEW 17:20; LUKE 17:6)

On several occasions Jesus indicated that if someone had faith as a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds in that day, then he would be able to move mountains by mere command and nothing would be impossible for him.

This is most naturally understood in light of the "little faith" and "great faith" passages. Faith the size of a mustard seed is certainly *small* or *little*.

Morris is confusing in his discussion of *faith like a mustard seed* in Matt 18:20:

Jesus is saying that even a little faith would enable the disciples to do what they had just proved that they could do. It is not necessary to have great faith; even a small faith is enough, as long as it is faith in the great God.<sup>18</sup>

France is even more confusing when he says:

Faith is, for Jesus, not a matter of intellectual assent, but of a practical reliance on a living God. It is important to observe here that it is not the 'amount' of faith which brings the impossible within reach, but the power of God, which is available to even the 'smallest' faith.<sup>19</sup>

A much simpler understanding of what Jesus is saying is that He was saying in the right conditions it won't be remarkable to believe the God has given you the ability to move a mountain. What is now an impossible

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text like this, in his ability and readiness to give help in unexpected ways," *Matthew*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 449.

<sup>19</sup> France, *Matthew*, 266.

and unbelievable task need not be either impossible or unbelievable in the right setting.

Let's say that we lived in a day when the miraculous was common. For example, with glorified bodies in the Millennium, there is no telling what we will be able to do. Moving mountains by merely commanding them to move may well be something some of us will do. If Jesus commanded you to move a mountain by commanding it to move, it wouldn't take great faith to accomplish that in the Millennium. Things that are now miraculous things may well then be commonplace for people with glorified bodies.<sup>20</sup>

In the right context it doesn't take great faith to do mighty things. We are not in that context right now. But we will be one day.<sup>21</sup>

## V. AN ADMISSION

I admit that there is one aspect of this discussion that makes me sympathetic to those who believe in degrees of faith. It is the issue of biblical interpretations where there are a multiple views which are consistent with the rest of Scripture and none of which is yet absolutely clear to us as the correct interpretation. In such cases I typically have a view as to which one is *most likely correct*, but my view is less than a settled persuasion, conviction, or certainty.

For example, take my former understanding of Acts 2:38, which reads,

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, it may be that some miraculous tasks will only be possible for those who were overcoming saints in this life. In that case overcomers will believe they themselves can do these things and non-overcomers will believe they themselves cannot.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982; from the 1915 edition) seems to be in agreement. He writes concerning Matt 17:20: "It was not their faith in Jesus as Messiah that failed them, but their faith in the commission to heal which He has given them" (242). However, see his previous sentence in which he says, "It is easy for faith to dwindle, without the loss of it being observed." What he means by that is unclear.

In my dissertation I had a hard time explaining why this verse isn't teaching justification by repentance and baptism. I won't bore you with the details of the explanation I gave in my dissertation. But I will tell you that I was far from convinced that I correctly understood the passage.

Today I have a completely different understanding of the passage, one that fits the context well, fits Acts 22:16, and fits with the rest of the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the fact that this new view fits and is not forced, now I am convinced that I properly understand it.

So while some might say I've grown in my conviction about what Acts 2:38 means, I'd say I've come to be convinced what it means. In my dissertation I was floating out a possibility, but one I did not yet believe was true.

I'm forced to say, because of my understanding of what belief is, that when I'm not sure, I don't yet believe.

There are many passages of the Bible where I can say, "This text means such and so" or "I believe this text means such and so."

But there are others texts in the Bible where I am not yet sure what it means. In such cases I'm forced to make a lesser confession, like, "There are three views that fit the context and which are consistent with the rest of Scripture, and I lean toward the third view for three reasons..."

## VI. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### A. READ AND MEDITATE

You can't believe what you haven't heard, so make sure to feed regularly on the Word of God in terms of personal reading and meditation, church attendance, and mentoring (Psalm 1; Heb 10:23-25; 2 Tim 2:2). Your faith (the constellation of beliefs) grows the more you understand and believe what God says.

### B. EVANGELIZE CLEARLY

Don't confuse people about faith when you evangelize. If you are vague about what it means to believe, or about what it is that we must believe, then you will leave people confused when you evangelize. Remember, a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew. Make sure that you are

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of my current view, see Lanny Thomas Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38," *JOTGES* (Spring 1990): 27-52.

clear that all who simply believe in Jesus have eternal life. Personally, I don't think you need to explain what believing is, because people only get confused by obtaining higher education! Most people know what it is to believe. If they have confusion, most will ask you and then you can explain. Unfortunately many illustrations about saving faith do more to confuse than they do to clarify.

### C. DISCIPLE CLEARLY

Don't confuse people about faith when you disciple either. I've heard Free Grace people teach on the "Oh You of Little Faith" passages and leave the audience not knowing what the disciples' problem was. The listener is left with the vague notion that the disciples didn't have a big enough degree of faith. The same is often true with the teaching of the passages dealing with "Lord I believe, help my unbelief," "Increase our faith," and "great faith." Whenever you discuss those passages show what it is that the person in question did or didn't believe.

### D. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

Once you believe something, put what you believe into practice. James says three times in Jas 2:17-26, "Faith without works is dead." When James speaks of *faith*, he is not talking about faith in Jesus for eternal life. He is talking about putting into practice *whatever we believe* from God's Word.

For example, vv 15-16 show that one belief we ought to put into practice is being convinced that it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35). James means that anything we believe in the Bible, if it is not wedded to works, is unprofitable. The issue is not *saving faith* without works, it is *faith without works*.<sup>23</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

Faith is a conviction that something is true. There can't be degrees of faith for the simple reason that faith is a conviction that something is true. One is either convinced or he is not yet convinced that something is true.

It's time that we drop the idea of degrees of faith. This will help us when we talk about the vital issue of faith in the Christian life.

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<sup>23</sup> John Niemelä, "Faith Without Works: A Definition" *CTSJ* 6:2 (April-June 2002), 13-16.

It may take great faith to believe what I'm suggesting in this article. But it doesn't take a greater degree of faith!

## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX 1

#### OTHER "LITTLE FAITH" PASSAGES EXPLAINED

*Matthew 8:26.* The disciples should have believed that Jesus would not let them die in a storm, no matter how great the tempest, no matter whether He was awake or asleep (v 24). But they didn't believe that. In a panic, they awoke Him and said, "Lord, save us! We are perishing" (v 25). It is at this point that Jesus says, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" (v 26a). When Jesus then stills the winds and the waves, they are amazed (vv 26-27). The reference to *little faith* here concerns their failure to believe greater things about Him.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Gentile centurion with great faith, they believe He has to be both physically present and awake in order to deliver them from imminent death.

*Matthew 14:31.* This text shows that *little faith* need not always refer to failing to believe harder things, but to the duration of our faith. Jesus was walking on water. The disciples were frightened, thinking it was a ghost (v 26). But when Jesus identified Himself, Peter asks something that reflected great faith. He said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (v 28).

After Jesus said, "Come," Peter came down out of the boat and "walked on the water to go to Jesus" (v 29). Then something happened to short-circuit Peter's faith. "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!'"

Jesus said, "O you [singular] of little faith [singular], why did you [singular] doubt?" This is the only use of *oligōpistos* in the NT in the singular. The other references refer to all of the disciples.

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<sup>24</sup> So Plummer (*Matthew*, 131), "The disciples ought to have known that with Him they were sure of protection."

Peter's faith was little in this case because of its short duration, not because it was something easy to believe.<sup>25</sup> Jesus rebukes Peter for the short duration of his faith. This text shows that we can believe something for a time, but then when circumstances hit us, we may cease believing. It also shows that continuing to believe God in the midst of life's tempests is greater faith than believing Him when all is going well.

*Matthew 16:8.* After Jesus warned the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they thought He was saying something about the fact that they brought no bread with them. When Jesus then refers to their "little faith," He is rebuking them for forgetting the feeding of the 5,000 with five little loaves of bread (v 9).

France comments, "Not only have they failed to grasp Jesus' metaphorical teaching because of their preoccupation with their material problem, but even at the material level they have failed to learn the lesson of the miracles of feeding."<sup>26</sup>

They had many strong reasons to believe that He would meet their needs. What faith they had in Him did not reach this obvious level; hence *little* here refers to little in extent. Their belief that He miraculously fed the 5,000 wasn't influencing their faith in Him for their daily needs as it should have.

*Luke 12:28.* This is the only occurrence outside of Matthew. This use is parallel to Matt 6:30: *The disciples should believe that God will take care of all their basic needs in life as long as they seek His kingdom and righteousness* (see v 31). We often doubt God on some practical level and when we do, our faith is little.

Morris is on the mark when he notes:

If God does all this for the flowers that disappear so quickly, *how much more* will he clothe these people? *O men of little faith* shows that some of the disciples had shown anxiety. It is needless.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Morris (*Matthew*, 384) says, "The leading apostle might have been expected to trust more wholeheartedly, more especially since he had already taken some steps in his alien environment. He was learning that problems arise when doubt replaces trust."

<sup>26</sup> France, *Matthew*, 251.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 235, italics his.



## APPENDIX 2

### OTHER “GREAT FAITH” PASSAGES EXPLAINED

*Matthew 15:28.* When a Gentile woman approached Jesus about healing her demon-possessed daughter, Jesus said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v 24). Undeterred, the woman said, “Lord, help me.” Then after Jesus said that “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (v 26), she was still undeterred. She showed that she believed Jesus loved Gentiles as well and that she believed Jesus could and would heal her daughter. She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (v 27). This now prompts Jesus to say, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire” (v 28).

This woman’s *great faith* was clearly her belief that Jesus was merciful and loving to all, not merely to Jews. France’s comments on the woman’s great faith are helpful:

Was it merely her persistence in expecting a response despite apparent refusal...? Or is there also the idea of her spiritual perception in recognizing *both* the primary scope of Jesus’ mission to Israel *and also* the fact that that was not to be its ultimate limit?<sup>28</sup>

The disciples clearly didn’t believe this yet, as it evident at the start of the incident where they say to Jesus, “Send her away, for she cries out after us” (v 23). They didn’t say, “Lord, please heal her daughter for she is in great distress.”

*Luke 7:9.* This account is parallel to the one reported in Matthew 8:10. Again, the centurion had *great faith* because he believed that Jesus could and would heal long distance, just by His command, without seeing or touching the servant.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> France, *Matthew*, 247-48.

<sup>29</sup> Morris (*Luke*, 152) is confusing in his discussion of the centurion’s faith:

The surprising thing was that this Gentile should have such great faith, faith surpassing that among the Israelites, the people of God. *An intriguing question is the nature of the faith the man had.* Clearly he had faith that his servant would be healed. But is that all? In a Christian context to speak of faith without any qualification normally means more than that. *It means trust in Jesus and acceptance of him as Lord* (cf. v. 6).

### APPENDIX 3

#### ADDITIONAL PROOF MAKES ONE LESS LIKELY TO CEASE BELIEVING IN THE FUTURE

Belief is the conviction that a proposition is true. All it takes to be convinced is one piece of compelling evidence. Once you are convinced, you believe. But if you later learn of more compelling evidence concerning what you believe, your faith is stronger in the sense that it is less likely to unravel.

For example, Peter refers to the time when he and James and John saw Jesus transfigured before them. Concerning that event he says, “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed” (2 Pet 1:19). Actually the Greek word is a more intensive form of the word translated *sure* in v 10. Peter, James, and John already believed the prophetic word concerning Jesus’ reign as the King of kings. However, when they “were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Pet 1:16), they had more confirmation of that truth.

It wasn’t that they had come to believe any more strongly in His coming reign. Rather, it was that their hold on this truth was stronger. They were less likely to be dissuaded because of this additional proof.

Of course, in a sense, we are now dealing with multiple beliefs. The disciples initially were convinced that Jesus is the Messiah by hearing His powerful teaching (John 1). Then when they saw His miracles, they believed that they were legitimate works of God and that they validated what they already believed. When they saw His majesty at the Mount of Transfiguration and there actually heard God the Father tell them that Jesus is His Son and command them to listen to Him, their faith was now buttressed by so much overwhelming evidence that it was now easier to continue to believe that He would soon come again and set up His kingdom on earth.

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It may be that what this man heard about Jesus had brought home to him more than the certainty that he could cure sickness. It must always remain possible that the centurion had no more than a conviction that Jesus could heal and that to say more is to introduce the developed meaning of faith that became common among Christians. But the suspicion remains that Luke’s emphasis on faith means more (*italics added*).

The prophetic words was “more sure” because of additional verification.

We should note, however, that the disciples did lose their faith in Jesus as the Messiah for a time. When He was on the cross, they no longer believed He was coming again to set up His kingdom. The only one who believed that was one of the two thieves being crucified alongside Him.

The disciples’ concept of the Messiah didn’t include crucifixion and death, so their faith ceased for a time. But three days later, when they saw Him risen from the dead, the faith of all but Thomas returned. And Thomas’ faith that Jesus is the Messiah returned as soon as he personally saw Him.

The more proof we have of a proposition, the easier it is to believe it, and the more likely we are to return to that belief if we ever go through doubts. But the conviction that something is true, for example, that Jesus is the Messiah, is all or nothing.

## APPENDIX 4

### COMPOUND PROPOSITIONS ARE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT

Consider Jesus’ promise that “He who believes in Me has everlasting life.” This is a bit more complicated, for there are essentially three separate propositions which are combined into one compound proposition. The three sub-propositions are: 1) Jesus is the source of eternal life; 2) this life is given only to those who meet a certain condition; and 3) that condition is believing in Jesus.

Thus a person could believe some of the propositions but not all. *But if a person doesn’t believe all the sub-propositions in a compound proposition, then he doesn’t believe the entire proposition.* One is either convinced that the entire proposition is true, or he is not. There are no shades of belief in that single proposition, unless by that we mean that a person who believes two of the sub-propositions is closer to faith in the entire proposition than persons who believe one or none of them.

Note well, however, that one does grow in faith when he moves from believing none of the three sub-propositions to believing one of them. He becomes less hostile or more open to the proposition. But belief in the entire proposition doesn’t occur until one is convinced all of it is true.

## APPENDIX 5

### SOME BELIEFS MAY BE LOGICAL PREREQUISITES TO BELIEVING A PROPOSITION

Let's consider one specific proposition: He who believes in Jesus has everlasting life (John 6:47). While one either is convinced that is true or he is not, there are beliefs that are logical prerequisites to believing this. And the more of those prerequisite beliefs one is convinced are true, the softer his unbelief. That is, some unbelievers are closer to faith in Jesus than others due to what they currently believe.

This relates to evangelism because belief in Jesus for eternal life is logically linked to other beliefs. While a person might be illogical and believe in Jesus without some of these prerequisite beliefs, that is not the norm.

An otherwise unimpressive book called *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest*<sup>30</sup> does nonetheless have a nice chart on this point. It calls faith in Jesus and regeneration point 0. It suggests that to get to this point, one must move from minus 8 (awareness of a supreme being) to minus 7 (initial awareness of the gospel) to minus 7 and so forth all the way past minus 1 to 0 (faith in Christ).<sup>31</sup>

What are some of these logically prerequisite beliefs? Here are some beliefs that typically precede faith in Jesus for eternal life:

- God exists.
- Life after death.
- Eternal condemnation for some and eternal joy for others.
- God is righteous; I'm not.
- God took on bodily form.
- Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin.
- Jesus lived a sinless life.
- Jesus willingly went to the cross.
- Jesus' death on the cross removed the sin barrier so that all people are savable.

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<sup>30</sup> James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 45. I disagree some with the order and organization of the chart, but the idea is sound: there are some beliefs that are often *prerequisite* to faith in Christ.

<sup>31</sup> They actually refer to "repentance and faith in Christ," *ibid*.

- Jesus rose bodily from the dead. He didn't stay in the grave and He didn't just rise *spiritually*.
- People can't be righteous before God by their works.

Now when I evangelize, I don't worry about all that may need to precede faith in Christ. I realize that the Holy Spirit is convicting everyone of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7-11). So much of the work is already done by the Holy Spirit.

Say I am talking with a Mormon. I know they are theists. That makes it easier. I know they believe in life after death, coming judgment, the righteousness of God, that Jesus died and rose again, and many other biblical truths. I don't worry or focus on their theological errors in general. I focus in particular on their error regarding justification by faith alone.

Recently two Mormon missionaries came to my door. I told them I wasn't interested, but they pressed on. Okay, I decided, I warned you.

I told them they were under the curse of Gal 1:8-9 and that they were proclaiming a false gospel. They were startled.

"Us? Preaching a false gospel? No way!"

I said that Jesus taught, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" but that they don't believe that.

"Oh, we do believe that."

"Okay," I said. "So what happens if you stopped reading your Bible, stopped going to church, and you became an alcoholic and died away from God?"

"Oh, I'm not the Judge, but I'm pretty sure I'd go to hell."

"Then you don't believe Jesus because He said that all who simply believe in Him have eternal life. 'He who believes in Me has eternal life.'"

"But you're saying that a sinful person could get into the kingdom."

"Yes, that is what Jesus says."

We went on for another few minutes and I left them with the fact that they believed God wanted them to go through life not sure where they would spend eternity. I told them that God wants all His children to know that they are His forever, no strings attached.

In my view anyone in Christendom is easier to win to faith in Christ than an atheist, agnostic, or a fundamentalist from one of the other world religions. This is because in most cases unbelievers who have some exposure to Christian truth believe more of the logical prerequisites than unbelievers outside of Christendom.



# **“SONS OF GOD” AND THE ROAD TO GRACE (ROMANS 8:12-17)**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

I had just entered my second year of seminary when I was given an assignment to do an exegetical paper on Rom 8:12-17. While writing and researching the paper, I experienced a great deal of difficulty over a particular issue. I did not realize it at the time, but this passage, and the difficulty I encountered, produced my first step towards adopting a grace theology.

The class in which this assignment was given was on the Book of Romans. I did not know much about the book, but we had covered the first seven chapters in class before I started writing my paper. Even in my ignorance, it seemed clear to me that chapter 8 was a chapter on Christian living. In fact, all of chapters 6 through 8 seemed to deal with sanctification.

In these chapters, the Christian is given a choice. In chapter 6, Paul commands the believers at Rome to “not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts” (v 12). In v 13, the apostle tells them that they are not to “go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness.” To the contrary, they are to “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

The believer has the choice as to whom he will serve. He can serve sin and experience death, or he can serve God and experience righteousness (6:16). In very plain language, Paul makes it clear that the believer has this choice. In 6:19 he once again commands them to “present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

In chapter 7, Paul discusses his own struggle. While some maintain this chapter deals with Paul’s experience as an unbeliever, it is much more likely he is referring to his struggle as a believer. It would be

strange for him to discuss his life as an unbeliever in a section that deals with Christian sanctification. In addition, 7:21-22 can hardly describe the struggle of an unbeliever.

Chapter 7, then, describes Paul's experience dealing with the issues he discussed in chapter 6. How does a believer present the members of his body as instruments of righteousness resulting in sanctification? Specifically, Paul considers whether the Law is a means of achieving this goal.

Paul's conclusion and experience is that the Law is not the answer. He could not keep the Law in his own power. Our flesh is weak. Furthermore, as the apostle will state in 8:3, the Law does not provide the believer with the power to obey.

If the Law is not the answer, what is? In chapter 8, Paul tells us. We present our bodies as instruments of righteousness and experience sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every believer has the Holy Spirit (8:9). With the Holy Spirit, the believer has the power to obey. The successful Christian life is one lived in that power. In the Majority Text, v 1 adds that *those who walk according to the Spirit* are those who experience no condemnation. Since this is a section that deals with Christian living/sanctification, we should not understand the word *condemnation* as referring to hell. Instead, it refers to the consequences of sin in the life of the believer that Paul has been discussing throughout this whole section.

So, Paul gives the believer a choice. He can live according to the Law, in the power of his own flesh and power, or he can live according to the power of the Spirit. The former results in failure, while the latter results in success. In 8:6, Paul once again tells the believer of the choices as well as the consequences of the choice made.

Through my study of the Book of Romans both in class and privately, I was convinced of a couple of things. The Christian has the option. Success in the Christian life is not automatic. He can live in and walk according to the power of the Holy Spirit or he can live in and walk according to the flesh. The Spirit brings righteousness, sanctification and success in the Christian life, while the flesh brings failure.

With these assumptions I started my paper. The section of Scripture I was assigned presented no problems at first. In 8:12-13, Paul once again speaks of the choice the believer has. He can live according to the flesh or he can live according to the Spirit. It provided a summary of all that he had been saying in chapters 6-7. It was also clear that Paul was address-



ing believers. He calls them “brethren” and includes himself (“we”). Because we as believers can now obey God through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have an obligation to do so. We now need to go do it!

While I did not completely understand how the believer could experience death if he lives by the flesh (v 13), this did not present an insurmountable problem. I knew that this “death” was not hell because Paul had said he had an experience of death when he lived according to the flesh (7:9, 11, 13). It was enough for me to understand that the Christian who lives according to the flesh experiences death, while the believer who lives according to the Spirit experiences life. These are things the believer experiences *in this life*.

When I arrived at v 14, however, I ran into a theological brick wall. Paul states, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” I wasn’t sure what this meant. In class I was told that the phrase “sons of God” refers to all Christians. Therefore, all Christians are led by the Spirit of God. It is automatic. I did not know the terminology at the time, but this was the Lordship view of the Christian life.

This, however, did not make sense to me. How could Paul say that all Christians are automatically led by the Spirit, when he had just spent over two chapters exhorting them to choose that kind of life? Why did he say in the previous two verses that believers have an obligation to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh if they automatically lived according to the Spirit anyway (vv 12-13)? If it was automatic, why did Paul struggle with it in chapter 7? If it was automatic, why in my own life did I struggle with it? Why did other believers struggle with it? What about believers in the Bible who did not live according to the Spirit, like some believers at Corinth (1 Cor 3:1-3), some believers addressed in the book of Hebrews (Heb 5:11-12), and believers in the seven churches in Revelation 2–3? Finally, how often, or to what degree, does a person have to be led by the Spirit in order to know he is a believer?

Verse 14 however, seemed to say that all Christians live according to the Spirit. I equated being a Christian with being a “son of God.” This view, however, was contrary to the context as well as personal experience. I was eager to check the commentaries. Fortunately, the syllabus of the course provided me with a long list of commentaries that I could find in the library.

Unfortunately, the commentaries did not solve my problem. Every one of them agreed with what was said in class. All Christians live according to the Spirit. If a person does not live according to the Spirit,

he is not a believer. In fact, we can identify a Christian by how he lives his life.

Godet, for example, says that one becomes a “son of God” at justification. He sees the sanctification aspect of the passage, but says the verb “are led” carries with it the idea of a “holy violence,” and that the Holy Spirit drags the believer to where his flesh does not want to go.<sup>1</sup> Murray also equates being a “son of God” with being a believer.<sup>2</sup> Being a son of God is the guarantee of eternal life. In addition, he implies that the believer does not really have a choice in the matter because the phrase “led by the Spirit” places the emphasis on the Spirit and the believer plays a passive role.<sup>3</sup>

My readings, then, only added to my confusion. In studying the passage, however, I found a detail that I initially thought would shine light on the problem. In v 16, Paul says that we believers are the “children of God.” If the “sons of God” in v 14 referred to all believers, why does he change words and call us “children?” Was there a difference between being a “son” (*hious*) and being a “child” (*tekna*) of God?

While I held out the hope that this distinction would help clear up my confusion on the passage, once again the commentaries I checked provided no light. Cranfield says that there is no distinction between the word “son” and the word “child.”<sup>4</sup> Bruce agrees with Cranfield and says that the argument Paul makes in this section makes it “perfectly clear” that Paul uses the two words interchangeably.<sup>5</sup>

Even though it did not make sense to me, I adopted the view of the passage that I was taught in class. I felt that the “weight” of the evidence was overwhelming. My professor, as well as the commentaries I read, pointed in the same direction. In addition, I saw no other alternative. All believers are sons of God. Therefore, all Christians are led by the Spirit. It is an automatic process. If a person claims to be a Christian, but is not

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 308-309.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 295.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 396.

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 167.

experiencing success in his Christian life by walking in obedience, his claim is not valid. As I wrote the paper, it reflected these points.

However, there was a gnawing uncertainty as I finished the paper. The only way I could teach this passage in the way I was presenting it was to ignore the context of Romans 6–8. Also, experience taught me that this view of the passage would lead to many questions about the assurance of one’s justification. It would have to lead to a self-inspection among believers: Am I led by the Spirit? Am I really a believer? At times, the believer might feel fairly good about his prospects, but at other times we would all have cause to question our reception of eternal life.

At the conclusion of the paper, I took a pen and wrote in the margins my concerns about the passage. I wanted the professor to know that even though I had taken the views I had in the paper, I did not really believe them. I told him I was confused and that the passage did not make sense.

When the paper was returned to me, the grader had written next to my handwritten remarks that he appreciated my honesty. In addition, he stated that we have to accept a certain amount of tension in this instance.

In a seminary environment, this was my first exposure to what I would later learn is a Lordship theology. At that time, I would have defended that position but was also uneasy about my views. I did not think there was another option. Fortunately, my uneasiness allowed me to entertain another view when it did present itself.

## II. INTRODUCTION TO GRACE

The Lord was gracious to me by allowing me to have classes with Craig Glickman and Zane Hodges after my experience in Romans. These men started me on the journey of understanding that there was another way to view Rom 8:12-17 (and many other passages!) that made sense of the context.

The key to understanding this passage is to see that there is a difference between being a son of God and being a believer. They are not synonymous. In the context of Romans 6–8, we see that the believer has been set free from the power of sin. He no longer has to serve it. Whereas the Law did not provide the means by which the believer could obey God (8:3), the Spirit does (8:2). When we live according to the Law, we are trying to obey God in our own power—in the flesh. When we do, we experience defeat and death (8:13). Paul gives us his experience of this way of life in chapter 7. It is only when the believer lives by the Spirit that he has the power to obey God.

Immediately after Paul gives the believer the two options—living by the flesh or living by the Spirit—he makes the statement in v 14 that all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. He has just said that believers can live by the flesh so not all believers are led by the Spirit. Therefore, the phrase “sons of God” cannot be the same thing as “all Christians.”

Only those believers who live by the Spirit can claim the title “sons of God.” These are believers who realize who they are in Christ and realize that they have been set free from the power of sin and the Law as a rule of life (6:11, 14; 7:6). Through the Spirit, we have the option to obey. The Spirit-led believer operates under a different Law—the Law of the Spirit (8:2).

The title “sons of God” refers to those believers who are led by the Spirit. Perhaps we could say that they are mature believers, or that they are “sons” in the sense that they reflect who they are in the inner man (7:22). An infant does not reflect the character of his father. However, a grown “son” often does. After a child sits at the feet of his father and learns from him, he can then emulate his father’s behavior. The believer who is led by the Spirit walks in obedience and therefore reflects the holy character of his holy Father.

It is the desire of the inner man, who the believer is in Christ, to obey (7:22). The obedient believer, who obeys through the power of the Spirit, is doing what his inner man desires. He is free to do as his inner man desires, therefore it is a life of freedom and not slavery (8:15). The Spirit-led believer, the “son” of God, lives a life that reflects his birth-right.

### III. PARALLEL PASSAGES<sup>6</sup>

#### A. MATTHEW 5–7

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord shows the distinction between being a believer and being a son of God.<sup>7</sup> In Matt 5:9, the Lord says that

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<sup>6</sup> Editor’s Note: Another text showing that only some believers are *sons of God* is Rev 21:7. It reads, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.” Persevering believers are overcomers (cf. Rev 2:26) and will be sons of God in the life to come.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Pub. Co., 1992), 384.

peacemakers are blessed, for they shall be called *sons of God*. In Matt 5:44, He exhorts His disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. If they do, they will be called *sons of God*. Not all believers are peacemakers. Not all believers love their enemies, experience persecution, or pray for those who mistreat them. These are not requirements for obtaining eternal life, but the believer who does these things is being like Christ. He is being like his heavenly *Father*. He is reflecting who he is in the inner man. He can claim the title *son of God*.

It is also instructive that in the context of Matthew 5, Jesus says that believers who are sons of God will be rewarded for their actions (5:12). The word *reward* carries with it the idea of wages earned. This is not the reception of eternal life, for that is a free gift from God. While all believers have eternal life, the “reward” in Matthew 5 is not something that all believers receive. Only *sons of God* will.

## B. GALATIANS 3–4

Galatians 3–4 also contains references to “sons of God.” In 3:25, Paul says that the Galatians are no longer under a tutor since they have come to faith, and this makes them sons (v 26). Then, in chapter 4 he explains the part the law played in the OT. Prior to the coming of the Spirit, the Jews were under the Law. The law was a tutor or guardian (4:3, 5). But when the Spirit came, believers entered into a new era—one of adoption as sons—where we are “sons” (4:5-6). There is a difference between being a child (4:1, 3) and being a son (vv 5-6).<sup>8</sup> The son is grown up and no longer needs a tutor/guardian/babysitter. The problem with the Galatians was that they were going back to the Law as a means of living and justification (4:9-10).

A child (4:1) is still an heir of the father. However, the child needs a guardian or a babysitter until a future date (v 2). Only when the child no longer needs the guardian is he a “son.” (vv 5-7) This passage shows that the word “son” can be used to denote a mature child.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1992), 104.

<sup>9</sup> It needs to be stated that in Galatians 4, Paul does not use the same word for “child” that he does in Romans 8. In Galatians 4, he uses *nepios*. He uses it in 1 Cor 3:1 and 13:11 to clearly denote very young children. Moulton and Milligan give examples of the word to describe very young children as well. Even though the word for “child” is different in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, both passages show that the word for “son” can be used to indicate a mature offspring

The point in Galatians 3-4 is that we no longer need the law as a babysitter, for we have the Spirit that empowers us to live. We have grown up, why would we need a babysitter? It is the believer that lives by the Spirit that is the mature son, not the believer that goes back to the Law. The discussion in Galatians 3-4 is not about believers versus non-believers. There were believers under the law in the OT as well. The discussion is how we live our lives. If we live by the power of the Law, we are like little children that need a babysitter. When we live by the Spirit, we are like mature, grown sons.

In Romans 7, Paul spoke of his attempts to live by the Law (as a believer) and how that is really living according to the flesh. It is by the Spirit that we grow spiritually and produce fruit. Living by the Law is really trying to live in our own flesh. Every believer has the right to be a “son”, he has received this adoption. However, when we try to live by the Law (like the Galatians were doing), we are like a child who says – I don’t have the ability to do that, I need a babysitter.

There are a number of parallels between Gal 4:1-7 and Rom 8:12-17. Galatians 4:5-6 is parallel with Rom 8:14-15. The context of both passages deal with Christians attempting to live under the Law (Romans 7 and Gal 4:9-10, 21). In them, Paul makes a distinction between being a child and being a son. In Romans, the “son” is the believer who does not live the Christian life by the law by the power of the flesh but by the power of the Spirit. In Galatians, Paul says they are sons because Christ has set them free from the Law. However, if they go back to the Law as a way of life, they will become enslaved and thus be like a child (4:1-2, 9).

While the words son and child can perhaps be synonymous in some contexts, there can also be a distinction between them. The word *child* can simply denote physical descent. The word *son* can carry with it the meaning of a mature child who demonstrates certain moral characteristics, and thus has certain privileges.<sup>10</sup>

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instead of simply a child/infant. James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 426.

<sup>10</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.) 1070-71. Vine sees a distinction between a child and a son of God in Romans 8. A son, among other things, reflects his likeness to God's character by his actions. However, Vine does not specifically indicate whether he feels all children are also sons of God.

## IV. THE PRIVILEGED SONS

In Rom 8:12ff, there is a difference between being a Christian and being a *son of God*. In v 16, Paul says that the Spirit bears witness to our Spirit that we are the “children” of God. Unlike his discussion on the topic “sons of God,” there are no conditions on the believer being a “child” of God. Paul uses a different word (*tekna*) when he describes what is true for every Christian. There is a reason he does so. All Christians are the “children” of God. They have experienced the new birth from above. They are part of His family. But only those children who are led by the Spirit, and reflect the character of their heavenly Father, have the right to be called mature sons of God.

Once I saw the distinction between a “child” and “son” in Rom 8:12-17, I was able to look at the passage in a whole new light. This light enabled me to understand the verses in a way that did not do violence to the context of Romans 6–8. All Christians, by faith in Christ alone, are the “children” of God (v 16). However, those who present themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit can claim the title of sons of God (v 14). They are the ones that experience life in the Spirit in their present lives (v 13).

The understanding of this distinction also helped me see another truth in this passage that was formerly hidden to me. The passage ends with the promise that those who suffer with Christ will also be His fellow heirs. They will be glorified with Him (v 17b).

While all “children” of God will live forever with Christ, in this context we see that something else awaits the sons of God. Christians who are led by the Spirit, and are sons reflects the character of their Lord. The Lord is seen in the life of those believers. As the world hated the Son par excellence, so it will hate the son through whom He is seen. The promise in v 17b is that such believers will have eternal rewards in the world to come. The son will not only live with, but reign with, the Son.

The reward for the sons of God takes us back to Matthew 5. The Lord says that the believer should be glad when he is persecuted on His account (v 11). Such believers have a great reward (v 12). Here, in seed form, is what Paul teaches in Rom 8:12-17.

## V. CONCLUSION

In Rom 8:12-17, there is a difference between being a “child of God” and being a “son of God.” All believers are children of God by faith in Christ. All believers have eternal life and cannot forfeit it. The child of

God then has the option to be led by the Spirit and present his body for obedience. He can then claim the title of mature “son.” The “son” obtains rewards both in this life and in the world to come.

There is a tendency within the Lordship and Free Grace debate for some to say it is just semantics. We must avoid this tendency. As mentioned above, Rom 8:12-17 started me on my journey towards a grace theology. What a difference semantics make in this passage! When I had adopted a Lordship way of understanding it, it left me with confusion, questions about my possession of eternal life, and an interpretation that did extreme violence to the context.

Grace changed all of that. Romans 8:12-17 tells me that I will always be a child of God. Obedience to the commands of God does not prove I am a child of God. Obedience does not automatically characterize the life of the believer. However, God has given His children the Spirit, and thus the power to obey Him. It is the wise child of God who presents himself for this leading. It leads to the experience of life in this world and great reward in the next.



# THE GOSPEL IS MORE THAN “FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE”

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Surprisingly little work has been done on the definition and content of the *gospel* (*euangelion*, *euangelizō*) in the NT. Even with titles like *The Gospel According to Jesus*<sup>1</sup> or *The Gospel According to Saint Paul*<sup>2</sup> the authors nowhere define what they mean by “gospel.” *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* does contain a list of sixteen truths that are “fundamental to all evangelical teaching,”<sup>3</sup> but does not equate this in a technical sense to the term *gospel*. Throughout these books (as well as most others about the gospel), the gospel seems to be defined as “the essentials of what must be explained in evangelism” or “the facts that must be believed in order to receive everlasting life.”<sup>4</sup>

This is also the way the term is often used in Free Grace circles. Like Lordship/Perseverance authors, we equate the gospel with what a person must believe in order to receive everlasting life. Our definition of the *gospel* does not differ from theirs; we just have different ideas on what is essential to the gospel. For us, the gospel is often equated with “faith alone in Christ alone for everlasting life.”

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says "Follow Me"?* rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). When *gospel* is looked up in this index, we find the following entry: “See Evangelism, Lordship of Christ, Salvation,” *ibid*, 298.

<sup>2</sup> William Porcher Dubose, *The Gospel According to Saint Paul* (London: Longmans Green, nd).

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur writes, “What is the gospel? Here we get practical. The real question we are asking is, ‘How should I evangelize my friends, family and neighbors?’” *Faith Works*, 193. He goes on to list about twenty-one things that must be shared and believed (*ibid*, 199-208).

However, a study of the term *gospel* reveals that this understanding is incorrect. Therefore, a large part of the debate between Lordship Salvation and Free Grace is wrapped up in a failure to properly define the gospel biblically. Defining the gospel won't solve the debate, but it might clarify the issue. There is also some debate within our own circles about what truths must be shared and believed for evangelism to occur. Hopefully, a proper understanding of the gospel will bring some unity within our own circles as well.

## II. LEXICAL DEFINITION

A study on the term gospel begins with a lexical analysis of the word in its original contexts in both secular and biblical usage. The term translates two Greek words: *euangelion* (noun: used 76 times in 73 verses) and *euangelizō* (verb: used 54 times in 52 verses).<sup>5</sup> *Euangelion* is always translated as *gospel* in the NKJV. *Euangelizō* is most often translated as *preaching the gospel*, thus it can also be translated as "bringing glad tidings, or preaching, or proclaiming good news." Context must determine the content of the good news in view.

The word family is derived from the Greek word *angelos* meaning "messenger" and the prefix *eu-* meaning "well" or "good."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, *euangelion* is a *good message*, while *euangelizō* refers to *the proclamation of a good message*.

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT), the noun is only found six times and means either *good news* (2 Sam 18:20, 25, 27; 2 Kgs 7:9) or *bringing good news* (2 Sam 4:10; 18:22). The noun is never used in a religious sense. When someone brought news to David that Saul was dead, the messenger thought it was *good news* (2 Sam 4:10). Similarly, the four lepers who discovered the deserted Syrian camp and began loot-

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> U. Becker, "Gospel" in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of NT Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 2:107. See also C. C. Broyles, "Gospel" in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 282. and R. P. Martin, "Gospel" in Geoffrey William Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Fully rev. ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:529.

ing it said, “We are not doing right. This is a day of *good news* and we remain silent” (2 Kgs 7:9; italics added).

The verb is used in the general sense of *proclaiming good news*. When Adonijah seeks to crown himself king, he greets the messenger Jonathan with by asking for a report of *good news* (1 Kgs 1:42). Sometimes, the birth of a son was proclaimed as good news (Jer 20:15). These are nonreligious uses, but unlike the noun, the verb is occasionally used in a religious sense to declare the works of God. In Ps 40:10, David declares the faithfulness and salvation of God. In Ps 68:11; it is the decisions and commands of God which are proclaimed. So in the LXX, the terms are non-technical words used to refer to any news that is thought to be good.

In secular Greek usage, the findings are almost identical. The primary exception is that the noun is sometimes used in religious settings, where one believes he has received a gift or a word from the gods.<sup>7</sup> So in both the LXX and secular Greek usage, *euangelion* and *euangelizō* are words that refer to any good news, whether religious or not. Our primary concern, however, is whether this meaning is carried out in the NT as well.

### III. THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPEL

While the NT words *euangelion* and *euangelizō* still refer to good news about events and circumstances, they are used almost exclusively in a religious sense, encompassing everything the Bible says about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, including the implications of these events for the one who believes.<sup>8</sup>

The problem, however, is that different authors in different contexts have different *good-news* truths that they emphasize. This means one of two things. Either there are numerous different *gospels* with each author having one or more *gospel*, or there is one large, diverse, multi-faceted, all-encompassing *gospel* for the entire NT (which essentially *is* the entire NT). This second approach sees the NT term *gospel* as a non-technical way to refer to any and all good news connected to Jesus Christ. This

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich, “*euangelion*” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), II:723.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 1 for the NT data.

article defends the second approach, but the possibility of multiple gospels must be considered first.

#### A. MULTIPLE GOSPELS

The multiple gospel view holds that there are different gospels for different NT authors. There is “The Gospel According to Paul,” “The Gospel According to Peter,” “The Gospel According to Jesus,” “The Gospel According to Luke,” etc. Each gospel is different from, but not in conflict with, the others. Initially, the “Four Gospels” of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John seem to steer us in this direction. However, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are a well-known genre of literature in Greek and Roman culture called “gospel” and so we shouldn’t read too much into the designation of these four accounts as “gospels.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The genre of “gospel literature” is a theological biography where the author selectively reports certain events in order to convey a specific message. The imperial cult centered around a gospel account every time a new emperor was born, and was intended to encourage emperor worship. In the imperial cult,

The ruler is divine by nature. His power extends to men, to animals, to the earth, and to the sea. Nature belongs to him; wind and waves are subject to him. He works miracles and heals men. He is the savior of the world who also redeems men from their difficulties. ...He has appeared on earth as a deity in human form. He is the protective god of the state. His appearance is the cause of good fortune to the whole kingdom. Extraordinary signs accompany the course of his life. They proclaim the birth of the ruler of the world. A comet appears at his accession, and at his death signs in heaven declare his assumption into the ranks of the gods. Because the emperor is more than a common man, his ordinances are glad messages and his commands are sacred writings. What he says is a divine act and implies good and salvation for men.

...Caesar and Christ, the emperor on the throne and the despised rabbi on the cross, confront one another.

Freidrich, in Kittel, ed., *TDNT*, II:224-25. All of this *good news* about the emperor is very similar to the *good news* the NT contains about Jesus Christ.

The three synoptic gospels follow the emperor cult pattern of gospel literature. In Greek and Roman culture, the intention of a gospel was to encourage present followers of the emperor cult to worship the new emperor. The primary

Nevertheless, in each Gospel account, the various writers do seem to emphasize different *gospel* truths. Matthew tells us that Jesus taught the “gospel [good news] of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14) which was good news about the coming earthly kingdom and seems to be primarily for Jewish people. Mark begins his account explaining that he is going to tell the *gospel* (good news) about Jesus Christ (1:1). But only a few verses later, he talks about the “gospel of God” (1:14) as preached by John the Baptist which sounds very similar to the “gospel of the kingdom” as preached by Jesus. Similar terminology is used by Jesus in Luke (16:16).

The Gospel of John, surprisingly, doesn’t contain the word *gospel* at all.<sup>10</sup> Most Christians have never considered the fact that in the only evangelistic book of the Bible—the Gospel of John—the word *gospel* (*euangelion*) doesn’t appear even once! Neither does the verb, *preaching the gospel* (*euangelizō*). This should give us pause as to how we use the word.<sup>11</sup>

Outside of the gospel genre, we find other references to particular gospels (good news messages) of various authors. For example, in Acts and the epistles, Paul refers to “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “my gospel” (Rom 2:16; 16:25), “the gospel of your salvation”

intention of secular gospel literature is not primarily to gain converts from other religions.

In the case of the synoptics, their aim is to make disciples of believers. John’s aim, however, is to bring people to faith in Jesus for everlasting life (John 20:30-31). The fact that John nowhere uses the term *gospel* in the “Gospel of John” hints that he may not be following the typical pattern of *gospel* genre. This helps support the idea that John’s account of the life of Christ is not primarily intended to encourage present believers to obey, but to encourage unbelievers to believe in Christ.

<sup>10</sup> John doesn’t use the term *gospel* in his epistles either. It is used three times in Revelation (10:7; 14:6 [2x]), but there refers to God’s coming judgment, not to the saving message! Luke only uses the noun twice, both in Acts (15:7; 20:24).

<sup>11</sup> If John’s Gospel has leading people to faith in Christ for eternal life as its purpose (John 20:30-31), and yet John never calls his saving message *the gospel*, should we? See note 8 for more on this. Speaking of John’s account as an *evangelistic* book is not quite proper either, since the term *evangelism* is a transliteration from the Greek *euangelizō*, “to preach the gospel.” What John does do is explain how to pass from death unto life.

(Eph 1:13), “the gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15), etc. Are these different messages Paul preached in various churches, or are they all identical? And if they are identical, how do they compare with the good news that Jesus and His apostles preached as recorded in the synoptic gospels?

C. I. Scofield is one who held to different versions of the gospel for different NT authors. He distinguished between “the gospel of the kingdom,” “the gospel of the grace of God,” “the Gospel of Paul,” and the “everlasting gospel.” His conclusions are as follows:

The Gospel of the kingdom...is the good news that God purposes to set up on the earth, in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, a kingdom, political, spiritual, Israelitish, universal, over which God’s Son, David’s heir, shall be King, and which shall be, for one thousand years, the manifestation of the righteousness of God in human affairs.

The Gospel of the grace of God...is the good news that Jesus Christ, the rejected King, has died on the cross for the sins of the world, that He was raised from the dead for our justification, and that by Him all that believe are justified from all things.

The everlasting Gospel...is to be preached to the earthdwellers at the very end of the tribulation and immediately preceding the judgment of the nations. It is neither the Gospel of the kingdom, nor of grace. Though its burden is judgment, not salvation, it is good news to Israel and to those who, during the tribulation, have been saved.

That which Paul calls “my Gospel”...is the Gospel of the grace of God in its fullest development, but includes the revelation of the result of that Gospel in the outcalling of the church, her relationships, position, privilege, and responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Another author, possibly following Scofield’s lead, writes that while “In the New Testament, [the term gospel is used] only of the glad tidings of Christ and His salvation...[this is not the case] in the writings of

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<sup>12</sup> C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press American Branch, 1909), 1343.

Paul.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to equate the “gospel of the kingdom of God” with the “gospel of the kingdom of heaven” where both refer to “the rule of God in the human heart because of Christ (Luke 17:20, 21). It also refers to the kingdom in its future state during which the believers will reign with Christ forever.”<sup>14</sup> He emphasizes that this is different from Paul’s gospel, which is the “gospel plan of salvation, its doctrines, declarations, precepts [and] promises.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Friedrich distinguishes between the various gospels in the NT. The gospel of Jesus, he writes, is a

comprehensive picture of the whole activity of Jesus. His whole life was proclamation of the Gospel. ...His birth...the coming of Jesus to earth, His life and death, were the great message of peace...peace between God and man and between man and man.<sup>16</sup>

John the Baptist, on the other hand, proclaimed “the imminence of the kingdom of God.”<sup>17</sup> Third, the disciples, apostles and evangelists preach Christ as the kingdom of God come in the flesh, so that “bodily disorders are healed and man’s relation to God is set right...Joy reigns where this Word is proclaimed.”<sup>18</sup>

It is very possible that such definitions and distinctions between the various gospels (or good news messages) in Scripture are correct. However, the downside to such distinctions is that they lead to numerous different *gospels* in the NT, which is not only confusing, but can be misleading. If there are different *gospels*, or different versions of the *good news*, how can we know which one to use in evangelism? Should we use them all? Maybe some of them weren’t even for evangelism, but were *good news* messages for the Jewish people, or for believers.

But even if we could distinguish an evangelistic gospel from a discipleship gospel, the evangelistic gospel still seems to include large amounts of information. How much of it must be shared and believed in order for enough information to be imparted so that a person might re-

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<sup>13</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary NT: King James Version* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1991), 669.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich, “*euangelizomai*” Kittel, ed., *TDNT*, II:718.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 719.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 720.

ceive everlasting life? If one only has five minutes to evangelize a person on their deathbed, which of these good news messages should be shared, and how much of it must be shared?

In light of these, and other possible pitfalls, the multiple gospel view is not the best way to understand the NT data concerning the gospel.

## B. THE BROAD NT GOSPEL

Some, therefore, have opted for one, all-encompassing, multi-faceted gospel. This maintains the unity of the NT, but allows the different teachers and writers to emphasize different elements of the one gospel to fit their needs and audience. In this view, the term *gospel* is a non-technical word referring to everything and anything related to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

With this understanding, the NT *gospel* contains elemental concepts that are common throughout the NT, some minor details that are listed only once, certain truths that must be shared in evangelistic endeavors, and various ideas that should be reserved for discipleship purposes.

For example, there are gospel truths which are clearly not evangelistic. For example, in Luke 1:19, the angel Gabriel declares the *gospel* to Zechariah. Most translations say that the angel is declaring glad tidings, or declaring good news, but the Greek word is *euangelizō*, to declare the *gospel*. The content of the angel's gospel is that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, will be the mother of John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

No evangelist, to my knowledge, has ever claimed that knowledge of and belief in Elizabeth as the promised mother of John the Baptist is a necessary truth of evangelism. Yet it is part of the NT gospel. This example shows us that deciding what to include in witnessing is not as easy as just including everything the NT says about the gospel. In fact, by this author's count, the NT includes *fifty* truths and facts in the gospel.<sup>19</sup> Some of them are so vague and general, that essentially, the gospel includes everything in the NT, if not everything in the entire Bible.

So to say that a person has to know and believe everything the NT calls *gospel* in order to receive everlasting life is to say that a person has to know and believe most, if not all of the Bible. If this is so, then few, if any, actually have everlasting life, and unless the entire NT has been

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 1.



taught and explained, nobody has ever shared the entire gospel with anybody else.

Since it is unnecessary to share the entire *gospel*, what are the essentials of the broad NT *gospel* that must be included whenever we explain to someone how they can receive everlasting life? This question can be answered in numerous ways, but the best approach would be to take each individual passage where the term *gospel* is mentioned, and see in context (1) what truths are being taught, (2) who is doing the teaching, (3) who the audience is, (4) what the audience most likely knew prior to receiving this *gospel* information,<sup>20</sup> (5) what the desired response is for the audience, and (6) what will happen to the audience if they respond as desired. Needless to say, this sort of study for all 130 uses of *euangelion* and *euangelizō* is well beyond the scope of this article.

Therefore, a more generic approach will be taken. Four key sections of Scripture have been chosen for a macro-level study of the term *gospel* and its related truths. Three of the sections are quite large, and contain multiple references to the *gospel*. But in such a way, we can answer, in broad brush strokes, the six questions stated above.

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<sup>20</sup> Of the six, this is the most difficult and subjective. Yet gaining this information is important, because often a teacher will base new information on what the audience already knows. If we leave out this element, we might leave out essential truths of the gospel that are assumed, but not discussed in a particular passage.

Also, we must consider what the writer assumes his reading audience already knows, and why he writes what he does. It is my conviction that all twenty-seven books of the NT were written to people who were already believers. Therefore, unless Biblical authors explicitly state otherwise in a specific passage, they are not writing to tell people how to receive everlasting life. Since they assume a believing readership, such authors will purposefully truncate or ignore evangelistic messages and details, focusing instead on sanctification truths.

Nevertheless, one book of the NT—the Gospel of John—though written to believers, is written largely to instruct believers how to share the message of everlasting life with unbelievers. Therefore, while the entire NT should be considered to discover the *gospel* and what to share in evangelism, from a systematic theology perspective, and for practical reasons, the Gospel of John should have priority in determining what a person must believe to receive everlasting life.

## IV. KEY GOSPEL PASSAGES

The passages that have been chosen consist of three NT books (Matthew, Galatians, and Romans) and 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. These have been chosen because they represent the three key books and one key text in the NT on the term *gospel*.

### A. THE USE OF *GOSPEL* IN MATTHEW

The first use of the word *gospel* in the NT is in Matt 4:23, where we read that Jesus “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel [lit., good news] of the kingdom.” Jesus was teaching His message to the Jews in the region of the Galilee that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (4:17). The Jews would have understood Jesus to be saying that the OT promises to Israel were about to come true. The Messiah would come, and lead the nation of Israel to throw off Gentile domination, and become the leading nation of the world.

For Jews living under Roman occupation, this was *good news*! It was *gospel*. It was exactly what they were looking and longing for. What better news could there be? So Jesus preached a *gospel* to the Jews of Israel that the earthly kingdom was being offered.

The condition for the reception of this promise was the national repentance of Israel (4:17). Jesus said that to receive the kingdom, the Jewish people had to repent of the way they had perverted and destroyed the law of God, and return to a right relationship with Him in true obedience to the law. As an indication of their repentance, they had to be baptized, symbolizing their death to the ways of Judaism.<sup>21</sup>

Most Jewish people did not like this bad news element of the good news that Jesus preached, and so they rejected Christ as the Messiah, and instead of receiving the kingdom, killed Christ on the cross. As these events began to unfold, Jesus, knowing how things would turn out, pronounced woe upon Chorazin and Bethsaida (typifying the whole nation of Israel) that because they did not repent, judgment was coming (11:20-22). So the kingdom was postponed, along with the good news about it. Incidentally, Jesus teaches in Matt 24:14 that during the Tribulation, this good news of the kingdom will be preached again. During that time, the Jewish people will accept it, so that at the end of the Tribulation, they receive the promised kingdom.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on Israelite repentance, see David Anderson, “The National Repentance of Israel” *JOTGES* 11:21 (Autumn 1998),

That is the *gospel* message in Matthew. Scofield’s explanation of the “gospel of the kingdom” fits very well into Matthew’s use of the *gospel*. *But it is also clear that unless we spiritualize the gospel of the kingdom, the gospel according to Jesus as recorded in Matthew is not a gospel that can be offered to Gentiles in the church age.* There are certainly principles that apply to Gentiles today, especially the truth that a failure to repent of sin will lead to being cut off from God’s purposes and experiencing the wrath of God (which is what Romans 9–11 is all about). The kingdom, as used by Matthew, is not offered today to the church. Therefore, the gospel of kingdom is not something that must be included in our evangelism, or believed for the reception of everlasting life.

But although Matthew’s *gospel* was specific for the Jewish people at the time of Christ (and during the future Tribulation), from a broader NT perspective, it is good news for the church and the entire world as well, for it is through Matthew’s *gospel* that we learn about Jesus Christ, and how the Jewish rejection of Christ has led to the reconciliation of the world (Rom 11:15).

So there is a specific gospel in Matthew, but it is part of the broader NT gospel. But as was seen, there is little, if anything, in Matthew’s *gospel* about how to receive everlasting life, and therefore, it is questionable that Matthew should be used when explaining to people how to receive everlasting life.

A brief word about the *gospel* in Mark and Luke is appropriate here. The *gospel* in Mark and Luke also emphasize Matthew’s kingdom truths when Jewish people are the intended audience (e.g., Mark 1:14–15; 13:10; Luke 4:18; 4:43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1). However, Mark and Luke also make frequent mention of the *gospel* when mixed multitudes, Gentiles, disciples or the whole world is in view (Mark 14:9). Frequently, in these gospel offers, commitment, discipleship and cost are required of those who will respond. But in these instances, it is not everlasting life that is offered, but great reward in the life to come (Mark 8:35; 10:29). Sometimes, apart from the coming kingdom or the offer of eternal reward, the *gospel* contains truths about Christ’s birth and resurrection (Mark 16:15; Luke 1:19; 2:10; 3:18). There are occasional calls to *believe the gospel*, with the promised result not being everlasting life, but deliverance from coming wrath (Mark 1:15; 16:15–16).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mark 1:15 may shed a lot of light on understanding Mark 16:15–16. If believing the gospel of the kingdom leads one to repentance (or the baptism of

So nowhere in Matthew (or Mark and Luke) do we find a definition for the gospel as “faith alone in Christ alone.” In fact, so far, we haven’t even seen that this truth *is* an element of the gospel. The “Gospel” of John, of course, frequently mentions that everlasting life is by faith alone in Christ alone, but as was mentioned earlier, the term *gospel* never appears in John, and so it doesn’t help us define how the NT uses the term. It should, however, make us wonder whether the good news elsewhere in the NT is equivalent to the message of life found in John.

## B. THE USE OF *GOSPEL* IN GALATIANS

Any study of the term *gospel* must also consider Paul’s writings, since he uses the term more than any other biblical writer.<sup>23</sup> The main trouble with Paul’s use of the term is that in many cases, he seems to assume that his audience knows what he is talking about. So we must look at the few places where he seems to define the essential elements of his *gospel* and proceed from there.

The first place might be Paul’s letter to the Galatians, for it is in this letter that he defends the good news he preached. In Galatians, Paul is very concerned about a false gospel that is being preached and spread among the church. He begins his letter by warning the Christians about another gospel that is being presented among them (1:8-9). He says that he preached the true gospel to them, and anything else is a false gospel.

So the initial goal is to discover what Paul preached when he was in Galatia. But thankfully, to find this information, we do not have to go to Matthew, Romans, 1 Corinthians or even Acts, since none of these tell us what Paul preached in Galatia. Instead, Paul reminds his initial audience (and so informs later readers) what he preached to the Galatians.

After telling his readers that he is going to defend his gospel (1:8-9), he defines the gospel he preached (2:14-17). The gospel Paul preached in Galatia is that “a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16).

But Paul does not stop defining his gospel in v 16. It appears from Gal 2:17-21 that after an unbeliever believes in Jesus for everlasting life,

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repentance) in order to escape temporal judgment, then the salvation of 16:16 is not everlasting life, but deliverance from judgment. If Mark is written to believers (as I believe it was), then 16:15-16 is a call to believers (cf. 16:14), not unbelievers. Mark records two conditions for believers to escape wrath: (1) repent and (2) believe the good news about the kingdom offer.

<sup>23</sup> Sixty of the 76 uses of *euangelion* are in Pauline literature.

Paul continues to preach his gospel to them, only then, it is not a message of how to be justified, but how to live a life of freedom from sin. He talks about how we still do sin, but this doesn't prove we are not saved, nor does it mean that Christ is a minister of sin. Rather, all it means is that we are not living the crucified life.

So the good news message Paul preached in Galatia involved information for both believers and unbelievers. He told unbelievers to believe in Jesus for justification. To those who were justified by faith in Christ apart from works, he told them to live the crucified life, to live by faith that in Christ, they are dead to sin. That is the gospel Paul preached in Galatia—how unbelievers can receive everlasting life, and how believers can live free from sin.<sup>24</sup>

### C. THE USE OF *GOSPEL* IN ROMANS

If Romans is Paul's *mangum opus* on the *gospel*, we should expect a clear explanation about the content of the gospel he's writing about. And this is what we find. Though he does define the *gospel* in Galatians, he elaborates on it here.

Paul begins his letter right away by talking about the gospel. He wants to tell his readers what his letter is about. Verse 1 indicates that all sixteen chapters concern the gospel, not just the first three five or eight chapters. In Rom 1:1, we read, “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.” The following verses explain what he was separated to.<sup>25</sup>

First, he says that this gospel he has been separated to was “promised before though His prophecies in the Holy Scriptures” (1:2). So this gospel was a topic of prophecy. But in v 3, we really get into the content of the gospel. This gospel concerns “His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.”

So here we have several more elements in Paul's broad idea of *gospel*. It concerns Jesus Christ, who is Lord. Next, Jesus was born of the seed of David, according to the flesh. Many say that the Lordship of Christ is essential to the gospel, which here is seen to be true. But

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<sup>24</sup> Galatians 3:8 also includes in the gospel the fact that in Abraham, all people will be blessed (cf. Gen 12:1-3).

<sup>25</sup> David K. Davey, “The Intrinsic Nature of the Gospel,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 148.

nobody says that His lineage from David is essential. Yet Paul includes both in his gospel. Third, we read that He was declared to be the Son of God. While this is either a reference to His deity, or to Him being the King of Israel, it primarily is a reference to the power and authority Jesus received *after* the resurrection. And nobody denies that the resurrection is central to the good news.

In v 5 Paul explains why he was separated to the gospel, and why he preached. He says that he preached this gospel “for obedience to the faith among all nations for his name.” René Lopez points out in his commentary on Romans that there are four ways this phrase “obedience to the faith” can be understood, and he makes the case, rightly I believe, that Paul is not primarily referring to initial faith in Jesus for justification, but the continual life of faith in Christ which results in obedience. He says “Obedience to believe consists of faith, and [the] obedience to follow is produced by faith.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Paul’s gospel in Romans is not simply to tell unbelievers how to receive justification and everlasting life. Paul’s gospel in Romans includes this truth, but much more. Paul wants to emphasize how justified believers can live the life of faithful obedience to God, thereby escaping the temporal wrath of God in this life which comes upon us as a result of sin.

This is further seen by looking at Rom 1:16-17, the theme verses of Romans. The main point of these verses is that the gospel Paul preached is the power of God for salvation, or deliverance, to everyone who believes, that is, to believers. In Romans, Paul is not primarily teaching a gospel for unbelievers, but for believers! He wants to tell those who have already believed how to be delivered. Delivered from what? In v 18, we read about the “wrath of God” coming against those who practice unrighteousness.<sup>27</sup>

Paul’s gospel, or good news, in Romans is a message about how all people, whether Jew or Greek, can escape the temporal discipline and judgment of God in this life. Unbelievers must believe in Jesus for justification. Believers must live a life of faith under the cross of Christ. And

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<sup>26</sup> René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>27</sup> For various views on how the “wrath of God” in Romans is to be understood, see Davey, “The Intrinsic Nature of the Gospel,” 157; René A. Lopez, “Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?” *JOTGES* (Autumn 2002): 45-66.

of course, Romans 9–11 talk about how the Jewish people came under the wrath of God, and how they can escape it. Chapters 12–16 provide practical application for believers who want to escape wrath.

The gospel in Romans is about how both unbelievers and believers can be delivered from the temporal wrath of God: faith in Christ for justification and living by faith (resulting in obedience) for sanctification.

#### D. THE USE OF *GOSPEL* IN 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

Paul’s explanation of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is probably more controversial than any other gospel-related passage in the NT. But this is because this passage seems to explicitly define what the *gospel* is. In vv 1-2, Paul writes,

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

He writes that he is going to reiterate to them the gospel he preached when he was among them, which they had received, in which they still stand. There are no problems with this statement thus far, but the rest of v 2 brings the dilemma. Paul writes, “by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached.” This seems to imply that the gospel Paul preached, and which he is going to repeat here, explains what is necessary to believe in order to receive and retain (!) everlasting life.

Paul seems to imply that if a person doesn’t persevere in holding fast to the gospel, then they either lose their salvation, or never really believed in the first place. If Paul is defining what a person must believe in order to be justified, then apparently, they have to continue to believe it to stay justified or prove themselves justified. The only other option is that the word *saved* is not referring to being saved from eternal condemnation, but refers to some other form of deliverance. This is the best option, since the term *saved* in 1 Corinthians generally refers to being healthy or blameless at the Judgment Seat of Christ (cf. 1:18, 21; 3:15; 5:5).

So if the gospel Paul is about to define is a message for believers, to prepare them for the Bema, then this passage is not about the essential elements that must be believed in order to receive everlasting life. Rather, it contains essential discipleship truths which effect our sanctification.

But since this understanding of 1 Corinthians 15 is probably a new concept to most people, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the traditional view is correct, and Paul is talking about essential evangelistic truths that a person must believe in order to receive everlasting life. In vv 3-4, he begins to delineate what these essentials are. He says, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: 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.”

Most people, when they use this passage to define the gospel, stop at the end of v 4. Those who do so, say that based on this passage, there are three things a person must believe in order to receive everlasting life. They must believe that:

1. Christ died for our sins
2. He was buried
3. He rose again from the dead.

Some add a fourth element that we must also believe we are sinners because the first truth implies a prior belief in our own sinfulness.

But who in Christendom, except for the liberal (and now postmodern) theologians, doesn't believe these three (or four) truths? Almost everybody in most evangelical schools and churches believes that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. So if this is all that is necessary to receive everlasting life, then almost everyone in Christendom is going to heaven—even all those who believe that our own good works and faithfulness are required along with Christ's sacrifice.<sup>28</sup>

Some, recognizing that God does not give everlasting life to people who are trusting in their own good works to get to heaven, in an attempt to *narrow the door* go outside of 1 Corinthians 15. They may add something about justification by faith *alone* in Christ *alone*. They must do so because that fundamental truth is not mentioned here!

But before such outside additions are allowed, we must be certain we have added everything from this passage to the definition of the gospel that Paul does. We need to make sure we have included everything from 1 Corinthians 15. Most people who use 1 Corinthians 15 as a formal definition of the gospel arbitrarily stop at v 4. But Paul does not stop

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<sup>28</sup> There is nothing in 1 Cor 15:1-11 that eliminates obedience as a condition of the salvation in v 2! Indeed, if our analysis is correct, then obedience and faith are *both* required to be healthy at the Bema.



defining his gospel in v 4. He continues to define the gospel in vv 5-8. He says,

...and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

So if 1 Corinthians 15 defines what a person must believe to receive everlasting life, not only must we include the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also the appearances of Christ to Cephas, then the twelve, then to over 500 at once, then to James, then to the apostles, then last of all to Paul.

Very few people in the history of evangelism have shared all these truths with unbelievers and required them to believe all these appearances in order to receive everlasting life. But, for the sake of argument, if somebody does start including all of this in their witnessing, including the *faith alone in Christ alone* which they had to get from outside 1 Corinthians 15, they still have said nothing about the holiness of God, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, or the sinless perfection of Christ. There are many who say that if a person believes that Jesus wasn't God, or wasn't sinless, then they are not born again. But these truths aren't here either.

Do you see where this leads? As soon as someone starts adding things to the list of what a person must believe in order to have everlasting life, there is no rational stopping place. It's all subjective to how much doctrine you want to throw into the mix. Some will have three essentials, another will have five, while someone else will have eight or ten. And of course, all of these truths can be shown to be essential to the *gospel* since all of them, in one place or another in the NT, are included in the *gospel*. But, as Appendix 1 reveals, there are at least fifty NT truths related to the *gospel* and nobody says you have to proclaim all fifty.

The conclusion then is that 1 Corinthians 15 does not contain the entire good news message. There are certainly elements of it there, but it is not all there. Therefore, it is not a definitive definition of the gospel. And it especially is not an explanation of what a person must believe in order to receive everlasting life. That is not in 1 Corinthians 15 at all. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is defending the resurrection by showing that since

Christ was raised, believers will be raised also. This is good news (*gospel*) for the believer and this good news, if held on to, will make the believer healthy at the Bema.

## V. WHAT IS THE *GOSPEL*?

So what is the *gospel*? It can easily be proved from Scripture that *the gospel* is more than faith alone in Christ alone. Much more. The gospel “is not a consistent and clearly definable term which we can express in a brief formula.”<sup>29</sup> The gospel includes elements of the kingdom of God on earth. It includes facts about justification, sanctification, glorification, security in heaven, contentment on earth, and eternal reward. The gospel includes all of this.

[The good news is] that God has acted for the salvation of the world in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. ...[This] does not mean only the content of what is preached, but also the act, process and execution of the proclamation. ...The content of this gospel is the history of Jesus with its individual events.<sup>30</sup>

While the term *gospel* is a non-technical term for any good news, the NT usage seems to limit define it as good news for everybody, whether Jew or Gentile, believer or unbeliever, regarding the benefits and blessings which come to us from the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup> It includes everything from “the eschatological expectation, the proclamation of the [kingdom of God]...the introduction of the Gentiles into salvation history, [and] the rejection of the ordinary religion of cult and Law.”<sup>32</sup> This gospel contains *everything* related to the person and work of Jesus Christ, including all of the events leading up to His birth, and all the ramifications from Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for unbelievers and believers.

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<sup>29</sup> See Friedrich, “*euangelion*” in Kittel, ed., *TDNT*, II:729.

<sup>30</sup> U. Becker, “Gospel” in Brown, ed., *NIDNTT*, 2:111-12.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich writes, “The heart of the good news is the story of Jesus and His suffering, death and resurrection. Everything connected with this may be preaching of the Gospel. ...If we were to sum up the content of the Gospel in a single word, it would be Jesus the Christ.” See “*euangelizomai*” in Kittel, ed., *TDNT*, II:730-31.

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich, “*euangelizomai*,” 709-10, 717.

Based on what has been learned, it is easy to see why many evangelistic presentations can become so convoluted and involved. If someone tries to share all that the NT includes in the *gospel* they must share the entire NT (and probably the OT as well). But if we realize that much of the *gospel* focuses on sanctification truths for the believer, it becomes obvious that the entire gospel does not have to be shared in evangelism. This liberates us from worrying about whether we have shared enough.

So the real the real question then is not “How much of the gospel do you have to believe?” but rather “What do you have to believe to receive everlasting life?” If we want to know what a person must believe to receive everlasting life, we should not asks the question, “What is the gospel?” but rather, “What is the message of life?” When asked that way, the answer becomes crystal clear. The Gospel of John, which does not contain the word *gospel*, tells us over and over what people must do to receive everlasting life: believe in Jesus for everlasting life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; etc.) You do not have to believe the gospel to receive everlasting life, you only have to believe in Jesus for everlasting life.

Of course, as this study has revealed, faith in Christ for everlasting life is an element of the gospel, for what better news in Scripture is there that anyone who believes in Jesus has everlasting life? There is no better news. But there is a vast difference between saying that this truth is *part* of the gospel and saying that it *is* the gospel. Similarly, saying that one has to believe the gospel to be saved is like saying one has to believe the Bible to be saved. Such a statement is not wrong; it’s just too vague.

The NT term *gospel* is like the NT terms *saved* and *salvation*. The terms *saved* and *salvation* are too vague to refer accurately to the what a person receives when they believe in Jesus. Therefore, asking someone if they have “believed the gospel” is like asking someone if they are saved. Such a question is not technically wrong, it’s just not as clear as we could be, for without further explanation or clarification, such questions have different meanings for different people. When we tell someone to “believe the gospel” we run the risk of being seriously misunderstood.

It is better to be clear as we can, and to do that, use the the message of everlasting life as found in the only evangelistic book of the Bible: John. The message of life in John is that anyone who believes in Jesus for everlasting life, has it. This is a truth of the gospel, but it is not the entire gospel, nor must the entire gospel be believed to receive everlasting life.

When teaching, preaching or evangelizing, there is one truth of the gospel that *must* always be included. And this one truth has three parts. A person must

1. Believe
2. In Jesus
3. For everlasting life.<sup>33</sup>

How much of the rest of the gospel you want to share depends on the person you are sharing with, the questions and issues they have, and how much time you have to share. The gospel message may truly be different every time to you share it. And that's okay, because you are being flexible to the person before you, and to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

But the one thing that must never be left out is that to receive everlasting life, a person must believe in Jesus Christ alone. If a person believes the rest of the gospel, but they don't believe in Jesus for everlasting life, they have not believed the one justifying element of the gospel. The gospel is more than faith alone in Christ alone, but justification for everlasting life comes only through faith alone in Christ alone.

## APPENDIX 1

There chart on the following pages demonstrates fifty truths that the NT includes in its definition of the *gospel*. Though there may be some overlap of certain truths, there may also be a few that were missed.

When a double question-mark (??) appears, it means that the context of the verse is unclear as to what truth the term *gospel* is referring to.

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<sup>33</sup> These three elements make up the "core truth of the gospel." See Bob Wilkin, "Tough Questions About Saving Faith," *The Grace Evangelical Society News* (June 1990), 1. He elsewhere writes that these are the *sine qua non*, or the three essentials in evangelism, Bob Wilkin, "Justification By Faith Alone is an Essential Part of the Gospel" *JOTGES* 18:35 (Autumn 2005), 12. Friedrich agrees when he writes that "faith is the condition of the efficacy of the Gospel." See "*euangelizomai*" in Kittel, ed., *TDNT*, II:732.

<b>Greek Noun:</b> <i>euangelion</i>	<b>Greek Verb:</b> <i>euangelizō</i>	<b>Translated “gospel” (NKJV) unless noted below</b>	<b>Content of the Gospel (only new items will be added)</b>
Matt 4:23			<b>1. The kingdom is coming</b>
Matt 9:35			1
	Matt 11:5		1
Matt 24:14			1 – In tribulation
Matt 26:13			1
Mark 1:1			<b>2. The full story in Mark</b>
Mark 1:14			1
Mark 1:15			1
Mark 8:35			1
Mark 10:29			1
Mark 13:10			1
Mark 14:9			1
Mark 16:15			2
			<b>3. Emphasis on resurrection</b>
			<b>4. Believe to be saved</b>
			<b>5. Be baptized</b>
	Luke 1:19	bring glad tidings	<b>6. Mary’s virgin conception</b>
	Luke 2:10	bring good tidings	<b>7. Jesus born in Bethlehem</b>
	Luke 3:18	preached	<b>8. Jesus is coming</b>
			<b>9. Baptism of fire is coming</b>
			<b>10. Baptism of HS is coming</b>
	Luke 4:18		1
	Luke 4:43	proclaim good news	1
	Luke 7:22		1
	Luke 8:1	bringing glad tidings	1
	Luke 9:6		1
	Luke 16:16	has been preached	1
	Luke 20:1		1?
	Acts 5:42	preaching	<b>11. Jesus is the Messiah</b>
	Acts 8:4	preaching the word	??
	Acts 8:25		??
	Acts 8:35	preached	<b>12. Jesus’ humiliation/death</b>
	Acts 8:40	preached	??
	Acts 10:36	preaching	<b>13. Jesus is Lord</b>
			<b>14. Jesus was anointed</b>
			<b>15. Jesus healed all</b>
			3
	Acts 13:32	declare glad tidings	3
			4
	Acts 14:7		??
	Acts 4:15	proclaim good news	<b>16. Turn from idols to God</b>
	Acts 14:21		??
Acts 15:7			??
	Acts 15:35	proclaim the word	??
	Acts 16:10		??

	Acts 17:18	proclaim good news	includes 3
Acts 20:24			1
Rom 1:1			13
			<b>17. A physical descendant of David</b>
			<b>18. The Son of God</b>
			3
Rom 1:9			
	Rom 1:15		<b>19. How to live the justified life by faith</b>
Rom 1:16			19
Rom 2:16			19
	Rom 10:15		??
Rom 10:16			??
Rom 11:28			??
Rom 15:16			??
Rom 15:19			??
	Rom 15:20		??
Rom 5:29			??
Rom 16:25			??
	1 Cor 1:17		<b>20. The message of the cross</b>
1 Cor 4:15			??
1 Cor 9:12			??
1 Cor 9:14			??
	1 Cor 9:16		??
1 Cor 9:18			??
	1 Cor 9:18		??
1 Cor 9:23			??
1 Cor 15:1			<b>21. Christ died</b>
			<b>22. For our sins</b>
			<b>23. He was buried</b>
			<b>24. He rose from the dead</b>
			<b>25. the third day</b>
			<b>26. As Scripture teaches</b>
			<b>27. He appeared to Cephas</b>
			<b>28. He appeared to the 12</b>
			<b>29. He appeared to 500</b>
			<b>30. He appeared to James</b>
			<b>31. He appeared to all the apostles</b>
			<b>32. He appeared to Paul</b>
	1 Cor 15:1		21-32
	1 Cor 15:2	the word...preached	21-32
2 Cor 2:12			??
2 Cor 4:3			??
2 Cor 4:4			??
2 Cor 8:18			??
2 Cor 9:13			??

2 Cor 10:14			??
	2 Cor 10:16		??
2 Cor 11:4			??
2 Cor 11:7			??
	2 Cor 11:7		??
Gal 1:6			33
Gal 1:7			33
	Gal 1:8		33
	Gal 1:9		33
Gal 1:11			33
	Gal 1:11		33
	Gal 1:16	preach	33
	Gal 1:23	proclaim good news	33
Gal 2:2			33
Gal 2:5			33
Gal 2:7			33
Gal 2:14			<b>33. Not justified by works, but by faith in Christ (2:16)</b>
			<b>34. In Abraham, all people will be blessed</b>
	Gal 4:13		33
Eph 1:13			??
	Eph 2:17	preached	??
Eph 3:6			35
	Eph 3:8	proclaim good news	<b>35. Unsearchable riches in Christ and fellowship of the mystery</b>
Eph 6:15			??
Eph 6:19			35
Phil 1:5			??
Phil 1:7			??
Phil 1:12			??
Phil 1:16			??
Phil 1:27			??
Phil 2:22			??
Phil 4:3			??
Phil 4:15			??
Col 1:5			<b>36. Hope laid up for you in heaven</b>
Col 1:23			36
1 Thess 1:5			37
1 Thess 2:2			37
1 Thess 2:4			37
1 Thess 2:8			37
1 Thess 2:9			<b>37. That believers walk worthy of God (2:12)</b>
1 Thess 3:2			??
	1 Thess 3:6	declared good news	<b>38. A church's faith and love</b>

2 Thess 1:8			??
2 Thess 2:14			<b>39. God chose you for salvation through sanctification, by the Spirit and belief in the truth</b>
1 Tim 1:11			<b>40. All are sinners, but all who believe receive everlasting life (1:15-16)</b>
2 Tim 1:8			<b>41. Called with a holy calling</b> 33 <b>42. Given in Christ before time began</b> <b>43. Now given in Christ's appearing</b> <b>44. He abolished death</b> <b>45. He brought life and immortality to light</b>
2 Tim 1:10			<i>inclusio</i> with 1:8
2 Tim 2:8			17 24
Phlm 1:13			??
	Heb 4:2		<b>46. Entering God's rest</b> (Note: Whatever <i>gospel</i> the writer of Hebrews is using, is the same <i>gospel</i> that was preached to the Israelites in the wilderness wanderings.)
	Heb 4:6	preached	56
	1 Pet 1:12		<b>47. Sufferings of Christ</b> <b>48. Glories that would follow (1:11)</b>
	1 Pet 1:25		?? – If Peter is referring specifically to Isa 40:6-8, we have several more elements of the gospel
	1 Pet 4:6		?? – preached to the dead?
1 Pet 4:17			??
	Rev 10:7	declared	??
Rev 14:6			<b>49. Fear, glorify, and worship God</b> <b>50. Judgment has come</b>
	Rev 14:6		49-50



# FOR WHOM DOES HEBREWS 10:26-31 TEACH A “PUNISHMENT WORSE THAN DEATH”?

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Hebrews 10:26-31 stands as one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire NT. The thought that there is a sin one can commit that results in God’s fiery judgment as a punishment *worse than death* is sobering. In an attempt to find a satisfactory explanation, one typically retreats prematurely to his theology without doing full justice to an exegesis of the text. If one is predisposed to Reformed theology, then he will likely view those addressed in this warning passage as mere *professors* of the Christian faith who have never truly been regenerated, and their punishment is nothing less than eternity in hell. Those of an Arminian persuasion, on the other hand, take the original audience to be genuine believers who renounce their faith in Christ, and for that they must face the punishment of eternity in hell.

Ironically, both theologies agree on the end result of the punishment: eternity in hell. In this article, I will make a case that this passage is not talking about a punishment in hell, and that this passage has something very serious to say to all believers. In doing so, three crucial interpretative questions will be addressed. First, in light of the context, who are those being warned and what is their spiritual status? Second, what exactly is the nature of the sin that the author has in mind? Third, what is the punishment that awaits the person who fails to heed the warning, and when is this encountered?

## I. THE IDENTITY OF THOSE BEING WARNED

It is imperative that we first take careful notice of the context in which this passage occurs. Beginning in Hebrews 8, the author has sought to elucidate the significance of the sacrifice that the Lord Jesus Christ has made in presenting His own precious blood in the heavenly tabernacle. Indeed, this sacrifice (presented in the very presence of God Himself) has secured once and for all the foundation of the New Cove-

nant promised long ago in Jeremiah 31. Furthermore, this sacrifice has achieved what the blood of bulls and goats could never achieve, namely, perfect and absolute forgiveness of sins before God (note especially Heb 10:11-18).

Having completed his doctrinal presentation, the author of Hebrews immediately turns (beginning in 10:19) to exhort his readers to respond obediently and faithfully to the High Priestly work of Christ. Yet his concern is not merely that they *know* about Christ's sacrifice, but that they *take action* and respond appropriately. Their response must include holding fast "the confession of our hope without wavering" (10:23). The author had first mentioned their "confession" as early as Heb 3:1, where he had referred to the readers as "holy brethren." He used the adjective "holy" (*hagios*) to describe them, precisely because they had been "sanctified" (*hagiazō*) by the "leader of their salvation" (2:10-11).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, those partaking of this sanctification (at the new birth) are those whom He is not ashamed to call "brethren" (2:11). There should be no mistaking that after this careful definition of "brethren" in chapter two, subsequent references throughout the book clearly have in mind "genuine believers."<sup>2</sup> For this reason, his address to them as "brethren" at the beginning of the exhortation section in Heb 10:19 is most significant. What he has to say to them beginning in 10:19 and continuing throughout the remainder of the chapter is clearly an exhortation to believers.

That these brethren—fellow Christians—are exhorted to "hold fast [their] confession" (10:23) is all the more significant in light of the following words "our hope." What does he mean by "the confession of our hope"? For the author of Hebrews, "our hope" is the very blood of Christ that has been presented in the heavenly tabernacle on our behalf. This explains why he could write in Heb 6:19, "This hope we have as an

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<sup>1</sup> In view of the context of Hebrews 2, "sanctify" refers to *positional sanctification*. Verses 9 and 10 make reference to "the suffering of death," His "tasting death for everyone," and His "sufferings." Hence, He is their *sanctifier* by virtue of His death on the cross for them.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent and more exhaustive defense of the author's use of the term *brethren* for genuine Christians, see John Niemelä, "No More Sacrifice," Part 1 of 2, *CTSJ* 4:4 (Oct 98): 2-17.

anchor of the soul, a *hope* both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil.”<sup>3</sup> They are to *hold fast* this confession!

Note that he did not exhort them to examine themselves to ascertain whether or not they had ever made this confession. If the original audience of Hebrews were Jewish believers—as I and many other commentators maintain—a reference to their “confession” was quite *à propos*. Their previous confession that Jesus was their Messiah was simultaneously a confession that they were trusting in His shed blood on their behalf as their ultimate hope before God. They must not relinquish this all important confession, which is precisely the same point that the author had confronted the readers with in Heb 3:6, when he exhorted them to hold fast their confidence and the boast of their hope *firm until the end*.

What I have sought to argue for thus far is that the warning passage in Heb 10:26-31 is cast in a context of exhortation to true believers who needed to hold fast the confession of their hope in the blood of Christ on their behalf. The alternative, obviously, was that they might not “hold fast.” Hence, when he writes in Heb 10:26, “For if *we* sin,” he must be thinking of the very same ones he had begun to exhort in Heb 10:19 and following. (Notice that by using “we,” the author includes himself within the scope of the warning.)

Yet the following context also argues that those being warned are true believers. Immediately following the warning passage of 10:26-31, he turns their attention to the former days, “when after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings.” At some point in their past, they had suffered greatly for their faith. The author very specifically says that this took place after they had been “enlightened,” i.e., after the time of their conversion. Furthermore, it would be quite out of keeping with what we know of first-century Christianity, if these Jewish readers would have suffered for the sake of Christ had they not been genuinely converted. Indeed, even further on in the paragraph the author tells them that their real need is for *endurance*, not for believing the gospel (10:36). Thus, the following paragraph, i.e., Heb 10:32-39, supports our thesis that the context has genuine Christians in view.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Take notice in 10:20 to the reference of the veil in connection with the “new and living way.” Obviously, the author is thinking of the heavenly tabernacle, not the earthly one.

<sup>4</sup> We could also make mention of the phrase “My righteous one” in Heb 10:38 to buttress this view. In composing vv 37-38, the author draws from the LXX rendering of Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3-4 to remind them that their endurance

Lastly, we turn to consider a factor from within our paragraph of concern that substantiates that those being warned are true Christians, namely, the reference to being “sanctified” in Heb 10:29. The author’s warning is directed at those who would “regard as unclean the blood of the covenant *by which he was sanctified*” (italics added). This author has detected at least eight different views about the interpretation of this verse. For example, F. F. Bruce held that the blood was their “only hope,” i.e., the blood *alone* can sanctify his people.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Philip E. Hughes felt that the verse was only speaking of the *potential* to sanctify the person.<sup>6</sup> Yet both of these views must be ruled out by virtue of the grammar. The word *sanctified* is an aorist indicative passive of the verb *hagiazō*, which looks at an actual accomplished event, not something that was merely potential or an only hope.<sup>7</sup>

John MacArthur takes the position that the pronoun *he* refers to Christ, not the apostate—it is Christ who is sanctified (i.e., set apart).<sup>8</sup> Weeks took the position that it is the “covenant” that is sanctified by the blood (which would involve changing the translation to “by which *it* was

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should be focused on the Lord’s return—”for yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.” In so doing, the author has expressed a Messianic understanding of Hab 2:3. This is significant for the author of Hebrews, for the next verse of Habakkuk focuses on the “righteous one” who is expected to live by faith. In quoting from Hab 2:4, however, the author of Hebrews has deliberately reversed the lines. He first cites Hab 2:4b and then 2:4a, apparently to accentuate the words “my righteous one.” Ellingworth adds, “The restructuring of the verse means that the subject of *huposteilētai* is no longer ‘the vision,’ as in the LXX, by ‘my righteous one.’ This supports the author’s presupposition that his readers are all believers (and thus ‘righteous’), but that some of them are in danger of shrinking back from the life of faith” (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews; A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 555.

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the NT, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 262.

<sup>6</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 423.

<sup>7</sup> The aorist verb *hēgiasthē* in 10:29 is best understood as a *constative aorist*. An *ingressive* use of the aorist must be ruled out by virtue of *hagiazō* in the perfect tense in Heb 10:10.

<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 279.

sanctified”).<sup>9</sup> Leon Morris argues that only *initial sanctification* is involved, i.e., the apostate experienced an initial act in the sanctifying process, yet one that fell short of regeneration.<sup>10</sup> Peterson attempted to argue that the apostate had been sanctified in the sense that he was *covenantally set apart* as ‘belonging to God,’ though not actually regenerated.<sup>11</sup>

Stedman felt that the apostate only *professed* to be sanctified, i.e., he regarded himself as holy by the blood.<sup>12</sup> These latter five views, however, are all extremely doubtful in light of the way that the word for “sanctify” (*hagiazō*) is used in Hebrews. In his doctrinal argument about the sacrifice of Christ (chaps 9–10), the author instructed his readers that “by this will we have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10, italics added; cf. 2:11). A few verses later, he indicated that the benefit of Christ’s sacrifice (which brings eternal forgiveness) is for the *sanctified*: “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14). In these verses, the author uses “sanctification” in the sense of justification, not as progressive conformity to the image of Christ, and most commentators understand it that way in light of the context of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Hence, F. F. Bruce concludes,

The sanctification which his people receive in consequence is their inward cleansing from sin and their being made fit for the presence of God, so that henceforth they can offer him acceptable worship. It is a sanctification which has taken place once for all; in this sense it is as unrepeatable as the sacrifice which effects it.<sup>13</sup>

The reference, therefore, in Heb 10:29 to having been “sanctified” clearly has in mind what was just said earlier in this same chapter. It is *believers* who have been sanctified by Christ’s perfect atoning sacrifice. It is not Christ who is sanctified. It is not the covenant which is sanctified! Furthermore, the verse says nothing about a *potential* of being

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<sup>9</sup> N. Weeks, “Admonition and Error in Hebrews,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1976), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 107.

<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Peterson, “Apostasy,” *Presbyterion* 19 (Spr 1993), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews*, The IVP NT Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 112.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, 243.

sanctified or of being *covenantally set apart*. The contextual use of *hagi-azō* in this chapter warrants against any such suggestion.

Finally, I would agree with others (e.g., McKnight) who have pointed out that those in danger in Heb 10:26-31 are one and the same as those in Hebrews 6.<sup>14</sup> The characteristics of those in view in Heb 6:4-5 (those whom he hopes will move on to maturity) are convincingly *Christian*, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

Taking the context before and after Heb 10:26-31 into consideration as well as the *clue* in 10:29 that the potential apostate has been “sanctified,” those in danger of judgment in this passage are clearly true regenerate Christians. This is the position not only held by proponents of the Free Grace movement, but that of many notable commentators.<sup>16</sup> We must now seek to understand the nature of the sin that they are in danger of committing.

<sup>14</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992), 45-48.

<sup>15</sup> J. Paul Tanner, “‘But If It Yields Thorns and Thistles’: An Exposition of Hebrews 5:11–6:12,” *JOTGES* 14:26 (Spring 2001): 19-42. Cf. Randall C. Gleason, “The OT Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8,” *BibSac* 155 (Jan-Mar 1998): 62-91.

<sup>16</sup> Representatives of this position from the Free Grace perspective include Zane Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 805; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 463; Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, “The Danger of Willful Sin in Hebrews 10:26-39; Part 4 of The Warning Passages in Hebrews,” *BibSac* 145:580 (Oct-Dec 1988), 414; and Robert Wilkin, “A Punishment Worse Than Death (Hebrews 10:26-31),” *The Grace Evangelical Society News* 7:6 (Sep-Oct 1992), 2-3.

Other notable commentators who take the original audience to be regenerate Christians include R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 360; Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 331; I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969), 148; William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentaries, 2 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1991), 2:294; J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1992), 177; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 540; and Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages,” 38.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE SIN

Verse 26, the opening verse of the paragraph, raises the issue that there is some type of sin (or sins) that would warrant God's punishment. The question needs to be addressed as to whether the author is thinking of a particular type of sin or (in a more general sense) of *continuance* in sin. The latter is implied by many translations. The *NIV*, for instance, implies that the issue is one of continuance in a lifestyle of sin: "If we deliberately *keep on sinning*" (italics added). The words "keep on" have been added by the translators to reflect their understanding of the present participle meaning "to sin" (*hamartanontōn*), though the grammar certainly does not demand *persistent* action.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar construction in Heb 10:1, we have the conjunction "for" (*gar*) with a present tense circumstantial participle (though "causal") and followed later in the sentence by a present tense main verb. Yet the participle does not express persistent action, but mere statement of fact: "For the Law, *since it has* [not *keeps on having*] only a shadow...can never make perfect" (italics added).<sup>18</sup> There are certain constructions in which a present tense verb might be used to reflect persistent action, but that has to be carefully decided on the basis of context.

Since the grammar alone does not determine whether the author has in mind *a continual state of sinning* or the fact that a certain sin is done, we must look closely at the context to determine his point. The context, I believe, suggests that the author is thinking of a particular sin rather than

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<sup>17</sup> One would do well to read the comments about the verbal use of the participle in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 614-16. I would add, on the basis of my examination, that the present tense participle when used with a present tense main verb, far more often means *mere statement of fact* and rarely persistent action. In most cases where a present tense verb *could* be taken in the sense of persistent action, it could just as well be taken in the sense of mere acknowledgment of fact. For instance, we have a present participle (*tous hamartanontas*) in 1 Tim 5:20, but the translations handle this differently. The *NASB* translates "Those who *continue in sin*, rebuke in the presence of all," whereas the *NIV* translates "Those who *sin* are to be rebuked publicly" (italics added).

<sup>18</sup> Another similar situation involving a present tense circumstantial participle arises in Heb 4:14, yet once again the point is not *persistence* of action but mere acknowledgment of fact: "*Since therefore we have* (*echontes*—present participle) a great high priest...*let us hold fast* (*kratōmen*—present subjunctive) the confession" (italics added).

a lifestyle in which one *continues* to sin. The first clue stems from the preceding paragraph, in which the author had just exhorted his readers to “hold fast their confession of hope without wavering.” The fact that he had expressed the same concern earlier in the book underscores the significance of this action (cf. 3:6; 4:14). He was obviously concerned that they might abandon their confession, and the fact that he reiterates this again in chapter 10 reflects that this was uppermost in his thinking.

A more significant clue is to be found in the author’s choice to use the adverb *hekousiōs*, translated “deliberately” or “willingly.” Several commentators have pointed out that Heb 10:26 may have some relationship with the OT concept of “intentional sin” in Num 15:22-31, although the lexical connections with this passage are usually overlooked. The adverb *hekousiōs* does suggest a connection.

The passage in Numbers 15 is concerned with transgression of the Mosaic Law. If the violation was not intentional (they were unaware that the Law was being violated), then an acknowledgment along with an appropriate sacrifice was to be made.<sup>19</sup> This could happen at either the individual level or community level. Num 15:22-26 describes the community situation, whereas Num 15:27-31 describes the individual situation. Furthermore, the individual situation is divided into two parts: vv 27-29 prescribe what to do when the sin is unintentional, and vv 30-31 handle the case where the violation of the Law was done intentionally or *willfully* (with full knowledge and purposeful transgression). The latter was termed sin “of a high hand” (Heb *bēyād rāmāh*).<sup>20</sup>

The LXX translators rendered the phrase “by a high hand” with the Greek words *en cheiri huperēphanias*, meaning “by an arrogant or defiant hand.” Verse 30 goes on to say that in doing so, “he has *reviled* the

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<sup>19</sup> Harrison notes, “These transgressions could include actions undertaken in ignorance of Levitical law, inadvertent neglect or violation of Tabernacle or priestly protocol, or some other social misdemeanor that, although unintentional in nature, had the effect of violating the sanctity of the whole community of priests. Because the transgression was not deliberate, no specific moral guilt was attached to it” (R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1990], 225).

<sup>20</sup> Ashley points out that not all intentional sin was considered sin “of a high hand.” The latter “differs from the intentional sin described in Lev. 5:20-26 (Eng. 6:1-7) for which a reparation offering may be made, ‘when the offender feels guilty’ (5:23, 26)” (Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 288).



LORD.” Consequently, that one is to be “cut off” from the people, i.e., to be put to death.<sup>21</sup> The point is, in contrast to the preceding situations, the violator had no recourse to a sacrifice but was left with the severe alternative of judgment by capital punishment.

If the author of Hebrews has this situation in mind, that would do a lot to explain Heb 10:26. That he probably does have Num 15:22-31 in mind is borne out by his deliberate use of the words *hekousiōs* and *hamartanō* to describe the concept “to sin intentionally.”<sup>22</sup> Recognition of the lexical play upon Num 15:22-31 is significant to our exegesis of Heb 10:26. The issue in Numbers 15 was not *persistence in sin* but a certain kind of sin that was so serious as to warrant death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a *particular kind of sin*—one that would be for the New Covenant believer what “sin of a high hand” had been to the Old Covenant believer. Furthermore, when the author of Hebrews says “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,” he still has the Numbers 15 passage in mind. When one committed “sin of a high hand,” he had to realize that he had crossed the point of no return—there was no sacrifice available that could undo the damage. He could only expect judgment in the form of death. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is thinking of a most serious sin in which the believer will have crossed the point of no return—where he can only expect God’s severe judgment. There is a certain irony in all this, however, for the author of Hebrews had stated only a few verses earlier that Christ had “offered one sacrifice for sins

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<sup>21</sup> For the idea of the Hebrew verb *kārat* meaning “put to death,” see Exod 31:14 (cf. *BDB* 504b 1b). The LXX translators rendered *kārat* in v 30 by *exsolethreuthēsetai* (from *exsolethreuō*), meaning “to be utterly destroyed.”

<sup>22</sup> Although this phrase is not used in the Numbers 15 passage, the antithetical expression “to sin unintentionally” does employ the lexical antonym of *hekousiōs*, namely *aekousios*. The presence of *aekousios* in Num 15:22-31 takes on even greater significance when it is observed that the word occurs four times in vv 24-29, and a verb form of *akousiazō* occurs in v 28. In fact, the idea “to sin unintentionally” is expressed in v 27 by the Greek phrase *hamartē akousiōs* (with the aorist subj. active of *hamartanō*). Thus, if Moses uses *aekousios* and *hamartanō* to describe the concept of “sinning unintentionally,” it would be logically deduced that the opposite idea (“to sin intentionally”) would be expressed by *hekousiōs* and *hamartanō*—which is exactly what the author of Hebrews has done. We should also note that the author of Hebrews employs the word “sacrifice” (*thusia*) along with the phrase “for sins” (*peri hamartiōn*), both of which occur in Num 15:24.

for all time” (10:12).<sup>23</sup> How sad it would be that a believer would come to the point of abandoning his confidence in Christ (and His once and for all sacrifice for sins), only to discover that his “willful sin” would leave him no alternative sacrifice to deter God’s judgment.

The preceding discussion leads us to the conclusion that in the case of Heb 10:26, a better translation than “If we deliberately *keep on sinning*” would be the translation “For if we *sin willfully* after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” which is precisely what the *NKJV* has done. The latter puts the stress on the doing of a certain type of sin rather than the continual doing of sin in general. What makes this sin in Heb 10:26 so tragic is that it is done “after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” Some have thought this phrase only means that the guilty one had *some enlightenment*—some understanding of the gospel—but decided in the final analysis to reject Christ’s atoning work (and thus never to have entered into His salvation).<sup>24</sup> However, the words “the knowledge of the truth” are found at least four times in the Pastoral Epistles and are consistently used of authentic Christian experience.<sup>25</sup> In 1 Tim 2:4, for instance, Paul refers to God our Savior “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Lane concludes that this is a technical expression,

This technical expression refers to the acceptance of life in response to the preaching of the gospel... The phrase thus describes a dynamic assimilation of the truth of the gospel. It is an equivalent expression for the solemn description of authentic Christian experience in 6:4-5.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In Heb 10:26, the author of Hebrews uses the Greek phrase *peri hamartion...thusia* to express a “sacrifice for sins,” whereas in Heb 10:12, Christ’s sacrifice is *huper hamartion...thusian*. Although there is no apparent significant difference in meaning (note 1 Pet 3:18), he may have been influenced by the Numbers 15 passage which uses *peri hamartias* (three times!—vv 24, 25 and 27). Cf. Heb 5:3.

<sup>24</sup> R. Stedman, *Hebrews*, 110; and P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 419.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7; and Titus 1:1.

<sup>26</sup> Lane, *Hebrews*, 2:292. Schmitz concurs, “The knowledge of God’s truth is of equal importance with experiential profession of the Lord, and finally pushes it into the background. Hence, conversion to the Christian faith can be described almost technically as coming to a knowledge (*epignōsis*) of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 3:7; cf. Heb. 10:26; 1 Tim. 5:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 1:1; 2 Pet.

The author's reference in Heb 10:32 to their sufferings after "having been enlightened" would support Lane's conclusion. Certainly the sin in view in Heb 10:26 is one involving authentic Christians, not those who had merely professed to have believed at some point in the past. The question now remains as to what is in store for rebellious Christians who commit this New Covenant type of "willful sin."

### III. THE PUNISHMENT IN STORE FOR THE NEW COVENANT REBELS

In Heb 10:26, the author has brought to the attention of his Hebrew Christian audience that there is a New Covenant counterpart to the Old Covenant "willful sin." This sin amounts to a decisive and final repudiation of their faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ in order to return to the Old Covenant sacrificial system. Just as the wilderness generation utterly rebelled at Kadesh Barnea and God basically said, "Enough is enough," a similar situation can occur for those under the New Covenant. This is precisely why the author of Hebrews draws that parallel in chapters 3-4. There is a point where God's judgment will surely fall on those who rebel.

#### A. THE PUNISHMENT IS NOT HELL

In discussing this judgment, we must remember that one's eternal destiny is sealed forever the moment he or she places faith in Jesus Christ. Here we would do well to remember such verses as Rom 8:29-30 and John 10:28. Though faith in Christ and His work on the cross protects the child of God from eternal judgment in hell, it does not guarantee that all judgment will be averted. Christ's perfect sacrifice does not avert the judgment for "willful sin" any more than His sacrifice would avert God's chastisement upon a believer who had committed adultery or had drunk of the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27-30). The NT is clear that believers can (and do) commit sin that results in God's judgment and discipline, though they have God's eternal forgiveness of such sin through Christ's sacrifice on their behalf.

We must be careful not to over-read Heb 10:26b. Commensurate with Num 15:22-31, the author is simply saying that once such a serious sin is committed (abandoning their confession), there is no sacrifice they

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2:21)" (Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of NT Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], s.v. "knowledge," by E. D. Schmitz).

can offer that will avert God's judgment.<sup>27</sup> He is making them aware that they will certainly face some form of judgment from God—though he does not say precisely what that judgment will be. For the Old Covenant community, the judgment was of a temporal nature—capital punishment—not eternal punishment in hell, and the recognition of this fact should guide us in drawing the appropriate parallel.

Hebrews 10:27 underscores the point that they could expect a very severe judgment from God. In fact, he labels it “a terrifying expectation of judgment.” The second half of the verse is an allusion to Isa 26:11, and the use of the word “fire” from that verse has suggested to some that eternal torment in hell must be in view.<sup>28</sup> Stedman, for instance, writes, “it is to experience after death the eternal judgment of raging fire.”<sup>29</sup> Yet such a conclusion is unwarranted. Since the author customarily thinks with OT events in mind, it should not be thought surprising that he might be doing so here. Thus we should consider more carefully how the metaphor of fire is used in the OT.

Fire is associated with judgment in the OT in other ways than hell. For instance, we have the case of Nadab and Abihu (Levitical priests) in Lev 10:1-3 who dishonored the LORD by using the firepans in an inap-

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<sup>27</sup> For the author of Hebrews, the sin of “abandoning one's confession” must be a very hardened state and not a mere momentary denouncing of Christ. Even Peter denied the Lord three times, yet he was forgiven and went on to become one of the great Apostles of the first century. Westcott concluded about the apostate of Hebrews 10, “His conduct shews that he has already abandoned his faith, and that too after he had made trial of its blessings. His decision, expressed in deed, is regarded as complete and final” (330).

<sup>28</sup> Six of the final seven words from Heb 10:27 are found in the LXX translation of Isa 26:11. Both *edetai* and *esthiein* are forms of the verb *esthiō*. The word *zēlos* in Heb 10:27 seems to have been inserted under the influence of the preceding line in Isa 26:11. Hebrews 10:27 adds the word *mellontos*, a word often used in Hebrews with eschatological overtones (note Heb 1:14; 2:5; 6:5; 10:1; 13:14). There could also be an influence of Isa 26:21, “The LORD is *about to come out* from His place” (understanding the Heb participle *yōs*□ē as “future instance”; so *NASB*).

<sup>29</sup> R. Stedman, 113. Similarly, Hughes says, “his end is perdition” (420). Westcott is vague, but calls it “condemnation” and later “fatal punishment” (329). The inference about “enemies” (*hupenantious*) at the end of v 27 has also been used to argue that those judged are “God's enemies,” thus deserving hell (Morris, 107). Ellingworth, who understands the admonition as being to Christians, assumes that v 27 has in mind “final judgment” (534).

propriate way, such that “fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them.” In another incident, Korah (a Levitical priest) along with Dathan and Abiram and 250 leading men of Israel (the latter being Levites also; Num 16:8-10) challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). The issue apparently was jealousy of the exalted positions that Moses and his brother Aaron had obtained (both of whom were descended from Levi). Though only Aaron and his descendants could be high priests, the “rebels” themselves were not without privilege—they served as Levitical priests at the tabernacle. As a result, the LORD brought judgment upon those who participated in Korah’s rebellion (since their challenge was really a rebellion against the leadership structure that God Himself had ordained). The ground swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, while “fire came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men” (Num 16:35).

If the original context of Isa 26:11 does not have “hell” in view, it is doubtful that the author of Hebrews is thinking of such a punishment. Indeed, the context of Isa 26:11 is appropriate, since that verse paints a contrast between those who are faithful and those who act wickedly among Israel. Of greater significance, however, is the eschatological setting in which this chapter occurs. Chapters 24–27 of Isaiah are a depiction of the coming judgment of God in the “day of the Lord” which is followed by kingdom blessing.<sup>30</sup> The unit begins with the announcement that God will enact a universal judgment upon the earth that has transgressed his commandments (and this theme pervades the whole unit):

Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface, and scatters its inhabitants... The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the LORD has spoken this word (Isa 24:1, 3).

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<sup>30</sup> Though the phrase “the day of the LORD” is not used in Isaiah 24–27, the abbreviated form “in that day” occurs seven times (24:21; 25:9; 26:1; 27:1, 2, 12, 13). Announcement had been made in Isa 13:9 that “the day of the LORD is coming” (cf. 13:6). This would be “the day of His burning anger” (13:13) in which He would “punish the world for its evil” (13:11). The judgment of this “day” is described in Isaiah 24–27. References to the cosmic disturbances in Isa 24:23 confirm the eschatological setting of this time (cf. Joel 2:10; 2:31; 3:15; Ezek 32:27; Matt 24:29; Luke 21:25; and Rev 6:12; 8:12).

So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth (24:21).

For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity (26:21).

God's judgment at this time is likened to a fire. Isaiah 24:6 states, "the inhabitants of the earth are *burned*, and few men are left." Though this will be a terrible time of judgment for the inhabitants of the world, it will be good news for the righteous, since the judgment will be quickly followed by kingdom blessings. The Messianic kingdom (which had been described earlier in Isa 2:1-4; 11:1-10) results from this universal day of judgment. As Isa 24:23 declares, "The LORD of hosts *will reign* on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders."

In 25:6-9, the kingdom is likened unto a "lavish banquet." God's judgment of the wicked, His deliverance of His afflicted ones (note 25:3-5), and the inauguration of the kingdom in which the LORD personally reigns (cf. 32:1; 33:17) are depicted as the "eschatological salvation" for the righteous. They respond, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in *His salvation*" (25:9, italics added).<sup>31</sup>

The opening of chapter 26 clarifies that the initiation of the kingdom is a millennial event: "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah." This also suggests that the call to rejoice in 25:9 primarily has in mind believing Jews in the aftermath of the Great Tribulation, which would make the "song" of 26:1ff. particularly relevant to Jewish readers and thus quite appropriate for the author of Hebrews.

This "kingdom song" of the righteous is even more relevant to the Book of Hebrews when we observe that it begins with rejoicing that the righteous and faithful are given the privilege to enter the "strong city"—undoubtedly Jerusalem in this context (24:23; 27:13). The song of Isaiah 26 begins by stating: "We have a strong city...Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful" (26:1-2). The author of Hebrews held out the eschatological heavenly Jerusalem as the

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<sup>31</sup> Since the author of Hebrews thinks of "salvation" in primarily eschatological terms, this section of Isaiah would be particularly appropriate to his case (note Heb 1:14; 2:3 with 2:5; and especially 9:28). In fact, his reference in Heb 9:28 to "those who eagerly await him" may have in mind Isa 25:9 (cf. 26:8).

ultimate hope of New Covenant believers: “For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come” (13:14; cf. 11:16; 12:22).

Yet the song goes on to lament that though the inhabitants of the world learn about God’s righteousness when they are made to experience His judgments (in the context, the “day of the Lord”), the wicked “in the land of uprightness” (i.e., Israel) have not learned righteousness” (Isa 26:9-10). The LXX translation for the end of v 10 differs from the Hebrew text: “Let the ungodly one be taken away, that he might not behold the glory of the Lord.”<sup>32</sup> Then in Isa 26:11 (following the LXX text), the prophet declares, “O Lord, Your arm is raised high (i.e., posed to strike in judgment), but they do not see it. But when they perceive this, they shall be ashamed. The zeal (of God) shall seize this ignorant people, and then fire shall devour the adversaries.”<sup>33</sup>

In both the Hebrew text as well as the LXX translation, the prophet seems to have in mind the wicked among Israel who fall under God’s judgment at the time of the “day of the Lord.” They are in contrast to those in the nation who are trusting in the Lord (26:3-4) and waiting eagerly for Him (26:8). The “fire” depicts God’s judgment against His covenant people (recall 24:6; cf. 5:24-25; 9:19; 29:6; 33:14).<sup>34</sup> The fire is a threat to the unrighteous within the nation, but not to the righteous. Later Isaiah states, “Sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling has seized the godless. Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning? He who walks righteously, and speaks with sincerity” (33:14-15).

In these passages in Isaiah, the fiery judgment does not speak of eternal punishment in hell but rather of the eschatological judgment from God that will engulf the whole world and even Israel in particular. How the author of Hebrews envisioned this in relation to his readers is not altogether clear. At the very least, however, we could conclude this: if God does not withhold his awesome judgment against His own covenant

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<sup>32</sup> Failure to see the “glory” (*doxsan*) of the Lord in this verse should be contrasted with those before whom the Lord is glorified (*doxasthēsetai*) when He comes to reign (Isa 24:23). The MT, however, uses two different words (*gē’ūt* in 26:10 vs. *kābôd* in 24:23).

<sup>33</sup> On the thought of God’s uplifted arm in judgment, see Isa 5:25; 9:21; 30:30.

<sup>34</sup> For other contexts in which “fire” (*pur*) and “zeal” (*zēlos*) are used in combination, see Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Ps 79:5 (LXX = 78:5).

people as depicted in Isaiah 24–27, there is no reason to think He would spare those who forsook the New Covenant. That is, if rebellious Jews of the Tribulation will certainly receive God’s judgment, so will those who rebel in the days when the author of Hebrews writes. The allusion to Isa 26:11 would be particularly meaningful to the readers who were of Jewish descent and who should have their hopes set upon the future coming of Messiah to inaugurate His kingdom and the eschatological Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, the punishment envisioned by Heb 10:27 must be interpreted in light of both the context of Hebrews as a whole and the eschatological judgment depicted in Isaiah 24–27. In preparation for kingdom blessing, God will first bring about a fiery judgment that will fall on all the wicked of the world and which will not even spare the rebels within Israel. We must underscore the fact that the “fires of hell” are clearly not in view. At all points within Israel’s broad history, those who turn away in unbelief and rebel against the covenant are in jeopardy of God’s judgment. This was true at Kadesh Barnea in the past, it was true for the majority of Jews in Jesus’ generation, and it will also prove true in the eventual “day of the Lord.”

## B. CONTEXTUAL CLUES CONCERNING THE TIME AND NATURE OF THE JUDGMENT

In Heb 10:28–29, the author refers to the OT practice whereby certain people in the covenant community would be put to death for offenses like idolatry and murder. By analogy, he suggests that a New Covenant believer who abandons his confession of faith in Jesus deserves a “worse (or more severe) punishment” (*cheironos timōrias*). Temporal punishment (perhaps a premature death) could be in his mind, as sometimes happened to certain erring Christians in the NT (Acts 5:1–

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<sup>35</sup> There are numerous *conceptual* parallels between chapters 24–27 of Isaiah and the Book of Hebrews that may have prompted the author of Hebrews to utilize Isa 26:11. For example, both have an expectation of the Lord coming to reign and establish His kingdom (note Isa 24:23). Both refer to those who wait for the Lord’s salvation (*sōtēria*), though the terms for “waiting” are different in the Greek (Isa 25:9; Heb 9:28—the term for waiting used by the author of Hebrews [*apekdechomai*] is not found in the LXX). Finally, both refer to “confessing” His name (Isa 26:13; Heb 10:23; 13:15). The author of Hebrews uses the word *homologeō*, a term rarely used in the OT prophets and never by the translators of Isaiah. Isaiah, instead, has *onomazō*.



11; 1 Cor 11:28-31; and 1 John 5:16). Nevertheless, the context seems to demand more, and even suggests that some kind of eschatological judgment may be in store (yet something other than hell).

In Heb 10:25 (the very verse that precedes our paragraph of study), the author had exhorted the readers to encourage one another, “and all the more as you see the day approaching.” The conjunction “for” (*gar*) linking v 26 with the preceding paragraph does suggest a logical connection. What did the author have in mind when he spoke of “the day”? Pentecost takes the position that the approaching “day” refers to God’s temporal judgment upon the first century generation of Jews at the hands of the Roman general Titus in AD 70.<sup>36</sup> This would then be a fulfillment of the judgment that had been announced by Christ on unbelieving Israel who had rejected Him as Messiah (see Matt 23:37–24:2). The problem with this interpretation is that there are clues from the broader context that would associate “the day” with the Second Coming of Christ rather than with an event in the first century.

Most likely “the day” has a connection with the Second Coming. In Heb 9:28, the author had just reminded the readers that Christ would appear a second time. This time it would not be to bear sins (as He had done in His first advent), but to bring “salvation” (*sōtēria*) for those who eagerly awaited Him, i.e., an eschatological salvation-deliverance. This would include the formal establishment of the Messianic kingdom and all things being made subject to Christ that had been spoken of in chapters 1–2. In this light, “the day” of Heb 10:25 probably refers to the eschatological “day of the Lord” often mentioned in Scripture. Although a full-blown study of the “day of the Lord” is beyond the scope of this paper, several NT passages suggest that this includes the period of the Great Tribulation and even certain judgments beyond the Second Coming event—basically all that would be needed to execute God’s wrath on a sinful world that has rejected Him and to prepare the world for the messianic kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the following context to Heb 10:26-31 points in the direction that the apostates may be in store for a punishment in connection with “the day of the Lord.” In Heb 10:35-36, the author speaks about the time when rewards will be dispensed and about those who endure faith-

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<sup>36</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Note especially 1 Thess 5:1-11; 2 Thess 2:2-3; 2 Pet 3:11-13; and Rev 6:16-17.

fully so as to receive “the promise.” This is connected with the Second Coming, because in Heb 10:37 he states, “For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.”<sup>38</sup> Although the Second Coming will be good news for most believers, there will be some for whom this will not be so. The Apostle John, for instance, wrote, “And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 John 2:28; cf. 4:17).

The reference to the fact that the Lord will not be delayed in His “coming” (Heb 10:37) together with the idea that some who have done the will of God will be rewarded and receive “the promise” (10:35-36) may suggest that the “worse punishment” in store for the apostates is a negative experience at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The coming “day of the Lord” would not only mean the pouring out of the King’s wrath in the Great Tribulation, but also the time when believers have to appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10; Rom 14:10-12).<sup>39</sup> The emphasis of this event is that the Lord examines each believer for the purpose of determining his or her appropriate reward.

For those who “continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel,” they will be presented before Him “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (Col 1:22-23). For others not abiding in Him, however, they will shrink back in shame at His coming (1 John 2:28).<sup>40</sup> The Bible does not present a clear picture

<sup>38</sup> Heb 10:37 is not a strict quotation, but consists of an allusion to Isa 26:20 combined with a slightly reworked quotation from the LXX of Hab 2:3.

<sup>39</sup> From my studies in the Book of Revelation, I have concluded that the “Judgment Seat of Christ” takes place *after* the Second Coming rather than after a pretribulational rapture of the church, as some have taught. Notice how at the end of Revelation the Lord declares, “Behold, I am *coming quickly*, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12, italics mine).

In the context of Revelation, the mention of His “coming” must mean the Second Coming that was described in chapter 19. I would also point out that Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 4:5 most naturally implies a time of examination after the Second Coming. Those wishing to pursue this further should consult my article, “The ‘Marriage Supper of the Lamb’ in Rev 19:6-10; Implications for the Judgment Seat of Christ,” *Trinity Journal* 26:1 (Spring 2005): 47-68.

<sup>40</sup> John had defined what he meant by “abiding in Him” in 1 John 2:6: “the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He

of what the implications will be in regard to our “bad deeds,” but it does suggest that there will be some negative consequences.

The promise in John 5:24 that those who believe in Christ will not come into judgment probably means that the Lord will not take our sins into account in regard to determining our eternal destiny. Believers are assured of forgiveness of sins based on the work of Christ on the cross (Col 2:13-14). Nevertheless, all that we have done—“whether good or bad”—will be evident at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). Since our sins were forgiven by His blood, this cannot affect our eternal destiny.

However, our sins will obviously be brought up, because Paul declares in 1 Cor 4:5 that the Lord will “both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts.” He goes on to say, “Then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” The evil that we have done will factor in to the praise that the Lord gives us. Sin that others never knew about (things done “in the darkness”) and things done with impure motives will detrimentally affect what praise we receive. Furthermore, our “work” (i.e., our service for Christ) will be examined.

The mention of “the day” in 1 Cor 3:13 seems rather significant to the context of Hebrews 10: “each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.” Our “work” that survives the fire will be rewarded (3:14). On the other hand, “if any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:15). On the basis of this verse, a “loss” will be suffered for work that was not approved by the Lord. To some extent then, we will all suffer some loss of praise and loss of reward.

Finally, I would suggest that the topic of a negative experience at the Judgment Seat of Christ should be connected to the issue that the author of Hebrews had already raised earlier in the book, namely, the fear that some might not “enter God’s rest” (Heb 4:1-3). Out of this concern, the author exhorted his readers, “Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11). This, then, is the most likely eschatological

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walked.” Cf. 1 John 2:10, in which he particularly emphasized the matter of loving one’s brother.

judgment that the author envisions them of being in danger of in Heb 10:26-31...failing to enter God's rest.

If entering God's Sabbath rest to come involves exercising dominion in the messianic kingdom and ruling with Christ, then the failure to "enter" would be the failure to obtain this as one's proper inheritance.<sup>41</sup> This would be a punishment worse than temporal death, because it would be an eternal consequence that one could never reverse. The disobedient rebellious Christian who "sins willfully" will be a subject of the kingdom, but he will have forfeited the precious inheritance he could have had.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Book of Hebrews contains a number of "warning passages" inserted sporadically throughout. In the first of these warnings in Heb 2:1-4, the author had mildly reprimanded his readers that they needed to pay much closer attention to what God had revealed through the Son, lest they drift away from it. Each of these warning passages is directed to true regenerate Christians, whom he calls "brethren." It is not merely the use of this term alone that argues for their identity as believers. As I have demonstrated in this article, both the preceding and following contexts to Heb 10:26-31, as well as the reference to their being *sanctified* by the blood that Christ shed in making the New Covenant, argue for their being regenerate Christians.

With the warning in Heb 10:26-31, the author sounds a more serious note that continual "drifting," unbelief, and refusal to move on in maturity (concerns that surfaced in chaps 2-6), could eventually lead them to the point of committing a sin that would result in God's severe punishment. Hence, Heb 10:26 is not addressing the issue of persistence in a lifestyle of sin of a general nature (as some translations imply). Rather, the author uses terminology that echoes what was known as "willful sin" in Numbers 15. His point is that abandonment of their confession in Christ (not holding fast the confession of their hope in His shed blood) is a sin tantamount to committing what had been known as "willful sin" under the Old Covenant. Although they had not gone so far as to actually commit such a treasonous sin yet, they were dangerously close.

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<sup>41</sup> This view of God's "rest" will be further developed and explained in my commentary on Hebrews in the GES *Grace New Testament Commentary* (forthcoming).

Under the Old Covenant, “willful sin” resulted in punishment by physical death, and there was no sacrifice that one could resort to that would deter God’s punishment. For these Hebrew Christians under the New Covenant to decisively abandon their confession of Christ and His blood would (appropriately) demand a *punishment worse than death*. The punishment the author has in mind is not loss of eternal salvation whereby they would go to hell. Rather, it is a punishment linked to “the day of the Lord,” and the immediate context of the passage suggests that it would have something to do with the time of rewards, namely, the Judgment Seat of Christ. Hence, it is a punishment worse than physical death, because it carries eternal consequences.

The more remote context of the book further suggests that the punishment would be the failure to “enter His rest,” a concept first introduced in Hebrews 4, and which probably means that they would jeopardize their inheritance in Messiah’s kingdom (“the world to come”) and be denied the opportunity to reign with Christ. Despite this stern warning, the author goes on to remind them that by not throwing away their confidence (in Christ’s blood), they still have the opportunity to gain a “great reward.” The latter reflects what God truly desires for each believer to receive and which He will be faithful to grant to all those who endure in a faith like unto that immortalized in Hebrews 11.



# JUSTIFICATION: A NEW COVENANT BLESSING

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In a previous article, it was shown that the prophecy in Jeremiah 31 about the New Covenant involved a promise of *regeneration*.<sup>1</sup> This article will consider the question of whether it also entailed a guarantee of *justification*. After all, as seen in the previous article, Paul considered himself a minister of the New Covenant. Again, I quote his words in 2 Cor 3:5-6:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Of course, the doctrine of justification by faith was a crucial part of the Pauline gospel. The question being raised is this: Did Paul think of justification by faith as a benefit included in the promises made in the New Covenant?

The solution to this question is not quite as obvious as the issue discussed in the previous article. It is plain that the New Covenant anticipated regeneration, but did it also anticipate justification?

## II. FORGIVENESS UNDER THE NEW COVENANT

There is no question that forgiveness is one of the New Covenant benefits. For this we have the authority of the book of Hebrews, which states in 10:15-18:

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<sup>1</sup> See Zane C. Hodges, "Regeneration: A New Covenant Blessing," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Fall 2005): 43-49.

And the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," then He adds, "Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more." Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.

The last words of this quotation are not from Jeremiah but are the words of the writer of Hebrews. Notice his comment, "Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin." The word remission here, of course, is the Greek noun *aphēsis* which is the standard NT noun for forgiveness.

Clearly the author of Hebrews understands the New Covenant words, "their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more," as guaranteeing the forgiveness of sins.

### III. FORGIVENESS AND JUSTIFICATION COMPARED

For anyone who sees no distinction between justification and the forgiveness of sins, then the problem being discussed is already solved. If they are interchangeable terms, then when one is promised so is the other.

However, there is a critical difficulty with this approach. The identification of forgiveness with justification is invalid. I do not believe that the NT offers any evidence that they should be equated, as though they were interchangeable terms. In fact, in Acts 13, they seem to be distinguished.

In that chapter, in Paul's speech in the synagogue of Antioch of Psidia, Paul speaks these words in vv 38-39:

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; *and* by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.

Notice the word *and*. Paul clearly appears to distinguish the two benefits. To paraphrase his words, He seems to be saying: "I am preaching forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, *and* every believer in Him is also justified." There is no suggestion of equivalence here.

To forestall a question, I am aware that the *and* is not found in the critical editions of the Greek NT. Of course, it *is* found in the Majority



Text. But the absence of the *and* in no way invalidates my argument. Instead it results in two separate sentences. This is illustrated by the NIV translation of these vv as follows:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

Even under this translation, we have no real grounds for equating these two benefits of faith in Christ. As a matter of fact, the conclusion that they are distinct is strengthened by the fact that Paul and Peter are paralleled in the narrative of the book of Acts. As far as I know, this Lucan technique was first noticed as far back as the work of R. B. Rackham in the early 1900's. In the Lucan parallels observed by Rackham, Peter's premier speech in Acts 2:14-39 has its counterpart in Paul's premier speech in Acts 13:16-41. Close study of the two speeches reveals both similarities and differences.

Both speeches have in common an offer of the forgiveness of sins (2:38 and 13:38). But only the Pauline speech contains a reference to justification by faith. (If anyone thinks this is accidental, I have a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you.) Obviously, Luke was well aware of Paul's deep interest in this doctrine, whereas Peter never mentions it in Acts or in his two epistles. Thus, in the book of Acts, the only reference to justification is right here (13:39), and it is on the lips of Paul. That is both historically and psychologically accurate.

Of course, this is not to say that Peter did not know the doctrine. That would be absurd. Rather, Luke's assignment of this doctrine to Paul's mouth, but not Peter's, reinforces the inference that has already been made. Luke knew that this doctrine was profoundly important for Paul, and Luke knew it was not identical with the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins.

What then is the difference between these doctrines? This can be stated very simply. Forgiveness is an interpersonal issue. In ordinary life it deals with relationships between people. In religious matters, it deals with man's personal relationship with God. By contrast, justification in Pauline thought is a judicial issue. According to the American Heritage

Dictionary there are four fundamental definitions for the word “judicial,” plus a theological definition.

1. Of, pertaining to, or proper to courts of law or the administration of justice.
2. Decreed by or proceeding from a court of justice.
3. Belonging or appropriate to the office of a judge.
4. Characterized by, or expressing judgment.
5. *Theol.* Proceeding from a divine judgment.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the Pauline concept of justification is judicial in all of these senses. For Paul it is basically a term related to the courtroom, and the act of justifying someone is the function of a Judge (that is, of God) and expresses a divine pronouncement, or judgment, about the believer in Jesus Christ. That judgment is that the Judge recognizes no charge at all against the believer.

This conception appears very clearly in Rom 8:33-34a: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?” In justification, therefore, God pronounces the believer perfectly righteous and, as a consequence, he is beyond any and every charge before God’s Judgment Seat.

To summarize, forgiveness removes the personal barrier of sin between God and the believer. Justification frees the believer from all accountability in the final judgment.

As we all know, there is a myth abroad that holds that every human being will stand before God in the final judgment. It is a myth that still appears in commentaries. But it is a fiction since it contradicts the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here are His words in a more accurate form than what we find in our English Bibles:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and does not come into judgment, but is passed from death into life (John 5:24).

For God did not send His Son into the world *to judge* the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him *is not judged*; but he who does not be-

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<sup>3</sup> Dell; 4th edition (June 26, 2001).

lieve *has already been judged*, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:17-18).

From these statements it is clear that final judgment pertains only to the unregenerate. From Revelation we learn that the regenerate have already been raised and glorified a thousand years before the final judgment at the Great White Throne.

Someone may say, however: "But the saved are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ." In a sense, yes. However, it is interesting that Paul never uses the Greek word *krisis* for that event. The term translated "judgment seat" is the Greek word *bema*. Its general sense was that of "a dais or platform that required steps to ascend" and from which a magistrate might address an assembly or hear cases.<sup>4</sup> It could be translated "judicial bench" in the places where Paul uses it of the final accounting given by Christians to their Lord (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10)

The ethos of this word for Paul is far less formal than a full-fledged courtroom scene would be. Contrast with this the terrifying scene envisaged in Rev 20:11, where John writes: "Then I saw a Great White Throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away."

I am not trying to play down the solemnity of our day of accounting to the Lord. But it would be a mistake to confuse this accounting with the far more serious event of final judgment. It was to that event that Jesus referred in the passages I have quoted from the Gospel of John. In fact, in John's Gospel, when the term *saved* is used of our final destiny, it means to be "saved" from the final judgment altogether. Justification, therefore, is a term Paul uses with reference to our being "saved" from appearing *at all* in the last judgment.

#### IV. PAUL, HEBREWS AND THE NEW COVENANT

It has been pointed out more than once, that the writer of Hebrews never uses the word "justified." Instead, for him its close approximation is the word "sanctified." All believers are completely sanctified according to this writer. In Heb 10:10, 14, for example, he says: "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ

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<sup>4</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 175.

once for all.” Also, “By one offering He has perfected forever those who are sanctified.”

The writer is thinking here against the background of the Old Covenant. He is thinking of the merely external purification that people in the OT could get through the process of animal sacrifices and ceremonial washings. Under the New Covenant, however, the believer possesses the definitive reality to which these ceremonies pointed. He is totally clean, and he has been sanctified, or made holy, before the sight of God.

Just as a priest was sanctified for his priestly ministry, so now the believer is sanctified and is able to enter boldly into the Holiest of all, that is, into the very presence of God (Heb 10:19). In that sense, therefore, God no longer remembers “their sins and their lawless deeds.” That is to say, they are perfectly clean and holy in God’s sight. But if that is true, then clearly, the sanctified are also *forgiven*. Forgiveness is a necessary deduction from the New Covenant promise about not remembering sin.

But note something very important here. The New Covenant prophecy does not say explicitly: “their sins and lawless deeds I *will forgive*.” Instead it says, “their sins and lawless deeds I will *remember no more*.”

Suppose we ask this question: How would a *Judge* not remember sins and lawless deeds? What would be the effective *judicial* equivalent of regarding people as totally free from sin? Paul’s answer, I submit, would have been this: “a judicial pronouncement of justification”!

Of course Paul found biblical support for such a pronouncement in passages like Gen 15:6, Ps 32:2, and Hab 2:4. But the fact remains that he could have easily seen this as the judicial side of the New Covenant promise that “their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

In my judgment that is exactly what he did. Thus I believe he would have regarded justification as a New Covenant blessing. Naturally, so do I.

## V. CONCLUSION

More than one thing happens to people at the moment when they believe Christ for eternal life. At that moment we are: (1) regenerated, that is, born again; (2) washed from sin, that is, forgiven; (3) sanctified, that is, made holy and fit for the presence of God; and (4) justified, that is, declared righteous. This list is not complete for us today, since we re-

ceive the Holy Spirit as well. But the gift of the Spirit is not promised in the New Covenant, so my brief list will suffice for us just now.

Please note in this connection a Pauline statement in 1 Cor 6:11. After listing a catalogue of sinful people in vv 9-10, he writes: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

Note those words: *washed—sanctified—justified*. All of them denote New Covenant blessings that are implicit in the marvelous words of Jer 31:34: "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."

By grace, therefore, God sees us as perfectly clean from sin, as holy people belonging to Him, and as completely free of any and every charge of sin. God's grace under the New Covenant is rich and marvelous!



# BOOK REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

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*An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards.* By Stephen Nichols. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003. 202 pp. Paper. \$14.99.

While this book is about certainty that God's Word is true, not about one's personal regeneration, Nichols does spend two chapters (chapters 4–5, pp. 77-153) talking about what Jonathan Edwards believed about assurance of eternal life.

Unfortunately, Nichols *tells us* what Edwards believed as often as he *shows us* from his writings. At times he contradicts what other scholars believe about the views of Edwards. It would have been nice if there were more direct quotes in those places. That being said, this is still a very helpful book on the theology of one of America's greatest early theologians.

Nichols suggests that Edwards taught that assurance can and should be more than probability (pp. 102-104). Yet he also shows where Edwards taught that one must look at his works to see if he is a true or false professor (pp. 116-121). This seems to contradict the suggestion about certainty being possible. Note this statement by Nichols: “[Edwards] argues that the more one obeys the demands of the gospel [!], and the longer one lives a life of obedience, the greater one's sense of assurance will be” (pp. 117-118). If this is true, then one would never be sure until death, for one can always grow in his life of obedience and future defection is always possible as well.

I recommend this book for anyone interested in Jonathan Edwards or in the Reformed view of assurance.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

***In Pursuit of HIS Glory.*** By R. T. Kendall. Lake Mary, FL, Charisma House, 2004. 310 pp. Hardback. \$19.99.

I chose to read R. T. Kendall's autobiography, *In Pursuit of HIS Glory*, because of the great benefit I have received from many of Kendall's other writings. His book *Once Saved, Always Saved* (now back in print: Authentic Media, 2005) is a classic defense of eternal security, while his book *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford University Press, 1981) explains how Calvin was only a four-point Calvinist since Limited Atonement was "invented" by his successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza. Kendall's book *Total Forgiveness* (Charisma House, 2002) should be read by every Christian.

However, despite my positive views of Kendall's previous books, I was somewhat disappointed by this book. While overall, the autobiography was enjoyable to read, Kendall seems to have written with one purpose in mind—to defend his conversion to charismatic thinking. He does have a few good chapters on his theology and pastoral practice, but for the most part, he only wants to talk about what led him to become a charismatic. Even some of his theology seems to have developed through charismatic experiences rather than inductive Bible study. For example, he says that he became convinced of the truth of four-point Calvinism through "the immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit" (p. 4). In my opinion, this is not the best way to develop theology.

Nevertheless, his views on justification, assurance of salvation, sanctification, on-going faith, rewards at the bema, Jas 2:14, and Heb 6:4-6 were interesting. And these, it seems, were learned through careful, inductive study of the biblical text. Not all Free Grace readers will agree with his conclusions, but he is definitely within the Free Grace camp on these subjects.

Regarding justification, he says that "We become Christians by faith and repentance" (p. 211), but defines repentance as a "change of mind" (p. 211). He says that "if repentance is defined (as some want) as turning from every known sin and this repentance must precede faith" nobody can be sure they have repented (p. 212). Many *JOTGES* readers would find no fault with Kendall on this point. (Others, including myself, believe that repentance is a turning from sin, but is not a requirement for justification.) He defines faith as "believing God" (p. 29) and "persuasion" (p. 211). "*Faith* is the persuasion that Christ has died for us and we, therefore, rely on Him *alone* for our salvation" (p. 211, italics his).



Kendall is also a staunch defender of biblical doctrine of eternal security and that sometimes this teaching brought accusations that he was teaching the heresy of “antinomianism” (p. 96). All consistent teachers of Free Grace have received similar accusations. Kendall takes solace in something his predecessor, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, used to say: “If the gospel we preach is not accused of being antinomian, it is probably because we haven’t really preached the gospel!” (p. 97).

One intriguing development in Kendall’s theology of eternal security is his understanding of the faith of Christ as taught in Gal 2:16-20. He bases his view on the premise that eternal security cannot be dependant upon our ongoing faith, since we all falter in our faith and believe imperfectly from time to time. Therefore, Kendall teaches that when we believe in Christ, we are also believing in the faith of Christ, so that Christ believes perfectly for us. He says that it is “Christ’s very own faith that justifies us once we put our faith in him” (p. 56). This means that we do not rely on our faith, that is, we do not place faith in our faith, but we place faith in Christ, specifically, in the faith of Christ to justify us and keep us justified because he believes perfectly (p. 224). This idea is developed more in Kendall’s book *He Saves: The Assurance of Salvation Through Faith* (now back in print: Authentic Media, 2006).

Since he is a four-point Calvinist, Kendall does retain some typical Calvinist teachings, such as the idea that regeneration precedes faith. In such a system, faith doesn’t really save, but is a product of having been saved by God. He says, “Regeneration begins as an unconscious work...Some say they know the day and the hour and the place they were saved, and I know what they mean by that. But the truth is probably better stated that they know precisely when they were assured” (p. 212).

This brings us to what Kendall believed about the assurance of salvation. Reading what he taught about assurance made me think I was reading Bob Wilkin’s *Secure and Sure*, not the teachings of a four-point Calvinist! He says the primary way we gain assurance is through the use of a practical syllogism:

All who believe on Christ are saved. I believe on Christ.  
Therefore, I am saved. [This is] the way most people grasp assurance. They are trusting Christ alone, not their works, and refuse to be defeated by the absence of good works to prove that they are saved (p. 212).

Kendall goes on to argue persuasively that one cannot ever have assurance of salvation while believing in a limited atonement. He says that if Christ did not die for everyone, then

The poor seeker of assurance cannot look directly to Christ, for he may be trusting in one who never died for him in the first place. In such a case, the only place to look is toward his own good works or sanctification. The problem here is, how can you be sure you have amassed a sufficient number of good works to be sure? ...People who seek assurance of salvation in this manner tend to be in perpetual doubt (p. 214).

Those who can't believe that they are saved—apart from works—invariably and ultimately are trusting in their own works to some extent (p. 215).

Such teaching about faith alone in Christ alone for justification and assurance naturally leads one to question the place of works in the life of the believer. Sanctification, Kendall says, happens naturally as we walk in the Spirit (p. 216). Sanctification is not a condition or proof of salvation, but is rather a way “believers live to show their gratitude” (p. 252). Obedience to the law does not justify, and neither does it sanctify (p. 52). If some are confused as to how all this works, Kendall writes that he explains it further in his book *Just Grace* (SPCK, 2000).

One of the motivations for sanctification and obedience are eternal rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. He writes that “Of all the doctrines I taught during my twenty-five years at Westminster Chapel, whether theological or practical, this is possibly the one that has affected my personal life the most” (p. 224). He wants to be one of those who receives a rich welcome into the heavenly kingdom (p. 226). He further argues that those Christians who say they don't want any reward do not have a very spiritual outlook, for even Paul was looking eagerly toward his reward (p. 225). Again, it seems that in this area, Kendall fits very nicely within Free Grace theology.

Of great interest to *JOTGES* readers would be Kendall's views on Jas 2:14-24 and Heb 6:4-6. He clearly parts ways with his Calvinistic friends on these passages, but understands them in ways I have not found anywhere else. He says the understanding of Jas 2:14 begins with 2:6, where James talks about the poor being exploited by the rich. When James gets to his mock dialogue in 2:13, it is between a Christian and this same poor man. Therefore, when James asks in 2:14, “Can faith save

him?” the “him” refers not the Christian, but to the poor man (pp. 27-28; 255-57). Our faith does nothing to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. For that, we need works. James “has chosen to illustrate his point that we must show love for our neighbors by our works—not mere conversation, as saying, ‘God bless you’” (p. 256). There are numerous views on James 2, and this one fits nicely within Free Grace theology and should probably be considered.

His approach to Heb 6:4-6 was also new to me. His key to this passage was found in 3:7, where the author writes about hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 5:11 similarly talks about becoming “hard of hearing” which probably refers back to 3:7. Therefore, the people of 6:4-6 are genuine Christians.

They do not lose their salvation. They lose the spiritual acumen to hear God speak again. It is so sad. It had already happened at that time, for the Greek literally reads that they have fallen away (p. 230).

The sin described in Heb 6:4-6 refers to repeatedly rejecting the warnings of the Holy Spirit...the immediate danger is the Christian not taking the call to intimacy with God seriously enough, so that he or she ceases to hear God speak at all” (p. 231).

It could be that Kendall’s charismatic tendencies colored his exegesis on this point, but he makes a strong case, and so his views should be grappled with more fully through his book *Are You Stone Deaf to the Spirit?* (Evangelical Press, 2000).

Kendall has some new insights into passages and theological positions that will be of great interest to Free Grace proponents. Nevertheless, I cannot recommend his autobiography, since for the most part it deals with his journey into Pentecostalism. However, his other books which I mentioned earlier in this review I highly recommend, since they deal in more detail with the issues that interest *JOTGES* readers.

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***Opposite Poles: Contradictions within Sola Fide?*** By Frederick W. H. Wright. NP: Xulon Press, 2003. 276 pp. Paper. \$15.99.

In *Opposite Poles*, Wright tries to compare Lordship Salvation with Easy Believism. He quotes primarily from John MacArthur for the Lordship position, but doesn't seem to have a primary author in mind for the opposing view. He does occasionally cite R. B. Thieme and Charles Ryrie, but doesn't consider Ryrie to be truly in the Easy Believism camp. He does not cite Hodges, Dillow, Radmacher, Stanley, or myself. He clearly hasn't done much research of the Free Grace position, and indeed may be totally unaware of it.

The book is hard to read because early on Wright suggests that MacArthur feels that there are five groups in Christianity today, four wrong and one right. Wright lays out these five groups (p. 29) and then explains these five (pp. 30-122), with by far most of the discussion covering views #4 and #5.

The five views are:

1. No need for either justification or sanctification.
2. Self-justification—justification through sanctification.
3. Antinomianism—justification without sanctification.
4. Lordship sanctification—justification with full sanctification.
5. Justification with progressive sanctification—justification with a sanctification that grows progressively in conformity to Christ's demands for holy living (p. 29).

Two things make it very hard to follow the author. First, there is a complicated outlining system which is very difficult to remember and follow. Second, after initially laying out the five groups, thereafter Wright refers to them as #1, #2, and so on, without even giving a brief title for that view. The reader is expected to remember what all five views are.

For example, consider these quotes from one single page (224): "Perhaps Thieme belongs in #3." "Of whom is MacArthur speaking? Is he dealing with a person out of #1, #2, #3, #4, or #5? Judas denied Christ. And Peter denied Christ. Was Judas in #1, #2, #3, #4, or #5? He certainly was not in #4 or #5—except only as a false professor." "So should 2 Timothy 2:12 be used to unsettle the true Christians in #4 and #5?" "And remember that Peter was in #4—#5 when he denied Christ."

Wright repeatedly speaks of “Brother MacArthur” (e.g., pp. 22, 33, 38, 39, 46, 54, 85, 224, 233, 235). Similarly he often speaks of “LS [Lordship Salvation] brethren” (e.g., pp. ix., 235, 242).

He says that Easy Believism confuses unbelievers into thinking they are believers (pp. 234-35). Since he seems to put the *JOTGES* position in that camp, he believes ours is a false gospel.

Wright suggests that ongoing obedience and holiness are guaranteed for all true believers (e.g., pp. 41, 58).

While he criticizes MacArthur for robbing people of assurance (p. 238), he nonetheless suggests that assurance is to be found by looking at our desires, concerns, fruit, etc., going on for nearly two pages about all the things we need to see in our attitudes and lives before we can be assured (pp. 231-32).

I’m not quite sure where the author stands. He seems to be mildly in the Lordship Salvation camp, but uncomfortable with some of the extreme statements made by MacArthur.

There seems to be some helpful material buried within the pages of this book. But it is so hard to follow that I can’t recommend this book except to the person who wants to have a complete library of books on the issue.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

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***Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth.*** By Wayne Grudem. Multnomah Publishers, 2004. 864 pp. Paper. \$29.99.

Every pastor and theologian should have this book in their library. In 864 pages, Grudem uses his biblical scholarship to provide a thorough response to the current views expressed by evangelical feminists. In 1992, his book entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* was named “Book of the Year” by *Christianity Today*. In the Preface he lists several reasons why he wrote this book. One of the reasons was “to warn about troubling trends in the evangelical feminist camp that indicated increasing movement toward theological liberalism through various types of interpretation that imply a

rejection of the effective authority of Scripture in our lives” (p. 17). This concept was reiterated several times throughout the book. At one point he states that the rejection of the doctrine of inerrancy has historically led to the ordination of women in certain denominations (p. 503). Thus, he shows that feminism is not the problem, but is instead a symptom of a greater problem.

In the first two chapters Grudem presents a biblical case for the complementarian view of men and women. He unlocks the biblical role of men and women in the areas of creation, the home, and the church. The meat of the book is found in chapters 3–12 where he answers 118 feminist objections, based on the views posed in the first two chapters. These objections are taken from leading feminist writings from the past thirty years. Many of the answers are based on recent scholarly research, which has strengthened the complementarian position (p. 524). For example, Grudem’s personal research on the meaning of the Greek word *kephalē* has provided over fifty examples where it means “person in authority” (p. 526).

I found the final two chapters of the book to be quite interesting. He provides an overview on the state of evangelicalism with regard to feminist trends. His concern is that the rise of feminism within evangelicalism is a sign of liberal influence. Therefore, he urges the reader to search for truth in the Bible rather than in cultural or historical trends. He cautions against churches buying in to cultural relativity, and also how to practically deal with feminist infiltration in the church. He illustrates in the final chapter the reality of the correlation between feminist trends and theological liberalism. He includes both the current, and historical positions of many main-line denominations. And his premise holds true. The denominations that are primarily egalitarian have had a significant amount of liberal influence in their history.

It is hard to imagine that there is another book out there that deals with this subject with more detail and clarity. The reader will not only be able to defend the complementarian position, but will gain a perspective on the root of feminism. I highly recommend it for anyone who desires to gain a biblical view of the roles of men and women.

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***Why I Am Not an Arminian.*** By Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 224 pp. Paper. \$15.00. ***Why I Am Not a Calvinist.*** By Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 230 pp. Paper. \$15.00.

As we can see from the titles of what at first glance appears to be companion volumes, the great debate between Calvinism and Arminianism continues. “Debate” books, in which two or more authors contribute their viewpoint and then critique each of the other authors’ views, have become popular in recent years, as evidenced by the popularity of Zondervan’s “Counterpoint Series” (*Four Views on Hell*, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, etc.). There have even been “debate” books on the subject of Calvinism, like *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (InterVarsity, 1986), and more recently, *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views* (Multnomah, 2004).

Although they appear to be in the “debate” genre, these two new volumes from InterVarsity Press are *not* in that format, and can be read independently. Each book is written against the other position, but not in the form of a debate between the two sets of authors. In fact, there is no interaction between the two books at all. And although on the outside the books are about the same size and share the same cover design, and on the inside have similar formatting, the books are completely different in their approach.

*Why I Am Not an Arminian* is, of course, written by two Calvinists, Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, both professors of systematic theology at a Calvinist school, Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Peterson has previously authored *Calvin and the Atonement* (Christian Focus, 1999). Their book is seamless; that is, there is nothing in the book which indicates that a particular chapter or section was written by one author or the other.

*Why I Am Not a Calvinist* is likewise written by two Arminians, Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, both professors at an Arminian school, Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Walls is a professor of philosophy of religion while Dongell is a professor of biblical studies. Walls has previously contributed a chapter to *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Zondervan, 1995). Their dual authorship is more obvious, as evidenced by awkward phrases like

“though I (Joe) disagree...” (p. 45) that are found in the text and the footnotes. In fact, the author’s appear to disagree on two key points: the nature of foreknowledge and the knowledge of God.

Because I am neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian, I can recommend both of these books, but not equally or in their entirety.

*Why I Am Not a Calvinist* begins with a weak introduction and then falters briefly before really getting into the problems of Calvinism. Walls and Dongell maintain in their Introduction that Calvinists err by framing the debate in terms of the concept of God’s sovereignty and man’s ability. They insist that the fundamental dispute should rather be about God’s character. Their aim is to prove that “Calvinism distorts the biblical picture of God and fails in other crucial ways that show its inadequacy as a theological system” (p. 8). I think they make a grave mistake by dismissing the details of the historical dispute between Calvinism and Arminianism as “not our concern here” (p. 13). And in their much too brief overview of the Five Points of Calvinism, their claim that “recently a number of Calvinists have expressed reservations, and in some cases outright disagreement, with the traditional notion of limited atonement” (p. 11) is certainly incorrect. There is nothing recent about these reservations and disagreements at all.

The first chapter, “Approaching the Bible,” has some useful information, but can be skipped since it contains very little information about either Calvinism or Arminianism. The placement of this chapter is unfortunate because it has the potential of causing the reader to lose interest. The title of the second chapter, “Engaging the Bible,” looks at “the three strongest scriptural arguments for Calvinist theology: the sovereign nature of God, the gracious nature of salvation and the reality of divine election” (p. 47). The authors present the Calvinist perspective on these issues followed by an Arminian response. This chapter is really the only place in the book that contains any Scripture exegesis.

It is really chapters 3 and 4 that make this book worth reading and recommending. Chapter 3 (“Calvinism and the Nature of Human Freedom”) contains a solid philosophical discussion of hard determinism, libertarian freedom, and soft determinism (compatibilism). The authors argue that “there are large stretches of Scripture that are hard to make sense of if humans aren’t free in the libertarian sense of the word” (p. 117).

Chapter 4 (“Calvinism and Divine Sovereignty”) is likewise an examination of three views of sovereignty and foreknowledge: Calvinism,



Molinism, and Openness. Calvinists, of course, believe that God knows every future event because he decreed every future event. Evil is explained away, however, by saying that God merely permits it. Molinism, named after Luis de Molina (1535-1600), is the view that God has middle knowledge, that is, “what all possible created free wills would do in all possible circumstances and situations that are not and never will be” (p. 135). God knows everything that will be, might be, and could have been. The “open view of God,” as opposed to the traditional view, holds that “libertarian freedom and infallible foreknowledge are incompatible” (p. 143). Proponents of the Openness view (like, apparently, Joseph Dongell) “hold that it is impossible in principle for future undetermined free actions to be known with certainty” (p. 142). The authors conclude that although “God’s sovereignty and providential control of our world are surely matters that exceed our full understanding,” the Calvinist explanation “poses particularly severe difficulties, especially with respect to the problem of evil” (p. 152).

In the last two chapters, Walls and Dongell briefly explore a variety of topics like the genuineness of the offer of salvation, the sincerity of divine compassion, guilt and the Fall, evangelism, the fate of the unevangelized, assurance, and the problem of evil. They conclude in chapter 5 (“Calvinism and Consistency”) that in Calvinism can be found “inconsistency, confusion or misleading language where human freedom and responsibility are concerned” (p. 184), and in chapter 6 (“Calvinism and the Christian Life”) that “Calvinism is beset with practical inconsistencies that mirror its logical contradictions” (p. 215).

At first glance, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* appears to be different from the typical book on Calvinism that focuses on the Five Points of Calvinism. Appearances, however, are deceiving. Besides the introduction, which is chapter 1, there are two chapters devoted to history, but six chapters dedicated to expounding Calvinism. Five of these chapters relate explicitly to one of the five points of Calvinism. Peterson and Williams acknowledge in their introduction that they “would have preferred to write a biblical presentation of Calvinism, a *Why I Am a Calvinist* book” (p. 13). They go on to say that as Calvinists they will put forth their arguments against Arminianism, but: “To be honest, our true goal is to commend and defend Calvinism. We believe that we are obligated to say this because the answer to the question ‘Why am I not an Arminian?’ is that we are Calvinists” (p. 13). So, unlike *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, this companion volume is not true to its title.

The two chapters devoted to history (chapter 2—"Augustine and Pelagius" and chapter 5—"Arminius and the Synod of Dort") are well-written and crucial to understanding the issues in the Calvinist/Arminian debate. They are profitable whichever theological position one takes. This gives the book a major advantage over the companion volume, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*. Lacking, however, is historical information about John Calvin himself, other than the unfortunate blunder that Theodore Beza was Calvin's son-in-law (p. 93). There is a problem, though, with putting too much emphasis on the Augustine/Pelagius controversy. Unlike the majority of Calvinists, the authors do admit that "the allegation that Arminianism is Pelagian is unfortunate and indeed unwarranted" (p. 39), but the seed is sown nevertheless that anything opposed to Calvinism is heretical.

Following the chapter on Augustine and Pelagius, there are chapters on predestination and perseverance. Here we find the same old Calvinistic arguments that one might find in a standard work like Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Of particular note is the fact that in the chapter on perseverance, the authors begin by showing from Scripture how believers are preserved by God. It is only after eleven pages of using the terms *preserve*, *preserves*, and *preservation* that they introduce the concept of perseverance. But then they sound like Arminians when they write, "Arminians and Calvinists agree that professed Christians must continue to the end in three areas if they are to be saved: believing the gospel, loving Christ and other believers, and living godly lives" (p. 77).

Following the chapter on Arminius and the Synod of Dort, there are chapters on freedom, inability, grace, and atonement. Naturally, God's sovereignty is redefined as "divine foreordination" (p. 136), God's drawing is salvation (p. 167), God's grace is irresistible (p. 175), and God's regeneration results in saving faith (p. 189). On John 3:16, it was refreshing to see that the authors, who otherwise have impeccable Calvinist credentials, "reject attempts to limit the meaning of 'world' here to 'the world of the elect'" (p. 179). They further acknowledge that "Calvinists have not always argued well for limited atonement" (p. 202), and express their embarrassment "that at times Reformed Christians have not been as zealous as others to propagate the gospel" (p. 210). The authors' criticisms of Arminians for rejecting the idea of substitutionary atonement are right on.

Although each of these books contains material that I can unequivocally recommend, they both suffer from the same underlying problem: The authors assume that one must be either a Calvinist or an Arminian. Neither side recognizes a middle ground that refuses to be identified with either position. Typical is this remark by Walls and Dongell: “Those who hold to eternal security while rejecting the middle three points are not truly Calvinists but are rather a sort of Calvinist-Arminian hybrid” (p. 13).

The debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is one that will last until the end of time. Although these new volumes contain ammunition that each side can use against the other, I see these books as more likely to further cement Calvinists and Arminians in their respective views.

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***Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Messianic Jewish Epistles—Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, Jude Peter, Jude: Exposition from a Messianic Jewish Perspective*** by Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Th.M., Ph.D. Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2005. 477 pp. Hardback. \$35.00.

GES readers will generally appreciate this commentary. Arnold is in the Free Grace camp, although there are a few ideas that some Free Grace people will disagree with.

Overall the quality of the commentary is very good. It is well written, easy to read, and follows the biblical text verse-by-verse. As in his other writings, Arnold uses the *American Standard Version 1901* (ASV) translation, which is included in the text making it easy to follow and reference his comments. While a good literal translation, some readers may find the ASV a bit archaic.

The commentary is written from a Messianic Jewish perspective. Consequently, Arnold focuses on the Jewishness of the epistles and explains many references to things inherently Jewish. I find these insights particularly refreshing given that the human writers of these epistles were also Jewish and so is Jesus who is the King and Messiah to Israel.

The commentary section on Hebrews is approximately 200 pages (pp. 3-201). His treatment of this epistle is exceptional, even compared to

the other four included in the commentary. There are several points from a Free Grace perspective worth mentioning.

First, Arnold takes the “change of mind” view of repentance (p. 11). This comes out in his introduction to Hebrews where in discussing the background of the epistle he discusses the “unpardonable sin” of Matthew 12 (pp. 12-13). His point is that the Jewish generation alive during the time of our Lord needed to change their minds about Jesus to avoid national judgment, which ultimately came upon them in AD 70 (pp. 12-13).

One significant aspect that *JOTGES* readers will appreciate is his treatment of the five warning passages (Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). His explanation of each is very clear, contextually consistent, and emphasizes rewards, loss of rewards, and temporal judgment. He refutes erroneous views of these passages with sound reasoning, evidence and explanation, while focusing the reader’s attention on how the warnings were intended for the Jews in Israel prior to the destruction of their nation in AD 70 by the Romans (e.g., p. 78). He makes it clear that the epistle was written to Jewish believers who were in danger of falling away from their Christian faith and returning to Judaism. While these believers might fall into apostasy, they nevertheless remain eternally secure (e.g., p. 79). This point is expressed throughout the commentary and is central in the warning passages. The commentary is worth having just for his sections on the five warnings passages.

Another point *JOTGES* readers will enjoy is his treatment of the words *save* and *salvation*. He observes that these terms frequently relate to physical deliverance (not spiritual) which is consistent with the biblical text (e.g., pp. 13, 29, 43, 47-49, 57, 79, 143-144). Oddly, I thought he might say more about these terms in relation to the nation of Israel as a whole and their deliverance from dominion and domination by Gentile nations, which is a consistent OT theme and is related to their demise in AD 70. Nor did he comment on the phrase “inherent salvation” in Heb 1:14. I wish he would have offered explanation on this phrase, but he did not.

His commentary on James spans approximately 100 pages (pp. 205-313) but does not flow as well as his work on Hebrews. Also, he tends to overemphasize the significance of Greek verb tenses. For example, when discussing a present tense, he almost always describes it as having continuous action when that is not necessarily the case in every instance (e.g., p. 221). Usually such action depends on the immediate context.

This overemphasis on Greek verb tenses is evident in his commentary on the other epistles as well.

His pointing out of the Jewish traits in these epistles was helpful. For example, in Jas 5:17 where the biblical text says, "Elijah prayed earnestly," Fruchtenbaum reveals that the Greek wording is "prayed with prayer." Arnold describes this as a "Hebraism" meaning that the doubling of the root word (pray/prayer) "intensifies the verb to mean he prayed earnestly" (p. 312). He sprinkles little examples of the Jewishness of the text (like this one) throughout the entire commentary, which I find very helpful to gaining a better understanding of the text.

While the Free Grace camp will have little problem with most of his comments on James, his treatment of Jas 2:14-26 is not only interesting, but may raise some eyebrows. Arnold claims to hold the Free Grace position (and I believe he does), but his treatment of this section could arguably be taken as backloading the Gospel. He seems to dance back and forth between a full Free Grace position and a backloaded view. On page 252 he plainly states, "Justification in James is not soteriological." However, within the same discussion he later writes,

The works (c.f. James 2:14) in question are the works of verses 17-18, which are produced by a true faith.... The question is: Can that faith save him? Again, this is a rhetorical question that demands a negative answer. In other words, is a faith that produces no work whatsoever really a saving faith? The obvious answer is, No. The issue here is saving faith (pp. 252-53).

At this point he footnotes this statement with a reference to the GES commentary, written by Zane Hodges, which points out that what is in view is physical life and death and not a soteriological salvation. He acknowledges that the GES view is a possibility (p. 253).

There are several things that I find troubling in Arnold's comments. What does he mean by "true faith"? In a clear contradiction, he says justification in James is not soteriological, but then claims James is talking about saving faith in a soteriological sense. Another question is what about his notion of "that" faith? Is that a reference to some kind of special faith as Lordship types would argue? He did not comment on the use of the Greek definite article in the context of Jas 2:14. Unfortunately, these questions and issues are not adequately addressed or answered.

As he works through this entire section in James, his basic premise seems to be that the faith that saves (eternally) will show itself in good

works. Oddly, at the end of the section he enters into a refutation of Lordship Salvation, even quoting John MacArthur (p. 260). As part of this refutation, he states his view as being Free Grace, and cites Charles Ryrie (*So Great Salvation*) extensively (pp. 263-74). In his conclusion he writes, "to teach that it is possible to be truly saved and yet be totally fruitless goes against the very point that James was making. The balance is that a truly saved believer will produce some measure of fruit" (p. 274). I wonder how he reconciles this view this reconciles with the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15), especially considering the rocky and thorny soils. Arguably each one had life and growth, but not necessarily fruit, mature fruit, or visible fruit.

The commentary on 1 Peter consumes only 70 pages (pp. 317-85). Here Arnold takes aim at those who advocate Replacement Theology. He refutes those who claim that the church has replaced Israel (e.g., pp. 319-20). This is evident in his discussion of the human author (Peter) as well as the recipients of the epistle (Jewish believers scattered throughout Asia Minor, i.e., Turkey, pp. 317-21). The basis for his conclusion is 1 Pet 1:1-2 as well as subsequent references contained throughout the epistle. Clearly the terms sojourner (alien) and dispersion (*diaspora*) refer to Jewish people living outside the land of Israel. Arnold does a good job of developing this thought. He correctly concludes that Peter is "writing specifically to the Remnant of Israel; the Jewish believers of that day" (p. 319). He insightfully observes that the word church does not appear even once in the entire epistle (p. 319).

He only briefly mentions the term "the elect" contained in v 1 (though the actual Greek word occurs in v 1, most English translations place the word in v 2) writing, "they were chosen by God" (p. 318). However, he does refer the reader to his comments on 1 Pet 2:6-9 for further explanation. My disappointment is that he did not comment more on this term as it is used by Peter, because I think it is further evidence that Peter wrote to Jewish believers. After all, the Jews are *the chosen* (choice or select) nation/race (cf. Deut 7:6, 14:2, Ps 33:12, 105:6, 135:4, Isa 44:1, 45:4, 65:9). In fairness to Arnold, he does develop this motif in his discussion of 1 Pet 2:6-9 and throughout the commentary he expounds on this theme where appropriate (e.g., pp. 341-44).

Arnold's treatment and discussion of 1 Pet 2:1-12 is probably unique among evangelical commentators. It is in this section of the text where I think Arnold's Messianic Jewishness is most reflected. His main point in this passage is that Peter is distinguishing between the Remnant and

Non-Remnant of Israel (i.e., Jewish believers and unbelievers of that day). He is also careful to distinguish between Israel and the church because many have erroneously applied the context of 1 Pet 2:1-12 to the church (pp. 338-46).

The commands that Peter issues in 1 Pet 2:11 and following make sense in context when Peter's initial instruction to these Jewish believers (to maintain good behavior among the Gentiles) is considered. Peter's subsequent commands specify what constitutes this good behavior.

There are many unusual and notable views that Arnold presents. Regardless of whether you agree with the interpretation he offers, one cannot accuse him of faulty hermeneutics. His interpretations are consistently derived from the biblical text in a literal manner, giving priority to the context. An example of this is his view of 1 Pet 5:13, which indicates the human author wrote from "Babylon." Many consider Babylon as code, referring to Rome. However, Arnold argues convincingly that Babylon means Babylon, the city that was located in present day Iraq, not Rome (p. 384).

The commentary on 2 Peter fills only 35 pages (pp. 389-423). As a layman, I wished he would have written more. His comments seem too brief.

While I agree with Arnold's views in many instances, there are a few spots in this epistle that may give Free Grace readers some heartburn.

Under the section entitled "The Necessity of Growth – 1:8-11" Arnold observes Peter giving six reasons for spiritual growth. Concerning 1:10 he writes,

The fourth reason for the necessity of growth is to *give more diligence* in order to make their *election sure* (v. 10a), which in turn provides the assurance of salvation. *Election* is done by God, but a man's action proves his *election*. As James teaches, a man shows his faith by his works. If a man has saving faith, it is a product of his *election*. The way to *make this election sure* for himself is by producing works that are the result of his faith. These works provide valid evidence that his election is sure – that he has been called, chosen, and assured of salvation. This should be done with *more diligence* since this is an even greater incentive than those of verses 8-9. (p. 395, emphasis his).

What is disturbing is that Arnold contends that a believer's assurance of eternal life is by works, and not simply by belief in the promise of

God. This stems from his “proof of salvation by works” view of James 2:14-26 (pp. 252-53). Further troubling is that “election” is emphasized in a way that would make a five-point Calvinist proud. Where in the text does it say that electing and calling are unto eternal life or salvation? It is not there! Rather, as Zane Hodges points out, vv 3-4 indicate that the recipients were believers. Arnold points this out too, but misses the point of v 10 as it is tied to the discussion of rewards that follows in v 11.

To his credit, Arnold picks up that the kingdom mentioned in v 11 is yet future and correctly identifies it with the Millennium and the doctrine of rewards. However, the point Arnold misses is that a believer’s works are a powerful testimony to others and are of great use to the church body, but they do not necessarily “prove” that someone is a believer in Christ. What about the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Catholics? Do their works prove saving faith?

In his discussion of 2 Pet 3:9, which states that the Lord is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance,” Arnold merely writes, “he wishes to give opportunity to all to be saved” (p. 416). This is one instance where I wished Arnold had developed his comments more. He does not really deal with the terms “perish” or “repentance.” Both words are crucial to understanding the meaning of the text. Unfortunately, he simply takes a salvation view of the passage without much comment or analysis. There may be Free Grace readers who hold this view, but on the other hand, some would argue that the text is not dealing with salvation/eternal life *per se*, but relief from temporal judgment. One can only speculate if Arnold considered whether repentance means simply a change of mind or a decision to turn from sinful conduct to avoid or bring to an end God’s temporal judgment. Likewise, is the term “perish,” eternal punishment in hell or physical death?

Last, but not least, is his commentary on Jude, which takes up only 21 pages (pp. 427-48). His references to the Greek text are to the Critical text (CT) not the Majority text (MT). This creates a few interpretive differences due to minor variations between the CT and MT. For example in Jude’s salutation, the CT states the recipients are “called, beloved in God the father, and kept for Jesus Christ.” The difference between Greek texts lies in the words “beloved” (CT) as opposed to “sanctified” (MT). Hence, Arnold sees election (God in eternity past choosing those he will save) by the words “called” and “beloved” as he writes,

The believers were called by the Holy Spirit. Theologically, this ‘effectual calling’ is a work of the Holy Spirit; it is the



calling that brings one to salvation. They are beloved in God the Father, which is a result of their being elected by God the Father (p. 429).

It is that last sentence that gives us pause. As John 3:16 points out, God loves the world, not just the elect. In this context, the idea of being “sanctified” or “set apart” fits better in the context because that is what God does for those who have been called to believe the gospel.

Regarding vv 14-16 in which the Second Advent of Christ is prophesied, Arnold takes the position that in this prophecy, which is attributed to Enoch, church-age believers will accompany Jesus when He returns (pp. 438-39). In other words, church-age believers are the myriads of holy ones or saints that return with the Lord. While I do not exactly disagree, I find it difficult to think that Enoch was referring to church-age saints because the church was a mystery and undisclosed in the OT. Rather, this prophecy may be better understood as referring to angels that accompany Jesus at His Second Advent (cf. Mark 13:14; Rev 19:11-19).

His treatment of v 24 is interesting and brief. He writes,

In verse 24, Jude states two actions that God can perform. First, God is able to guard you from stumbling. The Greek word used here for guard means “to be kept under a military guard for safe conduct;” for safe custody. God is able to keep the believers in safe custody. While believers may indeed stumble in their spiritual lives, they will never stumble to the point of losing their salvation, not because the keeping of salvation depends on them but because it is dependent upon God’s power to keep them. Second, God is able to set you in the presence of his glory without blemish. The Greek word for without blemish is a sacrificial term; as the Passover lamb was to be without blemish. God is able to set believers in the presence of His glory, which will be true at the Rapture when they are taken up into heaven. Therefore, when the believer is in the presence of His glory, it will be in exceeding joy. In noting what God is able to do, Jude makes two statements; one statement pertains to the present and the other statement pertains to the future. At the present time, God is able to keep believers from stumbling. God is able to do this at the present time; however, in the future he will be able to set believers in the presence of his glory (p. 447).

What Arnold says is fine as far as it goes. However, stumbling does not seem to have the soteriological connection that he gives it. Certainly as Wilkin has pointed out, “ability is no guarantee.”

Arnold’s contribution to understanding these Jewish epistles is extraordinary, regardless of whether you agree with all of his views. I find his Jewish perspective refreshing and enlightening. His comments on Hebrews and 1 Peter alone make purchasing the book worthwhile.

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***Fishing for Men: A Practical and Biblical Guide to Sharing the Gospel with Others and Winning them to Christ.*** By. Richard A. Seymour. LaGrange, WY: Integrity Press, 2004. Paper. 368 pp. N.P.

Here is a refreshing book on evangelism. Though many books on evangelism are long on method and short on message, this one is an exception. It is clear on the message and it also contains helpful suggestions regarding method of communication.

The first four chapters introduce the book. Included here is a nice chapter telling the author’s personal spiritual journey (chap. 2). There are five chapters here on various aspects of understanding the message (chaps. 5–9). Eight chapters discuss how to present the message clearly (chaps. 10–17). Five chapters focus on the one doing evangelism, our mission, philosophy of ministry, opposition, power, and a final challenge (chaps. 18–22).

*JOTGES* readers will likely much appreciate the following points made by Seymour. He gives a list of 160 passages in the New Testament which state that faith alone is the sole condition of eternal life (p. 113). Seymour notes the difference between the works the legalists asked Jesus about in John 6:28 and the singular work of believing in Him that was Jesus’ response in John 6:29 (p. 115).

Defective invitations receive brief but helpful criticism by the author (pp. 194–99). Similarly, Seymour discusses and rejects false gospel messages, this time in more detail (pp. 257–88).

Seymour has seven pages dealing with the weaknesses of Lordship Salvation (pp. 273-79). He also has a nice discussion of the fallacy of the supposed head faith/heart faith distinction (pp. 279-81).

A series of excellent questions are suggested for using John 5:24 to make clear the promise of everlasting life to all who simply believe in Jesus (p. 188).

Some *JOTGES* readers will be bothered by Seymour's suggestion that assurance is not of the essence of saving faith, but is something optional which can be gained after one is born again (pp. 133, 190). Similarly, his suggestion that Rom 10:9-10 concerns acknowledging Jesus as God will not find approval among those who are familiar with and in agreement with the writings of Hodges, Lopez, and others on the theme of salvation (*soteria*) in Romans.

I was personally a bit surprised to see Seymour suggest that "on rare occasions" if a person says that they don't want to talk to you when you try to engage them in an evangelistic conversation, it might be acceptable to continue anyway (p. 232). He says, "Just don't try this approach [pressing on despite being told that the other person did not want to hear anything] unless you feel the person to whom you are speaking really does have a soft spot underneath his or her [hostile] exterior." Those who may not have Seymour's tact and discernment may find that this sort of approach can lead to being insulted or assaulted for their witnessing, which cannot be totally attributed to suffering for our testimony. Sometimes not listening to angry people can be harmful to your health.

Despite these few concerns, this is an outstanding book. I recommend it as a helpful tool. It has much excellent information and it places its main emphasis where few evangelism texts do: on the message of life in Scripture.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

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***Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment.***

Edited by David W. Baker. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004. Paper. 176 pp. \$12.99.

*Biblical Faith and Other Religions* is a compilation “of written records of oral presentations” from six different authors (p. 9). These topics were presented at the 2002 Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting. David M. Howard Jr., who wrote the introduction to this book, was the Chairman. The title of the 2002 Annual Meeting was “Evangelical Christianity and Other Religions.” Therefore, anyone who desires to understand the quality of discussion and scholarship that took place that year will get a thorough glimpse by reading this book. The content is academic, with varying degrees of practical discussion.

The book is comprised of six chapters; each chapter is an essay by a certain scholar of his topic presented at the 2002 ETS Annual Meeting. In the introduction, Howard points out that “each author comes at the question of how true biblical faith interfaces with other religious systems differently” (p. 16). He also explains that the purpose of the book is not only to present academic discussion, but so that “the church at large will attain better understanding of different faith traditions as it engages with them at numerous levels” (p. 9). The basic concept is that we live today in a religious pluralistic society, which Harold Netland defines in the first chapter as the idea “that the major religions are all to be accepted as more or less equally legitimate ways in which culturally and historically conditioned humankind responds to the one divine reality” (p. 24). Therefore, based on the religious ideals that are prominent in today’s society, the book contains relevant information.

The book as a whole is fairly understandable; however, as with any book, the reader will find a few confusing assertions. For example, in the chapter entitled “Biblical Faith and Islam,” J. Dudley Woodberry describes the parallels between the beliefs of Christianity and of Islam. Most of his statements are accurate and quite insightful, but some of them are not as clear as they could be. At one point he says, referring to both Christians and Muslims, “We are both missionary religions with a message for all people.” First, it is unclear to assert that Christianity is a “religion,” and second, it doesn’t seem fair to claim that Islam has a message for all people, being that it is a deterministic belief system. Another unclear statement deals with the contrast between Christianity and Islam’s view of salvation. He states “the Muslim sees forgiveness and the

law as sufficient, for the kingdom can come by the habit of following the law. Conversely, the Christian sees the law as insufficient. A *transforming new life* is necessary (John 3:3, 5 Acts 2:38; Rom. 8:2-3, 9-11).” Of course, from a Free Grace perspective, it would not be accurate to use *transforming new life* as a synonym for *believe in Jesus*.

Living in the midst of pluralism, this book is very informative. Each author makes interesting assertions as to how we should view other religions in light of Christianity. Some of the essays are harder to follow than others, but the book being comprised of only six chapters makes it fairly readable. I would recommend this book for apologists, Bible scholars, and pastors. It probably would not appeal to the average reader.

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***Why Men Hate Going to Church.*** By David Murrow. Nashville: Nelson, 2005. 248 pp. Paper. \$13.99.

Reaching men (adult males) must become the number one priority in your church. David Murrow explains why and how. Murrow spends the first half of the book laying out the problems in the average church and why men don't like church (chaps. 1–16). The second half of the book is devoted to making suggestions on how to change the church so that it is more appealing to men (chaps. 17–25). I have always been leery of changing a church to meet the felt needs of a particular people-group, because following that road can easily become the trap of changing the church's message. But as I read the book, it dawned on me that the reason most women and children feel more comfortable in church than men is because we are already meeting their felt needs. Most of what we do in church has nothing to do with biblical principles, but has everything to do with following Victorian tradition and womanly ideals. To reach the men, we don't have to jettison everything that speaks to women and children, but we do need to add some masculine spirit into the mix.

For example, a church can take more risks, ask for a higher degree of commitment, move some ministries outdoors, add ministries that appeal to men (e.g., automotive care for single moms, construction, electrical

and plumbing work for the poor, sports camps for the kids, etc.), have less singing (or at least some more *manly* songs), and get rid of congregational hugging and hand holding. One thing that every church must do is focus on discipling men. Murrow points out that men don't follow programs; they follow other men (p. 152, 216). Furthermore, discipling men doesn't mean just having a men's Bible study where they are taught the Bible and theology, but should also include showing men how to live the Christian life, serve and lead others, and defend the faith.

Murrow's primary reason for focusing on men is that this is what Jesus did (p. 43). Though women were some of his most faithful followers, and children were among His greatest joys, Jesus focused on men first. People often focus on women and children because they are easier to reach, and most people become Christians before the age of 13. But Murrow points out that "when a mother comes to faith in Christ, the rest of the family follows 17 percent of the time. But when a father comes to faith in Christ, the rest of the family follows 93 percent of the time" (p. 47). The same study found that when you reach a child for Christ, the family follows only 3.5 percent of the time.

While one may legitimately question the accuracy of such percentages, neglecting ministry to men is surely unbiblical and illogical. Reaching men may be significantly more difficult than reaching women or children, but it is more effective. With men come church health, leadership, strength, money, and more families (pp. 45-47). Furthermore, the Christianity dropout rate among teenagers and college students (at epidemic proportions right now) is significantly lower when the father is involved in church.

While I don't agree with everything in the book (e.g., Murrow proposes that nothing in the Sunday service should last longer than 10 minutes—even the sermon; p. 178), and he seriously confuses the difference between the free gift of eternal life through faith in Christ and the high cost of following Jesus in discipleship (p. 163), for the discerning reader, this book is a "must read."

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# PERIODICAL REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

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**“A Critique of the ‘Exchanged Life’,”** Robert A. Pyne and Matthew L. Blackmon, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 2006): 131-57.

Since many Free Grace people hold to some form of Exchanged Life thinking, this article should be of great interest to most *JOTGES* readers.

The authors identify ten “contemporary advocates” of the Exchanged Life teaching: Neil Anderson, Tony Evans, Dwight Edwards (listed as a former senior pastor), Charles Stanley, June Hunt, Charles Solomon, Bill Gillham, David and Denise Glenn, and Ruth Myers (p. 133, fn. 5). Others whom they cite as leaders in this movement include Major Ian Thomas, David Needham, and Steve McVey (p. 133, fn. 5).

After giving a strong disclaimer that this is a broad movement, they say that “the distinctive teaching of Exchanged Life theology is that *believers will experience victory and happiness in the Christian life only be recognizing and living out the reality of the inherent change already produced in them at conversion*” (p. 133, italics theirs).

The outline out this article is a bit confusing. Here is the outline:

- I. Introduction.
- II. Man—a Tri-Unity
  - A. A New Identity
  - B. Continuing Struggles with Sin
  - C. Appropriating Christ’s Life
- III. A Response to Exchanged Life Teachings
  - A. Sharing the Secret
  - B. A Faulty Anthropology
  - C. Problems with Justification
  - D. The Wrong Questions
- IV. A Final Word

The three points under the second section do not seem to fit under the heading, “Man—a Tri-Unity.” A better title for this second section might have been, “The Exchanged Life Position Explained.” These sections are the most helpful in the article since they do capture the broad position, though not without caricaturing it in some ways.

The four points under section three are hard to follow. What is meant by “Sharing the Secret”? After reading the section, I’m still not sure. I think what the authors really mean by their first point is this: *Exchanged Life theology doesn’t work*. Note this quote: “Those feeling this burden [having tried to live the Exchanged Life, but continuing to struggle spiritually] should take heart. It is not their fault that the technique does not always work. Not only is the spiritual secret of Exchange Life theology not the key to Christian spirituality, but the search for any such secret is misguided” (p. 149).

One wonders whether they mean what they say here. Do the authors really believe that the Exchanged Life does work *sometimes*? In light of the entire article it is clear that they feel that this theology *never* works because in their view it is unbiblical and even anti-biblical.

The subpoint entitled “A Faulty Anthropology” covers so much ground that it is hard to see what the authors main point is. I found myself wondering if they truly understand the point that Needham, Evans, and others make about the new man. They seem to think that these authors are saying that believers are sinless both in what Paul calls the new and old man: “If the believer is now righteous, with no need for further transformation, there is no more need for grace” (p. 153).

The subpoint dealing with “Problems with Justification” is once again puzzling. The authors suggest that the Exchanged Life position essentially denies justification by faith alone and that logically undercuts assurance (pp. 153-54). Yet they give not a single quote by any contemporary Exchanged Life theologian who says anything to undercut assurance.

Actually, it is the position of the authors that undermines assurance. They say that the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification is that “personal transformation takes place progressively over time” (p. 154). If so, then why wouldn’t a person who was less than perfect have valid reason to wonder if he were truly regenerate? If personal transformation is guaranteed, then anyone who died as an alcoholic or immoral person would prove he had never been justified, would he not? Unless the authors have some way of being sure that they themselves will undergo continuing transformation in holiness until death, something the apostle Paul was not sure of (1 Cor 9:27), then they themselves are not sure of their own justification.

*JOTGES* readers will be chagrined to see that Dietrich Bonhoeffer is given by the authors as an example of one with a proper understanding of



justification by faith alone, one that supposedly would not hinder a person's assurance (pp. 154-55)!

I have questions about the final subsection, "The Wrong Questions." Why is it wrong to "focus attention on oneself" (p. 155)? Did not the apostle Paul do that repeatedly and invite us to do so as well in passages like 1 Cor 3:10-15, 9:24-27, Gal 6:6-10, and 2 Tim 4:6-8? Where in the Bible do we find that "sin is characterized by self-absorption" (p. 155)? And what exactly is meant by "self-absorption"? If we are made in God's image, are we not to desire what is good for us? Are we not to follow Jesus' example and live for the joy that is set before us (Heb 12:2)? Didn't Jesus command us to set our hearts on heavenly treasure (Matt 6:19-21)? Why do the authors feel compelled to pit the glory of God and the betterment of self against one another? Why can't a believer lay up present blessings and eternal rewards while glorifying God? Why must these motivations be seen as conflicting in any way?

The Exchanged Life position deserves a much clearer and fairer treatment than it received in this article. It is a position that has advocates who hold to Lordship Salvation, like David Needham, and others who are strong Free Grace advocates like Tony Evans and John Best. That should have been pointed out in this article. To suggest that this view of sanctification leads to a single view of justification by faith is to seriously confuse the reader.

While I personally agree with some of the criticisms in this article (e.g., the Bible does not strongly delineate the differences between the spirit and soul and indeed often uses these terms interchangeably), I found the discussion to be disjointed and hard to follow. While I strongly recommend this article, I warn the reader that if you aren't well read on this subject beforehand, you will likely be confused after reading it.

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**“The Rich Young Ruler and Salvation,”** Alan P. Stanley, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 2006): 46-62.

Alan Stanley provides a stimulating though limited discussion of the famous interaction between Jesus and the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-29; Mark 10:17-20; Luke 18:18-30). *JOTGES* readers will find his article especially thought-provoking. The author captures the tension well when he asks, “Did Jesus require obedience to the Law as a means of gaining eternal life” (p. 51)?

Stanley’s premise presupposes that the issue in this passage is one of eternal salvation. However, Stanley too quickly dismisses the view expressed by Zane Hodges and others that the passage deals not with eternal salvation but with discipleship (p. 46). Many who hold to the Free Grace view of eternal salvation interpret the rich young ruler passage as dealing with the believer’s rewards at the Bema judgment rather than with the means of obtaining eternal life. Although the present reviewer does not hold the discipleship view of the passage *per se*, Stanley’s article would have benefited from a more detailed interaction with this view.

The author suggests five alternative views of what Jesus means. He affirms the fifth view as the correct one.

In general, the author seems uncomfortable interpreting this passage as a presenting a contrast between the ruler’s dependence on the righteousness of the Law and righteousness that comes by faith. One wonders why such a general approach is so unappealing to Stanley since the context in all three gospel accounts, but especially in Matthew, points to an affirmation of faith as the only means of obtaining eternal life over and against the piety of Jewish legalism. Furthermore, from a theological synthesis standpoint, the broad problem of law-based righteousness within first century Judaism is stated repeatedly by the apostle Paul in such passages as Rom 9:30-33; 10:3-4, and Gal 2:21. The Jews thought they would enter the kingdom by means of their self-righteousness. Jesus taught that faith is the only means of obtaining eternal life (cf. Matt 5:20; John 3:16; 6:47; etc.).

The first view critiqued by Stanley is *the evangelistic strategy view* (p. 51). This view interprets the passage as suggesting a method of evangelism rather than providing the content of the gospel (p. 51). The idea is that Jesus is attempting to lead the rich young ruler down a path toward recognition of his lack of faith. Although it is true that the ruler indeed lacked faith, Stanley is correct in rejecting this view, which sees the pas-

sage more through the lens of contemporary evangelistic methodology rather than its historical-contextual setting.

The second view is *the social relationships view*. According to this view, Jesus' comments are intended to "expose the ruler's selfishness" (p. 52) and lack of concern for others. While it is true that the ruler exhibited selfishness, this view likewise is to be rejected for its overemphasis on one aspect of the interchange between Jesus and the ruler. It fails to see the forest for the trees.

The third view sees Jesus as *exposing the ruler's failure to keep the Law* because of his failure to keep the particular commandment to "love your neighbor." According to this view, the ruler fails to gain eternal life because he in fact "was not as obedient as he thought he was" (p. 52). Again, while it is true that the ruler evidenced a lack of love for his neighbor, the passage does not explicitly invoke this commandment and thus this view strains the context.

The fourth view is similar to the third view. It sees Jesus as saying that "one must obey the [entire] Law in order to gain eternal life" (p. 53). That is, *one must be completely righteous—and the kind of righteousness that heaven demands can only come by faith*. This is the present reviewer's interpretation of the passage. That the object of the rich young ruler's faith is the focus of the passage is made clear by Jesus' clarifying statement in Mark's account: "How hard it is for those who *trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:24). The issue is *trust*. The young man was trusting in the wrong thing to get him to heaven. Similar to His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was dealing with a self-righteous young man who felt he not only *possessed* eternal life but was worthy of a great *inheritance* in the life to come as well. Jesus dealt with the young man right where he was and held him accountable for keeping the entire law, which he claimed to have kept perfectly (Luke 18:21).

Throughout the article, Stanley fails to properly distinguish between *possessing* eternal life and *inheriting* rewards in eternity. In fact, on one occasion the author misquotes 1 Cor 6:6-9 and Gal 5:19-21 when he writes that "Paul warned that flagrant disobedience to God will prohibit anyone from *entering* the kingdom" (p. 54, italics added). The actual word in the texts cited is *inherit* not *enter*.

Because the rich young ruler asks about his *inheritance* in eternal life, many interpreters, especially those from the Free Grace perspective, have assumed that the passage is dealing primarily with discipleship.

However, the broader context in all three gospel accounts shows that eternal salvation is in view. Stanley himself provides a good overview of the biblical support for the eternal salvation context (pp. 46-47, fn. 6). The rich young ruler's reference to *inheriting* eternal life does not demand a discipleship understanding.

Stanley contends that the present reviewer's approach to the passage is incorrect because in his view "what barred the ruler from entering the kingdom was not the demands of the Mosaic Law, but his reluctance to part with his wealth—and thus to love the poor—and follow Jesus" (p. 55). Stanley believes that Jesus "actually expected this man to sell his possessions" (p. 53) and that "the ruler was to give up all that he had and follow Jesus" (p. 53) if he hoped to gain eternal life. Simply put, "the young man's failure to sell all that he had meant he could not enter the kingdom" (p. 56).

Such an approach to the passage violates a basic rule of hermeneutics by failing to distinguish between a rhetorical illustration and an actual prescriptive command. One must keep in mind that this interaction between Jesus and the rich young ruler occurs within the context of a narrative portion of Scripture. Jesus, as He often did, was using a rhetorical teaching device to make a point. He was not concerned with the literal, actual selling of possessions any more than He was concerned with a literal camel or a literal needle (Luke 18:25). It is an example of a figure of speech called hyperbole. Jesus' statement to the ruler is similar to His statement in the near context in Matthew's account that if one's eye causes him to stumble, he should "pluck it out" (Matt 18:9). Jesus no more wanted the young man to *sell all of his possessions* than He wanted those with a penchant for lust to *gouge out their eyes!*

Ironically, Stanley cites Matt 13:44 as a cross reference to support his contention that a literal selling of the man's possessions is in view (p. 53). Yet in Matt 13:44 the context is clearly figurative—there is no literal treasure or literal field. Likewise, in the rich young ruler passage, the discussion of selling possessions is merely metaphorical. The larger point that Jesus is making is that obtaining eternal life requires more than the righteousness of the Law.

In the end, Stanley's interpretation of the passage is just another in the long line of works-based gospels. He contends that "faith is not merely uttering some words; it is to be seen" (p. 60). In his view, this passage shows that "Jesus expected that anyone who will enter into life at the end of the age will have demonstrated a practical outworking of

righteousness” (p. 58) by doing things such as selling all their possessions and giving them to the poor. “Works,” he writes, “are the inevitable outflow of faith” (p. 60). Such a view of the gospel makes works determinative in one’s eternal salvation. This view suffers from a failure to distinguish between eternal salvation and discipleship. Eternal salvation is a free gift received by simple faith alone in Christ alone (cf. Rev 22:17; Rom 3:24; Eph 2:8-9). Indeed, more than 160 times the New Testament conditions eternal life upon faith alone. Conversely, discipleship is a process wherein Christians seek to consistently walk in obedience to the Spirit by yielding to Him and thereby earn rewards in heaven.

This works-based salvation model represents the most troublesome aspect of Stanley’s article. There are, however, other assertions within the article with which one might take issue. For instance, his suggestion that Peter’s question about the disciples’ inheritance in the kingdom (Matt 19:27) “actually reflects the disciples’ insecurity...over their own salvation” (p. 50) is utterly without contextual and theological support. And his suggestion that the present tense verbs used by Jesus’ in His description of kingdom behavior as part of His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-48) represent a “habitual pattern of life” (pp. 53-54, fn. 40) is an unsubstantiated appeal to the *progressive present* use of the present tense in Greek.

In summary, Stanley’s article is an affront to the pure, Free Grace gospel.

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**“Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: ‘Baptized for the Dead’ in 1 Corinthians 15:29,”** James E. Patrick, *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 71-85.

I have always been intrigued by Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 15:29 about believers being baptized for the dead. Bible students throughout the ages have wondered what Paul meant, and there is no lack of theories attempting to clarify Paul’s meaning. Some scholars have suggested that there are over two hundred interpretations of Paul’s words (p. 71), but

Patrick has only uncovered about forty, and accuses the much larger number of stemming “from hearsay rather than careful counting” (pp. 71-72).

I am not aware of all forty, but have encountered about half that many, and found Patrick’s suggestion quite appealing. He suggests that when new believers in Corinth were baptized, they credited their salvation to the truth they had heard or received from some of the apostles, many of whom were now dead. They did this because they wanted these deceased apostles to receive greater reward in eternity for the work they had done (p. 85).

He bases his position on how to understand what Paul means by the terms *baptism*, *for*, and *the dead* (p. 73). He takes *baptism* to be literal, sacramental baptism of new believers (p. 73). The word *for* he understands as “for the benefit of” (p. 76). He identifies *the dead* as physically dead people, particularly in reference to 15:6 where Paul refers to those witnesses of the resurrection who had fallen asleep (p. 75).

Patrick’s idea is not foreign to Scripture. Generally, the privilege of baptizing converts belonged “to the witness responsible for the conversion” but sometimes the baptism could be performed by his followers on his behalf if he were absent (cf. John 4:1-2; Acts 19:1-3; p. 76).

At various places throughout the article, Patrick refutes a few of the other theories that are out there. The strangest may be Luther’s idea that “converts were baptized ‘over’ or ‘above’ the ‘sepulchers of the martyrs’” (p. 75). Other, more common views are often addressed. For example, there is the metaphorical understanding of “baptism” so that it refers to “identification” with suffering that apostolic martyrs experienced (so Lightfoot, p. 73), the “washing” of dead bodies before burial (so Beza, p. 73), or the understanding that this baptism is for their own spiritually dead and physically dying body (so Tertullian and Chrysostom, p. 74). Patrick rejects such views, pointing out that “in every other passage where Paul speaks of baptism, it is in reference to sacramental baptism” (p. 73).

Based on the complete absence of Pauline denunciation of this practice, Patrick rightly concludes that whatever the Corinthians were doing, Paul would not “cite a practice he did not agree with to support his argumentation for the resurrection” (p. 77). Though Paul does not explicitly state approval for the practice, the fact that he cites it as support for his argument proves that all views which hold to some sort of saving efficacy in the baptism can be rejected. So, for example, interpretations

like that of the Mormons can be rejected where people can be baptized vicariously for dead ancestors not of the Mormon religion (p. 74).

There are several good arguments in favor of Patrick's view. First, the Corinthians liked to associate themselves with the ministry of certain apostles (1:12-13; 3:4). This would explain why some of them were baptized "on behalf of" some deceased apostles.

Second, some of the Corinthians did not believe in a resurrection (15:15-16). In refuting this, Paul refers to their practice of baptizing for the dead (15:29). Their practice is contradicting their beliefs (p. 79).

Third, Paul had previously mentioned eternal rewards, (3:1-15), the Corinthian desire to bring honor to the apostles (1:13-17), and how the Corinthians themselves would be part of Paul's apostolic reward when he stood before Christ (3:10; 4:14-15). This reward can only be received in the resurrection, and if the Corinthians wanted the dead apostles to receive the reward they were ascribing to them by baptizing new believers for these apostles, resurrection was necessary.

Ultimately, it is impossible to be dogmatic about what Paul's statement means. Patrick presents a good case for his position, and Free Grace readers will find that his view fits well with the Pauline emphasis on eternal rewards. For that reason, I highly recommend this article.

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