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Life Though Faith

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel ... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.”

(Romans 1:16, 17a)

There is no question as to the fact that the impact of Martin Luther's hammer upon the Wittenberg door on that 1st Reformation Day so many years ago did more than just scratch the surface of the wood. It cut deep into the lives of millions and millions of people bringing to them a whole new life! No movement could ever achieve the widespread success of Luther's Movement unless there was some kind of realization amongst the people of his time that what he taught and what he said was life-enriching. They had to know that

what Luther said was going to change them forever and that it would change them on the very deepest level possible.

I called what happened on that first Reformation Day “*Luther's Movement*” but that's not really right, is it? What Martin Luther did when he set the reformation in motion was to rediscover and re-emphasize the teaching of the Bible. The teaching of the Bible tells us of how God enters our lives. It teaches that the Christian faith is not just for church; it is not

just for those who work in the church; it is for all of us and it is for every part of our lives. And so, it is not Luther's Movement that we celebrate this month. No, the reformation was God's movement.

The Teaching of Paul

This same teaching of how God enters our lives was the key to the huge success of the church when Christianity first began. The Apostle Paul went thru the whole Roman Empire preaching the message of salvation thru Jesus Christ. Paul taught that Jesus Christ was crucified, risen, and ascended into heaven, and that thru Him comes the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. In addition, Paul spoke and



Volume 53, No. 8 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) “*And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’ (Judges 7:20).*”

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wrote of how a new life in Christ was supposed to change the whole person, making the born again believer a child of God who lives for God in every part of life.

Some people were hostile to the teaching and preaching of the Word in Paul's time, just like they were in Martin Luther's time, and just like they are today. But there were many who sensed that the salvation offered through the finished work of Jesus Christ upon Calvary's cross was exactly the salvation that they needed in their lives.

For too long the people had been held captive by the church. For too long the Pharisees and Sadducees had been telling people how to live their lives. For too long the scribes and Sanhedrin had been controlling the church, dictating and prescribing every move the people made. The church leaders had placed themselves above the people. Those in the church claimed that they were chosen by God to be in the temple and everyone else was just a common layperson. The true Word of God had been silenced.

The Teaching of Thomas Aquinas

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the powerful, cleansing, life-changing Word of God had once again been buried and silenced. The Bible's clear call to live according to God's plan for life was muffled by human conceit, ignorance, and superstition.

A medieval monk by the name of Thomas Aquinas had started the deterioration of the church by once again dividing human life

into two different compartments: one for nature and one for grace.

In the sphere of grace, which Aquinas called the supernatural, he placed God in heaven, the angels, man's soul, and all the influences of the supernatural upon man through the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. This realm, Aquinas claimed, belonged to the church.

In the lower realm of nature, Thomas Aquinas placed all the created beings and all earthly things. It included man's passions, the

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State, politics, and social life. These, reasoned Aquinas, the layman could take care of. The church would take care of the spiritual.

One of the natural by-products of making the church the authority of all things spiritual was that the Bible began to take a back seat in religion once again. In fact, only the church was allowed to have a Bible. After all, only the church could interpret the Bible correctly. What obviously followed was that once the church claimed responsibility for everyone's spiritual life, the people became less spiritual. The church would take care of

them. Soon the Biblical message of Salvation thru Jesus Christ was forgotten.

The Teaching of John Tetzel

Once the church was in charge of everyone's spiritual well-being, it began to build beautiful, elaborate cathedrals in which to harbor the spiritual things. Over time, the church began to sell the forgiveness of sins for money in order to pay for these buildings and their upkeep.

It wasn't long before a Roman Catholic priest by the name of John Tetzel began to sell forgiveness for those who had already died. According to Tetzel, for only a few dollars a person could buy the forgiveness of sins for a dear departed relative. That relative would then be moved out of purgatory and into heaven. And of course, the worse the reputation of the deceased, the greater the cost of the forgiveness. Tetzel would also provide a beautifully written document, suitable for framing, to prove that your relative was no longer in purgatory. John Tetzel's selling of indulgences represented the depths to which religion had fallen.

The Teaching of Martin Luther

Nothing is more deadly, more terrifying to the soul, than false religion. False religion had earlier driven Martin Luther to despair as he tried to earn his own salvation. For years he would sleep in the monastery, not on the bed in his room, but on the cold, damp floor hoping that such suffering for Christ's sake would earn him a place in heaven. For years he

would climb the stone stairs of the monastery on his knees until they would be raw and bleeding, hoping against hope that such actions would earn him forgiveness of sins. Oh, how Luther longed to be like the righteous man he read about in the Psalms.

Then one day, by the grace of God and thru the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the truth of the gospel dawned upon Martin Luther. He discovered the Bible. He discovered passages like Romans 1:17 “...the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith .. as it is written, the just shall live by faith.”

But a faith in what? The church? That certainly seemed to be the understanding of the day. The church would take care of your spiritual life and if the church failed your descendants could always buy your way into heaven.

The dismal, mercenary sales pitch of Tetzl compelled Luther to take issue with the church. His response was the ninety-five theses nailed upon the Wittenburg door on October 31, 1517. It is not the church that saves a person, Luther claimed, it is the GOSPEL. Faith needs to be in GOD - in the sovereignty of God!

The rediscovery of the sovereignty of God led to a rediscovery of God's Word. The Word of God began to be preached. The Word of God was placed in the hands of the people. Through this radical reformation, the people came to see that God's Lordship extended far beyond the church as an institution, but that instead, His lordship was to include all of life.

Martin Luther wanted to change the way the organized church was thinking at that time. Unfortunately, the church did not want to change. It liked having control over the lives of the people and so it rejected the teachings of Martin Luther.

In time, the people rejected the church. They no longer would accept the medieval dichotomy in which they had found themselves. No longer could they accept the idea that life was divided into two

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parts - grace and nature. Thomas Aquinas was wrong and the Word of God was right. The people saw from God's Holy Word that God ruled over all things and that the grace of God extended to every part of life!

With this new outlook on life came the insistence that man had the responsibility to examine all things in the light of God's Word and then to use all things God had given them to His glory. For Luther, and for countless others, this discovery of life through faith was like having a storm cloud pass and seeing once again the glorious rays of God's Son.

The Teaching of Today

The church today stands at the

crossroads. Her situation is remarkably similar to the conditions found in the days of Paul when the church wanted complete control over the destiny of man and also in the days of the late Middle Ages when the Roman Catholic Church wanted complete control over everyone's spiritual lives.

We see in many instances the church telling us what we must believe. We see them placing the Bible on the back shelf claiming to have a new interpretation, a new way of looking at God and life. Churches today promote evolution, feminism, and homosexuality. They write and preach about the Openness of God rather than the Sovereignty of God.

In addition, we are being taught a new religion called "tolerance". If you have any religion, keep it to yourself. We have placed all religions on the same level. Jehovah or Allah - what's the difference? The Bible, the Koran or the Book of Mormon - who cares? Just be true to yourself. Tolerance among religions has accomplished what persecution and martyrdom could not. It has convinced the believer that he could be wrong, that there are other beliefs, other ways to heaven and that there are more important things in life than religion.

Today Islam is the fastest growing religion in the Northern Hemisphere. Many of the churches that proclaimed the Reformed faith in the Netherlands are now Mosques. In our country it is the same way. There are all kinds of occults that teach the worship of false gods and the worship of demons. There are cults rising up



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teaching escapism. There are all kinds of denominations that teach humanism. There are even churches today that teach that you can buy your way into heaven and you can earn your forgiveness just like in Martin Luther's day. Oh yes, there are plenty of John Tetzels in the organized church today.

These false religions should serve to prove to us not only the total depravity of mankind, but also how hungry people are for truth and righteousness. We are just as much in bondage to death as were the people at the time of the Reformation. How great the desire people today have for a peace and comfort the world cannot offer. Oh, how much the world needs the gospel! How much we need to hear about faith in Christ and how faith in Christ leads to a changed life in every part of life.

The Teaching of God

During the Reformation the Bible was taken out of the Holy of Holies, that is the Latin Language, and lifted up into the pulpit in the people's own language. Once again a great Pentecost event took place as the people were hearing the glorious truths of Scripture spoken to them in their own language.

Martin Luther's message, John Calvin's message, the message of all the reformers came from the pages of the Bible. Preaching

flourished. Thousands of people heard the Word of God proclaimed in their own language for the first time. As they heard the good news of the gospel, they came to know life thru faith and how faith affected every part of life.

The response of the people to this preaching is often overlooked as we celebrate the Reformation. It is important for us to know that their increase in faith came as a response to the Bible. The Bible alone tells us that Jesus lives, that Jesus loves and that faith in Jesus effects everything about you.

A faith for all of life is a faith that drives us to our knees - not to climb stairs seeking to earn salvation - but in repentance and in confession of our sins. Through the Holy Spirit, such a faith will unite us with the Savior and give us assurance of eternal life.

Your faith should be the most important thing that there is about you. It should influence everything you do, everything you say, and everything about you in life. With true faith you are out of danger from God's wrath because, as Romans 1:17 says, a righteous-

ness from God has been revealed to you. Faith in Jesus Christ makes all the difference. The re-discovery of this gospel brought life and peace to thousands of people in Paul's day and during the Reformation centuries ago. Let it do the same for you.

Rev. Wybren Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan and editor of *The Outlook*.

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The Odyssey of Jonathan Edwards [1703-1758]

Three hundred years ago this month (October 5), Jonathan Edwards greeted the world in East Windsor, Connecticut. He was the lone son of Rev. Timothy Edwards and his wife, Esther Stoddard Edwards. But Jonathan was not the sole child—he had ten sisters. This auspicious year (1703) was also the year of John Wesley’s birth. The great American Calvinist and the great British Arminian would share natal years, but their soteriology would be as distant as the span of the Atlantic Ocean (and beyond).

To Yale

Edwards was precocious. By age seven, he had learned Latin (from the ‘home school’ tutelage of his father). By 1716, at age twelve, he had added Greek and Hebrew to his vocabulary. In that twelfth year, he matriculated at the Collegiate School of Connecticut (later Yale College, now Yale University) in the branch campus at Wethersfield, Connecticut.

Three years later, Edwards moved to New Haven for his senior year. He graduated first in his class with his Bachelor’s degree at age sixteen (1720). After two more years at Yale (1720-22) in which he labored on his Masters degree, Jonathan Edwards received a call to a Presbyterian Church in New York City (a branch congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of that locale). The small fledgling congregation was destined to fail from financial problems and Edwards was

back in Connecticut in April 1723 after a nine month ‘pastorate’. Returning to his Masters studies, he completed the requisite thesis in September 1723. It was entitled “A Sinner is Not Justified before God except through the Righteousness of Christ obtained by Faith”.

To Northampton

A short ‘pastoral’ sojourn in Bolton, Connecticut (November 1723 - Spring 1724) ended when he was invited to serve as Tutor at Yale (1724-26). In August 1726, his maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, invited Jonathan to assist him in the church at Northampton, Massachusetts. Solomon Stoddard, the ‘Pope’ of the Connecticut Valley, had labored in Northampton for 55 years. Stoddard’s peculiar view of the Lord’s Table was to be portentous: he invited non-communicant persons to the Table in the hope that they would be converted by means of the experience. In 1726, Jonathan little realized the ominous significance of his grandfather’s ‘converting ordinance’ view of the Lord’s Supper.

Edwards was ordained to the ministry February 15, 1727 and served with his grandfather until the latter’s

death February 11, 1729. Meantime, he married Sarah, a seventeen-year-old member of the wealthy Pierrepont family in New Haven. Edwards was 23 years old at the time, but confessed that he had been smitten with Sarah when she was 13.

The union between them was to produce eleven children. Relief from the duties of parenting was found by Jonathan and Sarah in delightful afternoon horseback rides in which Jonathan would discuss the profoundly penetrating ruminations of his amazing mind with his best beloved. Associating each thought with a piece of paper pinned to his great coat, Sarah would help him arrange and record the thoughts on their return to the parsonage.

From 1729, Edwards was alone in the shoes of the ‘Pope’ of Northampton. Preaching was his work; it was his meat and drink. For 13 hours per day (according to his first biographer, Samuel Hopkins), Edwards labored over his sermons in his study. The heart of his work was the justification of God in his mercy—and his wrath. And this drove Jonathan Edwards to Jesus Christ. The Son of the Father is the chief affection of the believer—an affection generated by the breath of the Holy Spirit. One of the favorite terms for the person and work of Christ on the Edwards

In 1726, Jonathan little realized the ominous significance of his grandfather’s ‘converting ordinance’ view of the Lord’s Supper.



tongue (and pen) was the word “sweet”. Christ Jesus was the sweetest Savior; his grace was the sweetest favor; his presence was the sweetest savor.

To Boston

Edwards was not to be destined to revel in Christ’s sweetness without the furnace of controversy. The hostility began when he was asked to deliver the ‘Great and Thursday Lecture’ on July 8, 1731. All Boston turned out to hear the ‘Pope’s’ grandson address them on the topic “God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man’s Dependence upon Him, in the whole of it.” It was a straightforward declaration of *sola gratia*.

Boston objected. Boston in 1731 had already subtly embraced Arminianism and worse, Latitudinarianism and Deism. As Edwards exalted classic Reformed doctrines of free grace, man’s native depravity, the sinner’s dependence on God alone—yea Christ alone—for salvation, Boston’s elite winced and cringed. Edwards was too old-fashioned for their progressive lights. The young grandson of Solomon Stoddard would most definitely not be invited back!

Revival

Two years after he had caused a stir in Boston, the Holy Spirit began to stir the hearts in his own hometown and congregation. While Edwards rebuked the young people of his church for their Sabbath evening ‘frolics’ (drinking bouts, lewd songs and language, general Sabbath desecration), he also invited them to his home/parsonage to meet with him and discuss “the things of the Lord.” The young

people agreed, suspended their ‘frolics’ and turned to Bible study and discussion with their pastor on Sabbath evenings. It was the beginning of the “surprising conversions”.

The following year (1734), Edwards launched a series of sermons on justification by faith. Within a year, the Northampton revival was at its peak. Edwards himself was surprised and catalogued the revolution at Northampton in the *Faithful Narrative of Surprising Conver-*

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sions (1737). John Wesley was to read Edwards’s book the year after its publication as he walked from London to Oxford. He wrote, “This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Back in Massachusetts, the Northampton church had returned to ‘normal’ by 1736. One factor in the decline in fervor was the suicide of Edwards’s uncle (Joseph Hawley) who imagined that a voice had commanded him to slit his throat. Hawley had suffered from extreme depression, but his death depressed the revival in the village.

The Great Awakening

Four years later, the Grand Itinerant, George Whitefield, arrived in Northampton at the height of the Great Awakening. Edwards invited Whitefield to spend four days in the Edwards home. When Whitefield preached on the Lord’s day, Jonathan Edwards sat before him in tears. Whitefield’s preaching was sweet, too!

It was during the Awakening in July 1741 that Edwards delivered the most famous sermon in American history: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Most of us have been exposed to Edwards via this message. For power and imagery, it is probably unsurpassed.

Yale Commencement

In the fall of 1741, Edwards was invited to deliver the commencement address at Yale, his alma mater. The address formed the basis of his book *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the True Spirit of God* (1741). In that speech and work, Edwards was defending the Great Awakening against its critics. Yes, there were excesses in the Awakening—especially the ‘falling down fits,’ ‘swoons’ and the noisy outcries heard in many venues. But Edwards cautioned that the critics not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Excesses did not negate the genuine work of the Holy Spirit. That work was a sincere love for God Himself—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Edwards emphasized that bodily effects were not a true mark of the work of the Holy Spirit. The true work was the regenerating act of the Holy Spirit on the heart—a

Edwards urged his hearers/readers to turn from self-love to God-in-Christ-by-the-Holy-Spirit love.

work evidenced in love for Christ. In his follow-up book, *Charity and its Fruits* (an exposition of 1 Corinthians 13), Edwards directed his readers to Paul's central affection—love for Jesus Christ. Love of one's personal religious experience was emotionalism, fanaticism, subjectivism because it was anthropocentric (me-centered because man-centered). But love for Christ was other-oriented, theocentric and Christocentric passion. Such affection for Jesus looked away from self to the Savior. In accordance with the apostle's emphasis (*Distinguishing Marks* was an exposition of 1 John 4), Edwards urged his hearers/readers to turn from self-love to God-in-Christ-by-the-Holy-Spirit love.

Bad Book Incident

Back in Northampton, normalcy had begun to brew hostility to the village pastor. In 1744, squabbles erupted over Edwards's salary (it was withheld by the church); over Sarah's clothing and jewelry (she was "vain"). But the lid blew off when the village boys got hold of a book on midwifery. The boys began to taunt the village girls as "nasty creatures"—even teased them in public about their menstrual periods.

To Jonathan Edwards, this was public lewdness as well as disrespect for the way God had created the female of the species. At the close of a worship service, Edwards read a list of persons who

were summoned to appear before the elders. But in reading the names, Edwards did not distinguish between the accused and those being summoned merely as witnesses. All Northampton broke out in an uproar. While three boys were disciplined by the church as a result (and they declared their contempt for the authority of the elders in language which would outrage even us in this profane era!), the damage to Edwards's pastorate was irreversible.

For four years (1744-48), Edwards was the object of bickering and backbiting. Most of it arose from the town merchants, who resented Edwards's authority and counsel, i.e., that the Bible and the preached Word are the rule of life in the community of the saints—even when the saints do "business". Moneyed interests in Christendom face the same dilemma even now. Will they use their God-given wealth to serve the Lord Jesus; or will their money be the club which they hold over the humble servants of Christ? Every wealthy Christian should beware of riches (as Christ and the entire New Testament warns them). For wealth used against God's true and humble servants is the tool of the Devil.

Break with his Grandfather

The last straw was a flashback to Edwards's grandfather and the Lord's Supper. Jonathan came to believe that Scripture did not present the Lord's Supper as a con-

verting ordinance. When he published his views (*An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a complete standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* [1749]), his detractors accused him of demanding assurance of salvation for admission to the Table.

Edwards required a credible profession of faith for admission to the Lord's Supper (i.e., a knowledge of the basic teaching of the Christian faith; a profession of acceptance of that doctrine; a life which reflected that profession).

While this may seem like a 'no brainer' to us, we must remember that Stoddard's position allowed people at the Table who had made no profession of faith at all. Hence Edwards's change of mind was a rejection of his sainted relative and a bar to social acceptance in the community. Such a shift was unforgivable.

To Stockbridge

On June 22, 1750, Edwards was overwhelmingly dismissed from his pulpit (the vote was 200 to 20, a margin of 10 to 1 against him). Ironically, he was asked to remain and supply the pulpit for over a year after his dismissal.

Unemployed, Edwards, his wife and ten children left Northampton in November 1751. The family made their way west to an Indian village and frontier stockade at Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Here Jonathan Edwards, erudite, profound, powerful preacher, proclaimed the riches of the gospel to the Mahican/Mohican and Mohawk Indians. How did the great theolo-



gian communicate with the (mostly) illiterate Native Americans? Very plainly and very patiently. Here is a sample outline of a sermon on Hebrews 11:14-16 preached to the aboriginal Americans: (1) This world is an evil country; (2) Heaven is a better country. Gracious simplicity from a theological genius!

The Stockbridge years gave Edwards peace—peace and time to write. His greatest works date from these years of relative quiet in which he put down on paper books which had been rumbling about in his mind (and jotted down in his notebooks) for years. The magnificent *Freedom of the Will* (1754) which, once understood, makes Arminianism an impossibility; indeed impossible because absurd!! *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (1758), a tour de force against Pelagianism, so profound that John Murray was fascinated by it. The *History of Redemption* (finished in 1739, but first published in 1774) was his attempt at a “body of divinity on a entirely new principle.” In fact, it is a faltering stab at an elementary biblical theology.

To Princeton and Christ's Sweet Presence

In 1757, the call to leave Stockbridge came from Princeton, New Jersey. The College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) had lost its President, Edwards's son-in-law, Aaron Burr, to death. The father-in-law was sought by the revival party at Princeton as a replacement. Edwards reluctantly answered the call and in January 1758 left Stockbridge for the long, lonely horseback ride to Princeton. He was installed President Edwards on February 16.

When the threat of a smallpox epidemic was noised about, Edwards submitted to inoculation as a proposed preventative. Whether his lifelong constitutional weakness (like Calvin, Edwards was rarely “well”—“weak in body,” as George Whitefield described him), the absence of his very attentive wife, the depletion from the arduous winter journey from Massachusetts to New Jersey—whatever the physiological cause, Edwards died from the inoculation on March 22.

The unbiased reading of Edwards finds him a classic Calvinist with profound insights into historic Reformed truths.

Edwards was buried in Princeton cemetery where his gravestone stands as a mute witness to America's only native-born genius (and he a theologian!). “The greatest thinker that America has produced”—James McCosh. “We are, with Edwards, in the hands of one of the great minds of world history”—Bruce Kuklick.

The name Jonathan Edwards continues to fascinate and alienate. Many, even in the Reformed movement, have a love-hate relationship with Edwards. He has been excoriated as an “incipient Arminian.” Such slander is as ignorant as it is vicious. And yet he is embraced for

delaying the triumph of Arminianism for at least a hundred years (as B. B. Warfield pointed out). The unbiased reading of Edwards finds him a classic Calvinist (see the sympathetic treatment in John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 volumes) with profound insights into historic Reformed truths.

Postscript

The standard biographies by Perry Miller (*Jonathan Edwards*), Ola Winslow (*Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*), Patricia Tracy (*Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*) are complemented (and corrected) by Iain Murray (*Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*). George Marsden's newest is entitled *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. But the sleeper in this biographical catalogue is M. X. Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards* (1988). Unfortunately out-of-print, Lesser masterfully interweaves biography with theological development (through succinct summaries of Edwards's writings) in an uncannily scintillating manner. It is the finest brief outline of Edwards and his Christianity ever put to paper.

The Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* has now reached 19 volumes. More than 27 volumes are projected. Yet the final Yale edition of 27 tomes will be but half of what Edwards wrote. Were we to have the entire Edwardsean written corpus, it would reach to 55 volumes and beyond. A CD-ROM version of Edwards *in toto* is being discussed by Yale. Precocious; prolific; profound; protean indeed!

The Yale project is but one part of the living voice of the 'Last Puritan'. But it is also the lives of men and women and children changed by the preaching, teaching and writing of Jonathan Edwards which will be his legacy until his Lord—until Jonathan Edwards's sweet Lord Jesus Christ returns.

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Jesus Christ is Man

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

There are many people who claim to be Christians who will ask you: “Who cares if Jesus was just a man or if He was just God? Why does He have to be both God and man? That is a hard thing for us to understand and believe. What difference does it make so long as you believe in Jesus? After all is said and done, that’s all that is important. That you believe in Jesus.”

But who is this Jesus in whom you believe? You may confess that Jesus saves you from your sin, but why is He able to save you when you cannot save yourself and when others are also unable to save you?

Through the centuries there have been many people who have tried to answer that question. Many of them have advocated either the deity or the humanity of Jesus - confessing one and denying the other. Through the centuries we have seen how wrong these teachings are.

One of these teachers who denied the divinity of Jesus was Paul of Samosata, a bishop of Antioch in 260 AD. He advocated that Jesus was born a human, the son of Joseph and Mary, who was adopted by God the Father at the baptism of Jesus. Another was named Arius who believed that Jesus was created by the Father before the heavens and the earth. As created, Jesus would be subordinate to the

Father and certainly not equal to the Father.

Those who denied the humanity of Jesus were the second century Gnostics. They believed anything made out of matter was evil. Therefore, they reasoned, if Jesus were human, he would be made out of matter and He would be evil. Since Jesus was perfect and without sin, he could not be evil, and therefore He had to be truly God, but not human.

In the third century, Sabellus taught that there was only one Person in the Godhead who manifested Himself in different ways. When God created, He was the Father; when He redeemed, He was the Son; and when He sanctifies, He is the Holy Spirit. But, reasoned Sabellus, God is always the same Person.

One may argue today that this is all ancient history. Nobody thinks that way anymore. Have you ever had a Jehovah’s Witness knock on your door? Ask him if he believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ. He will say that he does not. He believes the same thing Arius did. Other cults that deny the divinity of Christ include the Moonies, Mormons, Christian Science, and the Worldwide Church of God, to name a few. The list that denies the humanity of Jesus is equally long. All of them are around today boldly proclaiming that which is not true.



An Important Truth

It is vital for us to know the truth. We cannot make the mistake of thinking that it doesn't matter who Jesus is as long as we believe in Him. Once a person is exposed to the truth of God's Word, he has the responsibility to receive that Word. To reject God's truth is to reject salvation.

Question and Answer 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks why it is so important that we believe that Jesus is truly human. The answer is clear. Man sinned and man must pay for his sin. The Bible is very clear that the wages of sin is death. Man must die. Human flesh must pay the penalty.

Before the beginning, in the eternal counsels of God, Jesus foresaw all human history and knew that He was the One who would redeem the chosen children of God. In the fullness of time, in the days of Herod, the Second Person of the Trinity took upon Himself flesh and blood - a body - so that He could offer up that body as the perfect sacrifice for Man's sin.

The death of Jesus is the theme of the Old Testament beginning already in Genesis 3. The sacrifices

of the Old Testament prefigure the sacrifice of Christ; the prophets foretell what the Messiah would accomplish. Paul writes that Abraham was saved because of his faith in God's promise of a coming Savior.

In the New Testament, the angel announced that the Christ was to be given the name "Jesus" because He would save His people from their sins. Jesus often spoke of the suf-

The most important reason for the humanity of Jesus was that it made it possible for Him to die for our sin.

fering that He would have to endure. The success of His mission was the crucifixion. In light of all that the Word of God teaches, the most important reason for the humanity of Jesus was that it made it possible for Him to die for our sin.

Truly Righteous

It was not enough that Jesus died as

a human. If that were all that was necessary, He could have been born in the manger and died before the wise men ever met Him. Jesus also had to live as a human; He had to suffer as a human; and He had to be obedient to His Father as a human.

A sinner cannot pay for the sins of another sinner. Sinners have enough trouble of their own. They cannot pay for their own sins let alone someone else's sins. What we need as sinners is someone who is holy, blameless, and unstained to pay for our sin. We need a sinless human being.

Hebrews 4 points out that Jesus was tempted at all points as we are, and yet He was without sin. There were no supernatural advantages for Jesus. He felt pain. He became hungry and tired. There were no celestial angels rescuing Jesus from the power of evil men. Christ's agony upon the cross was not lessened by some superhuman anesthetic. We cannot begin to imagine the anguish that caused Jesus to sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, nor the anguish He must have felt as He cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

It is in His suffering that we are set free. In His weariness, His disappointments, in His being misunderstood, and in the pain of His life that we can know Jesus, the Christ, as truly human. In His humanity, He is able to understand us when we grow weary, when we are disappointed, and when we are misunderstood. Because He was tempted in every way that we are tempted, He is able to understand us when we are tempted.

Q *Why must he be truly human and truly righteous?*

A *God's justice demands it; man has sinned, man must pay for his sin, but a sinner cannot pay for others.*

As the perfect sinless human, Jesus is able to understand us. He experienced all that we will ever experience. And so much more. As the perfect sin offering upon the cross, Jesus experienced the wrath of God for our sin so that we should never have to experience that wrath. Jesus took upon Himself our sin as a truly righteous being. By doing that, He fulfilled the demands of God's justice.

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1527: The Ten Year Anniversary of the Reformation

On October 31, churches throughout the world celebrate the nailing of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Chapel door. The event represents the outpouring of Christianity unshackled and blossoming. Like Hilkiah finding the Book of the Law, the thirty-four year old Luther began to re-proclaim the doctrinal "solos" to the world: scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and the recognition that all of life is lived to the glory of God alone. For over five hundred years, these biblical truths reclaimed by the Reformation have transformed individual lives and entire societies. Truly, churches do well to celebrate the victory of the Reformation.

But like all victories, we tend to overlook the struggles involved. We may even romanticize the Reformation. We see the triumphs, and think that God blesses particular individuals like Luther with great growth and success, while the rest of us struggle through our Christian lives with failures and hardship.

Just ten years after the posting of the Ninety Five Theses, we find the forty-four year old Luther one of the most famous men in Europe. In 1527, he preached sixty sermons, lectured to students, wrote one hundred letters and fifteen tracts, and spent time working on his translation of the Old Testament. He did all this while having the responsibilities of a husband, father, minister, teacher, and political advisor. One

can find this productivity throughout all of his life. We would like to think that God must have blessed Luther by making his life easier so he could concentrate on God's work.

But a closer look at Luther in 1527 shows some surprising details. Scholars mark this as the year Luther's health increasingly began to deteriorate. It is recorded that he had several fainting spells, even fainting during a sermon. Luther, a man who loved to preach, had to stop preaching for a while. He also complained of intense pain in his chest, accompanied by painful buzzing in the ears. It had become so severe that it was thought he was about to die.

News of this spread quickly, and fear gripped the people of Wittenberg. An entire deathbed scene of "Luther's last words" was recorded in which Luther, surrounded in bed by his closest companions, voiced a deep concern for his pregnant wife and infant son: "Lord God, I thank Thee for having allowed me to be a poor beggar on earth. I leave no house, property, or money. But you gave me a wife and children, I commend them unto Thee. Feed, instruct, and preserve them as Thou hast preserved me, O Thou Father of children and widows."

Luther recovered, but his physical condition continued only to become worse from this point. This physical weakness brought on serious bouts



of depression. This melancholy would accompany Luther throughout his life.

As he struggled with failing health, he would at times wish for death to release him from the pain brought on by intense headaches, dizziness, arthritis, digestion problems, infections, and uric acid stones, to name only some of his maladies. In his pain, he questioned whether or not God had abandoned him. He wrote to Melancthon, "I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints [Luther's friends] God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below."

Some may be surprised to read these words by Luther. How could a man who stood alone against the Catholic Church and Roman Empire show such a lack of faith? My belief is that Luther was like all of us. We at times stand strong, and at other times we cry out to God to increase our faith. Where Luther lacked faith in 1527, he also displayed it remarkably in other instances.

The plague ravaged Wittenberg that same year. Many of Luther's friends died, and his students and colleagues fled for their lives.

Luther's son even became ill for a time. Luther though felt "public servants, preachers, mayors, judges, doctors, policemen, and neighbors of the sick who have no one to take care of them are on duty and must remain." He did not begrudge those who fled, "for to flee dying and death and to save one's own life is a natural instinct implanted by God and is not forbidden." But for Luther, fleeing the plague was not an option. He turned his house into a makeshift hospital, where he and his pregnant wife took care of the dying. The house was quarantined, remaining so even after the plague subsided.

This was the year 1527 for Luther, the ten-year anniversary of the Reformation. How many of us in Luther's place would question whether or not God was chastising us for sin? How many of us would question whether or not we were missing God's will for our lives? How many of us would wonder why we were not successful in our Christian ministry? Luther though, expressed profound understanding for all these trials: "The only comfort against raging Satan is that we have God's Word to save the souls of believers."

In all these trials, Luther clung to that Word, and its promise that it would see believers through the difficulties of life, and that it alone showed us Christ and our salva-

tion, the only really important thing. Luther best expressed this at the end of the troubled year 1527, by penning, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Luther expresses that in our trials, God will be victorious, and so will we.

And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God has willed His truth to triumph through us.

The prince of darkness grim? We tremble not for him.

His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure.

One little word shall fell him.

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How could a man who stood alone against the Catholic Church and Roman Empire show such a lack of faith?

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 3: Of Holy Scripture

The prophet Amos once proclaimed an age of darkness for the Old Covenant people of God, when he said

‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.’ (Amos 8:11)

Of course that age ended when prophecy was restored in John the Baptist and the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. But one wonders if what the prophet said about God’s people 750 years before the coming of Christ does not apply to the situation we find ourselves in today. For example, in a 1997 survey, church growth advocate George Barna says that many American Christians claim to believe the Bible, but have their own beliefs about what it teaches. He writes:

Correcting people’s mistaken assumptions about Bible content is made nearly impossible by their self-assurance about their beliefs. Even if they are exposed to good Bible teaching they typically fail to absorb that input because they think they already know it all. Changing the errant

theological positions of millions of Americans is a very tough assignment.¹

Some of these errors are serious. 80% of born again Christians agree that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves. Others are downright humorous: 12% of adults believe that the name of Noah’s wife was Joan of Arc.

We, as historic Protestants, must not only know what we believe but why we believe it. Our Confession, then, begins a survey of the nature of Scripture. Notice that it spends five articles on this doctrine to press home the point to us that this is *God’s Word*, this is *God’s teaching* about Himself, from Himself, to us. Remember from our last article that Article 2 of the Belgic Confession says that God “makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word.” So what is it about this Word, that makes it able to do this?

What is “Inspiration?”

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that “men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit,” as the apostle Peter says ...Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.

When we confess that the Scriptures are “holy and divine,” we are saying that they are “inspired.” What is this all about? It seems to me that there is no better brief definition of inspiration than that of B.B. Warfield. The great Princeton theologian defines it as:

A supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness.”²

It is the power of God upon the authors of Scripture that guarantees and ensures that their words will be God’s words, without mistakes or errors. But where do we find this taught in Holy Scripture itself?

Deuteronomy 18:18-20

There are three main texts on the inspiration of Scripture, the first of which is God’s words to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18-20. Here the LORD promises to give a prophet like Moses. And notice that the LORD Himself “will put My words in His mouth” (v. 18). The prophet will speak “all that I command Him” (v. 18) and “in My name” (v. 19). And the false prophet speaks words “which I have not commanded him” (v. 20).

So did the prophets and other writers of Scripture simply hear a whisper of God and then write exactly what they heard? There are some times when the LORD actually gave the prophets the exact words to speak; but the majority of time they spoke “in My name” (v. 19), and as we shall see, this means that God was guiding and preserving the pen of the writers.



II Timothy 3:15-17

Another text on the inspiration of Scripture is in II Timothy 3:15-17. Here Paul reminds Timothy that the words of God he grew up hearing “are able to make you wise for salvation” (v. 15). And why? Paul goes on to say that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (v. 16).

Here Paul uses an interesting compound word, which is never used anywhere else in the New Testament. The compound word he uses is *theopneustos*. *Theos* is the Greek word for “God” and *pneustos* is the word for “spirit, breath, wind.” The phrase in the New King James, “inspiration of God” is not as good as the NIV which says, “God-breathed.”

This is important. The “inspiration” of Scripture is not “inspiration” in the sense of a literary inspiration that a writer has while writing on a favorite or moving topic. It is not being inspired in the sense of being spurred on to do something from some desire within us. And it is not even a religious inspiration to go on a missions trip, for example. The “inspiration” of Scripture is the fact that it is “God-breathed,” or, “breathed out by God.” The Scriptures are able to bring us salvation because they are the very words of God which He has breathed out through His prophets and apostles.

II Peter 1:20-21

Finally, II Peter 1:20-21 gives us a beautiful picture of the process of the writing and inspiration of Scripture. Basically what Peter says here is that Scripture did not originate in man (v. 20, 21), but it originated in God, who used the prophets and apostles as the instruments

to communicate His word (v. 21).

Notice that the writers of Scripture were also guided by God. His providence is key in the writing of Scripture, as the writers “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” This word “moved” in verse 21 is in the passive voice – “they *were* moved.” This means that the activity of moving was not the activity of the men, but the activity of the Holy Spirit who moved them. They were passive, they were being carried.

The Scriptures are able to bring us salvation because they are the very words of God which He has breathed out through His prophets and apostles.

Peter uses the same verb that is used in Acts 27:15, 17. In Acts 27 we have the account of the shipwreck of Paul. There was a great head-wind and they had to let the ship “be driven.” By analogy, just as the ship had to put its sail up and let the wind drive it where the wind willed, so too the writers of Scripture set their pens to begin writing all the while they were being led by the Holy Spirit.

So how is this beneficial to us? Besides giving us a confidence in Scripture, the inspiration of Scripture is a powerful proof of the sovereignty of God. Think about it. Isaiah, Peter, and Paul were “commanded,” as the Confession says,

to write. And their writings, though from their pens, could not have any errors. Because God is totally sovereign, His words came through the pens of the writers. Our Confession says “*God commanded His servants,*” which is the prerogative of a sovereign God. He commanded, preserved, and guided the writers in His sovereignty.

How Was Scripture Inspired?

As we have seen in our previous article, we need the Scriptures as a new, clean pair of glasses to replace our sin-stained spiritual eyes. Unfortunately we can’t just end here, as there are various theories about how God inspired His word. Let us take a look at this for a moment. There are three major views on what is meant by inspiration.

The Dynamic View

This view says that the Holy Spirit only affected the *writers* and not their *writings*. Inspiration is understood to be a literary or religious “inspiration.” Scripture then, is a revelation of the religious feelings of the writers. We get kind of a sneak peak beyond the outer religious actions of the writers into their hearts and minds. This is the view of Liberalism, which we have already seen, the Scriptures do not support.

The Mechanical View

In reaction to the dynamic view of Liberalism, Fundamentalism says that God inspired His word by literally dictating each and every word to the writers. As we’ve said, some parts of Scripture were literally dictated, but for the most part, this is not true. We can study the peculiar style of Isaiah, or of John, or of Peter. This is because their person-

alities, their styles, their background and training are used by God to communicate His word.

More relevant to our day is that this view is the view of Islam. If you should speak with a Muslim, keep in mind that they argue against Christianity's doctrine of Scripture by using the mechanical dictation view. Muslims believe that the Qu'ran is the word of God because Allah was actually moving the pen of Mohammed. Allah just needed a vessel to control to get His word to men. They say that our Bible is not completely inspired because the writers added and deleted important parts. So how would we respond to this accusation?

The Organic View

Our view has been described as the organic view of inspiration. This means that God moved the writers of the Bible to use their style, vocabulary, research, and personalities in such a way as to communicate His perfect, unerring word to His Church.

Charles Hodge, another of the great Princeton theologians, said

We learn from the Scriptures themselves, that the Holy Spirit, in employing men as his instruments in conveying truth, did not change their mental habits; he did not make Jews write like Greeks, or force all into the same mold. Each retained his own peculiarities of style and manner, and, therefore, whatever is peculiar to each, is to be referred, not to his inspiration, but to

*his original character and culture ... God effects his purposes by those instruments which he has, in the ordinary course of his providence specially fitted for their accomplishment.*³

The Bible is both the Word of God and the word of man. This means that God speaks, but also Isaiah preaches. The Spirit communicates to us while Paul is rebuking the Galatians. And the marvelous thing

God moved the writers of the Bible to use their style, vocabulary, research, and personalities in such a way as to communicate His perfect, unerring word to His Church.

is that the nature of Scripture is based on God's nature. Because He is holy and not able to sin, His word is holy and not able to lead us into error (infallibility). So, in response to Islam, God didn't have to dictate His words through the prophets and apostles, because His holiness guarantees that His word would be written by the writers of Scripture without error.

How Much of the Bible is Inspired?

Another question we must answer is how much of the word of God is inspired? I hope from the above

discussion it is evident that we believe the whole thing is. But for the sake of awareness of our culture, note that there are basically two views on this question.

Partial View

The partial view says that just the moral and religious teachings were inspired by God. All the details of history, archaeology, and chronology are not inspired. They can be right, because the writers lived in that culture; but they also made mistakes in dates, details, and place names.

Verbal, Plenary View

In contrast to this, we wholeheartedly believe in what is called verbal, plenary inspiration. What does this mean?

First, the Scriptures are verbally inspired, meaning that the very words themselves are inspired. How do we know this? For example, in Matthew 5 Jesus gives that famous statement "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot and one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). A "jot" was the smallest of Hebrew letters, the *yod*, while the "tittle" is the serif part of a letter. In our language this would be a dot in an "i," or a cross of a "t." Notice also that in Matthew 22:43-45 and in Galatians 3:16, Jesus and Paul base an entire theological argument on one simple word of the Old Testament.

Second, the Scriptures are fully (plenary) inspired. As we've already quoted, Paul says in II Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed."



The Spoken/Written Word

... men spake from God ... and that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing; and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law...

Finally, our Confession speaks of the word of God as coming through different means in the history of redemption. His inspired word first came through the spoken means. This is truly amazing. Think about Moses, writing the book of Genesis after the Exodus. The spoken word of God had been preserved down through the covenant line for millennia!

So why did His spoken word get written down for us on paper and with ink? Here our Confession uses the language of John Calvin that the Scriptures are an accommodation to us: “*afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation.*” What is accommodation? It is coming down

to another persons’ level; stepping into someone else’s shoes. This is like when we as parents make sounds and eat some baby food before giving it to our children or when we empathize with the struggles of a friend. And God has done this in the Bible. In Nehemiah 9:13-14 the writer praises God who “came down” onto Mount Sinai to communicate with His people. And, finally, the Psalmist extols the LORD who “humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth” (Psalm 113:6).

Endnotes

¹ website

² B.B. Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Inspiration,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 2000) 77-78.

³ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Geneva Series Commentary; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1989) 4.

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Book of the Month

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Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. What are some common theological errors that people you know believe?
2. Why would our Confession spend 5 of its 37 articles on the doctrine of Scripture, if all Christians believe the Bible?
3. How important is the inspiration of Scripture for our faith, worship, and evangelism?
4. How can Scripture be both the word of God and the word of man?
5. Why did the Lord have His word written?

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

“To the Seven Churches”

The numerics of Revelation are significant. The number seven is the number of completeness. There are seven lampstands (1:12, 13, 20; 2:1), seven stars (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1), seven lamps of fire (4:5), seven seals (5:1, 5), the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), seven angels holding seven trumpets (8:2, 6), seven thunders (10:3, 4), the fiery red dragon with seven heads and seven diadems on his heads (12:3), a beast rising up out of the sea with seven heads (13:1), a scarlet beast with seven heads (17:3, 7, 9) later identified as seven mountains (17:9), seven angels (15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9) having the seven last plagues (15:1, 6; 21:9) who are given seven bowls (15:7; 17:1; 21:9). There are also seven churches (1:4, 11, 20).

That there are seven churches mentioned suggests that John has in view here not merely the seven churches of Asia Minor (though the seven letters to the seven churches are certainly addressed to them), but a composite picture of the complete church as she lives in the midst of the world between the first coming of Christ and His return. The number seven, indicating completeness, suggests that composite picture.

A Book for the Church

The book of Revelation, then, is addressed to the church: not only the seven churches of Asia Minor,

existing in the days of John, but to the church that lives in the days after Christ's first coming and before His return. In other words, the book of Revelation is addressed to the church today! The book of Revelation remains every bit as relevant for the church living in 2003 as it did for the church living in 95 AD, and it will continue to remain relevant for the church until Christ, the Head of the Church, returns on the clouds of glory.

The book of Revelation is not only addressed to the church as she lives in the midst of the world between the first and second comings of Christ, it is also the *history* of the church as she lives in the midst of the world between the first and second comings of Christ. You may not have known it, but the book of Revelation is church history! It is not merely concerned with those events that transpired just prior to the year 70 AD (the fall of Jerusalem), thereby rendering the book largely irrelevant to the church today. Nor is it merely concerned with those events that will transpire just prior to the return of Christ, thereby rendering the book largely irrelevant to the church today. The book of Revelation is concerned with the history of the church from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return, thereby rendering the book of the utmost relevance for the church today.

The Identity of the Church

Revelation is relevant for the church today precisely because it is describing the identity and life of the church. The identity and life of the church today is the same as it was in the days of John, and it will remain the same until Christ comes again. The identity and life of the church, from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return, is Christ Himself! The Church's identity is Christ. The Church's life is Christ. The book of Revelation is concerned to set our minds on things above; the intent of Revelation is to get us, the Church of Jesus Christ, to look above, that we might find our identity and life above, namely, in Jesus Christ!

It is only in Christ that we receive grace and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne (4:8). Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. He is the One who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to whom be the glory and dominion forever and ever (4:5-7). The identity and life of the church, as she lives between the first coming of Christ and His return, is Christ Himself!

The Comfort of the Church

Christ is our life – He is the life of the Church. And He is coming! “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn be-



cause of Him. Even so, Amen” (4:7). While the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him, the Church rejoices! His coming is for our comfort. “How does Christ’s return to judge the living and the dead comfort you? In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and the glory of heaven” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 19, Question and Answer 52).

The return of Christ on the clouds of glory, to judge the living and the dead, is for the church’s comfort! Paul calls the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ the Christian’s “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

Though Revelation, in recording the history of the church as she lives in the midst of this world between the first and second coming of Christ, is filled with disturbing and horrific images, the theme of comfort dispels that horror. The church does not wait until the consummation to find her life in Christ. The church’s life is in Christ already now – and nothing can touch those who are held in His hands!

That God will certainly bring the consummation is as certain as the fact that He has created. He says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). As one author has put it: “God precedes all things, as their Creator, and he will bring all

things to eschatological fulfillment. He is the origin and goal of all history. He has the first word, in creation, and the last word, in new creation. Therefore, within John’s literary structure, he speaks twice, declaring himself Alpha and Omega first, before the outset of John’s vision (1:8), and last, in declaring the eschatological accomplishment of his purpose for his whole creation: ‘it is done!’ (21:6).”

This is the message given to the church, as she lives between the first coming of Christ and His return: as you live in the midst of this world awaiting Christ’s return, look above, for your life is hid with Christ in God, and when Christ who

is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. This is the message to the seven churches, and it is the message we need to hear!

Rev. Brian Vos is the Pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. He is also the President of the Board of Reformed Fellowship.

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (4)

What Does Paul Mean by ‘Works of the Law’?

Part 3

“WORKS” AND “WORKS OF THE LAW” IN ROMANS

The book of Romans also uses the expression, “works of the law,” as well as the general term, “works,” but in a way that quite clearly goes beyond the limitations of certain boundary marker requirements of the law. Even though it is plausible that the expression, “works of the law,” initially has a more limited application in the argument of Galatians, this expression serves in the book of Romans to show how no human acts of obedience can justify anyone before God.

No works of any kind, whether they be performed by Jews or Gentiles, whether they be in conformity to the written law of God (through Moses) or what is written upon human consciences, can be a basis for the believer’s justification. Whatever limited value the new perspective’s view of the “works of the law” may have for a reading of Galatians, it does not appear to work with respect to the kind of argument the apostle Paul musters in the book of Romans.

The use of the term “works”

One of the features of Romans that distinguishes it from Galatians is the apostle Paul’s use of the language of “works” to refer in a general way to human deeds or acts.

Though this language is clearly linked to the expression, “the works of the law,” as we shall see below, it suggests the broader and more general idea of *any human performance or deed*. When used in connection with the doctrine of justification, therefore, it refers to any act of obedience to the will of God that might play a role in procuring salvation or justifying a sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, before God (compare Romans 9:32).¹

The first instance of this general usage of “works” in Romans occurs in chapter 2:6: “He [God] will render to each one according to his works.” The context for this declaration of the apostle is the certainty of God’s righteous judgment. All will be judged, and this judgment will be in terms of the works or deeds performed by all, whether Jew or Gentile.

In his development of this theme throughout Romans chapter 2, the apostle Paul makes it evident that his language of “works” is inclusive. He speaks, for example, of those “who do evil” (v. 9) and of those “who do good” (v. 10). He also distinguishes between those who do evil “under” the law and those who do evil “without” the law (v. 12).

To God, who shows no partiality, it makes no difference whether one is a Jew or a Gentile. What matters is whether anyone can perform deeds

or acts that are good and therefore pleasing to God. The burden of Paul’s argument in the latter part of this chapter is that even Jews who are tempted to “rely on the law and boast in God” are at no advantage in relation to the Gentiles. Even those who would teach the law to others stand condemned by its prohibitions against lying, idolatry, adultery and the like.²

Paul’s use of the language of “works” in Romans 4 also confirms this general usage and reference to human deeds or acts. Though we will consider in the following section how this chapter uses the more specific expression, “works of the law,” Paul begins by noting that Abraham was not justified by “works.”

To ascribe Abraham’s justification to his works would contradict the truth of his justification by faith (vv. 2-3). In order to underscore this opposition between faith and works so far as Abraham’s justification is concerned, the apostle uses the analogy of a person who works for wages. Anyone who works for wages does not receive them “as a gift but as his due” (v. 4). Thus, if Abraham were justified by works and not faith, he would be counted righteous on the basis of deeds that have their just reward or wage. However, Abraham’s justification was by faith (alone). The contrast drawn by Paul in Romans 4 is between someone who works and earns a wage, and someone who believes and graciously receives a free gift (compare Romans 4:16). “Works” in this contrast refer to human actions that merit their due. To illustrate further this contrast,



Paul appeals as well to the example of David. Even though David undoubtedly kept what Dunn and others term the “boundary markers” of the law, he was counted righteous “apart from works” (v. 6). Despite David’s “lawless deeds” and “sins” (v. 7), God accepted him by not counting his sins against him. Though Paul goes on to note that God’s acceptance and forgiveness of David did not depend upon whether he was circumcised or not (vv. 10-12), the point made by his general reference to David’s works is to exclude *all works* (including, most notably, circumcision) as a basis for his forgiveness with God.

One particularly important instance of the use of the term “works” is found in Romans 9, which addresses the question of the effectiveness of God’s Word and promise in the salvation of His elect people. Speaking of God’s election of Jacob rather than Esau, though both were sons of the same parents, Paul notes that the “calling” of Jacob was on the basis of “God’s purpose of election” and not of “works” (v. 11). The reference to “works” in this passage is explained earlier, when the apostle declares that neither Esau nor Jacob “had done anything either good or bad.” “Works” in this passage, therefore, refers to any human deed or act in the most general sense possible. Nothing done or accomplished by either of these two sons is the basis for the election of the one and the non-election of the other.³

The use of “works of the law” in Romans

In addition to these instances where he uses the general expression “works” in Romans, the

apostle Paul also speaks more particularly of the “works of the law” in chapter 3 (vv. 20,28). Within the context of the argument in Romans 2-4, this expression is used in close association with the more general term “works.”

Though it may refer more particularly to obedience to the commandments of the Mosaic law, especially the commandment regarding circumcision, the thread of the argument in Romans 2-4 indicates that it is a fairly general expression. The “works of the law” include any

The fault Paul, or rather the law, finds with Jews as well as Gentiles is that they do not do what the law requires.

human deeds, whether performed by Jews or Gentiles, that are conformed to what might be termed the *moral claims* of the law.⁴ No more than the term “works” does the expression “works of the law” exclusively refer to those acts of obedience to the written law of Moses that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

The first instance of the use of this expression, “works of the law,” is found in Romans 3:20: “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The context for this text is the apostle Paul’s extended indict-

ment of Gentiles and (especially!) Jews for their failure to keep the requirements of the law. Particularly instructive is Paul’s argument that the Jews have failed to abide by the requirements of the law in respect to the prohibitions of theft, adultery, and temple desecration (Romans 2:17-29). The law’s function to expose the reality of sin, therefore, includes all failures to keep the obligations of the law. It is not that the law exposes the Jews for their failures in respect to the “boundary markers” of the law. Nor is the fault Paul finds with the Jews their improper imposition of these requirements, including circumcision, upon the Gentiles. The fault Paul, or rather the law, finds with Jews as well as Gentiles is that they do not do what the law requires.

The only other instance in Romans where this expression, the “works of the law,” is found is chapter three: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (v. 28). Upon first reading in its context, this text might appear to favor the idea that the “works of the law” refer specifically to “boundary marker” requirements such as circumcision. For immediately after this verse the apostle Paul underscores that God is the God of Gentiles and Jews alike, and not of Jews alone. Whether someone is circumcised or uncircumcised, it does not matter, since justification is by faith and not by “works of the law.” However, it is not possible to restrict Paul’s reference to the “works of the law” in this text to circumcision as a boundary marker requirement in the law. Nor is it possible on that basis to restrict the reach of Paul’s point

about justification by faith “apart from works” to the concern regarding who belongs to the people of God, as is suggested by the new perspective.

In the context of Paul’s argument in Romans 3 and 4, it seems clear that Paul is maintaining that all sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles, fail to keep the requirements of the law in all of its stipulations. In Romans 3, the apostle sums up his case or indictment of all sinners by saying “there is none righteous, no not one.” This is the prior context for the statement of Romans 3:28.

Moreover, in Romans 4, as we previously noted, the apostle speaks quite broadly of the principle of “works” in opposition to “faith”; whereas faith receives freely what God’s grace grants, works obtain their reward on the basis of merit or wages due. The problem with an appeal to “works of the law” as a means of justification is that this begs the question whether anyone can meet the burden.

SUMMARY

Though we still need to address the second and third questions raised in our introduction, it is evident that the new perspective’s insistence that the “works of the law” refer particularly to the boundary markers of the law cannot be sustained. The apostle Paul’s opposition to the teaching of justification by “works of the law” does not simply refute a Jewish-Christian refusal to include Gentiles among the people of God. Though this may well be an important part of the occasion for Paul’s treatment of justification in his writings, he clearly wishes to oppose any doctrine of justification

by works in the most radical and general manner possible. No “works of the law” of any kind can possibly justify someone in the presence of God. Any appeal to justification by “works of the law” utterly fails in the face of the truth that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Endnotes

¹ For a more extended defense of this claim than that provided in what follows, see Douglas J. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” pp. 90-99; and Charles E. B. Cranfield, “‘The Works of the Law’ in the Epistle to the Romans,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43 (1991): 89-101.

² N. T. Wright, “The Law in Romans 2,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 131-50, argues that the criticism of the law-breaking of the Jews in this passage is addressed to their unwillingness to include Gentiles in the covenant community, not their moral failures or defects. Consistent with the general tendency of the new perspective, Wright takes the case Paul makes in this passage to be framed by a historical-redemptive question of the inclusion of Gentiles among God’s people as heirs of the promise to Abraham. Thus, Paul’s case regarding the law and the works of the law is aimed at the question of covenant status, not how individuals who are sinners can find favor with God. Though he does speak of the general problem of human sin in his commentary on Romans, Wright still contends that the principal issue is the inclusion of Gentiles within the worldwide family of God. Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Roman*, vol. X of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), esp pp. 464-86.

³ For instances of a similar, general use of the language of “works” in Paul’s epistles, see: 2 Cor. 11:5; Col. 1:21; Gal. 5:19. For instances of this usage in passages that are not universally acknowledged as authentically Pauline, see: Eph. 2:9-10; 5:11; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10, 25; 6:18; 2 Tim. 1:9; 4:14; Titus 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:5, 8, 14. Even if we were to grant the view that these latter texts are not Pauline (which we do not), they minimally suggest that an author influenced by Paul took him to exclude all boasting in any works whatever in the matter of salvation (Eph. 2:9).

⁴ It should be noted that close parallels to this language of the “works of the law” can be found in the literature of Second Temple Judaism. In these parallels, “works of the law” and “works of righteousness” refer to acts of obedience to the whole law, whether in its so-called ceremonial or moral requirements. For a brief treatment of these parallels and sources that consider them, see Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, pp. 52-54. These parallels are of particular significance, since the new perspective (rightly) insists upon a reading of Paul’s writings *in the context* of Second Temple Judaism.

Dr. Cornel Venema is the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary where he teaches Doctrinal Studies. Dr. Venema is a contributing editor to *The Outlook*.



Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1977

January 1977

“Once we begin to fiddle-faddle with the inspiration and inerrancy of all the Bible, we will begin to question Adam and Eve, Paradise and the Fall, or the withering of the fig tree, or the destruction of Jericho, or the resurrection of the saints at the crucifixion of Jesus, or Paul’s instruction about women, and on and on. There is nothing - no objective criterion at all - to hold a man back from denying the miracles, virgin birth, vicarious atonement, and resurrection of Jesus.”

De Koster Versus Lindsay
Edwin H. Palmer

“Satan is too cunning to fulminate in a diatribe against Bible Study as such. No, but he is clever enough to keep the church members busy with everything else that there is simply no time left for it.”

This We Will Do, D.V.
John Vander Ploeg

February 1977

“This New Hermeneutic already began in Paradise when the serpent said to Eve, ‘Yea, hath God said...’”

* * * * *

“Historical criticism always assumes the possibility that man today can interpret better than the writer the reality of what he said.”

The Historical Critical Method
Peter De Jong

“How distorted the judgment of church assemblies when they pro-

tect the reputation of a human being at the expense of maintaining fully the pure teaching of God’s Word, the purity of the church, and the honor of God Himself.”

“That We Might Be Like That...”
Johanna Timmer

July 1977

“Suppose that out of all the tensions, all in God’s gracious providence, a new denomination would emerge - a denomination that would not shilly-shally in its witness to the Reformed faith; but a church that would rather be unambiguous, consistent, and enthusiastic in the profession of it Just suppose that some day God would be pleased to grant this ... allow me then to suggest as a name, that it be called the United Reformed Church.”

A United Reformed Church
John Vander Ploeg

September 1977

“We are working in the training of our children not as isolated family units but as a community of believers in the training of His children!”

Education that is Christian
Garrett H. Stoutmeyer

October 1977

“The institutional church is the instrument through which God brings His kingdom to pass. And that means that it is incumbent on every office-bearer to serve faithfully in the Church of Christ so that the fruit of his labors will be the manifestation of Christ’s body at work - both within and outside of the

the institutional church.”

For Elders and Deacons
Harry G. Arnold

November 1977

“Immediately after the secession of 1834 in the Netherlands a controversy arose regarding a subject that can be characterized as ‘much ado about nothing.’ It was known as the question regarding ‘Het Ambtsgewaard’ - what kind of ministerial robe or garment should a minister wear? Such decisions, it seems to me, should be left entirely to the judgment of the pastor himself. There is one garment, however, which should be in the wardrobe of every preacher and to be worn not only on Sunday, but every day of the week. The Lord of the church through His apostle Peter commands its use, saying ‘Be clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.’ Let’s just leave the strutting to the peacocks!”

The Insignificance of the Minister
Frank De Jong

December 1977

“I know that a Reformed church must press forward and constantly be reforming; otherwise she is no longer true to her call and purpose. But I also know that if the foundations are abandoned and if the breaches are left unrepaired, destruction will follow, for God’s blessing does not rest upon an unfaithful or a spiritually complacent people.”

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Looking Out and About

• Rev. Peter Adams, the pastor of the Grace URC, Alto, Michigan will be speaking at a Bible Conference in Austria during the latter part of September. Rev. Adams formerly served as a missionary in Austria.

• Rev. Ed Marcusse was installed on September 7 as the pastor of the Faith United Reformed Church, Olive Center, Michigan. Rev. A. Besteman who has served the Faith Church as Interim Pastor of Preaching for the past nineteen months conducted the installation service. Rev. Marcusse formerly served the Bethel United Reformed Church, Calgary, Alberta. The Marcusse family is waiting to move into the new home they are having built.

• The Bethel Church of Dallas Texas, a congregation of one hundred four families organized in 1978 voted on August 10 to disaffiliate from the Christian Reformed Church. No decision has been made at this time in regard to future denominational affiliation

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