

Grace, Works and Faith

Several years ago, while studying the historical setting of the eighteenth century revivals and some of the issues involved, I could hardly believe what I was reading when I came to the battle that raged between the Established Church on one hand, and the Dissenters and Methodists on the other hand, over the matter of a converted clergy. That a branch of Christendom (a powerfully prevailing one, at that) could even consider, let alone contend for, the validity and usefulness of unconverted men as preachers of the gospel, was the most incredible thing I had ever read. My ignorance and naivete could be understood somewhat, considering my two-hundred-year distance from that ecclesiastical scene. Change is most shocking to those who have not been involved in its gradual development, while those who have been a part of it have usually lost all reference to the point of beginning, and do not realize how far they have drifted.

Now I find myself almost as shocked by some developments in my own time. For some time now I have been out of “mainstream Christianity” – long enough to experience considerable peace and joy, and consequently spared much of the provocation of spirit generated by the idiotic, anti-scriptural fads and notions that are constantly fueling the modern headlong rush into apostasy and ruin. Occupation with these things tends to foster a mean, contentious, railing spirit in us, robs us of joy in Christ, and displaces the gospel with unprofitable polemics. But there is a hazard in ignoring what is going on. We lose our appreciation of the astounding advances of false doctrine and spiritual ignorance. Just how deep this apostasy and ignorance has penetrated was highlighted a few years ago by Dave Hunt in his well-documented book, The Seduction of Christianity. What a yelp it raised from the evangelical establishment! But the strongest objection that could be lodged against it was that it was too bad to be true. They said, “If this is true, then virtually every prominent and successful movement of present-day Christianity is false.” Well said! And that out of their own mouths!

Today the book raising the most ruckus from modern evangelicals in John MacArthur’s excellent The Gospel According to Jesus, in which this fine preacher takes on a formidable host of “Only Believers” who deny that submission to Christ as Lord is inherent in saving faith. Again, my amazement that such a book would be necessary, let alone controversial, is an admission of my relative isolation from popular trends. I had no idea that things had drifted that far in just a few years. How is it possible that today’s Christianity should need an apologetic for a salvation that is inseparable from obedience to Christ? How astonishing it is that such a work should be attacked with such vehemence by those who have the audacity to call themselves Christians, especially in view of the gracious tone of the work, and the sound, scriptural appeal it makes! I am appalled beyond measure.

It seems that urging genuine Christians to read this book should be superfluous, about on par with recommending a book arguing the case for normal men coming equipped with two hands, each of which has four fingers and one thumb. However, there are many deceivers in the world, and there is much ignorance and darkness. Hence, we are driven back again and again to bedrock fundamentals. In fact, if we are to root this error out of the mind of sound Bible believers, we shall be compelled to dig even a little deeper into the foundations than MacArthur did in his book.

J. I. Packer, in his introduction to The Gospel According to Jesus, wrongly identifies today’s Only-Believers with the teachings of Robert Sandeman of Scotland two hundred years ago. There are similarities between the two teachings, to be sure. The Sandemanians claimed to be contending for justification by faith alone, as does Only-Believers. They held a purely objective, intellectual concept of gospel faith, claiming only the necessity of being convinced in the mind of factual information, as does today’s error. Both teachings claim to be safeguarding salvation from the requirement of men’s works. But Sandemanians had an entirely different background, theological perspective and objective than today’s teachers of Only-Believers.

Sandemanianism sprang from extremely high Calvinism, and was at odds with the established Church on several points they claimed to be unbiblical. Its founders made war, not only with the establishment, but with the Revival and Puritan elements of the eighteenth century. It was the latter with whom they clashed over the matter of saving faith. The Puritans insisted that saving faith be evidenced and accompanied by subjective experience, a change in the affections, a holy disposition of heart, a sensibility of love of Christ and the gospel, and a joy and peace in the inner man. These are what troubled the Sandemanians. They claimed that this was adding some other requirements for salvation than bare belief of bare truth, and therefore, was introducing works. Robert Sandeman named such men as Isaac Watts, Phillip Doddridge, Thomas Boston, the Erskines and John Wesley among those whom he considered as dangerous to the church.

Present-day Only-Believers, on the other hand, is rooted in extremely low Arminianism, indeed Pelagianism; for, as we shall see, it unabashedly represents faith as man’s contribution to his justification, and as such, its effectual cause. Its adherents are not so much bothered by the heart-felt experience of the revival converts which disturbed the Sandemanians, as they are with the identification of repentance with faith. Submission to Christ in gospel obedience is the thing they want left out of their brand of Believers. Christ should be offered as Saviour, they tell us, with no reference to His claim as Lord. To stipulate obedience to Him is, according to their views, adding works. Today’s preachers of this alien “gospel” are all part of a “soul-winning” cult that demand that professions of faith be extracted at whatever cost, through whatever means may prove effectual. “Lordship Salvation” drastically cuts down on the number of decisions. And when one examines the strange children begotten by this watered-down evangelism, they are indeed bereft of both inward affections for God and truth, and outward obedience to the commands of Christ. To validate The Gospel According to Jesus is to invalidate their own converts, their works, and themselves! No wonder they are up in arms!

It would be redundant for me to drag out the enormous body of Scripture that demonstrates the distinction between saving faith and human faith, the inseparable connection between gospel faith, repentance, and good works, all of which indicate that the call to salvation is a call to discipleship. John MacArthur has done an exhaustive job of that in his book. Get it and read it. But the books and articles that have been written in rebuttal to MacArthur's book demonstrate that scriptural proof-texts are not sufficient to stop the mouths of these gainsayers. The authors of such have their own proof-texts, wrongly exegeted from a defective hermeneutic developed to buttress bad theology. We may prevail in this confrontation only by appealing to sound theology. Scripture texts will not be enough, for the above reasons. We may not be able, even then, to silence these false teachers, but we shall expose them for what they are and rest our case in the eternal councils of God as revealed in His Word, which supplies us with a whole, complete, and consistent body of truth. When we have done this, we shall not have been as kind as MacArthur to his detractors, and we shall have drawn some lines of alienation – but then, there never has been any communication between light and darkness. I think MacArthur understands this, for he admits that his studies on the controversy have persuaded him that “the two sides in this argument have distinctly different views of salvation.” He is quite right, of course, but that is an alarming conclusion. We have what is likely the largest, most prominent section of “conservative, fundamental, evangelical Christianity” contending for a false salvation, a false gospel, a false Christ, indeed, a false God! The men teaching these things do not deserve to be handled delicately or be commended for the good they have done or the right things they have said. All false prophets teach much truth, otherwise they would have little effect on the faithful.

MacArthur also understands the theological issue that is at stake, for he states in his preface that “salvation is by God's sovereign grace and grace alone,” that “nothing a lost, degenerate, spiritually-dead sinner can do will in any way contribute to salvation.” Of course, his opponents say they believe that, too, and they are the real champions of that doctrine by defending a salvation free from repentance and obedience, which, they insist, has to be something the sinner contributes *in addition* to faith. We shall see that these are the real “works-salvation” teachers, and that they are incapable of comprehending salvation by sovereign grace, for they have never seen the Fountain from which such grace springs.

The Charles Ryrie/Zane Hodges brand of Believism sees faith as naked and notional; that is, that the sinner is simply persuaded in his mind that certain objective facts are true. This sort of faith is, of course, amoral; it brings no virtue with it and commits the man to nothing. He simply stands on the side-lines and ascribes belief to supplied information. They also believe, on the other hand, that repentance, obedience and submission to God's revealed will is something virtuous and meritorious, therefore must be good works, and must be excluded from the terms of salvation by grace. That rationale, I think, is at the heart of their bad soteriology. It may be immediately demolished with biblical soteriology.

In the first place, that sort of faith is well within the unregenerate sinner's power *and* within the evangelist's persuasive powers. They are well aware of this, for they wish to keep soul-winning an activity in which the Holy Spirit's power is unnecessary. But the Scriptures resoundingly declare that saving faith is a sovereign gift of God, as indicated by John 6:44, 10:26; Matthew 16:17; Acts 3:16; Romans 4:16, 10:17; 1 Corinthians 2:5; Galatians 2:16, 20; Ephesians 2:8; Hebrews 12:2; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 3, to name a few. Note especially in 1 Corinthians 2:5, Paul says that he deliberately *avoided* using his persuasive powers, lest his converts' faith should stand in the wisdom of men rather than the power of God. He wanted no notional-faith converts, knowing that they would be spurious! In the second place, repentance and obedience are as truly sovereign gifts of God as faith (Acts 5:31, 11:128; Romans 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:25; Hebrews 12:17). These graces stand distinct from merit-works, as does faith. In the third place, faith, supplied by the sinner as a condition of his justification and regeneration, as they teach, meets the test for merit-works. It is something that the sinner does of himself, and marks the distinction between him and other sinners who do not do it. He has something to boast in – his faith. That is salvation by works, not grace.

We may cut directly through to the theological heart of this matter by observing that Only-Believism misunderstands the Reformation theme of justification by faith. Sinners are not justified by faith, but by God! When faith, repentance, and obedience are properly perceived as *gifts* of God, they are stripped of an innate causation. John tells us in chapter one, verses 12 and 13, that those who receive Christ, who believe in His name, are those who have been born, “*not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*” We are unequivocally told that faith is a *consequence*, not the *cause* of the New Birth. Persons are in possession of regenerated life *before* they believe. That is why the Lord could say in John 10:25, “*You do not believe because you are not of my sheep,*” *not* “*You are not my sheep because you do not believe,*” as Only-Believism must have it. Men are not justified apart from believing, but faith is neither the cause nor means of justification. The death and resurrection of Christ in the sinner's place is the effective cause of his justification, and God's satisfied justice is the means. Nor can faith and repentance be said to mediate justification. Christ in His high priestly office does that. These can and do facilitate the regenerate's consciousness and perception of the justice of God, the wickedness of the sinner, and the worthiness of the Saviour. As such, they can be considered the immediate means of the sinner's reconciliation and peace with God, and of his cleansed conscience.

Now someone is going to object, “But we are told in Galatians 3:24 and in Romans 5:1 plainly, that we are justified by faith.” If we are going to take those statements alone at their face, literal letter-meaning, then we have endowed faith itself with justifying powers, and have subscribed to the Neo-orthodox error of faith in faith. Those passages no ore mean that our faith actually justifies us than that the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet was saved by her faith, even though Christ said, “*Your faith has saved you*” (Luke 7:50). It is evident that it was Christ the Saviour Who saved her, not her faith. Nor was Paul ascribing to himself saving power when he said in Romans 11:14, “*If by any means I might save some*”, or in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “*that I might by all means save some.*” Nor is the believing spouse said to have saving power when she is told that she may save her husband (1 Corinthians 7:15). Nor does a prayer of faith have inherent healing virtue, although it is said to “save the sick” (James 1:21). These are all activities and agents through which God does His saving work. They are not the cause, but the sphere and element, or agency in which the work is done.

The application of redemption (what is commonly called “being saved” or “becoming justified”) is graphically spelled out in 1 Peter 1:12: “*Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and the*

sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” Our salvation is mandated by God’s sovereign election according to His eternal purpose. It is executed by the Holy spirit Who separates and calls us out by prevenient regeneration. This separation by the Holy Spirit is infallibly unto obedience of the elect sinner and application of the blood of Jesus Christ as satisfaction for his sins. A parallel passage is 2 Thessalonians 2:13, where “belief of the truth is used instead of “obedience”. The two terms are synonymous, in the sense that they are used in the gospel.

We commonly seize upon one word out of a group of words and impute to it all that is in the other words in the group. For example, “soul” in the narrow sense is a part of man along with, and distinct from, spirit and body. But the Bible often uses “soul” to speak of the whole person, including body and spirit. Likewise, salvation in the narrow sense is most often used to denote conversion only. In the broad sense it includes all the separate and distinct operations of grace, as election, atonement, regeneration, conversion, calling, reconciliation, sanctification and glorification. The Holy Spirit has chosen the words “faith” and “believe” as terms to embody and convey *all* the various distinctive graces that are imparted to the sinner at regeneration, enabling him to act in them. These graces, such as belief of the truth, trust in Christ as his Sin-Bearer, repentance of himself and his life as a sinner, obedience to the will of God, love of God and adoring submission to God as Father and Christ as King, are utterly inseparable from one another. They are inherent in the life of God in the soul of man. I will not quote all the Scriptures which demonstrate that these graces are synonymous with faith. MacArthur has done that in his book, and every genuine Christian knows it to be experimentally true. Faith embodies repentance, obedience, and good works necessarily, for one cannot truly believe *what he has not previous believed* without a change in his whole perspective of life. Something must be forsaken, left behind, as well as something new embraced. This will not be done without some degree of repudiation of past error and a sensibility and grief over the evil and foolishness of that sin. To truly believe what is right and true is to mandate that we align our lives with that righteousness. Otherwise, our integrity is compromised and we do violence to our conscience. There can be neither peace, joy, nor assurance with such a defiled conscience. We get the word fidelity (devotion, loyalty, commitment, trustworthiness) from the Latin *fides* (faith). The word filial (having to do with family unity, sons and daughters . . . all that is involved in such love and loyalties) derives from the same root. In regeneration, God has sent forth the Spirit of sonship into our hearts and we cry “Father”. That is what is in view in Galatians 3:26, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”

If a person is complete in Christ at regeneration, that is, fully endowed with all the inherent Christian graces he will ever have, and has been given all things that pertain to life and godliness, how is it that we see so much disparity in the lives of those who give evidence of being genuine Christians? It is true that the depth and range of faith in Christians varies greatly, especially in the newborn. This is not due to any difference in the content of character of the new creation, but the range of objects in the believer’s mind available for new life illumination. One may believe and respond to no more truth than he has learned. One’s cultural and environmental background may have rendered him temporarily advantaged or disadvantaged for spiritual development. Thus Paul can say in Romans 3:1, that the Jew has great advantage over the Gentile, because his mind and cultural background have prepared him better for immediate spiritual growth when the veil of darkness is removed by the life of Christ. The more truth that is present in the mind with respect to the law and holiness of God, the deeper one’s repentance and more complete his immediate breaking with sin. The more one understands the sublimity and excellence of Christ’s substitutionary sufferings and the riches of His grace, the greater his love and rejoicing. The more clearly one sees submission as salvation and deliverance, the more quickly and resolutely he will follow Christ.

This is far removed from the carnal Christian theory of Only-Believism that holds out these essential Christian responses as arbitrary and optional. A person may be truly regenerate; they say, see and understand all this truth, and still stand afar off, unmoved. Not so! It is not possible that a child of God’s grace, in whom the life of God reigns, should see truth and his heart and soul not be immediately moved to compliance. To borrow a phrase from Isaiah 8:20 – “*to the law and to the testimony!*” If they do not answer according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. As in Jesus’ incredulous question to Nicodemus, we could well say to these prominent theologians who pass themselves off as conservative, fundamental Bible teachers, “Are you a teacher in Israel and ignorant of these things?”

The theological mud-hole that is mainly responsible for all this ignorance and false doctrine is Dallas Theological Seminary. It has the distinction of being the only institution for theological education which has as its primary touchstone and perspective a peculiar view of eschatology: Dispensational Premillennialism. Eschatology is not a field of study that can be safely developed independently, for it involves obscure and puzzling prophetic writings which are vulnerable to all sorts of bizarre interpretations, if not subjected to the rigid discipline of other clear doctrines. The Christian church has historically recognized this. Biblical soteriology arises from Biblical theology (the doctrine of God) and anthropology (the doctrine of man) and the fact of sin. One ought to readily see the mischief that can be done when this order is reversed. In this framework, the doctrine of God, man, sin, salvation, sanctification, and glorification, are all made to line up with a fixed eschatology. A system better suited to ruin the Christian faith could hardly be imagined, especially when you consider the modern novelty of dispensationalism and its complete absence from Christian thought prior to the 19th century. A defective hermeneutic had to be developed to contort the Scripture into line with dispensational presuppositions.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, the principal founding theologian of Dallas Theological Seminary, fell early under the influence of C. I. Scofield, who laid hands on him and charged him with giving his life to the study of the Scriptures. The Scofield Reference Bible became the official Bible of the Seminary until Charles Ryrie published his own. These, along with the seminary, have been responsible, more than any other factors, for thoroughly saturating the fundamental religious scene in America with dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism lays hold of a semi-figurative phrase in 2 Timothy 2:15, “*rightly dividing the word of truth*”, as its warrant to put the unity of divine revelation under the chopping axe. The Greek *orthotomeo* (from *ortho*, meaning right, erect, honest, plus *temno*, meaning to cut sharply), translated “rightly divide”, is intended to instruct the man of God to *dissect* or cut directly into the truth of God’s word, to correctly analyze and expound its true, orthodox message, not cut it into pieces.

To Paul's question: "*Is Christ divided?*" (*1 Corinthians 1:13*), Darby, Scofield, Chafer, Ryrie, and Hodges, all answer, "Of course, it is the only way the Bible makes sense." And divide Him they do! Dispensationalism divides Christ's common salvation for all men (Jude 3) by having the Old Testament saints saved by works and the New Testament saved by grace. It separates Christ's single kingdom into two: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Heaven. L. S. Chafer's jack-leg, four point Calvinism severs Christ's atoning death from its application to sinners, thus robbing it of its satisfactory efficacy. This seminary divides the mind of Christ by having Him speak one thing by the Old Testament prophets, another by the New Testament apostles, and yet another in His person teachings during the days of His flesh. It even dares to create a tension between the Gospels and between some of the Epistles. Dispensationalism divides Christ's one flock and one fold into two peoples, the Church and Israel, with two separate destinies. It wrests His single, earned inheritance, which He vows to us as joint heirs, and splits it into merit/demerit, reward-for-our-works prizes to be awarded at a divided, special judgment for those whom He declares can never be brought into judgment. Small wonder, then, having robbed Christ of His crown by dividing His kingdom off to another dispensation, that these gospel butchers sense no horror in dividing His Person as Saviour, King, and Priest. The sinner is offered a slice of Christ, the Saviour part. The Lord and King part may be put off until the Millennium.

Dispensational exegesis commits many other outrages against the Word of God. For example, it mends the veil of the temple rent at Christ's death, closes up the Holiest Place He opened, rebuilds an earthly temple replaced by His Church, and re-establishes the Levitical priesthood with its animal sacrifices which were abolished by His perfect sacrifice. All of this despises Christ's finished work on the Cross and displays an incredible ignorance of, and arrogant contempt for, basic Christian doctrine.

It is not surprising, therefore, that this mentality should empty salvation of any meaningful change at conversion, or that there should be any detectable difference between the regenerate and unregenerate. It unabashedly has fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers and extortioners saved – unrepentant and unchanged! *1 Corinthians 6:9-10* is dismissed by "dividing", making a distinction between entering the kingdom of God and inheriting it. These are all saved, but simply cut short on inheritance because they did not earn it by good works. Can you believe it? Or are you as appalled as I?

These false teachers do not comprehend the grace of God in salvation because they are bereft of basic knowledge of God, man, the fall, sin and regeneration. Dispensationalism, with its demonically-inspired system of Bible interpretation has run its deadly course and brought forth its inevitable corrupt fruit. It is hoped that some good will come out of this attempt to show its fallacies, that Christians will have the good sense to see that it is not just another unique but harmless view of last things, but a hellish system bent on destroying the faith once delivered to the saints.

Finally, I do not want to be understood as condemning good and godly men who have been, *like myself in the past*, duped into subscribing to and teaching *some parts* of this system. Good men have come out of Dallas Seminary, but they were better men before being hindered by its false doctrines. May the Lord grant us grace to rid ourselves of past error and shun any doctrine that compromises the supernatural power, excellencies, and perfection of what God wrought in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

- C. M.

NOTE: For further reading:

DISPENSATIONALISM, by Jon Zens, Chapel Library, 2603 West Wright St., Pensacola FL 32505.

A LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO THE LORDSHIP CONTROVERSY, by Richard Belcher, Crowne Publications, Inc., P. O. Box 688, Southbridge, MA 01550.

THY KING COMETH, the GATEPOST, Vol. 15, No. 1.

GOD'S PEOPLE ARE ONE, Ibid.

GRACE AND REWARD, Ibid.

GREAT PROPHECIES OF THE BIBLE, by Ralph Woodrow, P. O. Box 124, Riverside, CA 92502.