

04 SOLA SCRIPTURA
STEVEN J. LAWSON

14 SOLA FIDE
JOHN MACARTHUR

22 SOLA GRATIA
GEOFF THOMAS

34 SOLUS CHRISTUS
MICHAEL HORTON

42 SOLI DEO GLORIA
W. ROBERT GODFREY

EXPOSITOR

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ONEPASSION MINISTRIES


NOVEMBER/DECEMBER

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the 5 Solas of the REFORMATION



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How can sinful man be right with God?

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

In this issue of *Expositor*, we are focusing upon the five *solas* of the Reformation. During this sixteenth century movement, five dominant truths encapsulated the message that the Reformers believed and preached, and each was expressed with the term *sola*, Latin for “alone.” Return to these *solas* is critical to the recovery of the true gospel.

The *solas* answer a crucial question: How can sinful man be right with God? Each one plays a significant role in capturing the message of salvation.

We can remember these five *solas* and their relationship by picturing the image of an ancient temple.

The first *sola* is *sola scriptura*, which is the temple’s foundation. Everything rests upon the foundation, and so it is with the written Word of God. Rome said that the truth is found in Scripture and tradition, church councils, and the pope. But the Reformers said that the saving truth of the gospel is found in Scripture alone.

Resting upon this foundation are three massive pillars: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*. These *solas* affirm that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. This comprises the most basic expression of the gospel. Salvation is not by grace plus something else that man or the church can contribute. Rather, it is entirely by the grace of God alone, which supplies both the faith to believe and Jesus Christ, who must be received.

When these three pillars are in place, the roofline over this temple is *Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning “to the glory of

God alone.” This pinnacle points upward to the heights of heaven and magnifies the name of our triune God. But any crack in this foundation or any weakening of these pillars robs God of His rightful glory.



In the articles that follow, we will give careful thought to each of these five *solas*. May these truths anchor your soul to the throne of grace. ♦

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04 Martin Luther & *Sola Scriptura* STEVEN J. LAWSON

14 Jesus & *Sola Fide* JOHN MACARTHUR

22 The God Who Has Saved Us: *Sola Gratia* GEOFF THOMAS

30 The Pulpit: Jesus Before Pilate JOHN MACARTHUR

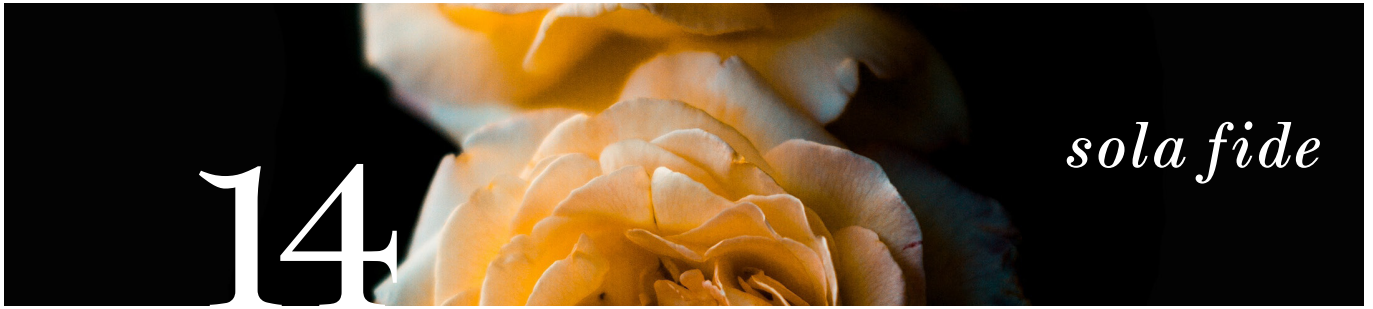
34 Preaching *Solus Christus* MICHAEL HORTON

42 *Soli Deo Gloria* W. ROBERT GODFREY



04

sola scriptura



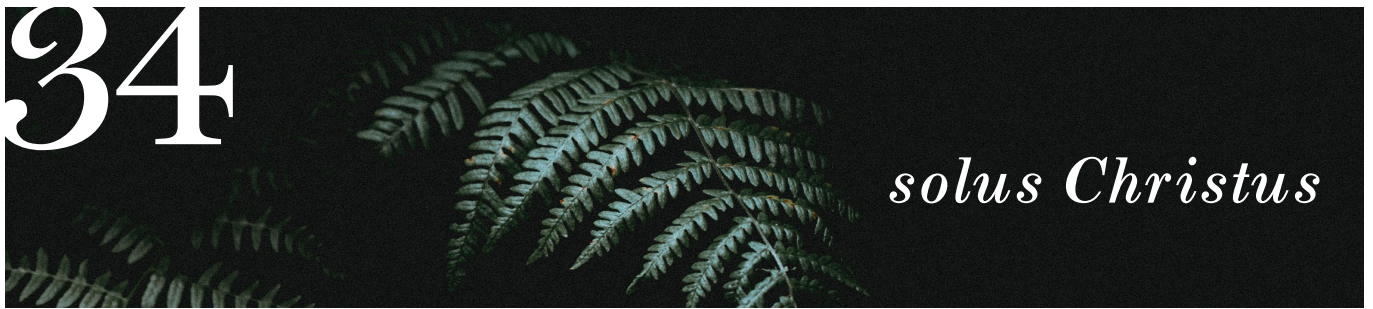
14

sola fide



sola gratia

22



34

solus Christus



soli deo gloria

42

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Martin Luther &
SOLA SCRIPTURA



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Martin Luther was a man who stood for the truth. It is one thing to believe the truth, but it is something else to stand for it, especially at the threat of your own life. In the face of mounting difficulties and growing dangers, this German Reformer held tenaciously to what came to be known as *sola Scriptura*. These two Latin words, meaning “Scripture alone,” formed what is often referred to as the formal principle of the Reformation, because it gave form to what Luther and the Reformers believed and preached. In the tempestuous sixteenth century, *sola Scriptura* became the battle cry for those who fought the good fight for the truth of the gospel.

So bold was Luther's commitment to the singular authority of the Bible that he resolutely stood against Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg and remained resilient before Martin Eck at Leipzig. So firm was his stance that he burned the Pope's bull in Wittenberg and was immovable before Johann von Eck at the Diet of Worms. Unbowed, Luther publicly confronted Erasmus in *Bondage of the Will* by holding to the Word alone. In this pivotal movement, this frontline soldier stood against centuries of church tradition and papal abuse as he asserted the sufficiency of Scripture alone.

The Defining Moment

The defining moment came on April 18, 1521, when Luther had been summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor,

Charles V, to appear at the Imperial Diet in Worms, Germany. Despite being warned by friends not to come, Luther nevertheless appeared. Assuming it would be an opportunity for him to present his beliefs on the Scripture, he soon discovered that he was standing at his own heresy trial. The political and ecclesiastical hierarchy of the day was present—in addition to the Emperor, six electors, the Pope's legates, archbishops, bishops, dukes, margraves, princes, counts, deputies, ambassadors of foreign courts, and numerous dignitaries. Outside were several thousand spectators.

A table in the middle of the room held twenty-five of Luther's books and treatises, including his *95 Theses*, *On the Papacy*, *Address to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of the Christian*. The prosecuting attorney for the Roman Catholic Church, Johann von Eck, essentially asked Luther two questions. “Martin Luther, are these your books?” and, “Will you recant?”

Luther realized that this was not an open debate, but an examination for a capital offense. Sensing the gravity of the moment, he asked to recess for the night that he might give careful thought to the answer. The request arose not from any lack of courage, but from a sense of responsibility. He wrote a friend that night, “I shall not retreat one iota, so Christ help me.” The next day, Luther appeared before the dense crowd and stated that he would not recant his books.

Such writings are filled with Scripture, he asserted, and to recant would be to recant the Word of God itself.

Luther then issued his famous response:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves, I am bound by the Scriptures that I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, God help me.

By this declaration, Luther testified that the Bible is the sole authority upon which he stood. He asserted the Scripture is a higher authority than church traditions, ecclesiastical councils, or even the pope himself. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church had espoused the authority of the Scripture *and* these other things. But Luther rebutted this position and declared that Scripture *alone* has the right to rule in the church. By means of this fearless posture, he established and embodied *sola Scriptura*.

For Luther and the other Reformers, *sola Scriptura* meant a fundamental commitment to six essential truths about the Bible.

The Inspiration of Scripture

First, Luther's commitment to *sola Scriptura* meant that he fundamentally affirmed the divine inspiration of Scripture. This core conviction was ground zero for the Protestant Reformation. In the sixteenth century, this truth that the Bible is God-breathed gripped his heart and refused to let him go. Luther believed that the Bible is precisely what it claims to be, the written Word of the living God. 2 Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is inspired by God." The Greek word used (*theopneustos*) is translated "God-breathed." This means that God breathed it out of His very being. In the temptation account, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, saying, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that precedes out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Here, the Lord affirmed that the sacred writings in the Bible have come out of the mouth of God.

Luther held strongly to this foundational doctrine of divine inspiration. He declared, "Let the man who would hear God speak read Holy Scripture." The idea is not that the biblical authors wrote down their own ideas, and then God breathed into their writings, causing them to become inspired. Instead, the doctrine of inspiration means that the Bible has proceeded from God, who is its Author and

Source. It can be said that every biblical text has a primary Author and secondary author. The secondary author is the human instrument whom God chose to use to record the text, but the primary Author is God Himself. There were over forty human authors whom God used to write the Bible, yet God alone is its ultimate Author. Luther was rock-solid in this underlying conviction.


Without equivocation, Luther affirmed, "The Holy Spirit is the Author of this book." Though an individual book in the Bible may bear the human author's name, such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, it is nonetheless the product of the mind of the Spirit. Luther said, "We attribute to the Holy Spirit all of the holy Scripture." He held that every jot, tittle, verb tense, word, phrase, sentence, chapter, and book of Holy Scripture is the product of the Holy Spirit. Again, Luther stated, "The Scriptures, although they were written by men, are neither of men nor from men, but from God." By this, he stressed that when the Bible speaks, God Himself speaks.

Consequently, Luther was convinced that the Bible is uniquely different from every other book. He said, "We must make a great difference between God's word and the word of man. A man's word is a little sound that flies into the air and soon vanishes, but the word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yes greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God." In other words, man speaks, and his words merely evaporate into thin air. They have no power to rescue sinners or reassure saints. But when God speaks, the effect is entirely different. In the Bible, the supernatural power of God is unleashed to convert the lost and to conform believers into Christlikeness.

Luther said, "The Bible is alive. It speaks to me. The Bible has feet. It runs after me. The Bible has hands, it lays hold of me." Here, Luther is alluding to Hebrews 4:12, which states, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword." The Bible is a "living" book, full of divine life, and is able to give eternal life to the human soul. Every other book containing human wisdom is a dead book. There is only one living book that imparts divine life, and that is the Scripture alone. Luther understood this truth, and he took his stand on the divinely inspired Word of God.

The Inerrancy of Scripture

Second, an adherence to *sola Scriptura* also meant that Luther held to the inerrancy of Scripture. He believed that what God has spoken is recorded in His Word without any mixture of error. He was convinced that the Bible contains the pure, unadulterated truth of God. The Scripture is without any blemish or mistake. Luther said, "The word is flaw-



The holiness of God necessitates the inerrancy of Scripture. The Bible says, “God cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). That is, He always speaks the unvarnished truth. Thus, the Bible always tells it like it is.

less, so that not an iota in the law or the divine promises is defective.” This fundamental belief was based upon the clear teaching of Scripture. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by your word. Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Whatever God says in His Word, Jesus affirmed, is the truth, and so did Luther. The word “truth” simply means “reality.” The truth is the way things really are. The condition and destiny of man is whatever biblical truth says it is. Sin and salvation are what the Word says they are. Heaven and hell are what the Scripture says they are. Whatever God speaks in His Word is absolute truth.

The holiness of God necessitates the inerrancy of Scripture. The Bible says, “God cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). That is, He always speaks the unvarnished truth. Thus, the Bible always tells it like it is. Again the Scripture testifies, “It is impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18). There are some things God cannot do. He cannot act contrary to His own holy nature. Nor can He speak contrary to His moral perfections. God the Father can only speak truth because He is the “God of truth” (Ps 31:5). God the Son said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The apostle John testified that He is “full of...truth” (John 1:14). Jesus Himself claims to speak words of truth (John 8:31–32). God the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), who authored “the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Everything each Person of the Trinity says in the Word is the truth.

The psalmist David further testifies to the inerrancy of Scripture. He writes, “For the words of the Lord are pure words, as silver tried in a furnace on the earth refined seven times” (Ps 12:6). The imagery here is that of an ancient smelting practice, where a precious metal was put into a

furnace and the heat greatly increased. It would become so intensely hot that there would be a separation as the impurities would rise to the surface. The smelter would skim the dross off of the top, leaving behind a pure metal. That is what David is claiming for the written Word of God. The Scripture is refined seven times, the number for perfection. It contains no contaminations of flawed human opinions, worldly philosophies, or secular ideologies that would defile the truth. In the Scripture, there is only the pure, inerrant truth of God.

The psalmist writes, “The sum of your word is truth” (Ps 119:160). In other words, the reality of every individual part of God’s Word is absolute “truth.” The wisdom of Agur states, “Every word of God is tested” (Prov 30:5). Again, the ancient process of refining metal is used to convey the inerrancy of Scripture. In the heated furnace, there was the separation and removal of every impurity from the precious metal. Even so, the Word of God has been tested as by fire and is found to be a pure record of divine truth. It is utterly devoid of any errors or fallacies. The Scripture is without any mixture of error.

Luther strongly believed this doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. He rejected the false notion that the Bible was a collection of fallible human writings, drawn from men’s flawed insights into life. Instead, he maintained, “If God has said it, it must come to pass. For no one should ask whether it is impossible, but only determine whether God has said it.” That is, all that matters is what God says in His Word. Luther was affirming that if God has said something, then it must be the truth. This is exactly what Paul affirms, “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Rom 3:4). A holy God can only speak inerrant words.

On another occasion, Luther declared, “The apostles show that one should not trust the holy fathers and the church unless it is certain that they have the word of God. Only Scripture is to be considered inerrant.” These words “only Scripture” are an early statement of *sola Scriptura*. Here, Luther asserted that the church fathers are right only to the extent that they are in perfect alignment with the Word of God. Those teachers who preceded Luther are correct only as they speak in agreement with the Scripture. Scripture alone is the plumb line by which all human teachers are measured.

The purity of Scripture, Luther stressed, also means it is without any contradictions. He declared, “The Holy Spirit cannot contradict Himself.” He strongly believed that the entire Bible speaks with *one* voice. From cover to cover, it presents *one* dilemma for mankind—sin. It offers *one* solution for sin—the gospel. It teaches *one* pattern for living—holiness. It reveals *one* plan for the end of the age—the return of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Luther believed that the Bible never speaks out of both sides of its mouth. Rather, the Scripture presents its message with a perfect internal consistency and unbroken unity. Luther added, “Scripture will not contradict itself on even one article of faith.” This is what the Reformers called the *analogia Scriptura*, or the analogy of Scripture. This important principle affirmed that the Scripture is one seamless tapestry of truth, perfectly woven together, without a thread out of place, giving one self-consistent testimony of the truth.


The Authority of Scripture

Third, an allegiance to *sola Scriptura* for Luther meant that he firmly stood on the supreme authority of Scripture. The Word of God, he believed, is the highest arbitrator in the church. Every human opinion and ecclesiastical voice must yield to whatever the Bible teaches. Luther stated, “The pulpit is the throne for the word of God.” Here, he reveals his fundamental belief that God must rule in His church through the binding testimony of His Word.

Luther certainly had sufficient biblical grounds to support this claim. The supreme reign of Scripture is taught because the Bible is identified as “the law of the Lord” (Ps 19:7). This means the Bible contains the divine law that is authoritative over all people. In the next verse, the Bible is referred to as “the commandment of the Lord” (v. 8). The Scripture is not a collection of mere suggestions for people

to consider. It does not contain human opinions to ponder. Neither is it laying out options to weigh. To the contrary, the Scripture speaks with the governing authority of God Himself and contains the commandments that men must obey.

Luther understood this and believed that men must base their convictions, not on the words of human leaders, but on Scripture. He said, “When they extol the authority of the fathers or they extol the authority of Augustine or of



The Scripture speaks with the governing authority of God Himself and contains the commandments that men must obey.

Gregory and likewise of the councils, our answer is “Those things have no claim on us. We demand the word.” This stance put Luther at direct odds with papal authority in Rome. Luther declared, as if addressing the pope directly, “My dear pope, you must not lord it over Scripture, nor must I or anybody else, according to our own ideas. The devil has that attitude!” The epitome of human arrogance, Luther exclaimed, is to elevate man’s thoughts, even those of the pope, above God’s truth.

Luther forcefully declared:

God . . . would hold us solely to His word [so] that we may learn to despise the great cry: “Church! Church! Fathers! Fathers! The church cannot err! The church cannot err!” . . . We should learn to put out of sight church, fathers, temple, priesthood, Jerusalem, God’s people, and everything, and listen only to what God tells us in His word.

Here, Luther stressed that what really matters in determining the veracity of any issue is what God says about it. He exclaimed, “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on the earth.” Found in this



statement again are the words “Scripture alone,” which came to be *sola Scriptura*. Luther went on to say, “God’s word wants to be supreme or it is nothing.” Simply put, God’s Word must be recognized as sovereign over the church and all human lives or it has no binding authority whatsoever. There is no middle ground.

Luther also said, “God forbid that there should be one jot or one tittle in all of Paul which the whole church universal is not bound to follow and keep.” He understood that the Bible is not simply dispensing advice, but it is making assertive claims upon the lives of people. The Scripture must be recognized as having the right to regulate every church and every believer in every generation. That was the test to which Luther was put at the Diet of Worms. The whole matter was a crisis of authority. What would be the ultimate authority in the church? Would it be church tradition? Would it be ecclesiastical councils? Would it be the pope? Or would it be “Thus says the Lord”? For Luther, he bowed the knee to the sole authority of the Word of God.

The Perspicuity of Scripture

Fourth, a dedication to *sola Scriptura* meant that Luther affirmed the perspicuity of Scripture. This particular aspect of the Bible refers to the unmistakable clarity with which it speaks. In other words, the Bible is the most lucid

book ever written, specifically when it addresses matters of salvation and personal godliness. David writes, “The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19:8). The word “pure” means “clear, not obscure, not darkened or oblique, without ambiguity, not vague.” This is to say, the Scripture is comprehensive, understandable, cogent, coherent, and articulate. The Bible is like crystal clear water into which one can look and easily see what is lying at the bottom. It is the opposite of a muddy stream or a murky lake that has no visibility to the naked eye. This psalm states that the teaching in the Bible can be easily seen and understood. Its message can be clearly discerned.

This claim is supported in several of the challenges that Jesus issued to the Pharisees. He said, “Have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?” (Matt 12:5). This rhetorical question implies a positive answer. The point Jesus is making is that if these religious leaders can read, which they undoubtedly can, they should know the truth of Scripture. Jesus said the same when He addressed the Pharisees on another occasion. They had tried to trap Him on the controversial matter of divorce and remarriage, and Jesus directly appealed to the Scripture. He said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female?” (Matt 19:4). Again, this

rhetorical question implies a positive answer. If they can read the Bible, they should know the answer, because it is clear enough. The truth is right in front of their eyes. They should look into the Bible and see for themselves. Jesus makes the same appeal one more time when He says, “But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God?” (Matt 22:31). If they can read, they should know the truth.

In the sixteenth century, this issue of the clarity of Scripture became a critically important matter. At this time, the Bible was being withheld from the laity on the grounds that they could not understand it. In the days prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church looked down upon the people as though they were too ignorant to interpret and understand the Bible for themselves. Therefore, the church refused to translate the Bible into the vernacular language of the common person. Rome restricted the Bible to Latin, which was the tongue used by the learned in the academic classrooms of universities and monasteries. However, the farmer in the field or the blacksmith in his shop did not know Latin. Tragically, priests preached in Latin and conducted the worship service in the same, further keeping the people in ignorance.

By stark contrast though, Luther was convinced that the Bible is the most lucid book ever written in the essential matters of the gospel and Christian living. He held that God speaks in such a clear manner that He can be easily understood. Thus, when Luther was kidnapped by his friends after the Diet of Worms and taken to Wartburg Castle in 1521, he spent his time doing what was most strategic for the German-speaking people. He translated the Bible into the German language. This gift to his fellow countrymen was published in September 1522 and came to be known as the *September Bible*. From that point, a common German worker could take the Bible, read it for himself, and understand what God meant in His Word. The people soon discovered there is no mention of indulgences, purgatory, treasury of merit, the pope, last rights, nor the removal of sin through baptism or church membership. The people could read for themselves that the way of salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone.

So lucid is the Bible, Luther said, “No clearer book has been written on earth than the holy Scripture.” The Bible is plainly understood in the essential matters of salvation and the pursuit of personal holiness. Luther said, “Everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the word into the most definite light and published for all the world to see.” The message of the gospel in the Bible is not hidden from man’s eyes, but is in the open for all to see. Again, Luther said, “The meaning of Scripture is in and of itself so

certain and accessible and clear that Scripture interprets itself and tests and judges and illumines everything else.” He contended that what is in the Bible is abundantly clear, and by it we understand the issues of life, death, and eternity. It is by the Word of God that God, the world, and one’s self is understood. Luther also said, “There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the holy Scriptures.” This persuasion was in total contradiction to the dogma of Rome, but it was consistent with Scripture’s own testimony.

Moreover, Luther maintained, “Scripture is intended for all people. It is clear enough so far as truths necessary for salvation are concerned.” The gospel, as recorded in the Bible, is not to be reserved for only a few educated elitists. It is to be read and understood by all people. Luther certainly admitted that some parts of Scripture were hard to understand. But they are those portions that have nothing to do with knowing and entering the way of salvation. The difficult parts of Scripture are the peripheral issues, while the primary parts are crystal clear. When reading the parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand, he said, “If you cannot understand the obscure, then stay with the clear.” Again, he said, “If the words are obscure at one place, they will be made clear in another place.” That is to say, Scripture shines the best light upon Scripture. Put another way, Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Fifth, a belief in *sola Scriptura* also meant that Luther firmly held to the sufficiency of Scripture. He believed the Bible is fully able to carry out all of God’s saving and sanctifying purposes. Nothing else needs to be added to the written Word of God, because it is complete in and of itself in matters of finding acceptance with God and growing in conformity with Christ. No human wisdom or worldly knowledge needs to be added to the testimony of Scripture. All that any man needs to know concerning his relationship with God is found in the Bible alone.

Luther was in full agreement with what David writes, “The law of the Lord is perfect” (Ps 19:7). The word “perfect” means “complete, whole, comprehensive, lacking in nothing.” This is clear testimony to the sufficiency of Scripture. Isaiah 55:11 says, “My word which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.” Whatever God is doing in the world in converting sinners and maturing saints is being carried out by the ministry of His Word. The Scripture never fails to accomplish the purpose for which God sent it.

The apostle Paul affirms the sufficiency of Scripture when he writes: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable

“This word is the word of life. It is the word of truth. It is the word of light, of preaching, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory and every blessing beyond our power to estimate.” **MARTIN LUTHER**

for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). The word “adequate” refers to a person who is made capable and proficient to perform a task. The word “equipped” indicates he is enabled to meet the demands that God requires. All the divine truth that we need is deposited in the Word of God. Other books written by men are helpful only to the extent that they help us understand and apply the Word of God. Insights from other sources are not needed for anyone to enter or advance in the kingdom of God.

Luther understood this when he wrote, “This word is the word of life. It is the word of truth. It is the word of light, of preaching, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory and every blessing beyond our power to estimate.” He believed all that is necessary for anyone to come to faith in Christ and follow Him is contained in the Scripture. This truth, he believed, is a reflection of the sufficiency of God Himself. Luther said, “What kind of God would He be if His word is insufficient and is in need of supplementing by men?” An incomplete Bible, Luther reasoned, would mean that its Author is lacking. Any perceived insufficiency in Scripture would mean that His Word is not enough, and that men would have to augment God’s wisdom with their own wisdom. Such empty thinking is an open attack upon God Himself.

Luther repeatedly affirmed that the Scripture is sufficient to lead the sinner to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Luther states, “We should know that God has ordained that

no one is to come to a knowledge of Christ or to obtain the remission of sin without external and general means. God has deposited this treasure in the spoken word of the ministry.” When Luther says “external means,” he refers to the special revelation in the written Word of God. When he says “general means,” he means the preaching of this Word. Thus, Luther affirmed the supernatural ability of the Word preached to convert the soul and conform the life into the image of Christ.

The Invincibility of Scripture

Sixth, a loyalty to *sola Scriptura* means that Luther believed the Bible is a superior weapon. He was confident it wields an invincible force in the hands of a skilled, Spirit-empowered handler. Luther held that no human weapon can match the irresistible power of the Word of God in the day of His power. When the apostle Paul describes the full armor of God, he concludes, “take. . .the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). The Word of God is a razor-sharp sword that can cut through the thickest façade of a person’s life and pierce to the heart. When unsheathed and used against the enemy, the Bible gives the believer an astounding victory in the evil day. All other weaponry crafted by man is inferior. The Word alone enables the believer to live victoriously in Jesus Christ.

The invincibility of Scripture was clearly seen in Jesus’ response to the temptations He faced in the wilderness. The three climactic attacks by Satan began when the evil one said, “Command these stones to become bread” (v. 3).

Jesus responded by repelling this assault by using the Word of God, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:4). The devil then tempted Jesus to jump off the temple, to which Jesus responded, resisting him with the sword of the Spirit, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (v. 7).


Finally, Jesus was taken up to the highest point of a mountain, and the evil one offered him the kingdoms of this world on one condition, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (v. 9). Jesus fended off this temptation of Satan by again unsheathing the sword of the Spirit, and resisted the devil, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only’” (v. 10). Even Jesus used the Word of God to overcome the temptation. No matter how shrewd the devil is, the Word of God is greater and is able to give the victory in the evil day.

In like manner, Luther knew that in his own wisdom and strength, he could not stand against the papistry and its ecclesiastical hierarchy. But one man armed with this sword of the Spirit was able to withstand even the deadly deceptions of Rome. He was well aware of the triumphant power in the Word of God. He was a frontline warrior who was attacked on every side by many advances from the evil one. He was constantly exposed to the hidden ambushes and frontal assaults of Satan. Though he faced temptations and discouragements on every side, Luther remained armed for the battle and was made to be victorious in the conflict.

Why Luther Stood Here

Why was it so necessary for this German Reformer to adhere so strictly to *sola Scriptura*? What was at stake? Why was this conviction so critically important?

Principally, Luther knew if he stood upon anything except *sola Scriptura*, it meant he would be taking steps away from God Himself. God and His Word cannot be separated. The two are inseparably bound together. When the Bible speaks, God speaks. To depart from the exclusive nature of the Word of God, even in the slightest, is to take steps away from God. Such a departure from Scripture is always the first step onto the slippery slope that leads to the



To take one step off of the high ground of the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture inevitably leads to apostasy. To drift from the Word of God is to turn one’s back on its Author.

downfall of any movement or ministry. To take one step off of the high ground of the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture inevitably leads to apostasy. No one can stand with God and yet forsake His Word. To drift from the Word of God is to turn one’s back on its Author. Luther knew this, and he could not abandon the sacred writing, because to do so would be to desert the God of truth.

Moreover, Luther understood that to abandon *sola Scriptura* is to abandon Jesus Christ. An inseparable connection exists between the living Word and the written Word. In fact, the Scripture is identified by the apostle Paul as “the word of Christ.” He writes, “So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Paul further writes, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you” (Col 3:16). Here, the Word of God and the word of Christ are synonymous expressions. To abandon the written Word is to move away from the living Word. To reject the one is to reject the other.

In addition, Luther realized that to abandon *sola Scriptura* was to forsake the truth for lies and deceptions. Paul refers to the Scripture as “the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Jesus affirmed the same when He identified the Word of God as “truth” (John 17:17). That is to say, the Word of God is the record of the truth of God. The Bible is the self-revelation of

God Himself. It is the self-disclosure of God to His people. In the Scripture, the mind of God is revealed and the glory of God is displayed. To abandon the Scripture is to depart from the light of truth and enter into the darkness of error. Luther knew this and dared not go there.

Finally, for Luther to abandon *sola Scriptura* was to forsake the gospel message as the only way of salvation. To desert the gospel message as taught in the Bible was to depart from the narrow gate that leads to life. Paul writes, “In Him you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. . .” (Eph 1:13). Here, Paul equates “the message of truth” with “the gospel of salvation.” These two phrases are synonymous and interchangeable. If anyone walks away from the Word of truth, he is deserting the gospel. James writes, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). Only by “the word of truth” is anyone brought into the kingdom of God. God exercises His sovereign will in salvation exclusively where His Word has been planted into human hearts.

This is why Luther took his stand upon *sola Scriptura*. If we are to see a great work of the Spirit again in these days, it will come only as we hold tightly to the same convictions concerning the Word of God. Every reformation in church history has been ushered in by a return to the exclusive claims of Scripture. J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, the great historian of the Protestant Reformation, said, “Every reformation emanates from the word of God.” If we are to see a reformation in our day, then pastors and preachers in pulpits must be firmly committed to *sola Scriptura*. The preacher must have nothing to say apart from the Word of

God. His calling is simply to be a mouthpiece for Scripture. Spiritual leaders must govern their churches and ministries by Scripture alone. Sermons must be saturated with the Scripture. Worship services must be regulated by Scripture alone. The witness of the church to the world must be governed by its commitment to *sola Scriptura*. God will honor the man and church who honors His Word. But He will abandon the man and flock that departs from the Word of God.

The Word Did It All

As the Reformation began to develop, Luther was asked to explain how such a history-altering movement was taking place in Europe. Luther responded with these words:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s word. Otherwise, I did nothing and then I slept. . .and the word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince and never an emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The word did it all.

Luther was not looking for any means to advance the work of God apart from unleashing the power of the Scripture. So it must be in this hour. We are not looking for gospel gimmicks in our day. Nor must our reliance be upon the latest fads or techniques. We are looking for men and women, churches and seminaries, ministries and denominations that will stand upon the Word of God alone. Let us proclaim the Word in the power of the Spirit and then trust the Word to do its work. ♦



Jesus &
SOLA FIDE



JOHN MACARTHUR





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M

Many who have embraced “the New Perspective on Paul” are also proposing a different slant on the doctrine of justification by faith. When the text of Scripture is interpreted in the new light, they say, Pauline support for the principle of *sola fide*, the doctrine of imputation, and the distinction between law and gospel doesn’t seem quite so strong.

We say that’s nonsense. We reject the historical and hermeneutical revisionism of the New Perspective, but regardless of how one interprets the apostle Paul, it is quite clear that *Jesus* taught justification by faith alone. To abandon this truth is to abandon biblical soteriology altogether.

No doctrine is more important to evangelical theology than the doctrine of justification by faith alone—the Reformation principle of *sola fide*. Martin Luther rightly said that the church stands or falls on this one doctrine.

History provides plenty of objective evidence to affirm Luther’s assessment. Churches and denominations that hold firmly to *sola fide* remain evangelical. Those who have strayed from the Reformation consensus on this point inevitably capitulate to liberalism, revert to sacerdotalism, embrace some form of perfectionism, or veer off into worse forms of apostasy.

The Very Essence of Christianity

Historic evangelicalism has therefore always treated justification by faith as a central biblical distinctive—if not the single most important doctrine to get right. This is the doctrine

that makes authentic Christianity distinct from every other religion. Christianity is the religion of divine accomplishment—with the emphasis always on Christ’s finished work. All others are religions of human achievement. They become preoccupied, inevitably, with the sinner’s own efforts to be holy. Abandon the doctrine of justification by faith and you cannot honestly claim to be evangelical.

Scripture itself makes *sola fide* the only alternative to a damning system of works-righteousness: “Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who *does not work, but believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom 4:4–5, emphasis added).

In other words, those who trust Jesus Christ for justification by faith alone receive a perfect righteousness that is reckoned to them. Those who attempt to establish their own righteousness or mix faith with works only receive the terrible wage that is due all who fall short of perfection. So the individual as well as the church stands or falls with the principle of *sola fide*. Israel’s apostasy was rooted in their abandonment of justification by faith alone: “For not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Rom 10:3).

Biblical justification must be earnestly defended on two fronts. No-lordship theology twists the doctrine of justification by faith to support the view that obedience to God’s

moral law is optional. This teaching attempts to reduce the whole of God's saving work to the declarative act of justification. It downplays the spiritual rebirth of regeneration (2 Cor 5:17); it discounts the moral effects of the believer's new heart (Ezek 36:26–27); and it makes sanctification hinge on the believer's own efforts. It tends to treat the forensic element of justification—God's act of declaring the believing sinner righteous—as if this were the only essential aspect of salvation. The inevitable effect of this approach is to turn the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 4). Such a view is called *antinomianism*.

On the other hand, there are many who make justification dependent on a mixture of faith and works. Whereas antinomianism radically *isolates* justification from sanctification, this error *blends* the two aspects of God's saving work. The effect is to make justification a *process* grounded in the believer's own flawed righteousness—rather than a *declarative act* of God grounded in Christ's perfect righteousness.

As soon as justification is fused with sanctification, works of righteousness become an essential part of the process. Faith is thus diluted with works. *Sola fide* is abandoned. This was the error of the Galatian legalists (cf. Gal 2:16; 5:4). Paul called it “a different gospel” (Gal 1:6, 9). The same error is found in virtually every false cult. It's the main error of Roman Catholicism. I'm concerned that it may also be the direction many who are enthralled with “the New Perspective on Paul” are traveling.

If doctrine as a whole has been ignored in our day, the doctrine of justification has suffered a particular neglect. Written works on justification are noticeably missing from the corpus of recent evangelical literature. In his introduction to the 1961 reprint of James Buchanan's landmark work, *The Doctrine of Justification*, J. I. Packer made note of this:

It is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism (to look no further) has produced. If we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been an age of such feverish theological activity as the past hundred years; yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline. Having neglected this doctrine for more than a century,

evangelicals are ill-equipped to answer those who are saying Martin Luther and the Reformers misunderstood the apostle Paul and therefore got the doctrine of justification wrong.

The evangelical movement is on the verge of abandoning the material principle of the Reformation, and most evangelicals don't even see the threat and would have no answer cogent if they did.

What must we do to be saved? The apostle Paul answered that question for the Philippian jailer in the clearest possible terms: “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31, emphasis added).

Paul's key doctrinal epistles—especially Romans and Galatians—then expand on that answer, unfolding the doctrine of justification by faith to show how we are justified by faith alone apart from human works of any kind.

At least, that is the historic evangelical interpretation of Paul. But that's the very thing under attack by the New Perspective.

So what if we move beyond the apostle Paul? Is it possible to prove the principle of *sola fide* from the earthly teaching of Christ? It certainly is.

The Gospel According To Jesus

Although Christ made no formal explication of the doctrine of justification (such as Paul did in his epistle to the Romans), justification by faith underlies and permeates all His gospel preaching. While Jesus never gave a discourse on the subject, it is easy to demonstrate from Jesus' evangelistic ministry that He taught *sola fide*.

For example, it was Jesus Himself who stated, “he who hears My word, and believes . . . has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24)—without undergoing any sacrament or ritual, and without any waiting period or purgatory. The thief on the cross is the classic example. On the most meager evidence of his faith, Jesus told him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). No sacrament or work was required for him to procure salvation.

Furthermore, the many healings Jesus accomplished were physical evidence of His power to forgive sins (Matt 9:5–6). When He healed, He frequently said, “Your *faith* has made you well” (Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). All those healings were object lessons on the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But the one occasion where Jesus actually declared someone “justified” provides the best insight into the doctrine as He taught it. He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

Jesus had stunned multitudes by saying, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20)—followed by, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house *justified* rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:9–14, emphasis added).

That parable surely shocked Jesus’ listeners! They “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9)—the very definition of self-righteousness. Their theological heroes were the Pharisees, who held to the most rigid legalistic standards. They fasted, made a great show of praying and giving alms, and even went further in applying the ceremonial laws than Moses had actually prescribed.

Yet Jesus had stunned multitudes by saying, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20)—followed by, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). Clearly, He set a standard that was humanly impossible, for no one could surpass the rigorous

living of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now He further astounds His listeners with a parable that seems to place a detestable tax-gatherer in a better position spiritually than a praying Pharisee.

Jesus’ point is clear. He was teaching that justification is by faith alone. All the theology of justification is there. But without delving into abstract theology, Jesus clearly painted the picture for us with a parable.

A Judicial Act of God

This tax-gatherer’s justification was an instantaneous reality. There was no process, no time lapse, no fear of purgatory. He “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14)—not because of anything he had done, but because of what had been done on his behalf.

Notice that the tax-collector understood his own helplessness. He owed an impossible debt he knew he could not pay. All he could do was repent and plead for mercy. Contrast his prayer with that of the arrogant Pharisee. He did not recite what he had done. He knew that even his best works were sin. He did not offer to do anything for God. He simply pleaded for divine mercy. He was looking for God to do for him what he could not do for himself. That is the very nature of the penitence Jesus called for.

By Faith Alone

Furthermore, this man went away justified without performing

any works of penance, without doing any sacrament or ritual, without any meritorious works whatsoever. His justification was complete without *any* of those things, because it was solely on the basis of faith. Everything necessary to atone for his sin and provide forgiveness had already been done on his behalf. He was justified by faith on the spot.

Again, he makes a stark contrast with the smug Pharisee, who was so certain that all his fasting and tithing and other works made him acceptable to God. But while the working Pharisee remained unjustified, the believing tax-gatherer received full justification by faith alone.

An Imputed Righteousness

Remember Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20)? Yet now He states that this tax-gatherer—the most wicked of men—was justified! How did such a sinner obtain a righteousness that exceeded that of the Pharisee? If the standard is divine perfection (v. 48), how could a traitorous tax-collector ever become just in God's eyes?

The only possible answer is that he received a righteousness that was not his own (cf. Phil 3:9). Righteousness was


imputed to him by faith (Rom 4:9–11).

Whose righteousness was reckoned to him? It could only be the perfect righteousness of a flawless Substitute, who in turn must bear the tax-gatherer's sins and suffer the penalty of God's wrath in his place. And the gospel tells us that is precisely what Jesus did.

The tax-gatherer was justified. God declared him righteous, imputing to him the full and perfect righteousness of Christ, forgiving him of all *unrighteousness*, and delivering him from all condemnation. Forever thereafter he stood before God on the ground of a perfect righteousness that had been reckoned to his account.

That is what justification means. It is the only true gospel. All other points of theology emanate from it. As Packer wrote, "The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace." The difference between *sola fide* and every other formula for justification is not theological hair-splitting. A right understanding of justification by faith is the very foundation of the gospel. You cannot go wrong on this point without ultimately corrupting every other doctrine as well.

And that is why every "different gospel" is under the eternal curse of God. ♦



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The God Who Has Saved Us
SOLA GRATIA



GEOFF THOMAS





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G

God “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:9, 10).

What mighty words! What a vision that sweeps from the beginning of time to immortality! Now, we know with absolute certainty the identity of the “us” that Paul refers to three times in our text. The text itself tells us that they are the people whom God has saved, and whom God has called, and who also were given grace in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. We know that the “us” must certainly refer to Paul and Timothy. God had saved them, and God called them to live a holy life; in fact, God’s grace was given to them before the foundation of the world.

The “us” here is a very definitive and particular constituency. It certainly does not refer to Satan and the rebel angels, and it does not refer to those who perished in Noah’s flood, and it does not refer to the emperor Nero. Today we could also add that these pronouns “we” and “us” do not refer to Hitler and they do not embrace the unsaved and the unholy—those who reject the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But we’d all agree that it certainly refers to the apostle Paul and to Timothy. Surely we must also add that it embraces those who believe as Paul and Timothy

believed and live as they lived. Such believers are all saved and called to a holy life.

1. What a Christian Is

Our text gives us a number of clues about what a Christian is.

1. *A Christian is someone whom God has saved.* The definition of a Christian is very simply expressed in four words of one syllable each: God has saved us. Some men and women are engaged in the saving vocations, serving as firemen, and lifeboatmen, and mountain rescue teams, and lifeguards, and helicopter rescue pilots. They all save other people from suffering and death.

In a similar but much more profound way, God saves people. What does He save us from? God saved Paul and Timothy from sin, from the consequences of breaking the law of God. He saves men and women from the guilt of being law-breakers and from the power that sin exercises over us that makes some temptations quite overwhelming and almost irresistible. God saves us from spiritual impotence, and also He saves us from the consequences of our sinning. The wages of sin is death. God will send in the bill for a life of rebellion and indifference to Him. God saves us from all of that, and He does so through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a blameless life, keeping and loving the law that we have failed to live, and took the judgment that our sin deserves in His body and soul on the cross of Golgotha. So,

a Christian is not someone whom God will save some day, but he is someone whom God has saved.

2. *A Christian is someone whom God has called to live a holy life.* That is what our text says, that God has saved us and called us to a holy life (v. 9). These two actions of God are indivisible. They are not an either-or; this is a both-and, for He both saves us and calls us to live a holy life. You cannot choose the second as an option to add to the first—if you are so inclined.

The first is indispensable—we must be saved. But the second is indispensable too. If we are saved by God, we are also summoned by God to live a blameless and godlike life. Holy living is not a suggestion from God—it is a call, an effectual call. If you go on living just as you always lived before you professed to become a Christian, then you are mistaken in claiming to have been saved. The forger who says he has been saved by God but continues his forgery is unsaved. The drunkard who claims to have been saved but goes on regularly getting drunk is unsaved. The thief who claims to have been saved but who does not stop stealing is unsaved. The man who once ignored the Holy Bible and then professes to have been saved, but soon indicates he has no desire for Holy Scripture read and Holy Scripture preached, is an unsaved man. The God who has saved us has also called every one of the saved to live a holy life.

Paul might have heard a professing, saved man suggesting that it was fine for him to go on sinning because then there would be more grace and more forgiveness and more mercy shown to him by God—“I am simply giving God’s grace plenty of scope!” It is the devil’s logic to argue like this: “If you are justified by faith alone, you may live as you please. You have a place reserved for you in heaven, so sin without compunction!”

Paul’s response is a resounding, “God forbid! By no means!” In other words, “No way.” It is utterly unthinkable

to Paul that a professing Christian saved from the condemnation of sin through the kindness of the love of God in sending His Son and not sparing Him from the accursed death of the cross should subsequently live for self! Such sinning makes merchandise of Golgotha.

Paul tells us that those who are saved are also called to a holy life. If a Christian is indeed justified by faith in the finished work of Christ alone, then he will inevitably demonstrate that faith by a life which is not merely moral, but positively holy. We are certainly justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies a sinner is never alone. It is always accompanied by a holy life and good works. These are not instrumental in his justification, but they are evidential and necessary. This is the buzz phrase: justification always leads to sanctification. Robert Murray M’Cheyne spoke on behalf of every Christian when he said, “If Christ justifies you, he will sanctify you. He will not save you only then abandon you to your sinning.” As Ryle said, “No holiness, no heaven!” So, a Christian is someone who is saved and who has been called to live a holy life.

2. Why God Should Have Saved Us and Called Us to Live a Holy Life

Paul gives Timothy two answers to this question; the first is negative and the second is positive.

1. *It was not that we did something to deserve it (v.9).* Let us clear away that heresy and destroy it. Was it the fact that we were a particularly good people that constrained God to save us? Did the Father rub His hands with glee as He saw you, turning to the Son and saying to Him, “Now there’s a fine man that we must save! He is worth saving!” No. Was it the righteous, and noble, and rich, and influential, and beautiful, and really smart, that Father, Son and Holy Spirit decided to choose, “We’re going to have *those!* They would be real assets to the kingdom of God”? Never in a month of

If we are saved by God, we are also summoned by God to live a blameless and godlike life. Holy living is not a suggestion from God—it is a call, an effectual call.

Sundays! That is not at all how God has worked!

God never bases His choice on what man thinks, or says, or does, or is. We don't know what God has based His choices upon, but we do know that it is not on anything that's in man. And isn't that wonderful? Suppose God had said that He would save a person because that person had attained a certain standard of morality, or theology, or religious experience, or had attained some glorious concept of the living God. Who then could ever be saved? What man here today could stand before God and claim that he has done one thing that for a single moment could bear the total, holy scrutiny of God? Who has done anything such that God Himself would evaluate it and conclude, "When he did that, it was 100% perfect"? If God's salvation were dependent on one single perfect thing that's found in us, something that is as holy as God Himself, then no one would be saved. No one would get to heaven. All would go to the place of woe. For no one is righteous, no, not one.

When God—the God who knows everything—evaluates us, He really scrutinizes our hearts and our motives and our imaginations, and God's final judgment on everyone is this, that even our righteousnesses are in His sight as discredited as used toilet paper. When we fallen, dirty specks of dust are set down in His presence. We therefore see the vastness of the existential contrast, an utterly sinless holy God on the one hand—light, with no darkness at all—and then ourselves, people who drink iniquity like water, on the other.

We deserve nothing from God because of the sin of our father Adam and our own personal rebellions against God. What could we possibly do to deserve the glories of heaven, to inherit the love of God eternally, to know complete forgiveness of all our sins, past, present, and future, to become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, to look forward to becoming like the Son of God and to be loved now and then with the same love as Jesus Christ is loved? What would be the price of deserving that? Would a man give the whole world and then get all that glory in return?

But we don't even have a world to give. We have nothing to give in exchange for that salvation. It was not because of anything that we've done that He saved us. It was not that we did something good in our youth or childhood, and so God has rewarded us with glorification. This is an undeserved salvation, one that could not be earned or bought or merited in any way. So, positively, why did God save us and summon us to live a holy life? What does Paul say?

2. *It was because of His own purpose and grace.* Some of you remember the catechism question (Westminster Shorter Catechism no. 7) "What are the decrees of God?" And the answer is, "The decrees of God are His eternal

purposes, whereby for His own glory He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." God has made up His mind that certain things should be done, and thus they will most certainly be done. "I will declare the decree" says God (Ps 2:7). If the Almighty has purposed, then He will never fail to achieve His purposes. His purposes are the first things; his purposes are the ultimate things. In other words, we can go back behind our own choice of God to God's choosing us, and we can go back behind God's choosing us to God's purpose in choosing us. But we can't go behind God's loving purpose to anything more rational or more basic.

God's loving purpose is the ultimate; it is the highest you can go. It is the alpha, the wellspring, the source of all that follows; it is what turns the switch on the whole humming machinery of redemption. "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus" (Eph 3:11). There is nothing that has more priority above the purposes of God; there is no angel or archangel giving Him advice so that He will change his mind. In the beginning, there was the purpose of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that alone.

There is nothing more foundational than the loving purpose of God. It's there that we find everything God has decreed. He purposed to create the world, and so he decreed it: "Let there be light!" He spoke, and it was done. We owe our existence, the very breaths we take day by day, our existence on this planet, in this solar system, in this galaxy, and in this cosmos to God's purpose. In the beginning, when there was nothing else but God, God created all things, and without Him was not anything made that was made.

It was then that God purposed to permit the fall of man and to send the Messiah to redeem the world and to save all His people. He did it like that because that was the greatest display of His glory. Everything before us and after us, above us and beneath us, in us and outside of us—all of it goes back to the loving purposes of God.

But when God determined to save us, more was needed than His words: "Let them be saved!" Saving and glorifying grace through His Son Jesus Christ was required—in order for God's purpose to be fulfilled. God's grace was essential in order to give us what we didn't deserve and what we could do nothing to obtain.

Sin and grace are like the two carriages on the cliff-top railway in Aberystwyth. One mighty, strong cable joins them. When one carriage is up, the other is down. What is upmost in your life? Is it you and your sin, or is it the grace of God in Jesus Christ? When one is up then the other is down.

God's grace is His purpose and power in redeeming us. He would not leave mankind in the estate into which their fall had plunged them. God would send His Son and spare

Him not. He would become the Lamb of God who would take away our sin. He would become incarnate and live in a dark fallen world; He would grow old prematurely by the enormous pressures of constantly living under scrutiny and the persistent testing of ignorant followers and hateful enemies; He would suffer physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. He would bear the judgments of men upon Him in false accusation and interrogation and beatings and lashings and crucifixion and mockery and death; He would bear the judgment of God for our guilt, which was imputed to Him. He did all this quietly and willingly because He loved us and had purposed to enter this world and to enter the anathema of God in our place to save us in His grace.

3. At What Time God Did Purpose to Focus His Saving Grace Upon Us

Paul says, “This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.” It was not when we made a decision that God gave us grace. In fact, it was before the beginning of time, before the first tick of the first clock, when there were no clocks and nothing whatsoever except God and His glory. It was then, we are told here in Scripture, that God had a purpose, and His purpose was to save favored people, and that each of them would live a holy life. That is what Paul is saying here.

Now, let me ask this question: at that time, before the earth’s foundations were laid, did God have foreknowledge? In other words, did the God who is from eternity to eternity know everything that was going to happen? Was He in the dark about the future, wondering how things would pan out? No, He was not ignorant. God knows everything—past, present, and future.

When God looked at the future, when he looked at this twenty-first century and the people who would live here today, what did He see? We are told in the letter to the Romans 3:10–12 exactly what God saw: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Did God see certain people of their own free wills choosing Christ and living a holy life? No, He did not. There was not one. There was no one seeking God, but long, long ago, before the beginning of time, at that moment, pre-creation, God focused His saving grace on a multitude of people more than any man could number, all of them without God, and against God, and yet He chose them and determined to forgive all their sins.

There were two women who talked to their pastor one Sunday night after he had been preaching on a passage like the one that is before us. The first Christian woman had

a problem with the teaching she had heard that God had purposed to save her before the foundation of the world. She talked about it to her pastor, and he gently asked her if she was saved. She told him that she believed she was. “Who saved you?” he asked, “did you save yourself or did God save you?” “Oh, God saved me,” she affirmed. “Did He do it on purpose or was it an accident?” “I reckon he must have done it on purpose,” she said. “Then that is what Paul is writing about here in our passage. ‘This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.’ That is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in election.” The woman saw it and was content.

The second Christian woman was quite different. She had no problem with God’s purposing to save her before the beginning of time. She smiled at her pastor and thanked him for the message. She said to him that if God had not chosen her from before the foundation of the world, He would never have saved her during her life because she had been such a bad woman. God knew the much-married woman of Samaria before the beginning of time, and He purposed to save her. He knew Mary Magdalene, who was possessed with seven demons before the beginning of time and purposed to save her.

And isn’t every Christian mighty glad that God knew all about them even before God said, “Let there be light,” and yet He in grace still purposed to save them? How could He do that? Because before the worlds were made, then in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In other words, Jesus Christ was there at God’s right hand in the beginning. He was the great reality in heaven, as much God as God the Father, possessing every attribute and function of God, and His Father had given Him in the beginning all those people for Him to save them through His coming and living and dying and rising and praying.

We were a donation of grace from the Father to the Son, and He had lovingly taken us then. We were on His heart then and would be for ever and ever worlds without end. We were joined to Him for ever from then on. It was all because of Jesus we were saved and lived different lives. It was because of all He was and continues to be as the God-man, and all He would do as our Savior that then God would act to save and sanctify all these people as innumerable as the grains of sand on Aberystwyth beach. God was then saying, “I will give this grace of salvation to the woman of Samaria, and to Mary Magdalene, and to Saul of Tarsus and to the chief of sinners, because I am giving them into the mighty safe keeping of my omnipotent and beloved Son Christ Jesus through all the years of time and for eternity.”

In 1969, at the famous Keswick Convention, John Stott

This is what Paul says about this grace, that “it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus.” The promised one came!

gave the four morning Bible readings on the second epistle to Timothy. I would love to have been there, but I have a book of all his Bible readings, and this is what he said then and there about this particular text:

It is plain therefore that our salvation is not due to any merit or good works of our own, because God gave us His purpose of grace in Christ before we did any good works; before we were born or could do any good works; indeed before history, before time and in eternity.

What do we have in this passage so far? The divine answer to five common questions.

1. Did we save ourselves or did God save us? God saved us.
2. Was it we who first made the decision to live a holy life or did God first make that decision? It was God.
3. Was any of this because of something that we had done? It was not because of anything that we had done but because of God’s own purpose and grace.
4. When did this saving grace fall upon us? It was given us before the beginning of time.
5. On what basis did God purpose to save and change us? Was it based on our deserving and our lives? No, it was based on us being united to Christ Jesus by the purpose of God in the beginning. Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.

But let me move on, because there are one or two other features of note in this text.

4. When the World Saw this Salvation of Grace

When God revealed to the world the incarnation of salvation in the Savior, Jesus Christ, to the young virgin Mary and to her betrothed husband Joseph was revealed the coming of the Son of God the Savior. To shepherds, the angels proclaimed that it was unto them in the city of David a Savior had been born, who was Christ the Lord. To the magi, a sign was set in the heavens in a star so that they knew that the King of kings had come.

The Lord Christ was born of a woman, born under the law. He was announced by His herald, John the Baptist, that He was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. He has appeared, what before His birth no eye had seen, nor ear heard, nor had entered into the heart of man such glory as this—that in one person there would be two natures, one that was totally human and one that was absolutely divine, both joined together without division for eternity.

This is what Paul says about this grace, that “it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus” (v. 10). The promised one came! God said that the seed of the woman would come and bruise the serpent’s head. He came! The son of David came! The one born of the woman whose name is wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father and the Prince of peace came. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 on whom the Lord laid the iniquity of us all—He came. What can we say of Him? What more moving can be said than these memorable words about Him preached by a man called James Allen Francis a century ago:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter’s shop until he

was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was nailed to a cross between two criminals. When He was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today He stands as the central figure of the human race. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as has this one solitary life.

Four men wrote careful gospels in which they tell us about His life and teaching, His mighty works, His debates with His opponents, His attitude to children and His family, to women, soldiers, and his own disciples. They tell us of His claims, that He is the way, and the truth, and the life, that before Abraham was He existed, He is the resurrection and the life, He and His Father are one. A man like Peter was an eye-witness of His life from His baptism to His resurrection. More than five hundred people were present at one of His resurrection appearances when He walked and talked with them for a good time and encouraged them to trust in Him. Many lived for decades after the event and loved any opportunity to tell others that they had seen Him risen from the dead.

What is ultimate reality? Is it death or is it the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount? It is the Lord Jesus Christ. He came, He tells us, not to be served but to serve us and to give His life as a ransom for many. He knew that His mission was to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, and He was aware that He was walking with destiny until Calvary. He set His face on that goal. Though His best friends sought to persuade Him to think again—wasn't His ministry of teaching and healing far more important than provoking the authorities and making no attempt to escape?—then Jesus rejected those words, on some occasions most vehemently—"Get thee behind me, Satan," he said to Peter. He must go to Jerusalem. He must be betrayed. He must suffer and be nailed to a cross. He must taste death and then on the third day rise again. That is the only way we could be redeemed. There is no salvation and there is no holy living without it. He

died to deal with our guilt and blame, but He also died to make us good. As Paul says to the Ephesians, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph 5:25–27).

That is the grace that has been revealed to the world in the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail the incarnate deity! He is the one who is the double cure of sin. He cleanses us from its guilt but also from its power, and this good news is now revealed to the world in Christ's life and death and resurrection. Consider Him! Look to this Jesus! We preach not ourselves. We are not a particularly fascinating or beautiful group of people, and all we have to offer you is this revelation from God of His Son, Jesus Christ, to tell you that in Him salvation is to be found. He was named Jesus because He came to save His people from their sin, and that is what He is able to do for you. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

I will close with one final statement.

5. Jesus Christ Has Destroyed Death and Brought to Light Life and Immortality

God has saved us and called us to a holy life—what good news—but Paul has not finished. God has destroyed death and brought to light life and immortality. Who is writing these words about death being destroyed? It is a man who is himself facing the imminent prospect of death. Any day now, three soldiers could come into his cell, two of them could hold an arm and the third take a short sword in his hand and thrust it through Paul's solar plexus and up into his heart. That was a humane Roman death. And so death was in Paul's mind, and yet in the very face of that deadly immanence Paul could cry defiantly, "The Lord Jesus Christ, my Savior and my friend, has abolished death!"

The Christian gospel is magnificent! The world will make nervous jokes about death but will not think about it, let alone talk about it, seriously. We talk about it. We sing about our hope, "For ever with the Lord. Amen, so let it be!" What a sweep of history is in our text. Before the beginning of time, God had purposed to save us, and now we face a future destiny when we are going to be with Him and like Him in eternity. Paul was incarcerated in a cold cell with probably a small hole in the ceiling for light and then hours of darkness with the stench, and the cockroaches and vermin. His body was confined there, but his mind and heart could soar into eternity, and that is what the gospel does in us and for us.

All mankind is facing death, physical death, the separation of the soul from the body, spiritual death, the separation of the soul from God, and eternal death or the second death, the separation of soul and body from the kindness and mercy of God for ever. All this is due to our sin; all this is sin's just reward. But God has sent His Son to abolish death. What does that mean? It does not mean the elimination of death. It can't, because we know that all men and women without Christ today are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins, and all of us are facing physical death, and some who continue to defy God are going to die the second death in hell. So, that death is still a reality; it has not been eliminated. But its power to snuff us out and keep us under its control for ever has been defeated. Christ is more powerful than death. He has met it on Golgotha. It has done its worst against Him. He breathed His last, and He tasted death for three days, but on the third day He rose from the dead. "Death could not keep its prey, Jesus, my Savior; He broke the bars away, Jesus my Lord, and up from the grave He arose."

What Paul is saying is that Christ has destroyed the invincible power that death had. We may now taunt death—"Oh death where is your power? Oh death, where is your sting? My Lord and Saviour is mightier than you. Because he lives we shall live also." Christ is the first-fruits of all them that sleep in Him. In I Corinthians 15, death is compared to a scorpion whose sting has been drawn; the insect tries to stab

and sting, but it is blunt and weaponless and impotent. So, the bragging tyranny of death is ended. Death is toothless! In Christ we discover the death of death. Life and immortality have been brought to light in the gospel. To die is actually enormous gain. It is better. It is falling asleep in Jesus. It is to live for evermore and never die. Spiritual death has been overcome; we walk with our Lord here on earth and we continue to walk with Him for ever. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we're not alone. He is with us comforting us. No Christian ever died alone. People without Christ are facing darkness; their life is, in the words of a twentieth-century drama, *A Long Day's Journey into Night*. What despair! But for the Christian, it is the very opposite: our pilgrimage is a short day's journey into light!

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. That gift is now being offered to you. Over the Christmas period last year, were you offered gifts from your family and friends? Did you refuse any of them? Did you shake your head when someone presented you with a nicely wrapped gift? Wouldn't your friend have been hurt? Have you received the gift of God's only begotten Son? Have you thanked God for it? Do you know what receiving that gift means? You will not perish but have everlasting life. Take the gift. Receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and so serve Him as your Lord and Savior—the living one! ♠



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JESUS BEFORE PILATE

Leaving the Jewish leaders standing outside, Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus. Luke 23:2 provides the background to His question, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Realizing that they had to come up with a charge that would impress a Roman judge, the Jewish leaders “began to accuse [Jesus], saying, ‘We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.’” The charges, of course, were completely false; Jesus had actually said the opposite: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). Their goal was to portray Him as an insurrectionist, bent on overthrowing Roman rule and establishing His own.

Pilate could not overlook such a threat to Roman power. His question, “Are You the King of the Jews?” was in effect asking Jesus whether He was pleading guilty or not guilty to the charge of insurrection. In all four gospel accounts this is the first question Pilate asks Jesus, and in all four the pronoun “You” is emphatic. The Greek text literally reads, “You, are You the King of the Jews?” Pilate was incredulous; from a human perspective, Jesus did not look like a king. And if He was a king, where were His followers and His army? And how was He a threat to Rome?

Jesus could not answer Pilate’s question with an unqualified



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“Yes” or “No” without first defining exactly what His kingship entailed. His counter-question, “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” was intended to clarify the issue. If Pilate was saying this on his own initiative, he was asking if Jesus was a king in the political sense (and hence a threat to Rome). Jesus’ answer in that case would be no; He was not a king in the sense of a military or political leader. He had earlier rejected the crowd’s attempt to make Him such a king (6:15). But neither could the Lord deny that, as the Messiah, He was Israel’s true king.

Pilate’s sharp retort, “I am not a Jew, am I?” reflects both his disdain for the Jewish people and his growing exasperation with the frustrating, puzzling ethnic case set before him. His further elaboration, “Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me,” makes it clear that the governor was merely repeating the charge leveled against Jesus by the Jewish leaders; the accusation was theirs, not Rome’s. Exactly why they had accused Him still eluded Pilate. He knew perfectly well that the Jews would not have handed over to him someone hostile to Rome unless they stood to gain from doing so.

Attempting once again to get to the bottom of things, Pilate asked the question that he should have asked at the outset: “what have You done?” Unlike Jewish practice, Roman

legal procedure allowed the accused to be questioned in detail. Pilate understood that the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over to him because of envy (Matt 27:18). What he still did not understand was what Jesus had done to provoke such vehement hostility from them and what, if any, crime He had committed.

Since it was now clear that Pilate was merely repeating the charge of the Jewish leaders, Jesus answered his question. He was a king, but not a political ruler intent on challenging Rome's rule. "My kingdom is not of (Greek *ek*; "out from the midst of") this world," He declared. Its source was not the world system, nor did Jesus derive His authority from any human source. As noted earlier, He had rejected the crowd's attempt to crown Him king. He also passed up an opportunity to proclaim Himself king at the triumphal entry, when He rode into Jerusalem at the head of tens of thousands of frenzied hopefuls.

To reinforce His point, Jesus noted that if His kingdom were of this world, then His servants would be fighting so that He would not be handed over to the Jews. No earthly king would have allowed himself to have been captured so easily. But when one of His followers (Peter) attempted to defend Him, Jesus rebuked him. The messianic kingdom does not originate from human effort, but through the Son of Man's conquering of sin in the lives of those who belong to His spiritual kingdom.

Christ's kingdom is spiritually active in the world today, and one day He will return to physically reign on the earth in millennial glory (Rev 11:15; 20:6). But until then, His Kingdom exists in the hearts of believers, where He is undisputed King and sovereign Lord. He was absolutely no threat either to the national identity of Israel, or to the political and military identity of Rome.

That the Lord spoke of being handed over to the Jews is significant. Far from leading them in a revolt against Rome, Jesus spoke of the Jews (especially the leaders) as His enemies. He was a king, but since He disavowed the use of force and fighting, He was clearly no threat to Rome's interests. The Lord's statement rendered the Jews' charge that He was a revolutionary bent on overthrowing Rome absurd.

Jesus' description of His kingdom had left Pilate somewhat confused. If His kingdom was not an earthly one, then was Jesus really a king at all? Seeking to clarify the issue, Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus' answer was clear and unambiguous: "You say correctly that I am a king." The Lord boldly "testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate" (1 Tim 6:13). Unlike earthly kings, however, Jesus was not crowned a king by any human agency. "For this I have been born," He declared, "and for this I have

come into the world." Jesus had not only been born like all other human beings, but also had come into the world from another realm—heaven. Taken together, the two phrases are an unmistakable reference to the preexistence and incarnation of the Son of God.

Jesus' mission was not political but spiritual. It was to testify to the truth by "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23). Christ proclaimed the truth about God, men, sin, judgment, holiness, love, eternal life, in short, "everything pertaining to life and godliness." What people do with the message of truth Jesus proclaimed determines their eternal destiny; as He went on to declare, "Everyone who is of the truth hears (the Greek word includes the concept of obedience; cf. Luke 9:35) My voice." Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through [Him]" (John 14:6). In 10:27 He added, "My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow Me." Only those who continue in His Word are truly His disciples; only those who are truly His disciples will know and be set free by the truth (8:31–32).

Jesus' words were an implied invitation to Pilate to hear and obey the truth about Him. But they were lost on the governor, who abruptly ended his interrogation of Christ with the cynical, pessimistic remark, "What is truth?" Like skeptics of all ages, including contemporary postmodernists, Pilate despaired of finding universal truth. This is the tragedy of fallen man's rejection of God. Without God, there cannot be any absolutes; without absolutes, there can be no objective, universal, normative truths. Truth becomes subjective, relative, pragmatic; objectivity gives way to subjectivity; timeless, universal principles become mere personal or cultural preferences. All fallen mankind has accomplished by forsaking God, "the fountain of living waters," is "to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer 2:13). Pilate's flippant retort proved that he was not one of those given by the Father to the Son, who hear and obey Christ's voice.

Having finished interrogating Jesus, Pilate pronounced his verdict. He went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him." He understood enough to realize that Jesus posed no threat to Roman rule. He made it clear that Jesus was innocent of the charges of sedition and insurrection leveled against Him by the Jewish leaders (Luke 23:2).

No valid indictment of Him at the beginning; no conviction of Him at the end. The Lord of glory was maligned, hated, and falsely accused, but nevertheless found to be perfect, faultless, and innocent. ♦



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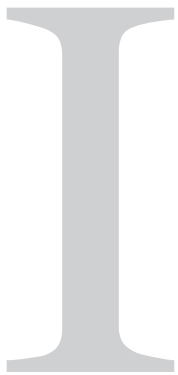
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If our preaching does not center on Christ—from Genesis to Revelation—no matter how good or helpful, it is not a proclamation of God’s Word. “You search the Scriptures in vain, thinking that you have eternal life in them, not realizing that it is they which testify concerning me.” With these words, our Lord confronted what has always been the temptation in our reading of Holy Scripture: to read it without Christ as the supreme focus of revelation.

Many people who come to embrace the specific tenets of the Protestant Reformation (grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, to God alone be glory, faith alone) are liberated by the good news of God’s free grace in Christ. Pastors who used to preach a human-centered message suddenly become impassionate defenders of God’s glory, and particular doctrines that often characterized their messages and shaped their teaching are exchanged for more biblical truths. This is all very exciting, of course, and we should be grateful to God for awakening us (this writer included) to the doctrines of grace. Nevertheless, there are deeper issues involved.

Not infrequently, we run into a church that is very excited about having just discovered the Reformation faith, but the preaching remains what it always was: witty, perhaps anecdotal (plenty of stories and illustrations that serve the purpose of entertainment rather than illumination of a point), and moralistic (Bible characters surveyed for their usefulness in teaching moral lessons for our daily life).

This is because we have not yet integrated our systematic theology with our hermeneutics (i.e., way of interpreting Scripture). We say, “Christ alone!” in our doctrine of salvation, but in actual practice our devotional life is saturated with sappy and trivial “principles,” and the preaching is often directed toward motivating us to follow practical tips.

The recovery of reformational preaching isn’t just a matter of concern for preachers themselves, for the ministry of the Word is something that is committed to every believer, since we are all witnesses to God’s unfolding revelation in Christ. It is important not only for those who speak for God in the pulpit in public assemblies, but also for the layperson who reads his or her Bible and wonders, “How can I make sense of it all?” Below, I want to point out why I think there has been a decline of evangelical preaching in this important area.

Moralism

Whenever the story of David and Goliath is used to motivate you to think about the “Goliaths” in your life and the “Seven Stones of Victory” used to defeat them, you have been the victim of moralistic preaching. The same is true whenever the primary intention of the sermon is to give you a Bible hero to emulate or a villain who will teach you lesson, like “crime doesn’t pay,” or “sin doesn’t really make you happy.” Reading or hearing the Bible in this way turns the Scriptures into a sort of Aesop’s Fable or Grimm’s Fairy

Tale, where the story exists for the purpose of teaching a lesson to the wise and the story ends with, “and they lived happily ever after.”

In his *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has Screwtape writing Wormwood in the attempt to persuade Wormwood to undermine the faith by turning Jesus into a great hero and moralist. He has to be a “great man” in the modern sense of the word—one standing at the terminus of some centrifugal and unbalanced line of thought—a crank vending a panacea. This kind of approach distracts men’s minds from Who He is, and what He did. We first make Him solely a teacher, and then conceal the very substantial agreement between His teaching and those of other great moral teachers.

This is the greatest problem, from my own experience, with the preaching we hear today. There is such a demand to be practical—that is, to have clever principles for daily living. But the danger, of course, is that what one hears on Sunday morning is not the Word of God. To be sure, the Scriptures were read (maybe) and there was a sermon (perhaps), but the message had more in common with a talk at the Lion’s Club, pop-psychology seminar, prophecy conference, or political convention than with proclamation of heavenly truth “from above.”

Because we are already seated with Christ in the heavens (Eph 2:4) and are already participating in the new creation that dawned with Christ’s resurrection, we are to be heavenly minded. This, of course, does not mean that we are irrelevant mystics who have no use for this world; rather, it means that we are oriented in our outlook toward God rather than humanity (including ourselves), the eternal rather than this present age, holiness rather than happiness, glorifying God rather than demanding that God meet our “felt needs.” Only with this kind of orientation can we be of use to this world as “salt” and “light,” bearing a distinctive testimony to the transcendent in a world that is so bound to the present moment.


Finally, moralism commits a basic hermeneutical error, from the Reformation point of view. Both Lutherans and the Reformed have insisted, in the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, “The Gospel is, indeed, opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing.” Calvin and his successor, Beza, followed the common Lutheran understanding that while both the law and the Gospel were clearly taught in Scripture (in both Old and New Testaments), the confusion of the two categories lay at the heart of all wayward preaching and teaching in the church. It is not that the Old Testament believers were under the law and we are under grace or the Gospel, but rather that believers in both

Testaments are obligated to the moral law, to perfectly obey its precepts and conform to its purity not only in outward deed, but in the frame and fashion of heart and soul. And yet, in both Testaments, believers are offered the Gospel of Christ’s righteousness placed over the naked, law-breaking sinner so that God can accept the wicked—yes, even the wicked for the sake of Christ.

Both Lutherans and the Reformed have also affirmed that the law still has a place after conversion in the life of the believer, as the only commands for works that are now done in faith. Nevertheless, preaching must observe clearly the distinction between these two things. As John Murray writes, “The law can never give the believer any spiritual power to obey its commands.” And yet, so much of the moralistic preaching we get these days presupposes the error that somehow principles, steps for victory, rules, or guidelines that the preacher has cleverly devised (i.e., the traditions of men?) promise spiritual success to those who will simply put them into daily practice. Those who are new in the faith regard this kind of preaching as useful and practical; those who have been around it for a while eventually burn out and grow cynical about the Christian life because they cannot “gain victory” even though they have tried everything in the book.

It must be said that not even the commands of God Himself can give us life or the power to grow as Christians. The statutes are right and good, but I am not, Paul said in Romans 7. Even the believer cannot gain any strength from the law. The law can only tell him what is right; the Gospel alone can make him right by giving him what he cannot gain by law-keeping. If the law itself is rendered powerless by human sinfulness, how on earth could we possibly believe that humanly devised schemes and principles for victory and spiritual power could achieve success? We look to the law for the standard, realizing that even as Christians we fall far short of reaching it. Just then, the Gospel steps in and tells us that someone has attained that standard, that victory, for us, in our place, and now the law can be preached again without tormenting our conscience. It cannot provoke us to fear or anxiety, since its demands are fulfilled by someone else’s obedience.

Therefore, it is our duty to preach “the whole counsel of God,” which includes everything in the category of law (the divine commandments and threats of punishment; the call to repentance and conversion, sanctification and service to God and our neighbor) and in the category of Gospel (God’s promise of rest, from Genesis to Revelation; its fulfillment in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, ascension, intercession, second coming; the gift of faith, through which the believer is justified and entered into a vital union



Much of the evangelical preaching with which I am familiar inspires neither a terror of God's righteousness nor praise for the depths of God's grace in His gift of righteousness.

with Christ; the gift of persevering faith, which enables us to pursue godliness in spite of suffering). But any type of preaching that fails to underscore the role of the law in condemning the sinner and the role of the Gospel in justifying the sinner or confuses these two is a serious violation of the distinction which Paul himself makes in Galatians 3:15–25.

Much of the evangelical preaching with which I am familiar inspires neither a terror of God's righteousness nor praise for the depths of God's grace in His gift of righteousness. Rather, it is often a confusion of these two, so that the bad news isn't quite that bad and the good news isn't all that good. We actually can do something to get closer to God; we aren't so far from God that we cannot make use of the examples of the biblical characters and attain righteousness by following the "Seven Steps to the Spirit-Filled Life." But in the biblical view, the biblical characters are not examples of their victory, but of God's! The life of David is not a testimony to David's faithfulness, surely, but to God's, and for us to read any part of that story as though we could attain the Gospel (righteousness) by the law (obedience) is the age-old error of Cain, the Pharisees, the Galatian Judaizers, the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Arminians, and Higher Life proponents.

There are varieties of moralism. Some moralists are sentimental in their preaching. In other words, their goal is to be helpful and a loving nurturer who aims each Sunday at affirming their congregation with the wise sayings of a Jesus who sounds a lot like a talk-show therapist. Other moralists are harsh in their preaching. Their Gospel is, "Do this and you shall live." In other words, unless you can measure a growth in holiness by any number of indicators or barometers, you

should not conclude that you are entitled to the promises. The Gospel, for these preachers, is law, and the law is Gospel. One can attain God's forgiveness and acceptance only through constant self-assessment. Doubt rather than assurance marks mature Christian reflection, these preachers insist, in sharp distinction to the tenderness of the Savior who excluded only those who thought they had jumped through all the right hoops. The sinners were welcome at Christ's table, while the "righteous" clearly were not.

Therefore, even the Christian needs to be constantly reminded that his sanctification is so slow and imperfect in this life that not one single spiritual blessing can be pried from God's hand by obedience; it is all there in the Father's open, outstretched hand. This, of course, is the death-knell to moralism of every stripe. The bad news is very bad indeed; the good news is greater than any earthly moral wisdom. That's why Paul said, paraphrased, "You Greek Christians in Corinth want moral wisdom? OK, I'll give you wisdom: Christ is made our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Aha! God in his foolishness is wiser than all the world's self-help gurus!" (1 Cor 1:18–31).

Moralism might answer the "felt needs" of those who demand practical and inspirational pep talks on Sunday morning, but it cannot really be considered preaching.

Verse-by-Verse Exposition

Having been raised in churches that painstakingly exegeted a particular passage verse-by-verse, I have profited from the insights this method sometimes offers. Nevertheless, it too, as a mere method and not done correctly, falls short of an adequate way of preaching, reading, or interpreting the sacred text.

First, an explanation of how this is done. I remember the

pastor going through even rather brief books like Jude over a period of several months, and there we would be, pen and paper in hand as though we were in a classroom, following his outline—either printed in the bulletin or on an overhead projector. Words would be taken apart like an engine is dismantled by an auto mechanic as the pastor conducted an extensive study on the root of various terms in the Greek language. This is inadvisable, first, because word studies often focus on etymology (i.e., what is the root of the work in the original language?) rather than on the use of the word in ancient literature. Yet, very often, the use of a particular word in ancient literature had nothing at all to do with the root meaning of the word itself. It is dangerous to think of biblical words as magical or as different somehow from the same words in the secular works of their day.

This approach is also dangerous because it “misses the forest for the trees.” In other words, revelation is one long unfolding drama of redemption, and to get wrapped up in a technical analysis of bits and pieces fails to do justice to the larger context of the text. What God intended as one continuous story that is proclaimed each week to remind the faithful of God’s promise and our calling is often turned into an arduous and irrelevant search for words. The same tendency is present in Bible study methods or study Bibles that outline, take apart, and put back together the pieces of the Bible in such a way as to get in the way of the Scripture’s inherent power and authority.

Another fault of this verse-by-verse method is that it often fails to appreciate the variety of genre in the biblical text and imposes a woodenly literalistic grid on passages that are meant to be preached, read, or interpreted in a different way. The Bible is not a textbook of geometry that can be reductionistically dissected to simple conclusions, but a book in which God Himself speaks to us, disclosing His nature, His purpose, and His unfolding plan of redemption through history.

A final danger of this method is that it tends to remove the congregation from the text of Scripture. Even though the hearers may be very involved taking notes, this only serves to reinforce in their experience that they could not simply sit down and read their English Bibles for themselves and discover the deeper meaning of the text apart from those who have the method down and know the original languages.

Carelessness

Unfortunately, too much of the preaching we come across these days does not even have the merit of attempting a faithful exposition of the Scriptures, as these preceding methods do.

When John Calvin was asked to respond to Cardinal Sa-

doletto as to why Geneva was irretrievably Protestant, the Reformer included this indictment of the state of preaching before the Reformation:

Nay, what one sermon was there from which old wives might not carry off more whimsies than they could devise at their own fireside in a month? For as sermons were usually then divided, the first half was devoted to those misty questions of the schools which might astonish the rude populace, while the second contained sweet stories and amusing speculations by which the hearers might be kept awake. Only a few expressions were thrown in from the Word of God, that by their majesty they might procure credit for these frivolities.

Calvin then contrasts this former way of preaching with the Reformation approach to Scripture:

First, we bid a man to begin by examining himself, and this not in a superficial and perfunctory manner, but to cite his conscience before the tribunal of God, and when sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, to reflect on the strictness of the sentence pronounced on all sinners. Thus confounded and amazed at his misery, he is prostrated and humbled before God; and, casting away all self-confidence, groans as if given up to final perdition. Then we show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions; by His sacrifice, appeased the divine anger.

The Genevan Reformer goes on to ask the Cardinal what problem he has with that. It is probably, says Calvin, that the Reformation way of preaching is not “practical” enough; that it doesn’t give people clear directions for daily living and motivate them to a higher life. Nevertheless, the Reformers all believed that the preacher is required to preach the text, not to decide on a topic and look for a text that can be pressed into its service. And the text, said they, was aimed not at offering heroes to emulate (even Jesus), but at proclamation of God’s redemptive act in the person and work of the God-Man.

Who couldn’t find in Calvin’s description of medieval preaching something of the contemporary situation? In many of the church growth contexts, once more the sermon is not given the central place liturgically, and the sermon itself often reveals that the speaker is more widely

read in marketing surveys, trend analyses, biographies of the rich and famous, “One Hundred & One Sermon Illustrations,” and *Leadership Journal* than in the Greek New Testament, hermeneutical aids, and the riches of centuries of theological scholarship. One can often tell when a pastor has just read a powerful book of pop-psychology, Christian personality theories, end-times speculations, moral or political calls to action, or entrepreneurial successes. He has been blown away by some of the insights and has scouted about for a text that can, if read very quickly, lend some divine credibility to something he did not actually get from that text, but from the Christian or secular best-seller’s list. “I’m a pastor, not a theologian,” he says, in contrast to the classical evangelical notion, inherited from the Reformation, that a pastor is a scholar as well as a preacher.

Good communicators can get away with the lack of content by their witty, anecdotal style, but they are still unfaithful as ministers of the Word, even if they help people and keep folks coming back for more.

The “Christ And...” Syndrome

In C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, the devil’s strategy is not to remove Christ altogether from the scene, but to propagate a “Christ And...” religion:

What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of “Christianity And.” You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychic Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian coloring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing (from Letter XXV).

Today, we see this in terms of Christ and America; Christ and Self-Esteem; Christ and Prosperity; Christ and the Republican or Democratic Party; Christ and End-Time Predictions; Christ and Healing; Christ and Marketing and Church Growth; Christ and Traditional Values, and on we could go, until Christ Himself becomes little more than an appendage to a religion that can, after all, get on quite well without Him. That is not, of course, to say that the evangelical enterprise could do this without some difficulty. After all, every movement needs a mascot. We say we are Christ-centered, but what was the sermon about last Sunday?

In fact, it is not even enough to preach the centrality of

Christ. It is particularly Christ as He is our sacrifice for sin and guarantor of new life because of His resurrection that the Bible makes central in its revelation. After a tragic car accident, Fr. James Feehan, a seasoned Roman Catholic priest in New Zealand, realized afresh the significance of Paul’s command to preach Christ and Him crucified:

If the pulpit is not committed to this utter centrality of the Cross, then our preaching, however brilliant, is doomed to sterility and failure. We preach the Christ of the Mount; we preach the Christ of the healing ministry; we preach the Christ of the sublime example; we preach the Christ of the Social Gospel; we preach the Christ of the Resurrection but rarely, if ever, do we preach the Christ of the Cross. We have evaded the very heart of the Christian message. In our preaching we tend to decry the human predicament, the turmoil of our lives, the evil in the world, and we wonder if there is a way out. The Way Out is staring us in the face. It is the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross.

In other words, to guard the centrality of Christ in our preaching, it is necessary to guard the centrality of Christ’s ministry as prophet, priest, and king. Otherwise, we will even use “Christ” as a means of preaching something other than Christ. We will insist that we are preaching Christ even though we are really only using His name in vain as a buttress for some fashionable tangent we happen to be on this week.

What, then, is the proper method for reading, preaching, and interpreting God’s Word? Many resist the idea that there is a proper method at all, dismissing it as naïve. The content is normative and unchanging, they say, but the method is relative and depends on what works best for each pastor. This decision is often treated as a matter of style, like whether one wears robes or has the choir in the front or the back of the church. But not only does the Bible give us the content of what we are to believe; it gives us a method for properly determining that message. ♦





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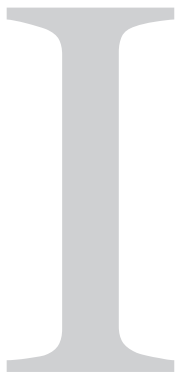


W. ROBERT GODFREY





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In Rome there is a church by the name of Saint Peter in Chains. It is not the famous Basilica of Saint Peter, but a smaller church, and in that church is one of the most famous sculptures ever done by man, the “Moses” by Michelangelo. If you have seen that statue, you must have been struck by the vitality Michelangelo has been able to communicate to marble. Moses has come down from Mount Sinai and is seated with the tables of the Law in his hand—seated, yet almost as if he were about to rise up not only from his seat but also out of the stone itself. It is an amazing representation. As you looked at it, you may have noted that on the head of Moses there are two little horns. This is surprising at first glance, until you remember, as I am sure you do, that in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate the passage that says “when Moses came down from the Mountain his face shone” (cf. Exod 34:29–33) is mistranslated and reads instead, “his head was horned.”

One wonders what Michelangelo might have done had Jerome translated the passage accurately. Because what really happened was that Moses had so basked in the glory of God on Mount Sinai that when he came down from the mountain his face literally radiated the glory of God. No doubt even Michelangelo would have been defeated in his effort to represent in marble the glorious shining of God’s glory in the face of Moses. What an incredible subject to address: the glory of God in predestination! Paul directs our attention to it in Romans 11.

Surpassing Glory

As we think about God’s glory, it is good to begin with Moses, because after Moses had come down from Sinai and had confronted the sinfulness of his people, in his great distress he turned to the Lord in prayer. His prayer, as we find it in Exodus 33, was this: “Now show me your glory”—in the face of the disobedience of your people, in the face of frustration and disappointment, in the face of having broken the tablets of the Law—“show me your glory” (v. 18). As we want to see the glory of the Lord, we might follow Moses back up the mountain, remembering what Moses saw as he climbed it.

The mountain was covered with a cloud, and in the midst of the cloud “there was a devouring fire.” After Moses had ascended the mountain, God promised to show him His glory. But He said, “You cannot see my glory as it is in itself; I will hide you in a cleft of the rock, and as I pass by I will put my hand over you so that you will not be destroyed and will remove my hand as I pass by so you can just see my back, just a portion of my glory, and I will preserve you so you will not be destroyed.” It was having seen that glory of God that caused Moses’ face to shine when he came down from the mountain.

Then we read a little further on that this glory came down from the mountain when the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, was completed. God’s glory was manifested among his people in the Tent of Meeting.

This gives some insight into what glory is. The root meaning of the Hebrew word for glory is “weight.” But as the Hebrews expanded on the meaning of this root word, they moved from the idea of weight to “wealth.” Somebody who had a heavy weight (of silver or gold) was a wealthy person. From the notion of wealth the word developed the sense of “importance.” Someone who is wealthy is usually an important person. At last we find it applied to God as the preeminently weighty, wealthy, and important one.

Glory also became associated with the notion of light, since God most often reveals His glory to man in the form of a visible radiance. As He is in Himself, God is, of course, inherently invisible. But when God wants to display His glory to us, He does it in terms of beautiful light, pointing to and illustrating His purity and holiness. The glory dwelt inside the Holy of Holies in the Tent of Meeting, because God could never fully display what He is in Himself to a sinful people.

We also see something of the hiddenness of the glory of God in Jesus. We read in John’s Gospel: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Yet that glory is veiled. John says, “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us,” using the word that literally means “tented” or “tabernacled” among us. You see, the glory of God is still in the Tent of Meeting, but the Tent of Meeting is now Jesus Christ our Lord. In Him we are in contact with God’s glory.

Charles Wesley expressed it beautifully in his hymn “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” when he declared:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity.

That expresses how the glory of God came down and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ. That glory is displayed even in that most unlikely of places, the cross. For it is of the cross that Jesus declared, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23). The glory of the mercy of God is displayed on Calvary.

But in Jesus, too, we see something of the visible display of God’s glory. You remember the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus was suddenly transformed, and light shone forth as He talked with Moses and Elijah. So, too, in the vision of our ascended Lord that we find in the first chapter of Revelation, Jesus is seen walking among the lamp stands of the church and is described in this way: “His eyes were like blazing fire . . . His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (vv. 14, 16).

So much glory! So much to glorify the Lord for! It is with this in mind that Paul is moved at the end of Romans 11 to

praise God, saying, “To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

Mercy Upon All

What in particular moved Paul to glorify God? There are so many things for which we could glorify God. If we look through the Psalms, we will find God glorified for a wonderful range of activities. But Paul, in this verse, has been moved to glorify God particularly by his reflection on God’s mercy.

When you think about it, all of Romans 9–11 has been a reflection upon God’s mercy to His people. When Moses asked God, “Show me your glory,” the Lord responded by saying, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD . . . I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Exod 33:19). In response to the request of Moses to see God’s glory, God said, in effect, “You will see it in knowing that I am a God who shows mercy upon whom I will show mercy.” Paul quotes this passage in Romans 9. The discussion begins, then, in chapter 9 and concludes in chapter 11.

All sorts of men have been bound up together in disobedience to God, so that the Lord in His mercy might bind up all men, Jew and Gentile from every part of the earth, in the experience of His mercy. That is what evokes Paul’s doxology. What a wonderful God we have! What a glorious God, who manifests Himself in such sovereign mercy! That is why Paul, in declaring His praise of God, says, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36).

A Mercy Planned

In these words we see salvation displayed: “from Him,” a mercy planned; “through Him,” a mercy preached; “to Him,” a mercy perfected.

A planned mercy is what Paul was talking about in Romans 9 through 11, as he reflected on God’s great purpose. This is what Paul has reminded us of over and over. God from all eternity has had a plan as to what He will do and what He will accomplish. That plan is, above all, that He will have a people for His name. His purpose is that the human race which He has created for fellowship with Himself will not be lost but that out of fallen humanity He will raise up a people to have fellowship with Him. That purpose will not be thwarted, neither by the will of Satan nor by the will of man, for God’s will stands over all. The tragedy of theologies that do not grasp this fact is that they reduce God’s plan only to making salvation possible and therefore leave open the possibility that God may not have a people for His name, that Jesus may have died but actually has saved no one.

This plan is profound in its richness. God has determined to create a people composed of Jew and Gentile alike, as Paul rehearses over and over again in these chapters. The church is built out of all the peoples of the earth: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him” (Rom 10:12). This is His richness, as He draws a people from every tribe and tongue.

Not only is God’s plan rich. It is also wise. It is wise because it accomplishes man’s glorification. You remember the golden chain of Romans 8:30: “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” That is God’s wise plan, a plan that moves from the beginning to the end. God will accomplish His purpose. He will have His people manifest His glory. We cannot increase God’s glory. We can only declare it.

What a contrast between the wisdom of that plan and the foolishness of men. Paul spoke eloquently about that foolishness in Romans 1, when he wrote: “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images, . . . the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised” (vv. 22, 23, 25). God’s wise plan is that we will be creatures in fellowship with our Creator. The foolishness of man is to miss that glory, reject that wisdom, and, in the foolishness of our understanding, to create images for ourselves to worship. The Psalmist says, “All who serve them become like them” (Ps 115:8). And, oh, the tragedy! We who are called to reflect the image of the immortal God become reflectors only of the passing things of this world.

When we think on the riches and wisdom of God’s plan, we dare never be apologetic that we are Reformed. If you do not talk about the Reformed faith, you are failing to give God all His glory. If you do not talk about it, you are not sharing the richness of God’s salvation with fellow Christians. Oh, do not harp on it! Do not beat people over the head with it! But do declare it! Declare the richness, wonder, and glory of that plan.

A Mercy Preached

There is also a mercy preached, for it is not only from Him but also “through Him” that we know mercy. The first thing that needs to be said as we reflect upon the mercy of

It is important for us especially who occupy the official office of preacher to remember our great privilege and responsibility.

God preached is that this mercy is preached above all by God Himself. God does not make His plan and stand back. No, God remains active in the preaching of His mercy. We read in Romans 9:33: “As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’” So also in Romans 10:21: “But concerning Israel [God] says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.’” God, who holds out His hand in mercy and calls people to Himself, promises, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” God remains the great preacher and declarer of this Word in the world.

But, as Paul states, God has also appointed preachers to carry that message. It is important for us especially who occupy the official office of preacher to remember our great privilege and responsibility.

Some of us are occasionally tempted to just sort of trudge off to church—either into the pew or into the pulpit—and take this as a matter-of-fact affair. But it is an awesome responsibility both to preach and to hear God’s Word. It is an awesome responsibility of the preacher to handle the Word of truth rightly, and it is an awesome responsibility of the listener to hear that Word. The apostle declares that the preaching of the Word is the savor of life unto life and death unto death (2 Cor 2:16). For those who hear the Word and treasure it, it is life. For those who hear it and reject it, it is death.

I remember hearing of an old Welsh minister who preached in a church that had a great high pulpit with a high staircase. He would conduct most of his service from below. But when the time came for the sermon, he would

climb those stairs and preach. Some Sunday mornings he would walk to the bottom of the stairs, look up into the pulpit, and say, “I cannot go into that awful place.” Then he would turn around and walk out of the church. This left the elders somewhat disconcerted, as we might imagine. But it was a good testimony to the awesome responsibility of being a declarer of God’s Word. Moreover, it impressed upon the people that preaching could never be merely commonplace and ordinary. The pulpit was an awful place in the sense of inspiring awe and reverence before God.

Christ must always be the center of our preaching. That is why Paul returns in chapter 10 to Christ as the essence of the gospel. His declaration is that Christ is the “end of the Law” (v. 4). Christ in His own life has fulfilled all righteousness, has been obedient in our place, and then has gone on to bear the wrath of God for us on the cross. Paul says He is also a resurrected Savior, risen from the dead in the power of God, who now declares His gospel to all who will come to Him. In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul talks about “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (v. 4). This is Christ’s glory—that He is the Savior of His people, that He has done it all: accomplished righteousness, borne the curse, risen victorious over sin and death, and now lives to make intercession for us. That is why we must always return to Christ as the very center of the gospel.

Luther once remarked, “People are always saying, ‘Give me something new! Give me something new! I don’t want to hear just about the death and resurrection of Christ.’” Luther remarked, “What a tragedy! As if that great center of the gospel should ever become old, stale, or a matter of indifference to us.”

When mercy is preached, it is preached in Christ. And it is preached unto faith. This also echoes through Romans 9–11. The preaching of faith is not at all opposed to the preaching of election. Paul weaves them together. In Romans 11 he declares: “You stand by faith” (v. 20). In Romans 9:30 he speaks of “a righteousness that is by faith.” This does not make faith the one good work we do. Rather, faith is our link to Jesus Christ, and we are righteous through faith because faith puts us in touch with the righteousness of Christ. Christ and His work are our righteousness, and faith is our link.

What a stumbling block this is to pride! We all want to do something, particularly in the new world. We have been taught that we are to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But Paul says that there is nothing we can do—

nothing, except to find refuge in Jesus Christ.

In Romans 10:16 Paul expresses this in ironic terms when he says, “But not all the Israelites obeyed the good news.” Israel was always talking about its obedience, but the people missed the whole point. It is not in our obedience that we are made right with God. It is in the gospel. Moses came with the Law so that people might be driven to Christ. The Law was to show us our sinfulness. But Israel missed that great function of the Law. Therefore, instead of being driven to Christ as their only hope and refuge, they took refuge in their pretended claim to self-righteousness. That is why Paul says we must preach faith.

Paul warns over and over against being wise in our own conceits. We are not to repeat the mistake of Israel and say, “We are God’s covenant people. He’s obligated to us.” Oh,



When mercy is preached, it is preached in Christ.

no! It is all by mercy. We have to rest in him and his completed work.

The contrast Paul draws in Romans 10 is between condemnation and righteousness. In our self-righteous efforts to fulfill the Law we will find only condemnation, but in Christ we will find righteousness and hope. That is, righteousness is harmonized with the theme of election. Election is never a threat. Election never undermines our faith but rather undergirds it.

Luther expressed this beautifully in *The Bondage of the Will*:

Now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will and put it under the control of his, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running but according to his own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and that he is also great and powerful so that no devils or opposition can break him or pluck me from him.

That is the certainty that election gives us. I do not want

salvation to be in my hands. I want my salvation to be in God's hands, because He is faithful and able. That is the mercy that we preach and the confidence that we have. That is the mercy that glorifies God, for it is a mercy grounded in God's plan and declared to His people.

A Mercy Perfected

Finally, there is mercy perfected: "To him are all things." God is active from the beginning to the end. He will accomplish His purpose, and God's purpose is that He will glorify Himself in glorifying us. What an assurance that is! God's original intention was to give glory to His creature, man. You remember the words of Psalm 8: "You made him [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (v. 5). In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul declares that "man. . . is the image and glory of God" (v. 7).

Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols." But the amazing thing is, although God will not give His glory to another god, He does give His glory to man, made in His likeness. Man lost God's glory in His sinfulness: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But God determined to restore that glory—not the fading glory that Moses had shining in his face when he came down from the mountain, the glory that passed away—but rather a permanent, unfading glory. In 2 Corinthians 3:11 Paul develops this, saying, "If what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" We are to grow in that glory even now: "We who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (v. 18). Moreover, we can spread that glory to others who have not heard: "The grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (2 Cor 4:15).

Finally, we have the culmination in the fulfillment of glory that awaits us. This must influence the whole way we live. Everything that happens to us in this life must come under the arc of God's coming glory. Paul says, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor 4:17). Paul, who had gone through shipwreck, torture, and imprisonment and who was now facing martyrdom, can refer to these problems of life as his "light and momentary" trouble in comparison to that eternal weight of glory which is beyond all comparison.

Calvin recommended meditation on the future life as a spiritual exercise. He said the only way we could really bring things into perspective in this life is to remember that our real home is in glory. Evangelicals are sometimes

accused of preaching "pie in the sky by and by." But meditation on the future glory does not make us "no earthly good," as some say, but rather gives us that liberty as sons of God that was expressed on the lips of a Spanish soldier in the sixteenth century: "I would rather face a whole army than one Calvinist convinced he is doing the will of God." That is what happens when you realize that whatever goes on in this world is only a momentary affliction.

Paul did not say this easily or lightly. Paul knew the reality of suffering. But he looked beyond this life to the eternal weight of glory that awaited him. Our Lord said, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43). Peter promised: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Pet 5:4).

Moses had only a fading crown of glory, but ours will be unfading. With that crown of glory we will glorify God for eternity. This is what John saw in the Revelation: "The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power'" (Rev 4:10, 11). There it is, you see. God glorifies us, and we take that glory and consecrate it back to Him, glorifying Him forever.

Calvinists are a minority today, and we can sometimes be discouraged. We can be discouraged by the surrounding secularism and because we sometimes feel that non-Calvinistic Christian groups are more successful than we are. That may be true in some areas. But we have a great task to perform, and that is to open to fellow Christians and to the world at large the depths, riches and wisdom of God's glory.

We live in a day when many have eclipsed the glory of God in their teaching. They have eclipsed it by ignoring God's perfect plan. The sinfulness of sin is reduced so that man's free will may be unimpaired, and therefore the work of Christ is reduced. Man needs only a partial faith. By contrast, we who have looked deeply into God's Word know that we are dead in our sin and unable to help ourselves. Therefore, at the right time Christ died for us, and by the irresistible work of His Holy Spirit, brought us to faith in Himself. What a gospel that is! What a Savior we have! "To Him be the glory forever! Amen." ♦



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