

04 How to Preach the
Sovereignty of God
STEVEN J. LAWSON

21 God's Absolute
Sovereignty
JOHN MACARTHUR

17 Preaching a
Sovereign Gospel
DEREK W.H. THOMAS

EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

SPRING 2021

No. 34

PREACHING
AND THE
SOVEREIGNTY
OF GOD

PREACHING • TEACHING • TRAINING



DISCOVER THE AWESOME ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

It's the most important question we can ask: Who is God? The wrong answer could spell our doom, but God has clearly revealed Himself and His majesty in His Word. Just as Moses asked the Lord on the summit of Sinai, we can approach God's Word with the ultimate request: "Show me Your glory."

In *Show Me Your Glory: Understanding the Majestic Splendor of God*, Dr. Steven Lawson takes us to the mountaintop of divine revelation by distilling the Bible's teaching about God Himself. Each chapter delves into the depths of God's awesome attributes, teaching that a deeper knowledge of our Creator can lead us into intimate fellowship with and reverent worship of the One who made us for Himself.

BULK QUANTITY DISCOUNTS
AVAILABLE FOR CHURCHES
AND BOOKSTORES.

DIGITAL EDITIONS AVAILABLE



amazonkindle



Ligonier.org/store | 800-435-4343

A LIFE-CHANGING DOCTRINE

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



During my years in seminary, God graciously opened my eyes to the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation and providence. Coming to this realization had a life-changing effect upon me, especially since I had come from an Arminian background. Upon graduation from seminary, I was eager to teach this truth to those who would be under my ministry.

But the first three churches that I pastored were adamantly opposed to the truth of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners, at least initially. As I preached this truth, there was a hostile response from many who reacted negatively to this biblical doctrine. I am grateful, though, that many came to embrace and live this truth.

In the first church where I preached this truth, the college students and young adults warmly received it. Younger people were accustomed to reading and critically thinking through what they had studied. On the other hand, those who were older were set in their ways, and they often refused this doctrine.

In the next two churches that I pastored, the reaction to the sovereignty of God was vocal and even aggressive. In

the last of those churches, preaching this cost me my pastorate as I was pressured out of my ministry there.

I share this simply to indicate that the subject of this issue of *Expositor* magazine is a matter to which I have given great thought. I have lived in this truth for more than four decades. I want to help you think through what I have learned and understand the great weight of this doctrine.

As you seek to honor God in your preaching ministry, proclaim the glorious truth of His sovereignty. May the Lord give you much grace as you preach this grand truth of His supreme authority over all. ♦



Join Dr. Lawson for a practical look into the life and ministry of the expositor.

EXPOSITOR
with STEVEN J. LAWSON *podcast*





A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES
WINTER 2021

No. 34

Contents

04 HOW TO PREACH THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

STEVEN J. LAWSON is founder and president of OnePassion Ministries. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, director of the doctor of ministry program at The Master’s Seminary, and host of the Institute for Expository Preaching. He is the author of numerous books.

21 GOD'S ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY

JOHN MACARTHUR is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and president of The Master’s College and Seminary. He has authored numerous books and is a regular contributor to *Expositor Magazine*.

29 PREACHING A SOVEREIGN GOSPEL

DEREK W. H. THOMAS is senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, and chancellor’s professor, Reformed Theological Seminary, as well as a teaching fellow for Ligonier Ministries.

37 JUSTIFICATION AND SOVEREIGN GRACE

JOEL R. BEEKE is president of the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and pastor of Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, MI.



SPRING 2021 ISSUE 34 © 2021 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES EXECUTIVE EDITOR Steven J. Lawson EDITOR Dustin W. Bengé
DESIGN DIRECTOR Dustin W. Bengé MARKETING DIRECTOR Grace Anne Lawson PROOFREADER C. Rebecca Rine

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION: Annual subscription price (4 issues): \$30.00. You can subscribe to *Expositor Magazine* by MAIL: *Expositor Magazine*, P.O. Box 461508, Escondido, CA 92046 ONLINE: www.expositormagazine.com EMAIL: expositormagazine@pcspublink.com PHONE: 855-492-1670. *Expositor* is published bi-monthly by OnePassion, Inc. P.O. Box 601649, Dallas, TX 75360. Postage Paid at Dallas, TX 75382 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Expositor Magazine*, P.O. Box 461508, Escondido, CA 92046.



HOW TO *P R E A C H T H E* SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

STEVEN J. LAWSON

One of the most foundational truths in the Bible is the bedrock doctrine of the sovereignty of God over all His creation. From Genesis to Revelation, this core teaching is found on the pages of every book in the Scripture. Divine sovereignty means that God is God, not in mere name only, but in all that it means for Him to be God. The Almighty is seated upon His throne in glory and actively presiding over every affair upon the earth. This doctrine of divine supremacy towers over the landscape of Scripture as the Mount Everest of all truth.


The sovereignty of God represents His undisputed right to govern all that He has created. God's reign is the unhindered free exercise of His supreme authority over every life, event, and destiny. This towering truth must be a primary article of our doctrinal creed. Every other doctrinal teaching must be brought into alignment with this truth and rest squarely upon it.

Sadly, this has become one of the most controversial subjects in the church. Many pastors who preach this truth suddenly find themselves in a gathering storm with their

congregation. I have been there myself more than once. This teaching can be accompanied by great unrest in the church. Broken relationships. Hurt feelings. Withheld giving. Slanderous rumors. Character assassination. Leadership dissension. People leaving. Perhaps more than any other truth, this doctrine can cause vast rifts within the body of Christ.

Despite these difficulties, no preacher is permitted to withhold any part of the Bible—and that includes this truth. You are not at liberty to pick and choose which doctrines you want to teach and which ones you want to ignore. If God has put a truth in the Bible, you may not skip over it. You may not censor or mute God. You are not allowed to edit the Scripture. You cannot plough around this massive boulder. You cannot be in denial of its existence. You cannot close your eyes and pretend like it is not there. You cannot fail to address it. Whatever is in the Bible, God put it there for a reason—it is your responsibility to preach the Word!

How do you preach the sovereignty of God? The



In your pulpit ministry, you should make it your regular practice to preach sequentially through entire books of the Bible. Starting at chapter one, verse one, you should preach verse-by-verse over multiple sermons until you reach the end of a book.

following headings will provide some helpful instruction for navigating these potentially turbulent waters:

PREACH IT BIBLICALLY

You must preach divine sovereignty as it is found in the Bible. “Predestination” is not a word that was coined during the First Great Awakening in the early colonies. The teaching of providence was not conjured up during the Puritan Age in Oxford or Cambridge. Foreordination was not invented during the Reformation in Wittenberg or Geneva. It did not first appear with the church fathers in Alexandria or Hippo. Rather, this truth was rooted and grounded in the sacred pages of divinely inspired Scripture long ago.

We preach divine sovereignty because it was recorded in the sacred writings of Moses, David, and Solomon. We preach it because it came from the infallible pens of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. We preach these truths because they came from the lips of Jesus Christ, Peter, and Paul. We preach it because it was written by James, John, and Jude. We do this not merely because anyone in church history

championed these doctrines, but because God placed them in His word.

Predestination is one of God’s words, not man’s. Sovereignty is in His divine vocabulary. These words and more like them—“calling,” “foreknowledge,” “regeneration,” “eternal security”—have come from the infinite genius of God. These truths have come from His infallible mind and were recorded in Scripture. They have come down from His throne of grace. You are to preach it because it is in the Bible. You must let God speak for Himself.

Someone once asked Martin Luther, “How do you defend the Bible?” The Reformer replied, “You do not defend the Bible. The Bible is like a lion. Just open the cage and turn it loose. It will defend itself.” Divine sovereignty and all its surrounding truths are like this lion. You simply open the Scripture and turn it loose.

PREACH IT SEQUENTIALLY

In your pulpit ministry, you should make it your regular practice to preach sequentially through entire books of

the Bible. Starting at chapter one, verse one, you should preach verse-by-verse over multiple sermons until you reach the end of a book. Of course, there will be occasional exceptions to this in your preaching schedule. But as you mostly preach consecutively through books, you will find the truth of the sovereignty of God repeatedly before you. These doctrines will automatically be evident in the flow of the book.

As you find the sovereignty of God in your passage, you should preach it as often as you find it. You do not need to insert it into every message, especially when it is not in the verses before you. It is certainly possible to bring this truth into selected sermons if it is not directly mentioned in your text. But as it appears in your text, explain it carefully and apply it pastorally. Do not ignore it.

The advantage of preaching sequentially is that no one can accuse you of going out of your way to preach this doctrine. God has placed it in the verses before you, and you are simply being faithful to address what is next. What is more, your church will expect you to speak to the truth that is before you. There is virtually no book in the Bible through which you can preach where this truth is not present. In a way, this gives you license to address this truth, because it will often present itself in the book you are expounding.

Further, there is a built-in balance that God has embedded into each book in the Bible. Inevitably, after you have preached on divine sovereignty, those verses will be immediately followed with a passage that stresses evangelism or human responsibility. Just keep preaching verse by verse through that book in the Bible, and be faithful to expound the truths in front of you in a given passage

PREACH IT THEOLOGICALLY

As you preach on the sovereignty of God, you must also show how this grand truth fits into the larger framework of systematic theology. It is true that whatever you believe about one doctrine affects what you believe about many other doctrines. The entire realm of theology is intricately woven together like a finely embroidered tapestry. The doctrine of divine sovereignty is interwoven so tightly with every other major doctrine that what you teach here affects how you teach other truths.

In your pulpit ministry, you must show how this truth relates to other truths such as foreknowledge (1 Pet 1:2), predestination (Rom 8:29–30), calling (1 Cor 1:9), regeneration (John 3:8), repentance (Acts 11:18), faith (Phil 1:29), sanctification (1 Cor 1:30), and glorification (Rom 8:30). You will want to show how these areas of doctrine are integrally connected with divine sovereignty. This includes all

matters of providence, both great (Dan 2:21; 4:17, 32) and small (Prov. 16:33), involving both believers (Acts 1:26) and unbelievers (1:1), both individually (Gal 1:15–16) and nationally (Acts 14:16; 17:26).

In your preaching, you should also explain how divine sovereignty is interconnected with various elements of Christian living. From the pulpit, you should show how the supreme will of God is inseparably joined with decision making (Prov 16:1, 9), prayer (John 15:16), missions (Acts 13:48–49), fellowship with Christ (1 Cor 1:9), humility (1 Cor 1:26–31), worship (Eph 1:3–14), good works (Eph 2:10), loving others (Col 3:12–13), perseverance (2 Thess 2:13–15), endurance (2 Tim 2:9–10), evangelism (1 Pet 2:9–10), assurance of salvation (2 Pet 1:10), and many more practical aspects.

Because the Bible never contradicts itself, you should show how these many different doctrines and truths about Christian living are perfectly harmonious with the biblical teaching of the sovereignty of God over all of life. In fact, every truth is held firmly in place because of this doctrine of God's supreme will over all things. Paul speaks of "one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:6). His sovereignty is what pulls everything in the universe together. It would be hard to avoid preaching this truth.

PREACH IT PATIENTLY

Not everyone will immediately accept these truths the first time they hear them. This is especially true with church members who are more advanced in age. Because they have been long instructed in erroneous thinking, they may stubbornly resist this new, and, to them, seemingly radical paradigm. It may be easier to gain a hearing with college students and young adults, who are not as hardened by wrong assumptions. Nevertheless, teaching these doctrines will require the patience of Job. Rarely will someone embrace these doctrines as soon as they are exposed to them.

When I first heard the truth of predestination, I was in seminary. It took me two years to come to a point of fully accepting this doctrine. My initial rejection revealed how prideful and hard-hearted I was. I could stare at this truth in the Bible, but I did not know what to do with it. I could not immediately embrace it. I had too many questions that needed to be answered before I could accept it. The same will be true with many people in your church.

As you preach, it could take some brothers and sisters a couple of years to understand this deep doctrine, like it did with me. Give your church time and space to understand and embrace this truth. Paul told Timothy, "Preach

the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). The emphasis here is the need for “great patience and instruction.” “Patience” means you need to be long-suffering with people who will not immediately receive these truths. “Instruction” requires that you continue to teach this repeatedly. As Augustine said, “Patience is the companion of wisdom.”

When you preach divine sovereignty, people may have forty different questions. They will require time to think through those perplexing questions. You will have to help provide answers during the following weeks and months, and maybe even years. Be patient. You are returning around a battleship, not a rowboat. This takes a greater amount of time and careful attention.

PREACH IT LOVINGLY

We must preach the doctrines of sovereign grace with much love, not just for the sake of these truths, but for those to whom we preach. We must not mount the pulpit with a clenched fist and a scowl on our face. We must not preach as if we have a theological revolver in our pocket, ready to bombard people with explosive doctrine. We must not beat people over the head with this teaching. There must be love in our hearts for the people to whom we minister. We need a gracious disposition as we expound this truth.

The Apostle Paul stresses the necessity of love in teaching any truth. This is especially true here. He writes:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor 13:1–3)

Elsewhere, Paul states that we must “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). It is important, not just what we say, but how we say it. Our desire is for the spiritual good of those to whom we preach, and this includes for them to know and embrace this truth. Our goal is not to win an argument for argument’s sake. It is not to put people down who disagree with us. Instead, our greater ambition is that they are conformed into the image of Christ and grow in godliness. As we preach, we must not be needlessly abrasive with this already combustible truth. Instead, “let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt” (Col 4:6).

Paul also states, “The Lord’s bond-servant must not

be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition” (2 Tim 2:24–25). Charles Spurgeon once quipped, “As soon as someone believes the doctrine of predestination, they need to be put into a barrel, and it nailed shut for a year.” In other words, those who have just found out about this truth should not overwhelm people with this subject.

PREACH IT DOXOLOGICALLY

As you preach divine sovereignty, you should present it as one whose heart has been transformed to worship God by this truth. As you hold forth these doctrines, you should be overwhelmed with a sense of wonder and amazement at the electing love of God. You should step into the pulpit asking yourself, “Why *me*, Lord? Why have You chosen *me*?” This awe should be your continual refrain. Your expositions of sovereign grace should cause you to bow low in humility and then soar to the heights of heaven in great praise. If you preach this truth as a worshiper, it will help your listeners truly hear what the Scriptures teach on this subject.

Consider how this profound theology should inspire every believer’s doxology. The Apostle Paul presents this transcendent truth in the context of adoring worship. He writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph 1:4–6).

Here, Paul presents God’s eternal choice of individuals for salvation. He affirms His predestination as a doctrine of divine “love” that flows from “the kindness of His will.” These truths moved Paul to respond with praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the rightful response to these truths, which is to exclaim, “To the praise of the glory of His grace!” There is no spiritual coldness flowing from the inspired pen of Paul. There is only Paul’s warm adoration of God from a heart humbled by His electing grace.

Likewise, this is how this doctrine must flow from your heart as you stand in the pulpit. You should be filled with the wonder of worship, with bewilderment and amazement


that God would choose to set His love upon you. Do not preach this truth on a purely intellectual level—cold and cognitive. Do not present this doctrine as if you are showing the congregation how to solve a math problem. Do not handle this teaching as if you are dissecting a frog in a laboratory. The doctrine of divine sovereignty should ignite your heart to love God even more. It should cause you to worship Him with a fervent heart, because He has chosen to have mercy on you.

PREACH IT PASTORALLY

As you preach the sovereignty of God, explain how it is the most comforting doctrine in the Bible. This truth brings great peace to troubled hearts. You should explain the practical relevance of this truth for daily living. Show what

an encouragement this teaching is to believers in the midst of their difficult times. Reassure your congregation that God is in control over every trial in their lives and is using each one for their benefit. Whether God sent the difficulty or whether He chose to allow it, it nevertheless is a part of His sovereign plan. He controls the limits to which it can go. Further, He promises to use it for our greatest good, which is to conform us into the image of Jesus Christ. If it was not for the sovereignty of God, we would have no such hope.

The doctrine of divine providence teaches that God rules in every situation, both great and small, for the advantage of believers. This truth provides strong encouragement in troubled times. Romans 8:29–30 states that those whom God chose to love with a saving love in eternity past had



**As you preach divine
sovereignty, you should
present it as one whose heart
has been transformed to
worship God by this truth.
As you hold forth these
doctrines, you should be
overwhelmed with a sense of
wonder and amazement at
the electing love of God.**

the certainty of their salvation guaranteed before they were born. These are the ones whom God will call, justify, and glorify. In the preceding verse in Romans 8, Paul writes, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (v. 28). This divine “purpose” is that every circumstance, both good and bad, would conform us into the image of Jesus Christ.

As you preach God’s sovereignty, you should make reaffirming applications of His kingly purpose. Teach your congregation that there is no such thing as good luck, bad luck, random occurrences, or a supposed accident. Reassure them that God’s timing is perfect, that He has ordained the day of their birth and the day of their death. Instruct them that God has a master plan through which He will work for their good. The sovereignty of God is like a comforting pillow upon which we rest our heads at night in troubled times. God is sovereignly in control of the events and circumstances of our lives, even in the midst of stormy trials. This should bring us immense comfort.

I vividly recall the day I received the phone call that my father passed away. In the midst of my grief, I trusted that this was the divinely appointed day of his passing, predetermined by God. Peace flooded my heart, knowing this. That was the perfect day, as God had planned it long ago.

What acceptance and internal calm it brought to my own heart, believing in this grand truth. The sovereignty of God even over death itself is one of the most reassuring doctrines in the entire Bible.


PREACH IT EVANGELISTICALLY

As you stand to preach, there will always be unconverted people present. You must preach this truth of divine sovereignty to lost souls in order to win them to Christ. All Scripture has power to save sinners, and that includes these majestic truths of divine sovereignty. This truth of election is not a hindrance to evangelism. Instead, it actually guarantees its success. With growing confidence, you should preach sovereign grace, even to lost, unconverted people. God will use it to save His chosen ones. Preach divine sovereignty, point people to Jesus Christ crucified, issue the call to believe, and then pray that God will save souls.

Jesus Himself preached sovereign election to unconverted people and gave an evangelistic appeal to come to faith in Himself. Jesus prayed to the Father,

I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things





As you stand to preach, there will always be unconverted people present. You must preach this truth of divine sovereignty to lost souls in order to win them to Christ. All Scripture has power to save sinners, and that includes these majestic truths of divine sovereignty.


have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt 11:25–27).

In no uncertain terms, these words by Christ strongly assert the truth of divine election.

In his very next words, Jesus invited the lost who were present to come to Him, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (vv. 28–30). Christ’s words

acknowledging divine election were no hindrance to His appeal to the lost to make a decisive step to come to Him by faith (cf. John 6:35, 37, 44).

In like manner, Peter preached the sovereign and saving grace of God on the day of Pentecost, and three thousand souls were converted. In this evangelistic sermon, Peter preached that Jesus was crucified by “the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). He exhorted those present to “repent” (v. 38) and announced such a decisive response will be by “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (v. 39). Peter was emboldened to preach by these doctrinal truths of divine sovereignty. God used these theological convictions to arrest the attention of



As you preach the sovereignty of God, do not apologize for these glorious doctrines taught in Scripture. Make no excuses for what God has put into the Bible. Never be sheepish about proclaiming this doctrine. Do not be reluctant, nor hesitant, to speak of His right to exercise His own supreme authority. Do not be passive, but preach without apologizing for God. “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). Leave no truth unspoken.

unconverted people and humble them. It created a sense of urgency in their hearts, causing them to act immediately by repentance and faith.

PREACH IT UNASHAMEDLY

As you preach the sovereignty of God, do not apologize for these glorious doctrines taught in Scripture. Make no excuses for what God has put into the Bible. Never be sheepish about proclaiming this doctrine. Do not be reluctant, nor hesitant, to speak of His right to exercise His own supreme authority. Do not be passive, but preach without apologizing for God. “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). Be like Paul, who said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Be bold and courageous. Leave no truth unspoken—including divine sovereignty.

To be ashamed to speak of God’s dealing in sovereign election is to be ashamed of God Himself. The person of God and His work cannot be separated. Who He is and what He does cannot be divided.

Some preachers act as if God’s divine will in choosing those upon whom He will have compassion is the “dark side” of God. But there is *no* dark side of God. The apostle John writes, “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). It is a degrading insult against the holy character of God to insinuate that there is a character flaw in the Almighty. Such a charge is a serious indictment that God is less than perfect in the integrity of His flawless being.

Paul rebukes the anticipated charge against God that He is guilty of wrongdoing in His sovereign choices concerning salvation: “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?” (Rom 9:22). The apostle states in no uncertain terms that any challenge to God’s right as the Creator to do with His creation as He pleases crosses a line of defiance. So it is with any preacher who calls into question—or denigrates—God’s right as the Potter to make from the same lump of clay one vessel for destruction and another vessel for mercy (see Rom 9:21). Make certain that you do not fall into this trap.

PREACH IT CONFIDENTLY

We must preach this truth of divine sovereignty confidently, believing that God will honor the man who honors the preaching of this truth. God will stand with the man who stands on this truth. As you step forward to preach this truth, know that God is standing with you. In fact, He is standing *in* you, *with* you, and *for* you. As you open your Bible to preach this doctrine, God will speak through you.

He will bring much fruit from the preaching of this truth.

Jesus affirmed His disciples with this truth as they were sent out to preach. He said: “You did not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain” (John 15:16). We are to have our confidence grounded in His sovereign choice of us. Because of this, we are to be assured that our preaching ministry will bear much lasting fruit. As we are to face the persecution of the world (vv. 18–20), we are to be confident that this same sovereign God will cause our preaching to be fruitful.

It was this truth that emboldened Paul on his missionary journeys. In eternity past, God chose a people to be saved. He appointed that they would believe when the gospel was brought to them. The sovereign election of God gave Paul increasing courage to preach in the midst of great rejection. Luke records what was the anchor of Paul’s soul: “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). The apostle knew that the eternal purpose of God could not be thwarted.

As you stand in the pulpit, you should be filled with this same confidence. The sovereign purpose of God cannot be stopped. All of His elect will be saved. The Holy Spirit is greater than any resistance that sinful man can mount against the gospel. All whom God appointed unto eternal life will believe. So, preach the Word and watch our sovereign God work. He has appointed not only the end of all things, the salvation of the elect, but the means to accomplish that end, which is the preaching of the Word. That includes even *your* preaching to further His Kingdom.

PREACH IT OPENLY

The truth of the sovereignty of God is not a subject to withhold from your congregation. This is not a doctrine to be reserved for only a select few in the church. Divine sovereignty should be taught on Sunday morning for all to hear. Do not consign this foundational doctrine to a small group on Wednesday night. Do not relegate this truth to an isolated discipleship meeting on a Friday morning. This God-exalting theology must be preached to the whole congregation. Everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, needs this strong truth deposited in their lives.

The Bible itself certainly does not hide this towering doctrine. The biblical authors often placed this truth at the very beginning of their books for all their readers to see. There was no attempt to conceal this teaching from those who may not be ready to understand it yet. This is especially true in the New Testament. On a regular basis, the apostles and others introduced their writings by asserting this truth. A brief survey of their books reveals this to be

consistently true.

In the opening prologue of the Gospel of John, for instance, true believers are described as those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12–13). In the opening of Romans, Paul addresses the church as “the called of Jesus Christ” (1:6). In 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed the church as “saints by calling,” those “called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:2, 9). The book of Ephesians begins, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world... In love He predestined us” (1:4–5). The book of Philippians begins similarly: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6).

Paul starts 1 Thessalonians by reminding the church concerning “His choice of you” (1:4). 2 Timothy opens by stating that God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling...according to His own purpose in Christ which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (1:9). James begins, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth” (1:18). Peter’s first epistle addresses those “who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1:1–2). His second epistle is written to believers “who have received a faith of the same kind as ours” (1:1). Jude is addressed “to those who are the called” (v. 1).

In the Bible, this doctrine appears “up front and center,” at the very beginning of books. It is not hidden at the end of books where few people will find it. To the contrary, God has placed it at the outset, because He wants this truth to be taught openly. This bold presentation also indicates how well the first-century church was taught on this matter of predestination. The biblical authors actually could begin their writings by mentioning divine sovereignty without needing to explain it. In like manner, let us proclaim this truth for all to hear, trusting God to instruct and bless with fruit.

PREACH IT PROPORTIONATELY

The truth of divine sovereignty is not taught in every verse in the Bible. Therefore, you should not preach on this weighty subject in every sermon. Overemphasizing this truth will soon wear people down. You should preach it proportionately, to the same degree and in the same ways that it is found in the Bible. As the Bible says it, you should teach it. There are times when you will bring this truth into your sermon when it is not found in the passage, because it is the unseen foundation for what is taking place. But you do not want to swing the pendulum to the extreme of reading this truth into every verse, whether it is there or

not. Do not fall into the trap of preaching God’s sovereignty every time you step into the pulpit.

Instead, be known first and foremost for preaching the gospel of God. Be known principally for proclaiming Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). The predominant thrust of your preaching should be to encourage people in their pursuit of holiness. Admittedly, even preaching one single sermon on predestination may feel like an overt emphasis to some people, because it is a heavy subject. You should be wary against riding this subject into the ground. After you preach this subject, move on to other texts with other truths.


Balance is critically important in your preaching. This is true with every aspect of your pulpit ministry. You must maintain balance between doctrine and duty, between instruction and application, and between indicatives and imperatives. The same can be said regarding emphases on divine sovereignty and human responsibility. An imbalance occurs when one is stressed over the other. The Bible maintains a remarkable equilibrium between these two. Like a man walking on two legs of equal length, your preaching will move forward with an even distribution of emphasis between these two truths, and with a balance between these truths and others that are woven throughout the Scripture.

PREACH IT WISELY

The preaching of divine sovereignty also requires God-given wisdom and discernment in order to know how to present this truth. As an example, a husband can say something to his wife in a way that is kind, or he can say it in an unnecessarily abrasive way. The same is true with a father to his children. This is why Paul writes, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath” (Eph 6:4). An overbearing father can escalate a situation beyond what it should be. In like manner, a pastor needs to exercise sound judgment when presenting this truth. If there is to be an offense, it should be caused by the message itself, not by the disposition of the messenger.

Solomon addressed the need for wisdom in speech: “A gentle answer turns away wrath...The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable” (Prov 15:1–2). “The lips of the wise spread knowledge” (v. 7). “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but the slow to anger calms a dispute” (v. 18). Many similar proverbs governing the use of the tongue could be cited. As you preach on this potentially explosive subject, you should give careful thought to how you can wisely teach this truth. Show as many positive aspects of this truth as you can.

As you study and preach, you should also show



The truth of divine sovereignty is not taught in every verse in the Bible. Therefore, you should not preach on this weighty subject in every sermon. Overemphasizing this truth will soon wear people down. You should preach it proportionately, to the same degree and in the same ways that it is found in the Bible.

sensitivity to where people are at in their spiritual growth. No matter where they are with the Lord—whether saved or lost, whether mature or a babe in Christ—they need to know about the sovereignty of God. However, where they are spiritually will determine how deep you can take them in this truth. It will also be a factor in your presentation of this concept.

Paul acknowledged this limitation in his teaching with the church in Corinth. He wrote, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able” (1 Cor 3:1–2). Paul recognized

that they did not have the ability to absorb any more truth that he had to give them. Even so, a pastor needs to have an awareness of the spiritual capacity that his congregation possesses to digest what he is teaching. This requires the wisdom that only God can give.

PREACH IT HISTORICALLY

As you preach, your congregation should know that during times in church history that significantly altered the course of human events, the sovereignty of God advanced to the forefront of preaching. Certainly, this was true in the Reformation with significant figures like Martin Luther and John Calvin. The same can be said for the Puritan Age

with men like John Owen and John Bunyan. Likewise, this truth was preached in the Great Awakening by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Further, the pulpits in the great Victorian age were set ablaze with divine sovereignty by the likes of Charles Spurgeon and J. C. Ryle.

While we do not believe a truth simply because these men taught them, they nevertheless must be acknowledged as gifted teachers who were given by the ascended Christ to instruct His church (Eph 4:7–13). This fact cannot be denied. Wise is the church that takes into consideration what these spiritually endowed leaders taught on divine sovereignty. Any congregation should want to consult these men in how they taught these truths. To stand contrary to godly teachers of the past should be a cause for concern for any church.


What should be noted is that while these men differed on many subjects such as baptism, church governance, and eschatology, they nevertheless spoke with one voice on the sovereignty of God over all of life, including matters of salvation. In the last church that I pastored, I met with

the men every Friday morning to study theology and church history. I wanted them to see that as we believe and preach this truth, we are not isolated from the mainstream of church history. Though we may be standing relatively alone in this hour of redemptive history, we nevertheless stand with those who have had the greatest effect upon the history of the church.

The greatest theologians and expositors, hymn writers and missionaries, seminary professors and Bible commentators have all spoken with one voice on this subject. As you preach, you should show how the giants of church history have embraced this doctrine. You should demonstrate that you are in good company to believe this truth. In this hour, this teaching must sound forth from pulpits again.

PREACH IT REALISTICALLY

As you step into the pulpit, you must realize that not everyone will believe this truth. Not everyone is going to embrace this doctrine. There may have been a time in your past when you did not believe these truths. Your responsibility



As you step into the pulpit, you must realize that not everyone will believe this truth. Not everyone is going to embrace this doctrine. There may have been a time in your past when you did not believe these truths. Your responsibility is not to be successful with winning everyone over to this truth.



is not to be successful with winning everyone over to this truth. Rather, you are simply to be faithful to present these truths and to leave the results with God. You are to plant and water, but it is God alone who causes the growth (1 Cor 3:6–8). Whether your preaching yields a bumper harvest or barren return lies, ultimately, with the Lord.

When Jesus preached these truths, many of His followers “withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore” (John 6:66). Even the Lord Jesus Christ did not always have a positive reception in His teaching the doctrines of sovereign grace. It can be argued that more rejected Him for teaching this truth than received it from Him. The Apostle Paul likewise anticipated a negative response from his readers when he taught the truth of sovereign election in the book of Romans (see Rom 9:14, 19). You should have this same realistic expectation whenever you preach this doctrine.

You may become very controversial. You may become not only a much-loved man, but also a much-hated one. I certainly have in the past. Yet, at the end of the day, you need to be true to the Word of God and to your own conscience. When I was in seminary, a professor told us, “If when you teach this, there are not some people who are troubled by it, you probably have not taught it well.” When you preach this doctrine, there will be inevitable pushback. However, many of those people who initially push back—just as I once did—will eventually come to the understanding of it.

At the end of the day, God is sovereign over who believes in His sovereignty. So, preach it and leave the results with God. Your responsibility is to be faithful, even if that means you do not perceive much tangible fruit.

TO THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE

Praise should be given to God that He is absolutely sovereign. With perfect wisdom, He rules over the affairs of this world. There is not one square inch of this universe over which He does not rule. This includes the hearts and lives of every single person. This world is not ruled by random chaos, but is governed with perfect design and order. Even when it escapes our notice, there is divine purpose for everything that comes to pass. Everything that is and that occurs, in one way or another, contributes to bringing greater glory to God.

The Apostle Paul declares, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36). For Paul, this truth of divine sovereignty is a cause for giving the most fervent benediction to God. This theology ignited his doxology, which caused his heart to soar to the heights of heaven. Even so, it should have the same effect upon our hearts.

Let us preach the sovereignty of God from our pulpits. Let us proclaim this truth from the housetops. God is supreme in the free exercise of His authority. Let us declare this to all the people entrusted to our care. ♦



THE MASTER'S
SEMINARY



DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

TAKING YOU TO THE NEXT LEVEL

As a shepherd of God's flock, the pastor demonstrates his love for the church most clearly through expository preaching. The D.Min. program modular sessions provide a way for you to grow in your preaching ability while remaining in your current ministry. Modular sessions are just three weeks each year during the first two years of the program—one week in January and two weeks in July.



GROW

Grow in knowledge of the Scripture, homiletics, and expository preaching.

STUDY

Study in Los Angeles under faithful preachers and teachers who are known for their expertise.

FELLOWSHIP

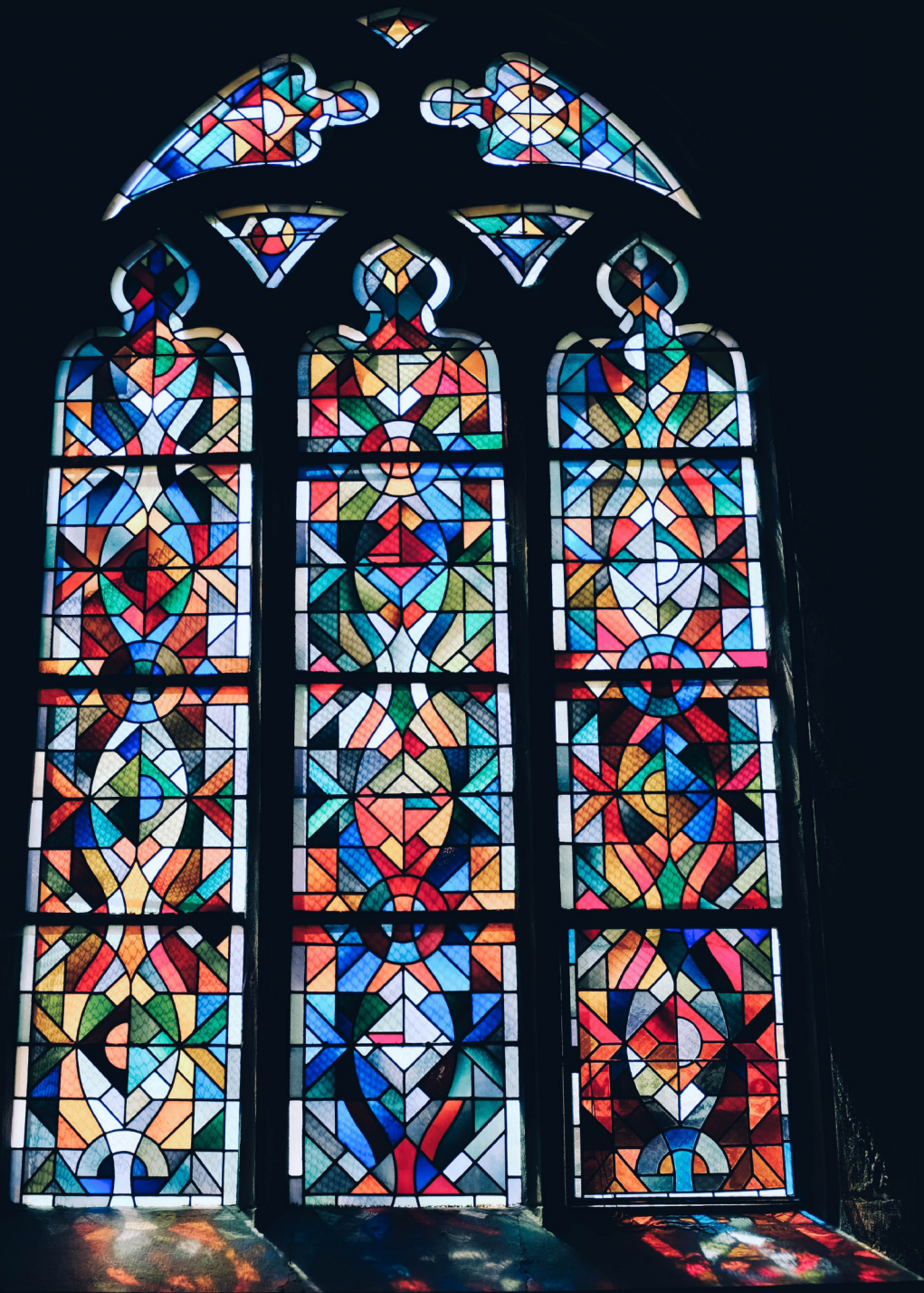
Fellowship richly with other pastors who share the calling to feed Christ's flock.

PREACH

Preach in your current ministry context using concepts from each modular session.

LEARN MORE

TMS.EDU



G O D ' S

A B S O L U T E

S O V E R E I G N T Y

JOHN MACARTHUR


No doctrine is more despised by the natural mind than the truth that God is absolutely sovereign. Human pride loathes the suggestion that God orders everything, controls everything, rules over everything. The carnal mind, burning with enmity against God, abhors the biblical teaching that nothing comes to pass except according to His eternal decrees. Most of all, the flesh hates the notion that salvation is entirely God's work. If God chose who would be saved, and if His choice was settled before the foundation of the world, then believers deserve no credit for their salvation.

But that is, after all, precisely what Scripture teaches. Even faith is God's gracious gift to His elect. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). "Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt 11:27). Therefore, no one who is saved has anything to boast about (cf Eph 2:8–9). "Salvation is from

the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

The doctrine of divine election is explicitly taught throughout Scripture. For example, in the New Testament epistles alone, we learn that all believers are "chosen of God" (Titus 1:1). We were "predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world... He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (Eph 1:4–5). We "are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. . . and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom 8:28–30).

When Peter wrote that we are "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1–2), he was



God did not choose certain sinners to be saved because of something praiseworthy in them, or because He foresaw that they would choose Him. He chose them solely because it pleased Him to do so.

not using the word “foreknowledge” to mean that God was aware beforehand who would believe and therefore chose them because of their foreseen faith. Rather, Peter meant that God determined before time began to know and love and save them; and He chose them without regard to anything good or bad they might do. We’ll return to this point again, but for now, note that those verses explicitly state that God’s sovereign choice is made “according to the kind intention of His will” and “according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will”—that is, not for any reason external to Himself.

Certainly, God did not choose certain sinners to be saved because of something praiseworthy in them, or because He foresaw that they would choose Him. He chose them solely because it pleased Him to do so. God declares “the end from the beginning, . . . saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa 46:10). He is not subject to others’ decisions. His purposes for choosing some and rejecting others are hidden in the secret counsels of His own will.

Moreover, everything that exists in the universe exists because God allowed it, decreed it, and called it into

existence. “Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps 115:3). “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps 135:6). He “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11). “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36). “For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Cor 8:6).

What about sin? God is not the author of sin, but He certainly allowed it; it is integral to His eternal decree. God has a purpose for allowing it. He cannot be blamed for evil or tainted by its existence (1 Sam 2:2: “There is no one holy like the LORD”). But He certainly wasn’t caught off guard or standing helpless to stop it when sin entered the universe. We do not know His purposes for allowing sin. If nothing else, He permitted it in order to destroy evil forever. And God sometimes uses evil to accomplish good (Gen 45:7, 8; 50:20; Rom 8:28). How can these things be? Scripture does not answer all the questions for us. But we know from His Word that God is utterly sovereign, He is perfectly holy, and He is absolutely just.


Admittedly, those truths are hard for the human mind to embrace, but Scripture is unequivocal. God controls all things, right down to choosing who will be saved. Paul states the doctrine in inescapable terms in the ninth chapter of Romans, by showing that God chose Jacob and rejected his twin brother Esau “though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls” (Rom 9:11). A few verses later, Paul adds this: “He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom 9:15–16).

Paul anticipated the argument against divine sovereignty: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” (Rom 9:19). In other words, doesn’t God’s sovereignty cancel out human responsibility? But rather than offering a philosophical answer or a deep metaphysical argument, Paul simply reprimanded the skeptic: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” (Rom 9:20, 21).

Scripture affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We must accept both sides of the truth, though we may not understand how they correspond to one another. People are responsible for what they do with the gospel—or with whatever light they have (Rom 2:19, 20), so that punishment is just if they reject the light. And those who reject do so voluntarily. Jesus lamented, “You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40). He told unbelievers, “Unless you believe that I am [God], you shall die in your sins” (John 8:24).

In John chapter 6, our Lord combined both divine sovereignty and human responsibility when He said, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37); “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life” (John 6:40); “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44); “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47); and, “No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:65). How both of those two realities can be true simultaneously cannot be understood by the human mind—only by God.


Above all, we must not conclude that God is unjust because He chooses to bestow grace on some but not to everyone. God is never to be measured by what seems fair




Scripture affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We must accept both sides of the truth, though we may not understand how they correspond to one another.

to human judgment. Are we so foolish as to assume that we who are fallen, sinful creatures have a higher standard of what is right than an unfallen and infinitely, eternally holy God? What kind of pride is that? In Psalm 50:21, God says, “You thought that I was just like you.” But God is not like us, nor can He be held to human standards. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My

thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9).

We step out of bounds when we conclude that anything God does isn’t fair. In Romans 11:33, the apostle writes, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?” (Rom 11:33–34). 



Are we so foolish as to assume that we who are fallen, sinful creatures have a higher standard of what is right than an unfallen and infinitely, eternally holy God? What kind of pride is that? In Psalm 50:21, God says, “You thought that I was just like you.” But God is not like us, nor can He be held to human standards. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.”



TRUTHS THAT MATTER MOST

In all the noise of everyday life, how do you focus on what really matters? Where do you go to regain perspective? Drawn from a lifetime of Bible study and reflections on the nature of truth, including content never before released, *Ultimately with R.C. Sproul* features unique moments of insight to help you understand what you believe and why you believe it. Each episode of this new podcast is only a few minutes, filled with biblical teaching and theological wisdom to help you renew your mind, make sense of the world around you, and grow in your knowledge of who God is. Listen every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to set your mind on what matters most—what matters ultimately.

Subscribe today. Just search for “Ultimately with R.C. Sproul” in your favorite podcast app.



UltimatelyPodcast.com





The Bible Study

with **STEVEN LAWSON**

LIVE STREAM

Thursdays, 7:00am CST

Pending Dr. Lawson's Schedule

**WATCH PAST EPISODES AND
DOWNLOAD TRANSCRIPTS OF ROMANS STUDY**

onepassion.org/the-bible-study



PREACHING A SOVEREIGN GOSPEL


DEREK W.H. THOMAS

There is no subject that shapes the contours of the gospel with greater clarity than the sovereignty of God. Consequently, a sustained period of preaching/study on this subject will drive us to reassess our understanding of the gospel.

It is particularly important that we understand that the gospel is not a message about social justice, or behavioral modification, or how to achieve a happy and contented life. Nor is it an exposition of the narrative of redemptive history—the story of creation, fall, redemption, and final judgment. The gospel is about Jesus—His coming into the world to be our substitute and sin-bearer, to undo the effects of Adam’s transgression, to provide a propitiation for our sins that we cannot provide. It is about a faith relationship with Jesus and an assurance of forgiveness and everlasting life. All of this is summed up magnificently at the end of Romans 3:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:21–26, ESV)

Here, of course, is the paramount importance of the doctrine of justification by faith *alone* in Christ *alone*, apart



There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace.

D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

from the works of the law. Preaching through Romans requires us to address the failed and pathetic (yes, that is right word for it) *new* perspectives on Paul—pathetic because these perspectives do not answer the most important question of all, *how can a sinner be regarded just in God's sight?* Getting justification right—the hinge on which the door of the gospel swings, as Calvin said—is crucial for the health and survival of the church. Preaching through the second half of chapter 3 and into chapter 4 will drive us to the gospel and “faith in Jesus Christ” (3:22).

And it is just here that we are often in need of refinement. For there is a tendency—particularly in Reformed circles—to speak of “grace” as though it were a commodity capable of being passed from one location to another. We speak, for example, of “the *means* of grace” (preaching, singing, praying, the Lord’s Supper, and so on) as though grace is a physical/spiritual commodity. This is so dangerously close to medieval Catholicism that it is positively pernicious. As I heard Sinclair Ferguson say somewhere, there is no such “thing” as grace; there is only Jesus! And *He* is all we need.

THE CHRISTIAN’S IDENTITY

I had been a Christian for only a year when I read Lloyd-Jones’s sermons on Romans 6. And something struck me then, and often still comes back to haunt me. He was addressing the drift into antinomianism:

First of all let me make a comment, to me a very important and vital comment. The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge [that it leads to antinomianism] being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel.

Those were powerful words when I first read them, and they continue to be a litmus test of how I understand the gospel. They raise, of course, the issue of the relation of gospel to law, an issue that continues to occupy the church to this day.

The issue of the relationship of law and gospel addresses

a perennial matter that constantly troubles Christians: the spiritual dysfunction of legalism and/or its antithetical dysfunction of antinomianism. According to Sinclair Ferguson, “In one form or another this accounts for perhaps fifty percent or more of the pastoral problems we face.” Christians often sway between the *Scylla* of a performance-based mentality of earning salvation by effort (*more* effort being viewed as the cure), and *Charybdis*, where the pain of failure causes them to throw aside the law, viewing it as entirely legalistic, flaunting their liberty as a sign that they really do understand grace.

How does Paul deal with this issue in Romans? The answer is almost entirely non-intuitive. He addresses the issue head-on: “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Rom 6:1). The issue had been raised earlier in Romans 3:8. Paul’s answer is clear: “By no means!”—and what is the solution for the one tempted to an antinomian lifestyle? Almost certainly, our answer (had we no knowledge of Romans 6) would not be what Paul says. For who in their right minds would suggest that the answer to antinomianism is to remember one’s baptism? And, perhaps, this is even less likely to occur to a Presbyterian (like myself) who cannot remember his/her baptism!

Sinclair Ferguson said:

If [Paul] operated simply at the level of symptoms he might well say: “Oh, we’ve got some legalism here. We’re against that, and to provide a spiritual balance we will need a mild dose of antinomianism.” Or, correspondingly, if faced with antinomianism: “What we need here is a brief course of the law and its commands.”

Having noted that this is precisely how the church has operated at times in the past, Ferguson continues:

Interestingly, he deals with both dysfunctions in exactly the same way: by treating both maladies with the only lasting remedy for either legalism or antinomianism. This he finds in his understanding of grace, and the dynamic of the way in which it operates . . . His response, if rightly understood, may strike us as sharply as a cold shower in the morning.

If someone in our congregation is a little “fast and loose” in their Christian life of consistent obedience to the commandments of God, would we go to such a person and say by way of prescription, “You have been baptized!”?

The problem of both these dysfunctions is *a loss of*

identity. “Know thyself,” the ancient Greek philosophers said. And in a sense, they were right. Knowing our identity in Christ is Paul’s fundamental motivational dynamic. Our union with Christ through faith is what he learned (presumably on the Damascus Road). And it is precisely union with Christ to which baptism points. Our baptism is a sign and seal to faith of union and communion with the risen, exalted Christ. This was something Luther would say whenever the devil tempted him to sin: “I have been baptized, I am a Christian.”

Preaching the sovereignty of God helps re-ground us in the anatomy of what the gospel is, and more pertinently, how the gospel works to change us and conform us to the image of the Son (Rom 8:29).

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Most of our dysfunction can be traced to the fact that our understanding of God is inadequate. And the conclusion to Romans 11 shouts that the gospel is something grand—greater than we can ever imagine:

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and


how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”


“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36, ESV)

This is the conclusion Paul makes after tracing the Himalayan peaks of the purposes of God in history back into the decisions of God in eternity. There are “depths” to the knowledge of God that should affect us deeply. It is not important that we understand His purposes in election and reprobation; it is only important that *He does!* Interestingly, Paul cites Job in his doxological conclusion. He, too, had questions—questions of the most personal and intimate kind, questions that pained him to ask—but to which no answers were given. At the end, Job lay his hand across his mouth (Paul may well pick up that allusion in Romans 3:19) and worshiped the God who is unfathomable. This is what preaching the sovereignty of God will



Preaching the sovereignty of God helps re-ground us in the anatomy of what the gospel is, and more pertinently, how the gospel works to change us and conform us to the image of the Son (Rom 8:29).



Sovereignty is the key to the massively encouraging eighth chapter of Romans—the greatest chapter in the Bible! God is sovereign in providence (Rom 8:28), He is sovereign in redemption (Rom 8:29–32).

make us do, too.

Sovereignty is the key to the massively encouraging eighth chapter of Romans—the greatest chapter in the Bible! God is sovereign in providence (Rom 8:28), He is sovereign in redemption (Rom 8:29–32), and, clearly, He is sovereign over Satan. And Satan does seem to be in Paul’s mind when he asks, “What then shall we say to these things?” (v. 31a), because in expanding the question he immediately switches from “what” to “who” in a series of four interrogatives that follow:

“*Who* can be against us?” (v. 31)

“*Who* shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” (v. 33)

“*Who* is to condemn?” (v. 34)

“*Who* shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35)

Clearly, “the Accuser of the brothers” (cf. Rev. 12:10) is in view. Satan desires nothing less than to dismantle the assurance that the gospel provides. And what better way to begin than to suggest that God is *against* us? “Take a good look at what is happening to you,” Satan says. “How can you possibly believe that God loves you when these terrible

events occur?”

Preaching the sovereignty of God will re-introduce us to the God who is totally committed to the task of rescuing us from the consequences of our sin. The “God of Romans,” the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the God who predestines and calls and justifies is committed to glorify us.

As Lloyd-Jones reached the final (of three) sermons on the concluding verses of Romans 11, he pressed the point about God’s sovereignty and our submission to it:

So the test of our view of salvation and of our appreciation of it, is simply this: whenever you think of it does it bring you to this doxology? If it does not, I take leave to suggest to you that you know nothing about it. If you, my friend, look back to your “decision” or anything in yourself, you are unlike the Apostle Paul. If when you contemplate your condition as a Christian, as a saved person, you do not come to this doxology, I say, there is something radically wrong somewhere. Man makes no contribution at all. I feel like saying what the Apostle has said in the third chapter in verse 4: “Yea,” he says there, “let God be true, but every man


a liar.” And any man who puts forward any claim to anything in himself, whether knowledge or understanding or righteousness or morality or anything, is a liar. It is all entirely, utterly, absolutely of God.

So I put to you a final question. Having gone through this mighty revelation of doctrine, having followed the mighty demonstration of the great Apostle right away through to chapter 11 verse 32, having listened to the Apostle’s doxology where he ends by saying, “To whom be glory for ever and ever...” do you say “Amen” to this? What does this “Amen” mean? It means that you confess that you are nothing, that you confess that you are a “vile hell-deserving sinner,” that you acknowledge gladly that you are what you are solely by the grace of God; that you have ceased to defend yourself, you have ceased to try to excuse yourself, you have ceased to try to justify yourself in any way whatsoever. I go further; that you have ceased to try to pit your mind against God’s way. Are you still arguing against election? If you are you have not said your “Amen” to all this.

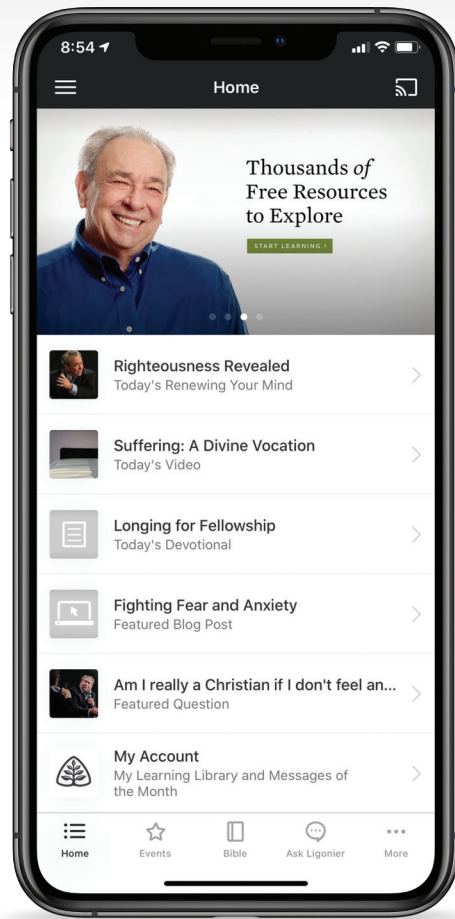
Do not forget the mighty demonstration of chapters 9–11. The purpose of God according to election! Are you still standing up and putting your mind and your opinion against it? If so you are not saying your “Amen” to this great doxology. The man who says his “Amen” is the man who says, I am nothing, He is all.

I know nothing, I can do nothing, I have nothing. I am simply a vile sinner, I owe all things to the grace and the glory and the mercy of God and I give it Him. I give it Him with my lips, I confess Him, I say I am nothing, I say it is all of Him—I do it by my life. I am ready to say what Paul says, not only here but again to the Corinthians: “Of him (of God) are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, him that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.” And I say “Amen” to it. What can we say? There is nothing to say except what the Apostle says: “To whom be glory forever”!

Preaching the sovereignty of God will bring you and your congregation to doxology. Preaching the sovereignty of God is a challenge that every preacher has to surmount and that every congregation desires to experience in their lifetime. The subject of the sovereignty of God is unequalled in its clarity regarding the nature of man, the nature of God, and the nature of the gospel. And all of that without even beginning to mine the depths of the practical chapters 12–16! Though you may feel unfit to the task, do your congregation, and your soul, a favor and put Romans on your list of books to preach. It will do you more good than you can ever imagine. ♦



**Preaching the
sovereignty of God
will bring you and
your congregation to
doxology.**



THOUSANDS OF FREE RESOURCES ARE JUST A CLICK AWAY

With the free Ligonier app, trustworthy teaching is always within reach. Whether you're at home or on the go, you'll have immediate access to thousands of discipleship resources, including daily devotionals, video teaching series, our biblical and theological chat service, and much more. It's like carrying a theological library with you at no cost, and every day, there's something new to study. Just search for "Ligonier" in your app store to get started.

DOWNLOAD THE FREE LIGONIER APP TODAY.



Ligonier.org/app



JUSTIFICATION AND SOVEREIGN GRACE

JOEL R. BEEKE

Justification by faith alone was Martin Luther’s great spiritual and theological breakthrough. It did not come easily. He had tried everything, from sleeping on hard floors and fasting to climbing a staircase in Rome while kneeling in prayer. Monasteries, disciplines, confessions, masses, absolutions, good works—all proved fruitless. Peace with God eluded him. The thought of the righteousness of God pursued him. He hated the very word “righteousness,” which he believed provided a divine mandate to condemn him.

Light finally dawned for Luther as he meditated on Romans 1:17, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, “The just shall live by faith”” (KJV). He saw for the first time that the righteousness Paul had here in mind was not a punitive justice which condemns sinners but a perfect righteousness which God freely grants to sinners on the basis of Christ’s merits, and which sinners receive by faith. Luther saw that the

doctrine of justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*per solam fidem*) because of Christ alone (*solus Christus*) was the heart of the gospel and became for him “an open door into paradise.... a gate to heaven.”

The phrase “justification by faith alone” was the key which unlocked the Bible for Luther. Each of these four words he came to understand in relation to the others by the light of Scripture and the Spirit. My task of expounding “by” may appear at first glance to be elementary, but around this deceptively simple preposition the heart of the Romanist-Protestant debate has raged. Let’s ask and answer several pertinent questions with regard to this critical preposition which will serve to highlight the relationship of faith to justification.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

First, where does the Bible teach justification by faith, and

what is actually entailed in the preposition “by”?

The Old Testament affirms that justification is “by faith.” Of Abraham’s faith Genesis 15:6 states, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” Roman Catholics have traditionally appealed to this verse to support their doctrine of justification by grace-empowered works, but not one word is mentioned here of work or merit. Rather, in Genesis 15:6, God grants righteousness to Abraham as a free gift.

Paul confirms in Romans 4 and Galatians 3:6-14 that the imputed (i.e., reckoned) righteousness of Genesis 15:6 is to be understood in terms of “by or through faith.” The Hebrew verb in Genesis 15:6 is also rendered “was counted” in Romans 4:3 (cf. Gal 3:6, which uses “accounted” in the text and “imputed” in the marginal notes). This verb most often indicates “what a person, considered by himself, is not, or does not have, but is reckoned, held or regarded to be, or to have.” It is clear, then, that when Abraham was justified by his faith, the righteousness which was reckoned or “charged to his account” was a righteousness not his own but that of another, namely, the righteousness of Christ (Gal 3:16).

But the objection may be raised: does not the preposition *eis* as used in Romans 4:5, 9, 22 (Abraham’s “faith is counted for righteousness...it was imputed to him for righteousness”) imply that the act of believing is imputed to the believer for righteousness? In these verses, the Greek preposition *eis* does not signify “in the stead of,” but always means “with a view to” or “in order to.” It could be translated “towards” or “unto.” Its meaning is clear from Romans 10:10, “with the heart man believeth unto [*eis*] righteousness”—i.e., faith moves toward and lays hold of Christ Himself. J. I. Packer summarizes well:

When Paul paraphrases this verse [Gen 15:6] as teaching that Abraham’s faith was reckoned for righteousness (Rom 4:5, 9, 22), all he intends us to understand is that faith—decisive, whole-hearted reliance on God’s gracious promise (vss. 18ff.)—was the occasion and means of righteousness being imputed to him. There is no suggestion here that faith is the ground of justification.

Expounding Romans 4, Theodore Beza comments:

Abraham was not justified, and made the father of the faithful, by any of his own works, either preceding or following his faith in Christ, as promised to him; but merely by faith in Christ, or the merit of Christ by faith imputed to him for righteousness. Therefore all his

children become his children and are justified, not by their works, either preceding or following their faith; but by faith alone in the same Christ.


A second major Old Testament text supporting justification by faith is Habakkuk 2:4: “the just shall live by his faith,” or as some scholars would read, “the just by faith shall live.” Paul makes clear that this verse, quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38, is ultimately fulfilled in the righteousness that comes by faith in the gospel of Christ, for which the law itself teaches us to look (Rom 3:21-22; 10:4). Paul’s explanation of Habakkuk has inspired not only Martin Luther but countless other believers to place their faith in a righteousness not their own, but that of Jesus Christ, who is called “the Lord our Righteousness” (Jer 23:6).

The New Testament is abundantly clear in asserting justification by faith: “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (Rom 3:20). “Thou standest by faith” (Rom 11:20). “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24).

But if Scripture clearly affirms the doctrine of justification by faith, what then is the precise relationship of faith to justification? The answer lies in what is entailed in the preposition “by.” “Few things are more necessary for a correct understanding of the New Testament,” wrote J. Gresham Machen, “than a precise acquaintance with the common prepositions.” The New Testament writers commonly employ three expressions: *piste*, *ek pisteos*, and *dia pisteos*. The Christian is justified “by faith” (*pistei* or *ek pisteos*) or “through faith” (*dia pisteos*). For example, *pistei* (the dative case of the noun *pistis*) is used in Romans 3:28: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” *Ek pisteos* is used in Romans 5: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” *Dia pisteos* is used in Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (emphasis added).

Each of these three usages has its own special emphasis or significance. The use of the simple dative (*pistei*) calls attention to the necessity and importance of faith. The use of the preposition *dia* (“through” or “by means of”) describes faith as the instrument of justification, i.e., the means by which the righteousness of Christ is received and appropriated by the sinner unto justification. The use of the preposition *ek* (“from,” “out of,” or “by”) describes faith as the occasion of justification, though never as the efficient or ultimate cause of justification.

It is critical to note that in none of these cases, nor



John Calvin compares faith to an empty vessel: “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our souls open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.”

anywhere else in Scripture, is faith (or any other grace) represented as constituting some ground of merit for justification. And this is all the more remarkable when one considers that *dia* with the accusative would mean “on the ground of” or “on account of.” Thus, *dia ten pistin* would convey the notion of “on the ground of or on account of faith,” thereby making faith the meritorious reason for the believer’s acceptance with God. Yet such is the precision of the Spirit’s oversight of the New Testament scriptures that nowhere does any writer ever slip into using this prepositional phrase. On every occasion, faith is presented as the means of justification. Justification by faith alone is never justification on account of faith (*propter fidem*), but always justification on account of Christ (*propter Christum*), i.e., on account of the blood-satisfaction of the Lamb of God being graciously imputed to and received by an undeserving sinner (Gal 3:6; James 2:23). Ultimately, the ground of justification is Christ and His righteousness alone.

In the Reformed tradition, various theological terms of expressions have been used to capture this biblical relationship of faith to justification. For example, the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561, Article 22) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647, Chapter 11.2) denominate faith as “only an instrument” and “the alone instrument of

justification.” Faith is not an agent (i.e., an efficient cause), but an instrument (i.e., a means) of justification. It is the believer’s sole means by which he receives justification. This means is not mechanical, as the word “instrument” unfortunately implies; rather, this means is itself the saving work of the Holy Spirit through the Word whereby a sinner is brought into a living, personal relationship with the triune God.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563, Question 61) states that there is “no other way” (*nicht anders*) than faith by which Christ’s righteousness becomes ours. God did not ordain faith to be the instrument of justification because of some peculiar virtue in faith, but because faith is self-emptying and has no merit in itself: “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace” (Rom 4:16).

John Calvin compares faith to an empty vessel: “We compare faith to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our souls open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.” The vessel cannot be compared in value to the treasure it contains (2 Cor 4:7).

The Puritan Thomas Goodwin uses strong and active language: “Faith is eyes, and hands, and feet, yea, and mouth, and stomach, and all.” And the nineteenth-century bishop J. C. Ryle writes: “Saving faith is the hand...the

eye...the mouth...and the foot of the world.” Yet faith lives by the Living Bread alone, not by the mouth that feeds on the bread (John 6:35-58). The sinner is justified by Christ’s sacrifice alone, not by his act of feasting upon or believing in that sacrifice by faith.

A CONDITION OF JUSTIFICATION

Second, is it accurate to call faith “a condition of justification,” as has frequently been done?


Given the meaning of “by faith” in the original Greek, it is more accurate to speak of faith as an instrument rather than a condition of justification and salvation, for a condition generally denotes a meritorious quality for the sake of which a benefit is conferred. We are justified not merely by faith, but by faith in Christ; not because of what faith is, but because of what faith lays hold of and receives. We are not saved for believing but by believing. In the application of justification, faith is not a builder but a beholder; it has nothing to give or achieve, but has all to receive. Faith is neither the ground nor substance of our justification, but the hand, the instrument, the vessel which receives the divine gift proffered to us in the gospel. “As little as a beggar, who puts forth his hand to receive a piece of bread, can say that he has earned the gift granted him,” Herman Kuiper wrote, “so little can believers claim that they have merited justification, just because they have embraced the righteousness of Christ, graciously offered them in the Gospel.”

The distinction between these two views is not merely semantic; it is fatal to regard faith as a prerequisite which a sinner can fulfill by an act of his own will in order to be saved. In such a case, man really becomes his own savior.

Worse yet, everything then depends on the purity and strength or perfection of the sinner’s faith. Rather, Scripture teaches that at stake is the very character of faith: Is faith a work of man or the gift of God? The question is answered decisively by the Apostle Paul: “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil 1:29; see also Eph 2:8; emphasis added). Justification is received in the form of faith since it pleases God to justify a sinner by giving him faith.

Though faith is the means through which God works salvation, faith is not and cannot be a human condition—that is, if “condition” implicates more than the necessary order or way of salvation. If faith were the conditional (i.e., meritorious) ground of justification, salvation by human merit would be introduced, dishonoring divine grace and subverting the gospel by reducing it to simply one more version of justification by works (Gal 4:21-5:12). Moreover, since we cannot be accepted by God with less than a perfect righteousness, our faith would have to be perfect. No one’s faith, however, is perfect. All our faith is impaired by sin.

Nothing in us, including our faith, could possibly succeed as a condition. Faith knows no human merit, and needs no human merit (Eph 2:8), for the very nature of faith is to rely wholly on the merit and righteousness of Christ as “more than sufficient to acquit us of our sin” (Belgic Confession, article 22). We are not justified by our ever-imperfect faith, but by the ever-perfect righteousness of Christ. All the conditions of salvation must be and have been fulfilled by Jesus through His obedience, both active and passive, in the state of His humiliation (Rom 5:19). There can be no conditions for salvation laid upon man, simply because salvation is



There can be no conditions for salvation laid upon man, simply because salvation is entirely of God and never dependent on anything of man.

entirely of God and never dependent on anything of man. “So then [salvation] is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy” (Rom 9:16). A. A. Hodge notes succinctly:

Justifying faith terminates on or in Christ, in His blood and sacrifice, and in the promises of God; in its very essence, therefore, it involves trust, and, denying its own justifying value, affirms the sole merit of that on which it trusts (Rom 3:15–26; 4:20, 22 Gal 3:26; Eph 1:12–13, 1 John 5:10).

Some Reformed divines, however, have called faith a “condition” in a non-meritorious sense. Robert Shaw comments wisely on this:

Some worthy divines have called faith a condition, who were far from being of the opinion that it is a condition properly so called, on the performance of which men should, according to the gracious covenant of God, have a right to justification as their reward. They merely intended, that without faith we cannot be justified—that faith must precede justification in the order of time or of nature. But as the term “condition” is very ambiguous, and calculated to mislead the ignorant, it should be avoided.

Robert Traill is even stronger: “Faith in Jesus Christ . . . in the office of justification is neither condition nor qualification . . . but in its very act a renouncing of all such pretenses.” The very act of faith by which we receive Christ is an act of utter renunciation of all our own works and righteousness as a condition or ground of salvation. As Horatius Bonar profoundly remarks: “Faith is not work, nor merit, nor effort; but the cessation from all these, and the acceptance in place of them of what another has done—done completely, and forever.” And John Girardeau notes, “Faith is emptiness filled with Christ’s fullness; impotency lying down upon Christ’s strength.”

But the objection may then be raised: if faith is essential, as it alone unites a sinner to Christ, but faith is not conditional in any meritorious sense, is it proper to regard faith as the “hand” that receives Christ? Isn’t the natural man being attributed some ability by this metaphor? since faith is always both God’s gift (Eph 2:8) and God’s work (“This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath seen” [John 6:29]), how can faith be designated as a “hand”?

The natural man indeed has no ability to reach out to accept the salvation of God in Christ. The natural man is

dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). He will never “accept Christ” of his own free will (Matt 23:37; John 5:40). Scripture teaches that a sinner does not first move toward God, but God first moves toward a sinner to unite him with Christ by faith, for a sinner would never of his own will or desire turn to Christ in faith (Rom 9:16). Even when tormented with the terrors of divine judgment, the natural man cannot be persuaded to flee to God by saving faith for salvation (Prov 1:24–27).

But in regeneration the Holy Spirit grants the gift of a living, empty hand that can turn nowhere else than to Jesus. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13; cf. Psalm 110:3).

Faith is not called a hand because it works or merits justification in any way, but because it receives, embraces, appropriates Christ upon divine imputation. Faith is not a creative hand, but a receptive hand. As Abraham Booth notes, “Hence, in justification we read of the precious faith in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1) and of ‘faith in His blood’ (Rom 3:25), and believers are described as ‘receiving the atonement’ and receiving ‘the gift of righteousness’” (Rom 5:11, 17).

Faith is passive in justification, but becomes active in accepting Christ when He is offered to the sinner. Indeed, when Christ is given, faith cannot refrain from being active, moving the believer to rejoice in the imputed righteousness of Christ with spiritual and profound joy. Nevertheless, this joy can boast no human merit, for it is not the hand in itself which produces joy and makes rich, but the gift received by the hand of faith, Jesus Christ.

The hand of faith graciously and unconditionally receives and rests upon Christ and His righteousness alone. Faith lives out of Christ, in whom all of our salvation is to be found (John 15:1–7). As B. B. Warfield appropriately summarizes:

It is from its object [Jesus Christ] that faith derives its value. . . . The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Savior on whom it rests. . . . It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ. . . . It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith.

FAITH’S APPROPRIATION OF CHRIST

Third, how is room made in the soul for faith’s appropriation of Christ? How does faith experientially appropriate Christ and His righteousness? What is the hallmark of

such appropriation?

The concept of receiving Christ by faith, hijacked in our day by Arminianism, needs to be recovered even for the Reformed pulpit. Many sincere Reformed Christians are afraid to speak of “receiving Christ” simply because of the false way modern evangelists describe such reception (i.e., as an act of the supposedly “free will” of the sinner to fulfill a condition for salvation). Believing that it somehow seems wrong and “Arminian” to receive Christ, their response to the gospel with liberty is inhibited.

To deny faith as the foundation of justification is not to minimize faith or the need for personally receiving Christ by faith. Though Scripture never ascribes merit to faith itself, it establishes unequivocally the necessity of faith (Heb 11:6). The sovereign grace of the imputed righteousness of Christ must be personally received by faith if a sinner is to be grafted or incorporated into Christ (John 3:36; Rom 5:11, 17). The Holy Spirit uses faith to work out sovereign grace. As G. C. Berkouwer states: “The way of salvation is the way of faith just because it is only in faith that the exclusiveness of divine grace is recognized and honored. . . . Faith is no competitor of *sola gratia* [by grace alone]; but sovereign grace is confirmed by faith. . . . *Sola gratia* and *sola fide* [by faith alone], thus, remain the be all and end all of the relation between faith and justification.”

Faith is a holy command, a personal necessity, a pressing urgency (2 Kings 17:14, 18, 21). There is only faith or damnation (Mark 16:16; John 3:18). Faith is indispensable. John Flavel wrote, “The soul is the life of the body; faith is the life of the soul; Christ is the life of faith.”

By the Spirit and Word of God, justifying faith is a saving grace which, first, convicts of sin and misery; second, assents to the gospel from the heart; third, receives and rests upon Christ and His righteousness for pardon and salvation; and fourth, lives out of Christ, who is the hallmark of appropriating faith (Heb 10:39; Rom 10:14, John 16:8-9; Rom 10:8-10; Acts 10:43; Phil 3:9; Gal 3:11; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 72-73). These marks of faith are experienced in the soul and urge closer examination if we are to ascertain the experiential dimensions of “by” in justification by faith alone.

A SOUL-EMPTYING GRACE

First then, faith is an experiential, convicting, soul-emptying grace. To lay hold of Christ, to treasure His righteousness, necessitates losing my own righteousness. Faith teaches utter humility, the total emptiness of all within the sinner when he is viewed outside of Christ. Faith means utter despair of everything except Christ. To that end, faith makes a sinner conscious of the desperate situation he is in

and the tragic judgment he deserves. Sin must become sin if grace is to become grace. Far from being a work of merit, faith is a realizing of my demerit, a negating of all hope of merit, a becoming aware of divine mercy. My filthy rags must be stripped away; the spiritual character of the law which demands perfect love to God and my neighbor must condemn me, if I am to come to appreciate the beauty of the Savior who, for the ungodly, perfectly obeyed the law in His active obedience and bore the penalty of sin in His passive obedience (Rom 5:6-10). My unrighteousness must be uncovered if Christ’s righteousness is to be discovered (Ps 71:16).

THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Second, faith wholeheartedly “assents to the truth of the gospel” (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 73). Faith is no mere intellectual assent. Faith believes from the heart that which the Scriptures teach about self, the holiness of God, and the saviorhood of Christ. Thrust before God’s holiness, faith repudiates self-righteousness and is brought to need Christ experientially as revealed in the Scriptures and given by the Spirit. Faith abandons all self-merit while being increasingly allured to Christ and His merits (Rom 7:24-25). Faith surrenders to the evangel and falls into the outstretched arms of God. “The act of faith is as much being held by God as holding Him; the power of faith is exercised as much in capitulation as in conquering—the faith that overcomes the world is capitulation to Christ’s great victory.” Faith looks away from self and itself to Christ, living and moving entirely from and in grace. Faith flees with all the soul’s poverty to Christ’s riches, with all the soul’s guilt to Christ as reconciler, with all the soul’s bondage to Christ as liberator. Faith confesses with Augustus Toplady:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

LAYING HOLD OF CHRIST

Third, justifying faith is especially that act of the soul by which a sinner lays hold of Christ and His righteousness and experiences pardon and peace that passes understanding (Phil 4:7). Faith is nothing less than the means which unites a sinner with his Savior. “Faith justifies in no other way,” wrote Calvin, “than as it introduces us into a participation of the righteousness of Christ.” It apprehends (*fides apprehensiva*), “closes” with, and “grasps” Christ in warm,



believing embrace, surrendering all of self, clinging to His Word, relying on His promises.

Christ is not only the object of faith, but is Himself present in faith. Faith reposes in the person of Christ—hearing, seeing, trusting, taking, embracing, knowing, rejoicing loving, triumphing. It leaves its case in the hands of Christ as great Physician, while taking His prescriptions, following His directions, trusting simply and supremely in His finished work and ongoing intercessions. Faith, Luther writes, “clasps Christ as a ring clasps its jewel”; faith wraps the soul in Christ’s righteousness. It appropriates with a believing heart the perfect righteousness, satisfaction and holiness of Christ. It tastes the efficacy of Christ’s blood-righteousness as the righteousness of God Himself (Rom 3:21–25; 5:9; 6:7; 2 Cor 5:18–21). It wedds the soul to Christ, experiences divine pardon and acceptance in the Beloved, and makes the soul partaker of every covenant mercy. Faith and Christ become inseparable in justification, as Daniel Cawdray illustrates:

As the act of healing through the eyes of the Israelites and the brazen serpent went together; so, in the act of justifying, these two, faith and Christ, have a mutual relation, and must always concur—faith as the action which apprehendeth, Christ as the object which is apprehended; so that neither the passion of Christ saveth without faith, nor doth faith help unless it be in Christ, its object.

William Gurnall put it this way: “With one hand faith pulls off its own righteousness and throws it away; with the other it puts on Christ’s.” The Heidelberg Catechism explains personal appropriation of Christ’s righteousness best:

Question 60: How art thou righteous before God?

Answer: Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:22ff; Gal 2:16); so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them (Rom 3:9ff.), and am still inclined to all evil (Rom 7:23); notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine (Rom 3:24), but only of mere grace (Tit 3:5; Eph 2:8–9), grants (Rom 4:4–5; 2 Cor 5:19) and imputes to me (1 John 2:1) the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ (Rom 3:24–25); even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me (2 Cor 5:21, inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart (Rom 3:28; John 3:18).

Question 61: Why sayest thou that thou are righteous by faith only?

Answer: Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith (Ps 16:2; Eph 2:8–9), but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God (1 Cor

Being united to Christ by faith, the believer is objectively possessed of all Christ's benefits and subjectively experiences these benefits as abundantly as the Spirit applies them and as he is capable of receiving them through apprehending Christ.

1:30; 2:2); and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only (1 John 5:10).

FAITH LIVES OUT CHRIST

Fourth, faith lives out of Christ. Being united to Christ by faith, the believer is objectively possessed of all Christ's benefits and subjectively experiences these benefits as abundantly as the Spirit applies them and as he is capable of receiving them through apprehending Christ. Since grace and faith are given in Christ, the essential righteousness of the believer will remain extrinsic to him, even as Christ is really present within him, effecting daily conversion. "Christ without" is the ground of justification; "Christ within" the fruit of justification, and an evidence of vital union of the believer to Christ. For faith, Christ—both in glory as ascended Lord and in the believer's soul—is the chief among ten thousand, white and ruddy, altogether lovely (Song 5:10, 16). With the Queen of Sheba, faith can say of the greater Solomon when gazing and feasting upon His blessed person and benefits, "Behold, the one half of

the greatness of thy wisdom was not told me: for thou exceedest the fame that I heard" (2 Chron 9:6). Faith exclaims, "Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3:11)!

This Christ-centeredness is the hallmark of faith. Faith's distinguishing mark is the real and redeeming presence of Christ. It is the very nature and fountain of faith to rest entirely upon Christ. Faith does not look at itself. Many today are too preoccupied with looking at their faith rather than faith's object. The Reformers spoke and wrote much about faith, but their concern was object-centered rather than subject-centered, Christo-centric rather than anthropocentric, theological rather than psychological. It is not faith in our faith, nor faith in the faith, nor faith in our justification, that is salvific, but faith in Christ.

The Puritans caught this well. As George Swinnock indicted, "First, Faith must look out for Christ; secondly, Faith must look up to Christ for grace; thirdly, Faith must take Christ down, or receive Him and grace." "Faith has two hands," Thomas Manton wrote, "with one it stretches out for Christ; with the other, it pushes away all that comes between Christ and the soul." Faith not only ventures to

Christ with the demanding law at its heels and upon Christ with all the soul's guilt, but it also ventures for Christ despite all difficulties and discouragements.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6). God is pleased with faith because faith is pleased with Christ. Christ honors faith the most of all graces because faith honors Christ the most. Faith continually takes refuge, as the Belgic Confession states, "in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Article 29).

Christ is faith's only object and only expectation. He is the heartbeat and life of faith. Faith enables the soul to enjoy the whole salvation of Christ; by faith Christ becomes the soul's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). Faith commits the total person to the total person of Christ. This Christ-centeredness, more than anything else, makes faith inseparable from justification and superior to all other graces in justification.

Small wonder, then, that faith has been called the captain of all spiritual graces. Thomas Watson wrote, "Love is the crowning grace in heaven, but faith is the conquering grace upon earth.... Faith is the master-wheel; it sets all the other graces running. . . . Other graces make us like Christ, faith makes us members of Christ." "Call forth first that commander-in-chief," George Swinnock adds, "and then the private soldiers, the other graces, will all follow."

THE INSTRUMENTAL CAUSE OF JUSTIFICATION

Faith is the instrumental cause of justification, while the alien righteousness of Christ, external to the believer and imputed to him, is the formal cause, i.e., the ground upon which God can justly justify sinners. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21; cf. Romans 3:26). It is critical to maintain that this formal cause of justification resides in Christ's righteousness alone, for all the Scriptures dealing with the fundamentally depraved nature of man make clear that there is no righteousness inherent in the natural man upon which a divine verdict of justification could be based. "They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Ps 14:3).

For the Reformers, faith was the conscious, personal, immediate reliance of a sinner on Christ alone. Such faith brings the sinner into Christ's church and makes him a member of Christ's body even if he had never heard of the visible church. Sacraments are not essential for salvation but for the consummation of discipleship. The sacraments are signs and seals of the grace that is received by faith; they are no part of justifying faith.

If the church is the dispenser of the sacraments, and the sacraments are necessary for salvation, the church becomes the dispenser of salvation. And so we have arrived at Roman Catholicism's ultimate error—the church replacing Christ—as one of many unavoidable consequences of her defective views of justification. Notwithstanding Vatican II, Rome has yet to repudiate any of the Council of Trent's serious errors on the doctrine of justification by faith. Until such takes place, as Martin Smyth concludes, there can be "no honest compromise between the Roman and Reformed doctrine of justification." Cooperation can only be based on evasion rather than on explanation, as has been witnessed yet again in the March 29, 1994, document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," signed by forty evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics.

ARMINIANISM AND ANTINOMIANISM

Finally, how are the historic doctrinal errors of Arminianism and Antinomianism, so prevalent in the modern church, exposed by a biblical presentation of justification by faith alone?

Arminianism errs in making part of justification's foundation to rest upon faith. By advocating conditional predestination and conditional faith unto justification (i.e., that God elects and saves those who believe), Arminian theology is a cruel hoax. John Owen ridicules the Arminian condition of salvation—i.e., faith—as an impossibility: it is "as if a man should promise a blind man a thousand pounds upon condition that he will see." Consequently, Owen styles the Arminian Christ "but a half-mediator," because He procures the end of salvation but not the means to it. Charles Spurgeon is more graphic. He compares Arminianism and Calvinism to two bridges over a river. The Arminian bridge is wide and easy but does not bring its traveler safely to the opposite shore. It stops short in sight of the shore of eternal communion with God, because something is left for the depraved will of the natural man to accomplish—i.e., to exercise faith in Christ by his own strength. The Calvinian bridge is narrow but spans the entire river, for Christ Jesus is the alpha and omega of salvation and justification.

In sum, Arminianism *looks* promising but cannot live up to its promises, because it depends upon depraved humanity to act; it deceives myriads of souls who think they accept Christ by a simple act of their own will but do not bow under Christ's lordship. They imagine they possess saving faith while their lives evidence that they remain spiritually dead. Calvinism *is* promising, however, for it places the entire weight of justification and salvation upon the

sufficiency of Christ and the operation of His Spirit, who bestows and sustains saving faith.

CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS

In the final analysis, if we base our justification on our faith, our works, or anything else of our own, the very foundations of justification must crumble. Inevitably the agonizing, perplexing, and hopeless questions of having “enough” would surface: Is my faith strong enough? Are the fruits of grace in my life fruitful enough? Are my experiences deep enough, clear enough, persistent enough? Every detected inadequacy in my faith is going to shake the very foundations of my spiritual life. My best believing is always defective. I am always too ungodly even in my faith. Apart from Christ, the best of my best is “as filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

Too many Christians live in constant despondency because they cannot distinguish between the rock on which they stand and the faith by which they stand upon the rock. Faith is not our rock; Christ is our rock. We do not get faith by having faith in our faith or by looking to faith, but by looking to Christ. Looking to Christ is faith.

Nor is it perfect faith, great faith, fruitful faith, strong faith that justifies. If we start qualifying our faith, we destroy the gospel. Our faith may be weak, immature, timid, even indiscernible at times, but if it is real faith, it is justifying faith (Matt 6:30). Our degree of faith effects sanctification and assurance, but not justification. Faith’s value in justification does not lie in any degree in itself but in its uniting us to Christ and His glorious achievement. As George Downname illustrates: “A small and weak hand, if it be able to reach up the meat to the mouth, as well performs its duty for the nourishment of the body as one of greater strength, because it is not the strength of the hand but the goodness of the meat which nourishes the body.”

Far too often we are prone to look to the quality of our faith, the quality of our conviction of sin, the quality of our evangelical repentance, the quality of our love for the brethren for confirmation of our justification, forgetting that it is Christ alone who saves by gracious faith alone. As Horatius Bonar states: “It is not the strength of faith, but the perfection of the sacrifice, that saves; and no feebleness of faith, no dimness of eye, no trembling of hand, can change the efficacy of our burnt-offering.”

Christ is the solid rock who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8):

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

On Christ the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.

We must also firmly reject Antinomian or hyper-Calvinistic tendencies which adhere to a justification from eternity that negates the need for actual justification in time by becoming personal partakers of Christ by faith. For example, Abraham Kuyper went beyond the Synod of Dort in describing justification by faith as merely “becoming conscious” of the fact that we were already justified by God from eternity and in the resurrection of Christ. William Gadsby, J. C. Philpot, and most of the Strict Baptists speak similarly by affirming that the believer is justified in time only with respect to his own conscience by the Spirit’s witness. This erroneous view was already exhibited in Puritan times among those with Antinomian tendencies, as Thomas Goodwin’s apt response to it reveals: “It is vain to say I am justified only in respect to the court of mine own conscience. The faith that Paul and the other apostles were justified by was their believing on Christ that they might be justified (Gal 2:15, 16), and not a believing they were justified already.”

The view that an actual justification by faith in time does not exist for the believer faces three additional obstacles: First, it is contrary to Romans 4:6–8, which clearly affirms the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in time. Second, time itself would then be a mere parenthesis, for God’s people would not be viewed prior to regeneration as being “children of wrath, even as others” (Eph 2:3). If justification by faith does not transfer a sinner from the state of wrath to that of grace, and is merely a recognition of justification from eternity, all historical relevance of justification by faith alone is swept away. Third, if justification by faith is not a personal and historical necessity, the fruits of justification in deadness to sin and aliveness to Christ would likewise be a matter of indifference. One could then ask in all seriousness, “Shall we not sin, that grace may abound?” (Rom 6:2). This Paul strenuously opposes in Romans 6.

We have shown that the absence of works is impossible for a true Christian. That faith which justifies is a working faith. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:21)—yes, “dead,” not just sick or dying. Saving faith does not exist where it is not accompanied by good works. A fruitless Christian is a misnomer. Where Christ saves, He will also exercise His lordship. Contrary to the primary tenet of Antinomianism—that the believer may disregard the law altogether (anti = against; nomos = law) since he is freed from its demands as a means of salvation—Christ sends the saved believer, who was condemned by the law prior to being justified by faith, back to the law to live out of gratitude

under His lordship in obedience to His Word. Luther said that the law was like a stick: “God first used it to beat me, but later I used it to walk with.”

As today’s Christians confront various forms of Roman Catholicism, Antinomianism, Arminianism, and Modernism, the doctrine of justification by faith alone too often no longer receives its biblical and rightful place. Unfortunately, as Alister McGrath has noted,

The present century has witnessed a growing tendency to relate the doctrine of justification to the question of the meaning of human existence, rather than the more restricted sphere of man’s justification *coram Deo* [before God]. It is this trend which underlies the existentialist reinterpretation of the doctrine.


But when exceptions exist and justification by faith alone is presented in all the freeness of the evangel, are not some bound to say, “This is dangerous teaching”? Of course they will, and in one sense they are right. Rightly understood and rightly preached, the doctrine of justification by faith alone exposes the natural enmity of carnal man to the exclusivity and freeness of the gospel. Therefore, this doctrine is distorted and wrested to the destruction of souls, both by “can-do” activist Arminianism on one hand and “won’t-do” passivistic Antinomianism on the other. Faith is overemphasized when viewed as a condition of salvation (Arminianism), but underemphasized when denied as a necessary fruit of salvation (Antinomianism). We are not transferred from the status of death to life by faith as a joint effort with works (Romanists), nor by faith as an act of grace in us (Arminians), nor by faith as it receives

the Spirit’s witness (Antinomians), nor by faith as it relates to the meaning of human existence (modern existentialists), but only by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness received by faith.

THE GLORIOUS GOSPEL

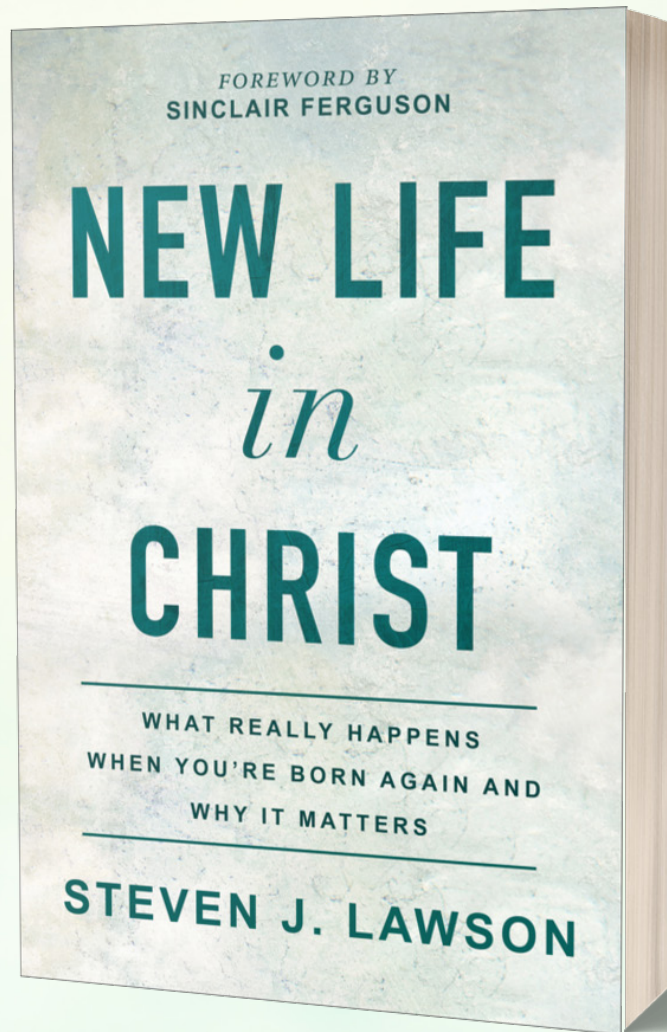
The precious and momentous doctrine of justification by faith alone, when biblically preached and rightly balanced, is not a denominational or sectarian peculiarity. It is not a mere species of Christianity. It is the heart of the evangel, the kernel of the glorious gospel of the blessed triune God, and the key to the kingdom of heaven. “Justification by faith,” John Murray writes, “is the jubilee trumpet of the gospel because it proclaims the gospel to the poor and destitute, whose only door of hope is to roll themselves in total helplessness upon the grace and power and righteousness of the Redeemer of the lost.”

In our decadent and desperate day there is a crying need to reestablish and defend, with prayer and hope, in the power of the Spirit, the scriptural proclamation of this doctrine. The relevance and urgency of this doctrine relate to the identity of the church, the essence of Christian theology, and the proclamation of the gospel, as well as to the scriptural-experiential foundations of the Christian faith for every one of us. Not only is justification by faith still, in Luther’s words, “the article by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*), but by this doctrine each of us shall personally stand or fall before God. Justification by faith alone must be confessed and experienced by you and me; it is a matter of eternal life or eternal death. ⚡



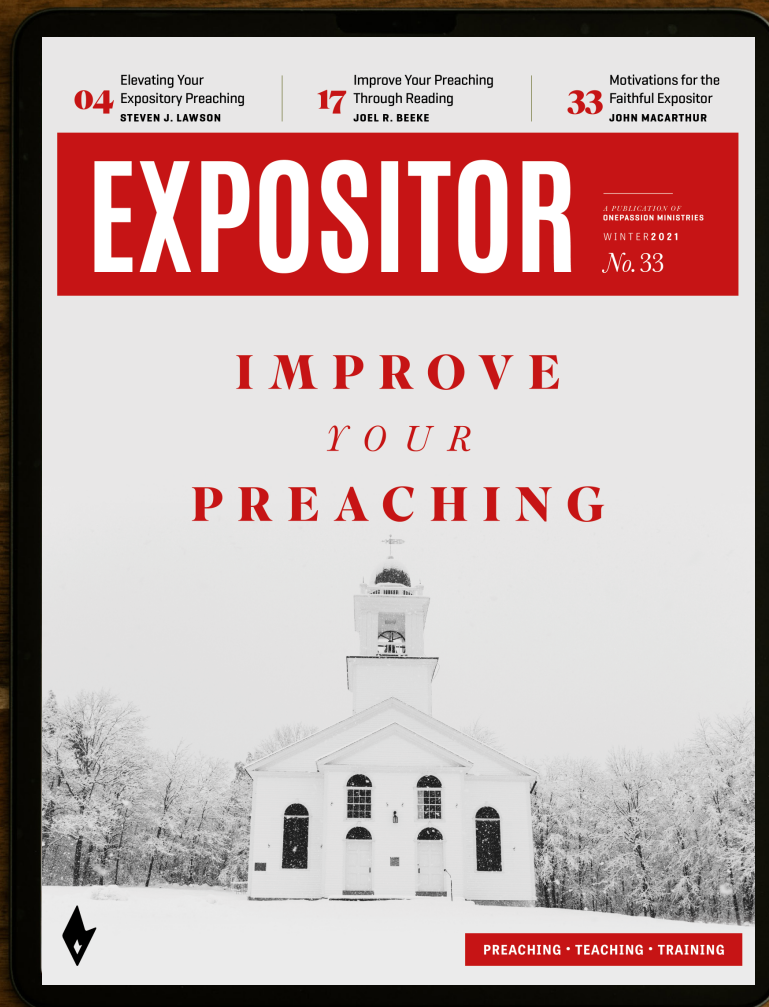
**We do not get faith by having
faith in our faith or by looking
to faith, but by looking to Christ.
Looking to Christ is faith.**

WHAT REALLY HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE BORN AGAIN?



“Steve Lawson is a force of nature. His preaching and writing have touched tens of thousands of lives. Saturated with Scripture, contoured by sound biblical doctrine, and passionately written, this book is a gem. It will change the lives of those who read it.”

DEREK W. H. THOMAS, senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; chancellor's professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; teaching fellow, Ligonier Ministries



EXPOSITOR

DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION

Expositor magazine is devoted to calling those who stand in pulpits to the high standard of biblical preaching. Every new subscriber joins with us in calling forth and training a new generation of biblical expositors. Subscribe to the **DIGITAL ISSUE** of *Expositor* and you will receive every issue sent to your mobile device.

[ONEPASSION.ORG/SUBSCRIBE](https://onepassion.org/subscribe)



STEADFAST HOPE

with STEVEN J. LAWSON

ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

LIVESTREAM

MONDAY, WEDNESDAY, & FRIDAY | 8:00 A.M. CST

[ONEPASSION.ORG/STEADFAST-HOPE](https://onepassion.org/steadfast-hope)