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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM

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Editor

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I. INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Postmoderns embrace doubt. They aren't sure God exists. Hence they aren't sure the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus is the Savior, that there is life after death, that they have everlasting life, etc.

Evangelical Postmoderns put a high premium on *experience*. Indeed, it is not surprising that many Evangelical Postmoderns are Charismatic in their worship and practice.

This emphasis on experience invades the way in which they evangelize and in their understanding of assurance.

Before we tackle the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism, let's first review what Postmodernism and Evangelical Postmodernism are.

II. POSTMODERNISM IS DOUBT

The modern era, the one before the Postmodern era, was an age of reason and rationalism and experimentation.

Generally the modern era is held to have started with the Industrial Revolution (or the Enlightenment) and to have ended around 1945 with the end of WW2.

A person with a modern mindset believes that there are lots of absolute truths today.

The modern would say that 2 plus 2 equals 4, the earth is not flat, the boiling point of water at standard pressure is 100 degrees Celsius, that George Bush is President of the United States, etc.

Postmoderns do not think that way. Nothing is certain except that nothing is certain.

Nihilism, the idea that life makes no sense and that there is no real meaning in life, is the philosophy of Postmoderns.

III. EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM IS EXPERIENTIAL, WITH ALL OUR DOUBTS SUPERSIZED

Evangelicals with a modern mindset still believe that God exists, that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, that the Bible is without error, that there is life after death, that there is heaven and hell, etc.

Evangelicals with a *Postmodern* mindset are not sure if God exists. They aren't sure if Jesus rose bodily from the dead. They believe the Bible is a human book with errors in it. They are not sure if there is life after death.

In his book, *The Next Reformation*, Dr. Carl Raschke urges Evangelicals to embrace Postmodernism. Indeed, that is essentially the subtitle of his book: *Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*.¹

Raschke has the academic credentials for his quest, having a Ph.D. from Harvard in the Philosophy of Religion. He is chair of the department of religious studies at the University of Denver.

Raschke says, "Postmodernity is all our doubts supersized."²

Evangelical Postmodernism places a high premium on skepticism and doubt. Evangelical Postmoderns view those who are sure of things as being arrogant and out of touch with reality.

They really are opposed to the idea that we can be sure of something simply because the Bible says it is true. Indeed, according to Evangelical Postmoderns faith and doubt *always coexist*. The Evangelical Postmodern is not sure of anything.

Thus Evangelical Postmoderns often speak of their *convictions*, by which they mean things which they affirm as true, though they realize they may not be true. Whenever they speak of what they *believe*, they do not mean things they are sure of. They instead mean things which they have convictions about, even though they doubt that these convictions are true.

If this sounds confusing to you, then you have the heart of Evangelical Postmodernism. It is all our doubts supersized.

¹Dr. Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

² *Ibid.*, 174.

IV. CHRISTIAN CONVERSION IS AN EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER, NOT BELIEVING IN JESUS FOR EVERLASTING LIFE

As you might imagine, such a view has a dramatic impact on evangelism. An Evangelical Postmodern does not focus on certain truths that must be believed. He does not focus on the guarantee of life that can never be lost to all who simply believe in Jesus.

Raschke cites the late Christian songwriter and singer Rich Mullins as a paradigm of what a Postmodern Christian should be like. In the course of his discussion of Mullins, Raschke indicates what a person must do to become—with the emphasis on an *ongoing process of becoming*—a Christian:

Mullins in the most radical way challenged both Christian literalism and legalism. He constantly stressed what the philosopher Kierkegaard had described as the task of “becoming” a Christian, as opposed to “being” a Christian. Becoming a Christian requires intense faith and spiritual discipline. It has little to do with intellectual conviction and even less with outward evidence of moral purity and perfection. Becoming a Christian, as Kierkegaard explained with irony, is not climbing a ladder of spiritual, let alone material, “success.” It all comes down to submitting oneself constantly to God through confession of our failures and presumptions and in taking what Kierkegaard himself referred to as the “leap of faith,” a leap into the fearful and unknown.³

A paragraph later Raschke continues:

Mullins testified that he was a Christian because he had “encountered God” in the many people who had “manifested (in many ‘unreasonable’ ways) His presence.” He [Mullins] added: “I am a Christian, not because someone explained the nuts and bolts of Christianity to me, but because there were people who were willing to be nuts and bolts. Through their obedience to the truth and not necessarily through their explanation of it, they held it together so that I could experience it and be compelled to obey.”⁴

³ Ibid., 162-63.

⁴ Ibid., 163.

In a Postmodern context one *becomes a Christian* over time by encountering God through others who are themselves becoming Christians.

The issue is not doctrine to be believed. Indeed, one must make a leap of faith into the fearful and unknown. While it supposedly has little to do with intellectual conviction *and even less with outward evidence of moral purity and perfection*, yet the way one becomes a Christian is *experiencing the truth and being compelled to obey it*.

V. THE GOSPEL IS NOT OTHER-WORLDFLY OR ETERNAL: IT'S ABOUT PEACE OF MIND NOW

The ramifications of Postmodernism for Evangelism are truly frightening. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not proclaimed by Evangelical Postmoderns. It is considered "literalism and legalism."

Of course, since Postmoderns supersize their doubts and consider certitude to be a terrible thing, there is no possibility of believing statements like, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47) or "He who lives and believes in Me shall never die [spiritually]" (John 11:26). The best one could say is, "That's a nice story."

Many people who claim to be Evangelical Postmoderns identify themselves as charismatics or as part of the third wave. Raschke says, "Charismatic Christianity is...thoroughly Postmodern. It has what Max Weber called 'charismatic' as contrasted with 'rational' leadership."⁵ In his book on *The Next Reformation*, Raschke tells of the evening when, "I had been, as charismatics say, 'slain in the Spirit.'"⁶ He then noted, "Rosemarie helped me up. 'You are blessed, Brother Carl,' she said. We hugged each other. Most charismatics hug each other during services. I stood up straight. I was reborn."⁷

What does he mean when he says, "I was reborn"? Is he referring to the time when he was literally born again? Is that when he entered the family of God? No. He is borrowing Evangelical language to describe an experience he thinks he had.

The message he had heard that Sunday evening concerned "the fact that the mind of the flesh must be 'broken' to be restored by the Spirit"⁸.

⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁷ Ibid., 201-02.

⁸ Ibid., 201.

Raschke tells us nothing about Jesus or of the promise of everlasting life to those who believe in Him. Rather, he tells of an experience he had when he surrendered himself: "I was already shattered to the core."⁹

VI. "SALVATION" FOR THE EVANGELICAL POSTMODERN IS A NEW AND TRANSFORMED LIFE HERE AND NOW

A. SALVATION ISN'T ABOUT ETERNAL BENEFITS SINCE MANY EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNS ARE NEAR UNIVERSALISTS

Another important aspect of the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism is what they believe a person gets. What is salvation?

Conservative Evangelicals think of "salvation" as gaining eternal life or being saved from hell. That is not necessarily what the Evangelical Postmodern thinks.

For one thing, some, if not many, Evangelical Postmoderns are either universalists or what some have called *near-universalists*. They believe, if we can use that term since they really aren't sure of anything, that few, if any, will spend eternity in hell. All, or nearly all, will be in the kingdom of God, whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, agnostic, or atheist.

In a 1995 article entitled, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," Roger Olson says:

Closely connected to this nature-grace dialectic is the postconservative hope of near-universal salvation. Many postconservatives abandon exclusivism and opt for a new inclusivist view of salvation, believing it is possible for many who never hear the gospel message to be saved. Two theologians who have pioneered in this move are John Sanders and Clark Pinnock. Both imply that all cultures involve enough grace to lead people to a saving relationship with God if they seek it earnestly.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roger Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *The Christian Century*, 3 May 1995, 408-83.

B. SALVATION IS PRIMARILY (OR EXCLUSIVELY) ABOUT PRESENT BLESSINGS

For at least some Evangelical Postmoderns “salvation” is a here-and-now deliverance from our fears, guilt, and hang ups. It is a sense of spiritual well being in the present life. It is not related to life after death.

It is probably safe to say that for most Evangelical Postmoderns the gospel is the good news that those who humble themselves before God will have a mighty experience that gives them inner peace. That peace can be maintained by regularly continuing to humble oneself before God.

Evangelical Postmoderns are very concerned about ecology. So in one sense individual “salvation” has as its aim the purification and cleansing of the entire earth. What Evangelical Postmoderns want is peace on earth through massive numbers of people encountering God.

Will McRaney at pastors.com has an article entitled, “*Sharing Christ with Postmoderns*.”¹¹ He gives a list of Postmodern evangelistic methods and one of them is “More earthly benefits—less eternal benefits.”

In the case of many Evangelical Postmoderns, some, if not many, are *solely* concerned with earthly, here-and-now benefits. There is little or no concern about eternal benefits because that is not a concern for many in Evangelical Postmodernity.

Pastor and author Kary Oberbrunner wrote an article entitled, “*Unpacking Postmodernism: Is a Postmodern Ministry Really What You Are After?*” In a chart comparing modernism and Postmodernism one of his points of comparison is “view of salvation.” Oberbrunner says the modernist views salvation as something which occurs at “a point in time,” where the Postmodernist views salvation as “a way of life.”¹²

In the concluding paragraph of an article called “*The Postmodern Gospel*,” written in January of 2006, Dr. James P. Danaher, who is the head of the Department of Philosophy at Nyack College, a Christian school sponsored by the Christian and Missionary Alliance Denomination, writes as follows:

The good news of the Postmodern Gospel is that, with the end of modernity, we now have an ever greater opportunity to or-

¹¹ Will McRaney, *Sharing Christ with Postmoderns* (2005); available from <http://www.pastors.com/en-us/sermons.htm>; Internet; accessed October 12, 2005

¹² Kary Oberbrunner, *Unpacking Postmodernism: Is a Postmodern Ministry Really What You Are After?* (2007); available from <http://www.purplenews.com/files/postmodernism.pdf>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

der our lives, not based upon understanding of some universal and objective truth, but rather upon an intimate understanding of a truth that is personal and subjective—indeed a truth that is a person (John 14:6).¹³

Note that there is no mention here at all of any benefits of the Post-modern gospel beyond the grave. What Danaher talks about is “an ever greater opportunity to order our lives.”

Note too that Danaher denies any universal or objective truth. If our truth is not universal, this implies there is another truth out there that allows other religions to find a way to order their lives around a different person, maybe Mohammed or Buddha.

At Nyack.edu there is an interview with Dr. Danaher that includes a section entitled, “*My conversion to life in Christ.*” Here is what Danaher says:

I had an experience with the Lord when I was eighteen, but it was an experience and not a conversion into a radically new and different life. Twelve years later, I had another God experience but again without the kind of surrender that marks the beginning of a transformed life. God was faithful still and, two year later, with a third experience, there was a surrender and the beginning of a transformation that has continued for the past twenty-five years.¹⁴

Note what is *missing* here: no reference to faith in Christ, no reference to eternal life or justification, and no reference to anything related to eternity.

Note what is *present* here: a repeated emphasis on “experiences with God,” repeated discussion of “a transformed life,” “a radically new and different life” is the aim, and surrender is the condition of this new life.

¹³ Dr. James P. Danaher, *The Postmodern Gospel* (2006); available from <http://www.globalmissiology.org/english/index.html>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

¹⁴ Dr. James P. Danaher, *My Conversion to Life in Christ* (2006); available from <http://www.nyack.edu/?include=FacultyInterview.php&id=35>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

VII. BOTH FAITH AND THE OBJECT OF FAITH ARE NON-ESSENTIALS IN EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM

One way to summarize the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism is to recognize that it isn't about faith or the object of one's faith.

For the past few years there has been a lot of debate in Free Grace circles over precisely what the content of saving faith is. That debate is not occurring in Evangelical Postmodern circles. None of the following would be considered essential beliefs in the Evangelical Postmodern view of the gospel:

Everlasting life.

Justification by faith alone.

Life after death.

The Trinity.

Inerrancy.

Creation.

Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Substitutionary atonement.

The virgin birth.

I'm not suggesting that all of those things are essential truths that must be believed. As those of you who know me know, I believe that *some* of those things are truths we must believe to be born again, though all of them must be true in order for us to be born. My view is that we must believe what John 6:47 says, that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting, irrevocable, life.

My point is that Evangelical Postmoderns do not have *any sine qua nons*. There is *nothing* that must be believed in order to be born again.

The issue for Evangelical Postmoderns is not some essential doctrine. There is no essential doctrine for them. The issue for them is a personal encounter with God which is gained by personal surrender to God.

If you don't realize this, you will find yourself misunderstanding what an Evangelical Postmodern is saying.

When an Evangelical Postmodern speaks of his *conversion*, he isn't saying anything about what he believes or even about his eternal destiny. He is talking about *an encounter he had with God that has given him peace of mind*.

When an Evangelical Postmodern speaks of when he became a Christian, you may wrongly interpret that to mean that he is referring to when he came to faith in Christ for eternal life.

If an Evangelical Postmodern were to speak of his *salvation*, you would most likely be wrong to think that he was talking about his secure eternal destiny, or even his *insecure* eternal destiny. He would most likely be talking about the peace of mind he has experienced as a result of his encounter with God.

I recommend you evangelize Evangelical Postmoderns. Don't assume they are merely confused believers. Ask them if they are sure that they will spend eternity in Jesus' kingdom. When they indicate that they aren't sure of that (or anything at all), show them that this is what Jesus promises to all who simply believe in Him.

When you evangelize an Evangelical Postmodern, you are essentially challenging their entire way of looking at the gospel, and indeed, of reality in general. You are calling for a radical paradigm shift.

VIII. EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM HAS MADE SOME INROADS INTO THE GRACE MOVEMENT

While very few in the Free Grace movement actually would call themselves Evangelical Postmoderns, some of the thinking of that movement has been embraced by some in the Free Grace movement.

A. MY EXPERIENCE TELLS ME WHAT THE GOSPEL IS

I've heard the following statement many times from many Free Grace people: "I know you need to believe A, B, and C (and you don't need to believe D, E, and F) to be born again *because of my own experience*."

Free Grace people often point to their *experience* as the reason why they know what the saving message is. Yet our experience proves nothing. Our experience can be wrong.

We determine what the saving message is not by our experience, but by what God has told us in His Word, especially what He told us in the only evangelistic book in Scripture, John's Gospel.

Over the past few years there has been controversy in Free Grace circles over whether in order to be born again a person must believe that Jesus guarantees the believer *everlasting life*, irrevocable life, secure salvation.

I have noted with amazement that the arguments against everlasting life as a necessary truth for the new birth are *often experiential, not biblical*. Someone may argue along the following lines:

I know you don't need to believe in the irrevocability of everlasting life to be born again because I was born again before I believed that the life I had was irrevocable.

Or, someone might say:

I know you don't need to believe in eternal security to be born again because my cousin was a wonderful Christian and he died without ever having believed in eternal security.

The fact of the matter, however, is that one's experience may be wrong. The Bible is true. So if a person isn't born again until he believes that what he gets from Jesus is an irrevocable eternal destiny, then I should change my testimony to reflect the truth. I don't change the truth to conform to my testimony.

How do you know your cousin never believed that? And how do you know that your cousin was a wonderful Christian? A person may be a wonderful religious person who is not yet born again. Or they may be a terrible person who is born again. We know someone is born again by what they believe, not by what they do. Of all people, we in the Free Grace movement should not be basing how we know someone is saved on their works.

B. ALL BELIEFS ARE MIXED WITH DOUBTS

I've spoken with Free Grace people who say that belief and doubt can and do co-exist. Some have gone so far as to tell me that nothing we believe is something we are sure of, that everything we believe is something we also doubt.

Free Grace people who hold this are basing this belief not on Scripture, but on experience.

The Scriptures are clear that what we believe is what we are persuaded is true. Belief in the Bible is never something which we think may be true and may not be true.

Belief and doubts are mutually exclusive in Scripture.

I have written elsewhere about the little faith and great faith passages.¹⁵ Those passages do not teach degrees of faith in a given proposition. They teach that some propositions are harder to believe than others.

My point is that when a Free Grace person says that we can believe something and also doubt that same something, he is being Postmodern and he is actually denying the Free Grace position.

The Free Grace position depends on the certainty of our beliefs. Obviously assurance cannot be of the essence of saving faith if we cannot be certain of our eternal destiny until we die.

IX. CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNITY IS NOT THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

The good news that Jesus Christ preached is found in verses like John 3:16, John 5:24, and John 6:47.

Jesus promises everlasting life, life that can never be lost, to all who believe in Him.

While there is a present benefit to the believer, that benefit is not an ordered life, a cleaner planet, or more joy and peace. The present benefit is that the believer has God's irrevocable life and that life is one which is full of great potential.

The emphasis in what Jesus gives, however, is on the eternality of the life. It never ends. It goes beyond the grave.

Jesus promises a new glorified body to the believer (John 11:25). And He promises a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Revelation 21–22).

The gospel of Postmodernism isn't even vaguely close to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Postmoderns have abandoned propositional truth found in the Bible and with it they have abandoned the promise of everlasting life that Jesus makes for those who simply believe in Him.

In place of believing in Jesus for everlasting life is surrendering to God for an ordered, transformed life here and now. When man creates his own gospel, the resulting message is not good news at all. The gospel of Evangelical Postmodernism is bad news.

¹⁵ Bob Wilkin, "Should We Rethink the Idea of Degrees of Faith?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19:37 (Autumn 2006): 3–21.

DOES GOD GIVE SUBJECTIVE REVELATION TODAY? THE PLACE OF MYSTICISM IN CHRISTIAN DECISION MAKING

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I. INTRODUCTION

During my 30 years of ministry in the Mormon (LDS) culture, I have observed that LDS people rely on emotions to confirm their beliefs. Mormon missionaries frequently refer to Moroni 10:4 which encourages people to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” That has been done by millions of people who are now fully convinced of the truth of Mormonism. Virtually nothing will change their thinking and perspective, not even proven forged documents of Mark Hoffman or DNA proof that American Indians did not descend from Hebrew immigrants, as the *Book of Mormon* attests. This is because most Mormons place their experience above Scripture or logic when confronted with facts.

Many Evangelical Christians, perhaps unknowingly, do much the same thing. This is no more obvious than in the area of guidance for life’s decisions. We often hear phrases such as, “I *feel* like this is what God would have me do” or “I *sense* that the Holy Spirit is leading me there.” That is fine if things work out as they desire, but what happens when things go sour? It is possible for them to become disappointed and disillusioned with God. My own experience in going to Utah, even though I was raised there, is a case in point. During my seminary days at Dallas Theological Seminary, my wife and I enjoyed a well-received ministry at a church in Fort Worth. Following graduation we moved back to Utah, because I was certain God was *leading* me in that direction. Ministry in Utah was slow, difficult, discouraging, and often lacked results. After several years I began to wonder if God (or I) had made a

mistake. I reasoned that if God had led me to Utah, surely I would enjoy some level of His blessing through effectiveness in ministry.

About that time I read the book *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen.¹ My spiritual liberation came when I realized that I was in Utah because I had chosen to be there, and that I had not missed God's "perfect will" for my life. I could serve God in any location I chose and still be in His will as long as I remained faithful to God and maintained a lifestyle of godliness. For a time I had allowed emotional subjectivity to dominate my thinking, causing me to question if I had missed the "dot," which Friesen defines as "an ideal plan [of God] for each individual,"² or "the center of God's will that must be discovered by the decision maker."³ Following the publication of Friesen's book, Evangelical Christians aligned themselves on the side of either the traditional approach that God's will for one's life must be found, or this radically new approach—the way of wisdom. Those who defend the traditional approach do not realize that they are opening a Pandora's Box of subjective mysticism in Christian experience.

On the other hand, can believers trust their intellect, apart from feelings, regarding courses of action they desire to take? Human reasoning and logic can also mislead us. Since all humans are created by God with intellectual and emotional capabilities, and because our present sinful condition can contaminate our motives, is there a need for current revelation from God for individuals? Must there be a *fresh* word from God or an experience of being "called" so one may be certain they are following God's chosen path for them? Many Christians claim to be "in God's will" due to their supposed "call" to Christian service, a point which this article addresses later.

All of this raises a very important question: Does God speak today to individuals (who have the Scriptures available to them) through feelings, impressions, or brain flashes? If the answer to that question is yes, does this allow the door of present-day revelation from God to remain ajar, not only for Evangelical Christianity but for Mormonism as well? (The situation is further compounded by the possibility that extra-biblical

¹ Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980).

² Ibid, 97.

³ Ibid, 113.

revelation from God may only be available to a privileged few.)* If God does not speak extra-biblically today, then one would have to agree that the Scriptures are our sole and sufficient source and guide. Perhaps a new look at this situation is needed.

II. THE PHENOMENON OF SUBJECTIVE REVELATION

A. MORMONS RELY HEAVILY ON SUBJECTIVE REVELATIONS

My thinking on this subject was rekindled in the summer of 2003 when Jon Krakauer's latest book was published: *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*.⁴ It traces the thread of polygamy in Mormonism from its founder, Joseph Smith, to the present day. Of special interest to me was the place of on-going revelation among those who are called *fundamentalist Mormons*. They defend all past and present polygamy practices by what they perceive as a current word from God.

The practice of polygamy was one of the primary tenets of early Mormonism and was a major reason for conflict between Mormon settlers of the 1800s and the US government. It was rigidly defended and liberally practiced by major Mormon leaders, despite objections from many constituents. In 1890, Wilford Woodruff, the fourth Mormon prophet/president, prompted by his desire that Utah be accepted into statehood, received a "revelation" from God to discontinue the practice of polygamy.⁵ This was made public in what is often called the *Mormon Manifesto*. Privately however, some leaders continued to promote and practice polygamy. This Achilles heel of Mormonism has also caused feuds between modern day sects of fundamentalist Mormons, resulting in numerous assassinations within and between clans.

Ron and Dan Lafferty, raised in a solid LDS family, were exposed to some early documents of Mormonism and became convinced of the truth of polygamy. They began to promote plural marriage, and Dan took a

* Editor's note: Both in the OT and the NT special revelation was exceedingly rare. Typically only a handful of people in each generation received special revelation

⁴ Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Random, 2003).

⁵ Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988).

second wife. When they received resistance from family members and their bishop,[†] they became convinced that God gave them a revelation to eliminate those individuals. On July 24, 1984 the homicides were carried out. Not only did they kill their youngest brother's wife, Brenda Lafferty, but they also killed her 15-month-old daughter, Erica as well. The bishop escaped because he was not at home. Ron and Dan were convicted. Dan is serving two life sentences, and Ron was sentenced to death. Later, his conviction was thrown out and he was retried in 1996, but was again sentenced to death. Currently Ron is seeking new counsel to handle the appeals of his death penalty conviction. Dan admits he did the killings but has never admitted wrongdoing because he says, "I was guided by the hand of God."⁶

The highly publicized abduction of Elizabeth Smart during the summer of 2002 is another illustration of a deeply religious person carrying out God's present-day revelation to him. Brian David Mitchell, a fundamentalist Mormon, received a revelation from God that he should have seven wives. He kidnapped Elizabeth from her bedroom and kept her as a wife for nine months. The mainline LDS church in Salt Lake City today denies any connection with these activities, yet the reality is that these atrocities reflect the church's original roots.

Both of these illustrations, while violating the laws of the land, were done by those claiming a revelation from God and their obedience to it. Despite the civil consequences, they were compelled by what they considered a higher law.

Another factor that figures into this scenario is what is commonly referred to as the *burning feeling* or the *burning in the bosom*. For LDS people this is a very special sensation. Some are not willing to discuss it with those outside their faith system. The first mention of this phenomenon was in a revelation Joseph Smith gave to Oliver Cowdery in April of 1829. Cowdery wanted to speed things up with regard to the dictation he was receiving from Smith, so Smith "dictated" this revelation from God: "But behold I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right"⁷.

[†] Bishop Richard Stowe played a role in Ron Lafferty being excommunicated from the mainstream LDS church

⁶ Ibid, 318.

⁷ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 9, Verse 8.

Since that time this physical sensation has become a standard by which Mormons substantiate the Book of Mormon as a true book from God. An actual description of this feeling is difficult to pin down, as it would likely differ for each person. Nonetheless, once the sensation is experienced, little can be done to convince people that it may not have come from God.

Putting these two concepts together—revelation from God in the present time and the emotional sensation that LDS people experience—both the mainline Mormon and the fundamentalist Mormon can claim to receive personal direction from God for individual situations.

B. MANY NON-CHARISMATIC EVANGELICALS ALSO RELY ON SUBJECTIVE REVELATIONS

With this background information it is not difficult to see a parallel in the practice of many well-meaning Christian people today. Even non-charismatic cessationist Evangelicals rely on subjective-mystical revelation from God. I have personally encountered many such situations. Years ago a well known Bible teacher decided God was directing him to change ministries. I was shocked because this individual had a very unique and much needed ministry. When I asked him why he was changing his focus, without hesitation he said, “God told me to.” I further inquired and he told me he had personally heard the voice of God speak to him. This individual was a Dallas Theological Seminary grad who did not have a charismatic cell in his body, yet the voice of God for him was the deciding factor. How many times has this story been repeated when people change ministries? Do these situations always prove to be from God? Consider also, does this make a person vulnerable to listen to other “voices,” which may ultimately damage or destroy his ministry?

We have all heard a pastor tell his congregation that he is waiting on God regarding the next series of sermons to preach. This indicates that he expects some sort of new word from God or feelings-centered brain flash from God before he can minister. Other pastors say that God told them to build a bigger building, or create a new ministry program. The implication is that if the congregation does not follow the pastor’s lead in this area, they are disobeying God.

In a November 2003 *Christianity Today* article entitled, “Mr. Jabez Goes to Africa,” the author relates how the founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, Bruce Wilkinson, had a “burning bush” experience at a

Wendy's restaurant while reading a biography of Hudson Taylor.⁸ Wilkinson was stunned when he realized that he may have just had a conversation with God, in which he asked, "God, tell me what do you want me to do," and he sensed God's reply: "*I want you to keep the Great Commission.*"⁹ Was this a real dialogue with God, a series of providential events directed by God, or an overactive imagination? Perhaps Bruce was bored with his present ministry and wanted an honorable way out—who can object when the source is God? Wilkinson's conservative evangelical approach to Bible teaching hardly puts him in the arena of the charismatic community, so this raises questions that often plague us: *Could this kind of thing happen to me? Does this happen only to "superstar" Christians? Why didn't God respond to me when I asked that question? Was I listening? Am I unworthy?* The questions are perplexing, not only for Christian workers but the general Christian public as well.

The problem of subjective leading and mysticism in Christian living is not a recent phenomenon. In his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, published over 30 years ago, Charles Ryrie made reference to a mystical approach to understanding the Bible, calling it an "affliction."¹⁰ Anyone familiar with Christian books and literature has doubtless become increasingly perplexed with every passing year at the explosion of information and themes about God speaking to individuals today, either directly or indirectly.

More often than not, many of these experiences indicate little interaction with the revealed Word of God, the Bible. The "listening prayer" fad is one case in point. As much as 15 years ago, David Pytches's book entitled *Does God Speak Today?* gave 47 cases of modern-day communication from God, apart from Scripture, which had good results.¹¹ The author also included 15 examples of counterfeit revelations and concluded that experiences must be tested. In a recent book entitled, *How to Hear From God: Learn to Know His Voice and Make Right Decisions*, the author, Joyce Meyer says, "God delivers His word through signs, revelations, and internal confirmation. Ask God for the sensitivity to hear

⁸ Timothy C. Morgan, "Mr. Jabez Goes to Africa," *Christianity Today*, November 2003.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969).

¹¹ David Pytches, *Does God Speak Today?* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 1990).

His voice.”¹² Even Henry Blackaby, who calls Christians to dependence on God’s Word, also teaches, “No amount of reasoning and intellectualizing will discover [God’s will]. God himself must reveal it. God’s Holy Spirit reveals his will to those who are seeking his mind and his heart.”¹³ He adds that Christian leaders can grow unfamiliar with God’s voice and miss His guidance.¹⁴ Is Blackaby merely using Christian jargon, or does he contradict himself?

No longer does doctrine govern and interpret experience, but rather, application and experience control interpretation. Meanings are assigned by the reader of Scripture, rather than by the writer, and multiple meanings are given to a single passage. *What does it mean to me?* has become the operative interpretive question, rather than *What did the author intend his readers to know or do?* Realizing that the entire area of hermeneutics is facing a crisis and that pre-understanding is now the rule, along with a growing intolerance for the common-sense grammatical-historical approach to understanding biblical truth, we now proceed to point out some positive aspects of cognitive—as opposed to emotional—approaches to this topic.

III. BIBLICAL INSIGHTS REGARDING THESE PRACTICES

A. EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIVE REVELATIONS FROM GOD

If the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, it presents clear evidence as to the avenues God uses in the transfer of His thoughts to the mind of man. To begin, one must understand that God took the initiative to reveal Himself to mankind. The written Scriptures are God-breathed—breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16); and men of God were moved or carried along to a destination by the Spirit of God as they wrote (2 Pet 1:21).

Perhaps the most spectacular means God used to reveal both Himself and His message to His people is through what is called an epiphany—a grand descent of God which terrified humans because of its uniqueness. Such was the visit of God to Mount Sinai when He communicated the

¹² Joyce Meyer, *How to Hear from God: Learn to Know His Voice and Make Right Decisions* (Nashville: FaithWords, 2003).

¹³ Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179, 181.

Ten Words to His people (Exodus 19–20). It is likely that this is what Moses encountered at the burning bush (Exodus 3) and also when he asked to see God's glory (Exodus 33–34). Nothing in human experience could compare with milestone occurrences of this nature. They are completely beyond natural explanation.

A less spectacular avenue used by God to convey information to mankind involved *dreams*, as in the case of Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 20), Jacob and Laban (Genesis 28, 31), Joseph and Pharaoh (Genesis 40–41), and of course Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2, 7). New Testament examples include Joseph (Matt 2:13–19), the magi (Matt 2:12), Pilate's wife (Matt 27:19), and Peter's trance (Acts 10:10).

While the focus of *dreams* is on what is *seen*, the emphasis of a *vision* is on what is *heard*. Examples of a vision bring to mind Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many of the minor prophets. A clear observation can be made: Those who received dreams and visions were usually surprised by them for they did not seek or solicit them. They were given by God, apart from any desire or request of the individual.[‡]

Another avenue God used to communicate involved messengers. Theophanies and Christophanies, most of which are said to be the Angel of the Lord, are sprinkled throughout the OT era, from a visit to Hagar in Genesis 16 to Zechariah overhearing a conversation between the Father and the Son (Zech 1:12–13). Angels were often used to deliver God's message, the most notable being Gabriel, the communicating angel, and Michael, the warring angel.

In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the NT, the messengers most often used were prophets and apostles. God employed the human element. This means was even requested by the people of Israel at the base of Mount Sinai, due to the great fear they had experienced when God revealed Himself to them (Exod 20:18–21).

The actual experience of the prophets and apostles in receiving a message from God is not a topic of much discussion in the Bible, other than by the phrase, "The word of the Lord came to..." We do not know how this happened, especially when dreams and visions or angels were not used. One thing is clear, many prophets and writers of the NT experi-

[‡] Editor's note: In addition, the communication was always objective and certain. There was never a sensing that God was communicating through some impression

enced this on numerous occasions. Their information was recognized by the people of God as coming from Him.

Perhaps David (in writing the Psalms), Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets did not fully realize what was happening to them the first time God gave them a message. When the writers of the NT, such as Paul and Peter, were compelled by God to write a letter to a group of believers, both writer and readers must have recognized the uniqueness of this material. Possibly NT writers conversed with each other, comparing experiences and concluding that a special work of God had been done through them (2 Pet 3:15-16).

The point that must not be missed is that no Scripture originated from the will of man (2 Pet 1:20-21). As stated previously, the message had its origin from God, and the messenger was carried along by the Holy Spirit. His own initiative played no role in whether or not he received a message from God or even understood that message completely. *Revelation did not result from self-stimulated existential or emotional experiences. In every case where God gave information to mankind, He communicated to his mind, not through his emotions* (1 Cor 2:10, 13). If God's revelation was cognitive, not emotive, then why should Christians think they can receive special revelation from God through their emotions or feelings today? Put another way, if God did not speak to Bible writers through their emotions *before* the completed Canon, why would He speak that way *today* when the Canon *is* complete? Therefore, in my opinion, since "impressions" and "inner promptings" cannot be proved as coming from God, it seems that they may be self-induced.

B. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND THE ROLE OF FEELINGS, EMOTIONS, AND DESIRES

We must not, however, divorce emotion completely from experience. We today, as well as the people of Bible times, do have inner promptings and impressions. These are undeniable if we claim to be human. Good, as well as bad, desires come and go. But should we follow our good desires as messages from God? Is a good desire proper motive and valid reason to proceed with a course of action? Does it have the same level of authority as the Scriptures that we should obey? Consider the noble desire King David had to build the temple. This would surely have honored God and been a blessing to many. God gave a very prompt and pointed message through the prophet Nathan not to proceed (2 Samuel 6-7). God would allow a temple to be built, but not at that time or with that personnel. David was told to forego this good and acceptable desire.

Paul's *good* desire of taking the gospel to Asia (Acts 16:7), his desire to visit the saints at Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:17-18) and Rome (Rom 1:13), while commendable, did not work out because of over-riding circumstances. Good desires are just that—good desires. They are not necessarily a sign or message from God that we must pursue.

It may be that while the desire is there to do a specific service for God or follow a certain pathway of action, one may not have the giftedness from God, the right timetable, or the support of God's people. There are many who would like to be teachers of the Bible, but they lack necessary communication skills or mental ability. Many would like to be pastors, yet they lack people skills, or the staying power necessary to hold a position of that nature.

All of this leads up to the conclusion that desires, impressions, promptings, and insights are not to be put on the same level as special revelation, as found in the Bible. Interpretation and illumination in our study of Scripture are entirely different from inspiration. Our minds and motives are often flawed and scarred by sin. These flaws can be reduced but never eliminated. We are free to act on our impressions, ideas, or good desires if they do not violate Scripture. However, it must also be pointed out that *we are never instructed or encouraged in the Bible to seek, listen to, or follow inner promptings or impressions.*

There are adequate examples of satanic influence in the biblical record to make us realize that impressions must always be suspect. Though impressions, feelings, and emotions may be included in the decision-making process, the Scriptures, wisdom and common sense, opportunities and obstacles, and wise counsel, must be the primary guides in our decisions and actions.

When we do not know what action to take, what are we to do? In the case of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13), Abraham did not ask God to show him what to do. He simply stepped aside and let Lot choose. In non-moral decisions about which Scriptures are silent, "one should exercise good judgment...and choose one's personal preference."¹⁵ Neither can circumstances or open doors be our sole guiding factor. Jonah found a boat going to Tarsus, but it was hardly providential guidance (Jonah 1)!

It is also important not to forget that God gave each of us intellectual capacity far beyond what any of us use. When we seem to have an original or fresh idea come to mind, it should not be construed as new revela-

¹⁵ Friesen, *Decision Making*, 263.

tion directly from God. Though a Christian song writer may say, “God gave me this song,” or a Bible teacher may say, “God gave me this idea or insight,” it is difficult to discern if that is really what happened. Perhaps meditation and contemplation resulted in bursts of creativity from their already God-given intellect and abilities. A *new* idea may be one we previously heard or read and then forgot. God uses the ways He has gifted us, and we must acknowledge our total dependence on Him for all our godly endeavors and accomplishments.

What then is the place for emotion and feelings in our Christian experience and is it a positive one? Like every God-given human attribute it can be used for either good or ill. Since all communication from God through the Bible is of a cognitive nature, it may well be that our feelings and emotions play a vital role in our *response* to that revelation. *In other words, our intellect has the role of receiving and understanding revelation from God while our emotions have a role in responding to that revelation.* Much of our worship of God must involve our mind, but our emotions function in that experience as well. We all enjoy feeling good about worship, but that must never be the primary governing factor in worship. It is often said that doctrine divides and emotional experiences unite. This could not be more misleading and false. Anyone who has been involved in a church split knows that such divisions are very emotionally charged, and rarely over doctrinal issues. And when doctrine is an issue, it is frequently because people are too emotionally attached to their own doctrine to discuss it calmly with those who disagree.

Given the wide variety of ordeals we face as followers of Christ, we will all discover that frequently it will be in the arena of emotion and feelings that our faith will have its greatest tests. We will be discouraged, face despondency and despair. This may come as a result of doubt and disbelief in the revealed revelation of God. No child of God is immune from this major hurdle of Christian experience. It is therefore, all the more important to have an objective standard to follow.

C. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND “BEING CALLED”

Being “called” to ministry is perhaps among the most hotly debated aspects of beginning a new ministry or planting a church. Many look to a past event in their life which had such a profound impact on them that they made a decision to pursue ministry. For myself, I see little emphases in Scripture on a personal individual experience of this nature. The focus seems to be not on *calling* but on *qualification*. A casual reading of the qualifications for Christian leaders in 1 Timothy 3 highlights several

things: aspiration, ability, and character qualities. I have personally known men who had the first but lacked the other two. It appears to be a package in which all must be present. When comparing the qualifications for priests in the OT, it is clear that the strict guidelines to be followed focused more on the physical body and lineage. The NT qualifications focus not on the external so much as on the internal. The parallel that must be noted is that in both cases there were standards which needed to be met, and these went beyond mere desire. Additionally, the emphasis of the epistles leans toward every Christian being “called” to sanctification (2 Thess 5:23-24), holiness (1 Thess 4:7, 2 Tim 1:9), and fellowship (1 Cor 1:9), rather than to specific ministries or geographic locations.

An objection may be raised that if there is no “call” it will reduce the number of people who go into vocational Christian ministry. But in actuality, it may increase it. Many effective Christian workers cannot point to a “call” from God; they desired Christian service, trained for it, and were affirmed by other Christians. Some even serve effectively without formal training, whether or not they received “the call.” We all personally know individuals who received all the training needed for Christian ministry (even with a “call”), yet when reality set in, they decided that was not what they wanted to pursue. Are they out of the will of God? Were they misdirected? Did they receive bad counsel? Did they misread their impressions or promptings? Or did it finally come to their attention that God simply had not gifted them for the service they previously desired?

D. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND “BEING LED BY THE SPIRIT”

Understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit is also important, as many talk about “being led by the Spirit.” There are only two references to this in the life of the believer: Rom 8:14, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” and Gal 5:18, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” Based on these two verses, the phrase, *led by the Spirit*, is commonly used as rationale for proceeding with a course of action. “The Spirit led me” or “God led me” gives undisputed justification for someone’s action. It becomes the uncontested “official will of God.”

When asking a person who believes they are “led by the Spirit” how they know, it often turns out that they had a feeling, impression, prompting, or even a personal desire. Thus the Holy Spirit is reduced from being a Person to a sensation. It becomes nearly impossible to reason with someone after they have attributed this emotional sensation to the Holy Spirit. *For many, the words spiritual and mystical are indistinguishable.*

They assume that a subjective/mystical experience is a spiritual experience and that a spiritual experience must involve something emotional. But Biblical spirituality is not mysticism as much as it is a life of godliness. If people understood spirituality as godliness, they might not confuse it with mysticism so readily.

The greatest problem with the use of the phrase *led by the Spirit* is that in context these passages have nothing to do with guidance or making decisions. Both passages contrast the lifestyle of fleshly desires with the lifestyle of godly living. Choosing a godly lifestyle is equivalent to being led by the Spirit. Joseph Dillow refers to B. B. Warfield's observation that the word 'led' (*agō*) involves self-action: "Had Paul wanted to teach that the leading of the Spirit involved only God's work, he had another word he could have used, 'moved' (*pherō*)"¹⁶ which Peter used in 1 Pet 1:21 referring to an exclusive work of God. Quoting Dillow again, "The child of God is not passive in the hands of the sanctifying Spirit. He is not 'moved' but 'led.' His own efforts enter into the progress made under the controlling influence of the Spirit."¹⁷ Being led by the Spirit thus has everything to do with sanctification and nothing to do with "guidance."

It is likely that the use of this phrase ("The Spirit led me to...") will be with us for a long time because we all desire to cloak our actions in sanctimonious jargon. But how refreshing it would be if we just said what we mean: "*I felt like doing this*" or "*This is what I want to do.*" Any Christian who desires special guidance from God should remember Ps 25:9, "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way." The qualification for being guided and taught by God is humility—realizing we have no resources within ourselves.

IV. THE SUFFICIENCY OF BIBLICAL REVELATION

Many would feel shackled if they were limited to the revealed Word of God. Others fear it takes too much time and effort to learn what has already been revealed.

¹⁶ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant King*, (Hayesville: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

The writer of Psalm 119 expressed complete contentment in what God had revealed up to that time. Consider vv 9-16 where the Psalmist makes it clear that his guidance comes from God's written word:

How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to thy word

With all my heart I have sought Thee; Do not let me wander from Thy commandments.

Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee.

Blessed art Thou, O Lord; Teach me Thy statutes.

With my lips I have told of all the ordinances of Thy mouth.

I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies, As much as in all riches.

I will meditate on Thy precepts, And regard Thy ways.

I shall delight in Thy statutes; I shall not forget Thy word.

The Word of God was his delight, his source of meditation, his means of guidance. He was convinced that it would protect him from sinful habits, and would comfort him in affliction, and guide him on the paths of life. Being the premiere acrostic psalm in the Psalter, each letter in the Hebrew alphabet is assigned eight opportunities to extol the wonders and glories of the revelation of God. The psalm presents no need for warm feelings or inner impressions when one relies 100% on God's law, ordinances, judgments, commandments, precepts, statutes, and Word.

The issue boils down to one of the primacy of God's revealed Word and its sufficiency. Are we willing to trust it completely and without hesitation?

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to evaluate in a small way the place of feelings, emotions, and impressions in the decision-making process. Does God use this means, and is it something one ought to be sensitive to? Generally, people have no intention of equating subjective mysticism with divine revelation. In their mind it has far less merit than

the written Word of God. However, even the well-intentioned person can become caught up in some sort of emotional phenomenon due to biblical ignorance, or exposure to non-biblical philosophy. Christian culture has become so ingrained with spiritual language such as: “I have peace about it,” “I was praying and sensed God speaking to me,” and “God led me to...” that it is difficult to break away from these ways of thinking. And as long as these “inner, private sensations” produce life-changing experiences, it will be difficult to challenge them, especially when they appear to have value to the recipient and can be used to justify one’s actions or at least give the impression of being “in touch” with God.

Despite the intensity and pleasure derived from these spiritual encounters, the major concern will always be their lack of objectivity. In addition they can easily lead one into false doctrine and sinful actions. Therefore, impressions and promptings, feelings and mysticism, peace and burning in the bosom should not be considered as the voice of God or as a source of truth. Let us recognize this for what it really is—a counterfeit spirituality that has the potential of side-tracking Christians from letting “all Scripture” thoroughly equip them for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

VI. AFTER WORDS

My thinking has been shaped by my reading. Early on I was exposed to *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen with Robin Maxson. As mentioned before, this was a liberating book for me and I eagerly await the revised edition. In my opinion it is a classic that should be mastered by every believer. Over twenty years ago, Garry addressed many of the issues raised in this article.

Bruce Waltke is a scholar’s scholar, yet he has written a very down-to-earth, and practical book: *Finding the Will of God—A Pagan Notion?*¹⁸ Perhaps the greatest contribution this book made to my thinking is in regard to the practice of pagans in Bible times. Pagans sought to discover the future and determine what actions they should take. Waltke points out that “there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God’s will after Acts 1:24-26. After Pentecost there is no instance of the church

¹⁸ Dr. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Gresham, OR: Vision House Publishing, 1995)

seeking God's will through any form of divination."¹⁹ Waltke suggests that God's program for guidance is: 1) Read your Bible, 2) Develop a Heart for God, 3) Seek Wise Counsel, 4) Look for God's Providence, 5) Does it Make Sense? Nothing is ever said about the need for impressions or inner sensations. This book is a *must read*!

Years ago I came across a small booklet by John MacArthur entitled, *Found: The Will of God*, in which the following suggestions were given: God's will for you is to (1) be saved, (2) be sanctified, (3) serve, (4) submit, and (5) suffer.²⁰ These summarize the Scriptural extent of God's will. MacArthur's concluding suggestion is: After you are doing the above, you can do whatever you want.²¹

In recent days I was directed to *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* by Arthur L. Johnson.²² I was delighted to acquire this out-of-print book through the internet. It addresses the problem of encroaching mysticism in many aspects of Christianity. In the forward, Norman Geisler is right on target when he says, "The Good Ship Evangelicalism is sailing without rational rudders in the hazy sea of subjectivity. Into this fog Arthur Johnson's book comes as a beacon in the night."²³

Finally, a recent book that follows the same pattern as Garry Friesen's is *Decisions, Decisions* by Dave Swavely.²⁴ This brief but helpful book has an excellent chapter on the place of feelings and impressions. The author makes an excellent point when he says, "Christians...are not content to make their choices based on the principles in the revealed Word, but want God to give them some more specific information, direction, or guidance."²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

²⁰ John MacArthur, *Found: The Will of God* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1977).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

²³ Ibid., Forward.

²⁴ Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) to Make Them* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2003).

²⁵ Ibid., 51.

LAW AND GRACE IN THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

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I. INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul wrote, “You are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14). When Jesus reigns, He will fully enforce the Law. Does this fact contradict Paul’s statement? If not, how do both these truths fit together?

II. LAW IN THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

Someone may wish to question the statement that the Lord Jesus Christ will fully enforce the Law in His kingdom. But this is what Jesus said so very plainly in the Sermon on the Mount. Matt 5:17-19 reads:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is saying that if there is someone *in the kingdom of heaven* who breaks a very small command of the Law and teaches others to do it, that person will have the lowest possible standing *in the kingdom*. This is certainly the most natural and straightforward way to read this passage.

Jesus’ large audience would have understood Him to be referring to the future messianic kingdom which the nation expected. They would not be likely to theologize this statement in some way, as modern readers are tempted to do. The obvious idea is that this is how it will be *in the kingdom*.

Furthermore, the reference to heaven and earth not passing away until the Law and Prophets are fulfilled supports this understanding. According to the Book of Revelation, heaven and earth do not pass away until the first thousand years have run their course. Jesus is therefore thinking of the end of the first thousand years of His kingdom as being the terminal point for this fulfillment. The Law *will have been* fulfilled when the old heaven and earth are burned up.

We know that before heaven and earth pass away, there will be law-breaking in the kingdom. For example, an uncountable multitude of people alive on the earth will participate in the rebellion of Gog and Magog (Rev 20:7-10). Zechariah 14:16-19 tells us a lot about the status of the Jewish Law in the messianic kingdom.

And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, on them there shall be no rain. And if the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the Lord strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

Keeping the Feast of Tabernacles involves obedience to a major command of the Law. Furthermore this requirement is not simply imposed only on the Jewish nation in the kingdom. It is required of all nations. Breaking this command, therefore, results in a major penalty, which consists of drought and plague.

By contrast, in the words of Jesus, the person who breaks a very small commandment and teaches others to do the same is merely reduced in status in the kingdom. This is a relatively light punishment compared to what happens, for example, if Egypt refuses to attend Tabernacles.

Obviously the idea of retribution for infractions of the Law of Moses in the first thousand years is clear and unequivocal in the Zechariah passage. The kingdom will inaugurate a time that is unparalleled in human history. Every command of the Law will be enforced in the kingdom, and there is no command that will be completely ignored. Thus, for the first time ever, many will be obedient to every requirement of the Law of

Moses. In that sense the Law will be fulfilled before heaven and earth pass away.

III. DESTROYING THE LAW

The statement made by Jesus in Matt 5:12 has caused trouble for some. Jesus says, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”

The Sermon on the Mount was very early in the ministry of Jesus. Apparently the Sermon was preached not long after the imprisonment of John the Baptist, which is noted in Matt 4:12. The execution of John is not recorded until chapter 14.

At such an early stage of His ministry, why should anyone have the idea that Jesus intended to destroy the Law and the Prophets? Clearly some people were teaching this, for Jesus tells them here to not believe it. What had Jesus said or done to lead them to this conclusion?

Before the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus had already begun to evangelize. This is evident from the statements made in John 3:24 and 4:1-4:

For John had not yet been thrown into prison (John 3:24).

Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John did (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again into Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria (John 4:1).

These statements show that the discourse with Nicodemus and the conversation with the Samaritan woman took place *before* Jesus had preached the Sermon on the Mount. In addition, before the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus had been in Jerusalem at the Passover. There “many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did” (John 2:23).

Therefore, by the time of the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel Jesus preached had been plainly declared by Him. But His message was contrary to the normative expectations of religiously inclined Jewish people. Jesus did not say a word about a person needing to observe the Law or the Prophets in order to have everlasting life.

This must have bothered a lot of strict religious Jews. Jesus sounded to them like an antinomian who was out to destroy the Law and the Prophets.

If no one was thinking this, why would Jesus need to say: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets.” To the contrary, Jesus says, “Don’t think that.” And then He adds (and again I paraphrase): “I intend to preside over the complete fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in My kingdom.” Jesus insists on the full integrity of the Law.

IV. THE LAW ENFORCED IN DEPTH

The Law will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom by the enforcement of every one of its commands, however small and seemingly unimportant, but that is not all. It will also be enforced in depth. That is to say, the enforcement will not just be in terms of the letter of the Law. The Law will be enforced in terms of its in-depth implications.

Jesus superbly illustrates the in-depth enforcement of the Law in Matt 5:21-22:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire.”

There will never have been a time or place in human history like this. If a person gets mad at his *brother* without good reason, he will be prosecuted for it. Or if he says to him, “Raca” (“You idiot”), it is possible he will go before a jury.

However, this is the future King speaking. He is still talking about how things will be in His kingdom.

The OT Law forbade murder. Behind murder there almost always lies some form of anger. In the millennial kingdom, judgment will not be executed on murder alone, but on anger itself, thus fulfilling the implications of the Law.

If a citizen of the kingdom expresses unjustifiable anger against a fellow citizen he will be *in danger of the judgment*. The words *in danger of* translate the Greek word *enochos* and this word can be rendered *answerable to*. A court hearing is implied in which the citizen would be convicted of a misdemeanor.

If the anger is expressed in an insulting way, so that a person calls his fellow citizen something like an “idiot,” that person is answerable to “the council,” a functional equivalent of a jury, where the offense is a felony.

If the verbal abuse rises to the level of “You fool,” the offense is punishable by banishment to Gehenna for a capital offense.

Bear in mind that at His Second Coming, the King will banish the Beast and the False Prophet—still alive—into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20). It follows that anyone else in His kingdom can be banished to the same place if the King commands it.

The word *enochos* is used for all three cases that Jesus is illustrating. This implies that some flexibility may be used in assessing these penalties. That does not affect the obvious point. Jesus is describing a strict enforcement of the Law that is far above and beyond anything mankind has ever known before.

Jesus is not talking about glorified people in the kingdom. They, of course, will be unable to sin in any way. He is talking about the type of ordinary person who might be among the many that will participate in the rebellion of Gog and Magog.

In fact, after a thousand years of the kind of government our Lord describes, the world will be ripe for a revolt. When Satan is released from the Abyss at the end of the Millennium, is it any wonder that he will find a large response to his call for rebellion? Millions of people will be only too ready to overthrow this unbearably strict King. They will no longer wish to be ruled with a rod of iron (Ps 2:9; Rev 2:26-27)!

V. ESTABLISHING THE LAW

In Rom 3:31, Paul echoes what Jesus taught in Matt 5:17-19. He writes that faith establishes the Law. To suggest that righteousness or eternal salvation can occur on anything less than a perfect fulfillment of the Law, is to subvert the unity, the integrity and the seriousness of the Law. However, if no one can fulfill the whole Law, righteousness must come by faith. Faith validates the integrity of the entire Law.

This idea is also clearly expressed by James when he writes in Jas 2:10: “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”

To put it very simply, you are either a law-keeper or a lawbreaker. You don’t have to break every statute in the state of Texas to go to jail. Do you have any idea how many prisoners in Texas jails might say to

you, “I just made *one* mistake”? So what? “Just one mistake” can be good for life in prison.

If God’s Law is to have full integrity and be taken with full seriousness, we cannot say of even the smallest command, “Oh well, that command doesn’t matter very much!”

If a person in the kingdom of heaven ignores even the smallest commandments and teaches others to do the same, he deserves to be relegated to the bottom of the societal ladder.

If the kingdom honors the Law down to its smallest requirement, then it follows that no ordinary righteousness can be adequate for entrance into that kingdom. In fact, that is what Jesus affirms when he says in Matt 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The scribes and Pharisees were at that time the arbiters of the Law in its strictest form. They insisted on its strict observance and they were punctilious in observing it. To all appearances they were paragons of righteousness in Israel. (Jesus had not yet begun to excoriate them for their hypocrisy.)

Jesus affirms even their righteousness is inadequate for entrance into the super-strict realm of His future kingdom. The ordinary hearer of the Sermon on the Mount might well despair when he heard this statement.

And that was just the point. If His audience thought in terms of a works-righteousness obtained by keeping the Law, their case was hopeless. That hopelessness, in fact, was precisely what the Law was designed to produce in people. Paul makes this clear to us in Rom 3:20 when he writes: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Having said this, he proceeds to write in Rom 3:21-22: “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”

Obviously it is *that* righteousness, and only that righteousness, to which Jesus is referring to in Matt 5:20. When He speaks of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees He is talking about a *perfect* righteousness. It is exactly such a righteousness that is imputed to the believer in Jesus. This alone is adequate for entrance into God’s kingdom. In fact, it is adequate precisely because it is the very righteousness of God Himself.

If man contemplates entrance into the kingdom on the basis of some form of imperfect righteousness, he demeans the Law. To think and teach like that is to subvert the Law and to degrade its seriousness and integrity.

Neither Jesus Himself nor Paul ever did that.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Sermon is contained in Matthew 5–7 and can be read in less than thirty minutes. It is obviously greatly condensed by Matthew. Given the large audience (Matt 5:1), it is likely that in its original form it took a couple of hours. Matthew has condensed it for his Christian readership and he has no need to spell out what righteousness Jesus was referring to. In his day—if not in ours—Christians knew what this righteousness must be. In the Sermon on the Mount, did Jesus ever explain what righteousness He was talking about in Matt 5:20? There is no way to know.

If Jesus did *not* explain what this righteousness was, then His Sermon is a masterpiece of pre-evangelism. Using the Law for the very purpose God intended, Jesus' affirmation of its complete integrity could only serve to bring deep conviction of sin to his unregenerate hearers.

If, as I suspect (based on 7:13-14), Jesus *did* explain this righteousness toward the end of the Sermon, then His message served as a powerful evangelistic tool. Either way, Jesus was fishing for men.

Matthew's presentation for his Christian audience is very effective as well. We, like the disciples mentioned in 5:1, are sitting at Jesus' feet to learn something about the righteousness of His future kingdom. And having seen its superlative standards of holiness, we can aim for these in our present Christian life.

After all, didn't Paul write in Rom 8:3-4:

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

Even this goal does not place us under the Law. Yet, contrary to the opinion of many, the Law has not been done away with. Jesus did not come to destroy it. Instead, as believers who have been united with

Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, we have passed *out of the sphere* to which the Law applies.

Mark this well; removal from the Law's sphere affects only those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ. Thereby they have been co-crucified with Christ and raised to live a resurrection life in Him. Paul says this plainly in Gal 2:19-20:

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for Me.

This is the true status of all who are a part of the Body of Christ. Just as soon as the Church is removed by the Rapture, the Law will again be in force for God's people. First it will be in force for the believing Jews of the Tribulation period, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 24. After His kingdom is established, it will be in force for the whole world.

And in the kingdom, as the Law is enforced in all its details, men will be able to learn the lesson it was always intended to convey: "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20).

Those who learn this lesson in the kingdom will have the opportunity to believe in the King for eternal life. Those who do not learn it will be candidates for the rebellion of Gog and Magog.

COLONIAL AMERICA'S REJECTION OF FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many Free Grace adherents assume that grace theology, the *de facto* doctrine of the first century church, was lost until recently. Such is not the case. Michael Makidon has demonstrated, for example, that Free Grace views surfaced in Scotland in the 18th century Marrow Controversy.¹ The “Marrow Men” were clear: faith is the sole condition of justification, and assurance is the essence of justifying faith.

Eighty years earlier peace was broken in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (MBC) over these doctrines. That upheaval, labeled the “Antinomian Controversy,” occupied the MBC for seventeen months from October 1636 to March 1638. The civil and ecclesiastical trials of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), whose vocal opposition to the “covenant of works”² gained unfavorable attention from the civil authorities, and served as a beard for theological adversaries John Cotton (1585-1652) and Thomas Shepard (1605-1649).

This article will survey the three main interpretations intellectual historians offer for the Antinomian Controversy. The primary focus will be on the doctrine of assurance, with an emphasis on sixteenth-century British Calvinism. We will evaluate the opposing views of John Cotton and Thomas Shepard. Finally, we will consider the opportunity that Free Grace theology missed in the Antinomian Controversy.

¹ Michael Makidon, “The Marrow Controversy,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Theological Society* 16:31 (Autumn 2003), 65-77. See also Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* [book on-line] (No Pub: ND); available from <http://www.mountzion.org/text/marrow/marrow.html>; Internet; accessed August 6, 2007.

² She was vocal in her opposition to the regnant view in the MBC that the unregenerate were capable of preparing themselves for conversion through a prescribed sequence of actions deemed necessary but not sufficient.

II. WHAT WERE THE ISSUES IN THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY?

At one time Anne Hutchinson was cast as the chief antagonist in the controversy. She was a strong woman who had spent years as a member of Cotton's church in England. There she learned the pitfalls of covenant theology.³ Her father was a minister; at home, she became well versed in the Scriptures. After arriving in the MBC, she developed an extensive teaching ministry in her home, often drawing larger crowds during the week than attended Sunday services. Her extensive biblical knowledge and quick mind made her more than a match for any of the MBC ministers. They were unable to refute her doctrinal views. Only when they cast her as a threat to the state welfare in a civil trial was she convicted and banished.⁴

Fresh documentary evidence published in recent years makes it clear that John Cotton, not Anne Hutchinson, was the major figure.⁵ Although

³ Anne encountered puritan doctrine at St. Botolph's Church in Boston, England, under the ministry of John Cotton. Cotton's determination to minimize the role of moral effort in the regenerative process conditioned her against preparationism and what today we would call "Lordship" theology. Upon her arrival at the MBC, shortly after Cotton's, she began embellishing his views at Bible study classes in her home. Her influence in the community grew widely and rapidly, including prominent businessmen and even MBC's young governor, Henry Vane.

⁴ See David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638; A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 311-348 for the transcript of her civil trial before the court at Newton and 349-388 for the transcript of her ecclesiastical trial before the church at Boston. Michael Ditmore, "A Prophetess In Her Own Country: An Exegesis of Anne Hutchinson's 'Immediate Revelation'" in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57:2 (April 2000), 349-392, demonstrates that Hutchinson's claim of "immediate revelation"—for which she was convicted and banished—was not uncommon. Even a chief antagonist at the trial, Thomas Hooker, teasingly reported having received prophetic communications (p. 354). Contrary to the accusations that she had abandoned the Bible, the trial transcript shows that she relied extensively on biblical references all through her trial, which frequently confounded her accusers. Ultimately, the divide was not between Hutchinson and her ministerial inquisitors, but between her and John Winthrop, the political power in the MBC. Her "charismatic" practices *per se* were not the problem; it was the threat her views posed to the political order.

⁵ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy* 4.

Cotton was not an Antinomian, his differences with the other ministers in the MBC were at the heart of the controversy.⁶

The Antinomian Controversy was a complex web of social, political, legal, cultural, psychological, and theological issues. No single theory explains the entire event. It has attracted the interest of biographers,⁷ social historians,⁸ legal scholars,⁹ and other historiographers,¹⁰ providing a rich body of primary and secondary sources for students of this period. Unfortunately, the nature of the primary source materials complicates

⁶ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Paternoster Press, 1997), 169.

⁷ Emery John Batts, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Charlotte: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), identified Anne Hutchinson as a menopausal woman of fierce temperament and rebellious nature who followed John Cotton and expanded on his teachings because her husband was a weak and ineffective male leader.

⁸ Lyle Koehler, "The Case of the American Jezebels: Anne Hutchinson and Female Agitation during the Years of the Antinomian Turmoil 1636-1640," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974), 55-78, portrays her as a latent feminist who served as a foil for John Winthrop's consolidation of power.

⁹ Richard B. Morris, *Fair Trial* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 3-32 and Michael Belknap, *American Political Trials* rev. ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 1-24.

¹⁰ Ann Fairfax Withington and Jack Schwartz, "The Political Trial of Anne Hutchinson," *New England Quarterly* 51:2 (June 1978), 226-240, cast as an undesirable those whose views were a political threat to the survival of the Commonwealth. Jon Meacham, *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2006), 49-52 and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States* (New York: Sentinel, 2004), 30-34, both cast Hutchinson and her views as a threat to God's continued blessings to a new society that had willingly entered into a covenant relationship with God. Her view that the believer is not obligated to observe the moral law of the covenant threatened the divine hand of protection upon the MBC at a time when external threats to their continued welfare were widespread. See also Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Anne Hutchinson, Sectarian Mysticism, and the Puritan Order," *Church History* 59:4 (December 1990), 482-496; Edmund S. Morgan, "The Case against Anne Hutchinson," *The New England Quarterly* 10:4 (December 1937), 635-649; Jeffrey M. Kahl, "The Antinomian Controversy and the Puritan Vision: A Historical Perspective on Christian Leadership," *Ashland Theological Journal* 35 (2003), 55-72.

identifying the theological center of the storm.¹¹ Our interests center on the theological issues, several of which bear a striking resemblance to the debate between Lordship Salvation and Free Grace.

Intellectual historians have offered three views about the essential doctrinal issues. Miller framed it as a debate about the role of human activity in the salvation process.¹² His theory about “preparationism” was the predominant view for much of the twentieth century. Stoever offered a second view by emphasizing the theological issue behind preparationism. It is his opinion that this was a disagreement about how the divine will operates in the world.¹³ Hall and Winship offer a third view. From

¹¹ Those involved did not produce substantial systematic works like the continental Reformers. Their work was largely confined to sermons, letters, and journals. The printed sermons were often transcriptions put into circulation by those who heard them. The letters and journals often did not enter the literature until decades later.

¹² Perry Miller, “Preparation for Salvation in 17th Century New England” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4:3 (June 1943), 253-286; Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, 2nd ed., (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1958); Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton: Puritanism and the American Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

¹³ William K. B. Stoever, *“A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven”: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, CT: Wesley University Press, 1978). Stoever’s effort to ferret out the underlying theological presuppositions is puzzling because the parties to the debate did not frame the issue in Stoever’s terms. Nor would they be considered skilled exegetes. Hooker was not careful in his theology or exegesis; he was a pastor with an agenda, and his method of interpreting Scripture suffered accordingly. See, for example, Alfred Habegger, “Preparing the Soul for Christ: The Contrasting Sermon forms of John Cotton and Thomas Hooker,” *American Literature* 41:3 (November 1969): 342-354. Habegger provides solid documentary evidence that Hooker’s approach to the biblical text was governed by Ramist logic, not inductive exposition, or careful theological method. It is doubtful that Hooker would have appreciated Stoever’s nuanced theological analysis. Even Iain Murray, who goes to great lengths to extol Hooker’s views on conversion and assurance, tellingly acknowledges that much of Hooker’s ministry was agenda driven. Hooker wanted to reform the Church of England by troubling unbelievers who fancied themselves Christian merely because they were the king’s subjects. Iain Murray, “Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion, Part 1,” *Banner of Truth Magazine* 195 (December 1979), 19-29; “Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion, Part 2,” *Banner of Truth Magazine* 196 (January 1980), 22-32.

the literature, they have demonstrated that the doctrine of the assurance of salvation is the crucial issue.¹⁴

A. PREPARATIONISM

Preparationism taught that an unbeliever is capable of acting in ways that may lead to salvation. Preparation was a sequence of steps one followed in order to acquire the willingness to believe, if faith came. The preparationists were careful to note that preparatory acts are neither saving nor meritorious; they are necessary but not sufficient.

Preparationism rests upon the twin pillars of Ramist logic and the view that conversion is a process rather than an event.¹⁵ These enabled preparationists to imagine themselves capable of discerning the steps that the Holy Spirit used to draw the elect to salvation.

The first preparatory step was discovering the commandments of God and a futile attempt to fulfill them. The next step was to experience "disappointments and disasters" when the attempts to keep God's Law fails. Next in the sequence was an increasing sense of hopelessness that led to the recognition that only Christ could bring salvation. Then came "the infusion of saving grace," sometimes, but not always, immediately apprehended. This was followed by a lengthy struggle between faith and doubt. Finally, the sinner recognized himself as a recipient of God's grace. This process may or may not include a moment when the individual was certain of passing from "death unto life."¹⁶

¹⁴ Michael Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), concurs that assurance was the central issue in the debate.

¹⁵ Ramist logic is a dialectic process of continually dividing and subdividing areas of knowledge by twos. The earliest English churchmen followed Zwingli in viewing Paul's Damascus Road experience (Acts 9) as a normative conversion. But as early as 1570 influential puritans began to ask if regeneration might be a process rather than an event. See Norman Pettit, "Hooker's Doctrine of Assurance: A Critical Phase in New England Spiritual Thought," *The New England Quarterly* 47:4 (December 1974), 518-519. Kendall sees preparationism as a pastoral device to allay the fears of those who dreaded the possibility that they were reprobate, anchoring it in the doctrine of predestination. See Kendall, 5. In light of the fact that the Synod of Dort explicitly rejected preparationism, it is unlikely that pastoral concerns over the doctrine of predestination alone are a sufficient explanation for the rise of preparationism. See note 33.

¹⁶ Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82:1 (Winter 1985), 115.

Two prominent pastors in the MBC, Thomas Hooker and his son-in-law, Thomas Shepard, were preparationists.¹⁷ Their formulations “reversed the order of the conversion process as described by Calvin, who had held that humiliation occurred only *after* [Parker’s emphasis] God’s arbitrary ‘effectual call.’”¹⁸ Preparationism requires humiliation *before* the call, requiring active effort on the part of the aspiring convert.

Preparationism paved the way out of a serious dilemma for the MBC. Its founders had tied the colony’s political welfare to covenant theology.¹⁹ They held that God makes covenants with groups, treating them as a single unit, in the same way that He makes covenants with persons. A covenant bound the group to a specific political scheme.²⁰ God blesses the group as long as they keep the political terms of the covenant.²¹

This meant that the community’s political welfare was a soteriological issue. When its members were regenerate, a pure church would ensue, insuring God’s blessings upon the community.²² Each person’s good works were essential to the MBC’s survival, but there was no intrinsic

¹⁷ “Hooker, often mistaken as representative of New England orthodoxy, explored preparation at extraordinary length and in extraordinary detail in his preaching. There is no evidence that anyone else, including Shepard, preached preparation with anything like Hooker’s convoluted detail. Shepard shared roughly the same Rogerian [referring to the Puritan Richard Rogers] emphasis, however, and he cared about it strongly. He claimed that failure to grasp that sin had to be severed before justification could occur was the ‘cause of all that counterfeit coin and hypocrisy in this professing age.’” See Winship, *Making Heretics*, 270, n25.

¹⁸ David Lowell Parker, *The Application of Humiliation: Ramist Logic and the Rise of Preparationism in New England*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 16-17.

¹⁹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ From here it becomes a relatively easy matter to work out why antinomianism was seen as a great threat to political survival. Thus, the civil governments of Massachusetts and Connecticut exercised greater control over the religious sentiments of its citizens than any European government had ever attempted. Their *political* need to realize a pure church of pure saints resulted in the absolute necessity to suppress heresy and schism with the organs of government. See Miller, 119-120.

²² *Ibid.*, 54.

motivation for doing those good works because they could not result in personal salvation. This set them on a collision course with the Reformed view of total depravity.

This left the community's political welfare in a precarious position, hanging on the covenant obedience of unregenerate people who had no interest in the covenant's strictures. The challenge was to work out the doctrines of election and total depravity in a political setting.

The solution lay in one fortuitous consequence of covenant theology. Covenant theology frames the relationship between God and man as a contract. Before entering the contract God discloses the terms to the person considering the relationship.²³ The preparationists seized on this concept, and by 1630 preparationism had become a familiar and widely descriptive term in puritan teaching.²⁴

Like good Calvinists, they were quick to note that the works, taken as works, had no merit and could not produce salvation. Their theological innovation was to posit that these preparatory works were *necessary* but not *sufficient*.²⁵ "If the covenant had any meaning, it signified a willingness on man's part to believe in Christ's redemptive power *before* [Battis' emphasis] Christ would accept him in spiritual union. The regenerative process was not an abrupt seizure of the will, but was advanced by easy stages wherein the prospective believer might prepare himself and show his readiness to believe."²⁶

This allowed them to maneuver around the Westminster Confession's assertion that man "is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."²⁷ Preparationism served both the theological need to preserve the doctrines of election and total inability, and the political need to cultivate a moral populace.

²³ Miller, *The New England Mind* 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 56. See also David Laurence, "Jonathan Edwards, Solomon Stoddard, and the Preparationist Model of Conversion," *Harvard Theological Review* 72:3 (July–October 1979), 267–283. The customary practice among English historians is to lowercase "puritans" and "puritanism" because the term refers to tendencies within the Church of England rather than a clearly identifiable movement. This article will follow that custom.

²⁵ They were necessary because God had ordained not only His divine purpose, but the secondary means by which they would be accomplished. The net result was that without these preparatory works there would be no regeneration!

²⁶ Battis, *Saints and Secretaries* 163.

²⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter IX, Section III.

B. NATURE VERSUS GRACE

Stoever goes beyond Miller's preparationism hypothesis, arguing that the controversy was a disagreement over "the proper relationship between created nature and divine activity in the process of regeneration..."²⁸ The Reformers labored to insure that salvation was entirely a work of grace, accomplished in a fashion that did not short-circuit nature. According to Stoever, the emphasis on human activity in preparation and on a works-dependent sanctification was not a departure from Reformation principles; it was an effort to preserve the balance between nature and grace. Because God's will operates through secondary means, human agency "participates legitimately in effectual calling" when restored by grace.²⁹

The issue in Massachusetts Bay may be posed as follows. Does God, in regenerating individuals, employ instruments that belong to the created order-church ordinances, for example, and the words of Scripture-and does he respect and work through the inherent capacities of human beings, empowering human faculties to perform holy actions? ... Or does God act directly on human beings, overruling their natural capacities and transforming them apart from or in spite of any activity of their own?³⁰

Stoever presupposes the point he needs to prove. "Divine sovereignty and human inability to achieve salvation were indeed cardinal points of Reformed teaching. It bears noting, however, that acceptance of these tenets did not mean that human activity, as such, was excluded from regeneration."³¹ John Cotton would have contested Stoever's breezy claim. In refuting Shepard's assertion of divine and human cooperation Cotton wrote, "To works of creation there needth no preparation; the almighty power of God calleth them to be his people...and by calling them to be so, hee maketh them to bee so."³²

²⁸ William K. B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy," *Church History* 44:1 (March 1975), 22.

²⁹ Stoever, "*A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*" 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, xiii. Contrary to Stoever, the MBC ministers departed from standard Reformed theology in several important aspects. For example, they expected positive disposition of the soul before regen-

Stoever overplays the orthodoxy of the MBC ministers³³ and misrepresents Cotton's theology.³⁴ Since the opponents in the controversy did not frame their disagreement in Stoever's terms, neither shall we.

C. ASSURANCE

Hall and Winship identify assurance as the heart of the Antinomian Controversy.

On no topic was the [socially conditioned] and provisional nature of godly knowledge more evident than the one over which the free grace controversy was fought, assurance of salvation... What legitimately constituted assurance and how it was legitimately obtained were issues that were thrashed out over a range of venues that stretched from public doctrinal and scriptural debates to the most intimate and private recesses of personal identity formation and experience.³⁵

eration, not merely the conventional legal preparation that Stoever suggests. They also required that prospective church members be able to convey their experience of grace. See Baird Tipson, "Review: 'A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven': Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 36:3 (July 1979), 480-482.

³³ Preparationism first came under scrutiny at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). The Continental Calvinists refused to be persuaded on the matter. Bishop Joseph Hall, who represented the English Calvinists, did not yield. Although Hall agreed that the unregenerate man's will has no power to achieve his own conversion, he maintained before the Synod that "there are certain foregoing acts that are pre-required to the conversion of a man...as the knowledge of God's will, the feeling of our sin, the fear of hell, the thought of deliverance, [and] some hope of pardon" because God's grace "doth not use to work upon a man immediately by sudden ruptures, but by meet preparations." Bishop Hall thus agreed that salvation is by grace alone while allowing for the elect's cooperation. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, 126-127.

³⁴ Stoever calls Cotton a "crypto-sectary" who came perilously close to invalidating human agency altogether. Stoever, 177. Stoever's assessment tells us more about his theology than it does about Cotton's. Kendall cogently observes that Cotton stood almost alone in hopes of reversing the slide toward experimental predestinarianism. Kendall, 169. If anything, Shepard *et al* were crypto-Arminians!

³⁵ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 4. Hall writes, "I argued in 1978, and would argue again, that assurance of salvation was the central issue in the controversy." See Hall, xiv. He overstates his case against preparationism as the central issue. "In point of fact there was almost nothing about preparation in the controversy."

The controversy broke out during a period when British Calvinism was drifting away from the view that faith and assurance are synonymous.

[E]arly Elizabethan puritan divines spreading the Reformation gospel expressed a powerfully self-confident conception of assurance. It was not something one strove for; it came along with faith. Indeed the most common definition of faith was that it was assurance—God’s declaration of justification produced its own testimony of his love. ‘If we be in the covenant of his grace,’ militant presbyterian Edward Dering said in the early 1570s, ‘it is impossible wee should not feele the comfort of it.’ Around the same time, John Moore, the ‘apostle of Norwich,’ audaciously claimed that true faith carried an assurance as certain ‘as if I performed [Christ’s sacrifice] in mine own person.’ ...The sanctification, or holiness, that followed justification was presumed to spring from assurance of salvation....³⁶

The great message of salvation preached by the early Elizabethan divines was twofold. Salvation came through faith, not through good works or sacraments, and believers could have certainty that their predestining God had pronounced them unalterably justified—Catholics hoped they were saved; the Reformed knew... So central was the doctrine of assurance that

See Hall, xv. Two pages earlier he had said, “As several historians have established, this quarrel had to do with the order of salvation, or the ways in which God accomplished the ‘work of grace,’” and acknowledged preparationism and assurance were intertwined. See Hall, xiii. Pettit observes that preparationism was largely neglected, suggesting that this was a measure “of how sensitive the preparationists had now become to the vulnerability of their doctrine.” See Pettit, 144. Although the controversy was a battle over the doctrine of assurance, preparationism was lurking on the sidelines.

³⁶ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 14. The problem with this view of assurance, which predated the Antinomian Controversy by more than sixty years, lies in the phrase “it is impossible wee should not feele the comfort of it.” This has the unfortunate results of grounding one’s assurance in the perception of God’s comfort and love, rather than leaving it grounded in the nature of faith and the promises addressed to it.

they, like the early continental Reformers, tended to equate it with faith itself.³⁷

The following section will explore the upheaval in British Calvinism over the doctrine of assurance. Here we simply note that while the doctrine was undergoing radical transformation, the desperate need to insure a godly populace confronted the MBC.³⁸ A confluence of threats to its existence, religious revival, and increasing ungodliness in the community flowed together to create what was, in the minds of many, a genuine crisis. Given the theological ferment and political turmoil, the Antinomian Controversy was inevitable. The controversy itself produced a wealth of documentary evidence that assurance was the central *theological* issue of the day.³⁹

III. TWO VIEWS OF ASSURANCE IN THE MBC

A. ASSURANCE IN 16TH CENTURY BRITISH CALVINISM

Sixteenth century puritans were preoccupied with two questions: "What are the avenues of grace and what are the means of assurance?"⁴⁰ The application of Ramist logic to the theological task led to detailed descriptions of the salvation process. This created numerous problems in attempting to develop a reliable doctrine of assurance.

Earlier puritans assumed that holy living followed justification, and that assurance preceded sanctification. In 1570 the martyrologist John Foxe preached, "Faith groundeth upon Christes passion, faith geveth the sappe of love, love blossometh forth in good works." Richard Greenham declared, "That joy with [a convert] conceiveth inforceth him, and putteh life into him, for the performance of those things, which are pleasing unto God."⁴¹ Others at the time echoed similar sentiments.⁴² Their views

³⁷ Michael Winship, "Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers: Assurance of Salvation and the Pastoral Origins of Puritan Practical Divinity in the 1580s," *Church History* 70:3 (September 2001), 465.

³⁸ Miller, *The New England Mind*, 119-120. He states, "The fundamental problem of life for English Puritans was not social: it was the salvation of the soul, out of which would flow purification of the church and a regeneration of the state," 54.

³⁹ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 5.

⁴⁰ Battis, *Saints and Secretaries*, 21.

⁴¹ Winship, *Weak Christians*, 466.

⁴² Winship, *Making Heretics*, 14.

on the relationship between salvation, sanctification, and assurance looked like this:

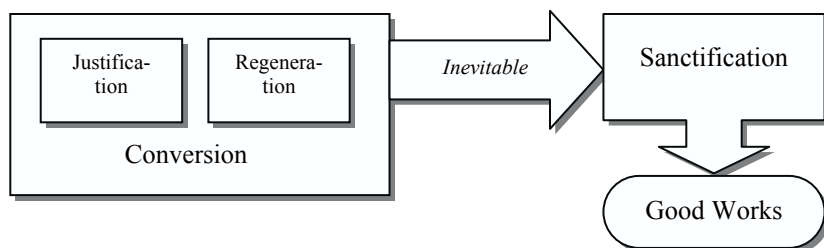


Figure 1: Earlier Puritan View of Assurance

Conversion bestows assurance. Assurance has no direct connection with good works but logically precedes them in the process. It was inevitable that the regenerate nature would eventually show itself in good works, which are sanctification's visible product. However, the practical reality was that many church members failed to live up to the high standards set for believers⁴³ while others seized on assurance presumptuously.⁴⁴ This led to grave doubts about whether this view of assurance was correct.

At the same time the earlier view of assurance was coming under scrutiny, Richard Rogers (1550-1618) and William Perkins (1558-1602) were discarding the view that conversion was an instantaneous episode that overcomes the elect, like Paul's experience on the Damascus Road.

⁴³ William Perkins complained that the earlier puritans had linked assurance and faith "at so high a reach as few can attaine unto it." See Winship, 14. It seems that none of the puritans ever bothered to question whether sanctification was inevitable. It was simply assumed because they did not recognize the differences between the standards for believers (faith alone!) and those for disciples (faith and obedience).

⁴⁴ A comment by Winship on this matter exposes the puritans' failure to distinguish between believers—who are regenerate—and disciples—who are striving for sanctification. "John Knewstub complained in 1577 that...most acknowledged that only faith in Jesus saved them. Yet they failed to understand what it really meant to renounce one's righteousness and rely on Christ..." See Winship, *Weak Christians*, 467. This suggests that renunciation of one's own righteousness is an essential component of faith in Christ.

They treated conversion as a process rather than an event.⁴⁵ This brought assurance into question because it was impossible to identify when regeneration occurred in the conversion process. By revisiting the earlier doctrines of conversion and assurance the later puritans broke the link between faith and assurance.

Perkins, Rogers, and Thomas Hooker⁴⁶ (1586-1647) helped create and eventually stepped into the breach between salvation and assurance. They not only de-coupled assurance from salvation, they held that holiness was a sign of salvation. Rogers concluded, "If you practiced strict and ongoing piety and compared it with God's conditional promises, that visible piety proved you were saved."⁴⁷ Perkins claimed that sanctification was "an infallible sign of salvation."⁴⁸ Soon others were following in the path that Rogers and Perkins had blazed. Their views on the relationship between salvation, sanctification, and assurance looked like this:

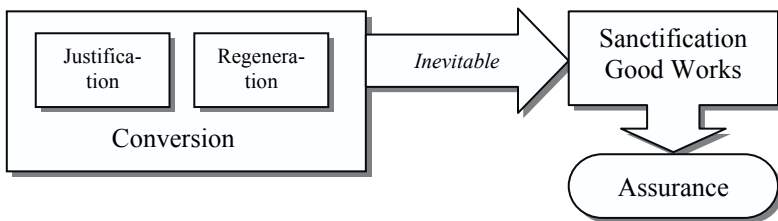


Figure 2: Later Puritan View of Assurance

At conversion, the elect are justified, receiving a regenerate and believing nature. This new nature will inevitably reveal its sanctification in good works. These declare the presence of the regenerate nature and, ergo, one's certainty of election is possible.

B. THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE MBC

By the time of the Antinomian Controversy, numerous unanswered questions clouded the doctrine of assurance in England. Were reading and meditation in the Scriptures the source of assurance, or did it come

⁴⁵ The earlier Elizabethan puritans had developed a robust concept of assurance that included it in the act of faith. "Indeed the most common definition of faith was that it was assurance..." See Winship, *Making Heretics*, 14.

⁴⁶ Pettit, *Hooker's Doctrine of Assurance*, 519.

⁴⁷ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

through the Word preached? Was assurance a once-and-forever event or was ongoing participation in the life of the church required? Did assurance insure against doubt? Could one doubt salvation, or should the issue never be visited again, even after falling into monstrous sin?

Given the lively debate going on within British Calvinism, the Antinomian Controversy was inevitable. The clash between Cotton and Shepard illustrates the two bases on which Calvinists develop their doctrine of assurance, both of which are wrong. On one hand, John Cotton anchored his doctrine of assurance on intuition, or the inner witness of the Spirit. On the other, Thomas Shepard relied on practical obedience to the law for assurance. As we shall see, both are wholly subjective and neither is satisfactory.

C. INTUITION

Earlier in his career, John Cotton held the view that works were the source of assurance,⁴⁹ but he began to shift from that position when it was brought to his attention that supralapsarianism—the view that God decreed eternal damnation of sinners before he decreed Adam’s Fall—was manifestly indefensible.⁵⁰ In the process of rethinking his views and rejecting covenant theology, he disconnected assurance from a constant stream of inward and outward duties.

In New England Cotton was firm: even the upright saint cannot safely advance his sanctification as proof of his state of grace, unless justifying faith was first plainly manifest.⁵¹ Rejecting works as the basis of assurance forced Cotton to turn within, searching for assurance in the awareness of union with the Holy Spirit. “Those in a true state of grace bore within themselves an all-essential witness that was to be more

⁴⁹ There is a double irony here because Thomas Shepard had flirted with the view that assurance is the promise of the gospel while in University studies.

⁵⁰ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 30.

⁵¹ Battis, *Saints and Secretaries*, 33. Kendall claims that after 1636 Cotton’s views could be summarized under three points. First, that faith alone is the evidence of justification. Second, that there is no saving preparation for grace prior to regeneration. Third, that sanctification is no proof of justification. See Kendall, 169. He also states that for Cotton “assurance is the essence of saving faith.” Before Free Grace adherents embrace Kendall’s conclusion they need to recall Cotton’s subjectivity. Cotton “tends to make faith an experience—a subjective emotional feeling.” See Kendall, 171.

closely regarded than works as an evidence of regeneration.”⁵² When pressed by the other MBC ministers on this point, Cotton was firm.

To the last part hereof, wherein you add other things besides the Image of God in Adam concurring to the making up of Christian sanctification, we cannot assent; because we conceive that faith is the medium whereby we are sanctified... and the indwelling power of the Holy Ghost the procreant and conservant Cause.⁵³

Although Cotton was correct that assurance is not a product of sanctification, he did not go far enough. He taught that at justification, the believer received assurance from the Son, mixed with doubt and fear. In time, the Holy Spirit would grant a Pentecost experience that would “so clearly reveal our acceptance through the righteousness of Christ, that from thence springeth peace unto the soul, which groweth until it passeth understanding.”⁵⁴

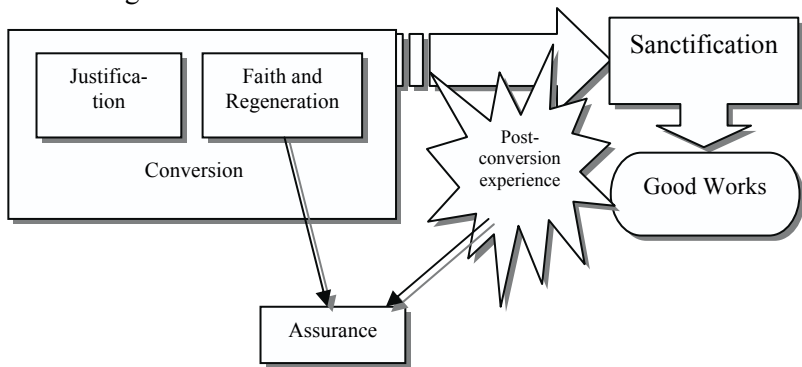


Figure 3: Cotton's View of Assurance

When in October 1636 the General Court took these matters in hand, “Cotton suffered no doubt that the essential witness of salvation lay in the immediate testimony of the Spirit.”⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 38-39.

⁵³ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 67.

⁵⁴ Winship, *Making Heretics* 35.

⁵⁵ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 121-122. The precise nature of this inner witness of the Spirit is difficult to define precisely. Winship, *Weak Christians*, 473, notes that “earlier divines tended to speak of that witness in terms of an I-thou encounter or in emotionally exalted terms.” It was variously described

D. OBEDIENCE

Thomas Shepard taught assurance is a product of practical obedience to the moral law.⁵⁶ He asked Cotton “Whether a Christian having once his sonship sealed to him by the spirit ever doubts agayne of God's love to him as a son, though he fall into diverse grosse and scandalous sins...” criticizing the subjectivity of Cotton’s view.⁵⁷ In contrast, he asserted that the regenerate undergo a “double alteration.” Not only is Christ’s righteousness imputed in justification, it is implanted in sanctification.⁵⁸ Thus the MBC ministers, under Shepard’s lead, asked Cotton “Whither Habits of Grace doe not differ a sainte from an Hypocrite?” and “Whither hee that hath received the Witnesse of the Spirit ought not to try it by Witnesse from sanctification?”⁵⁹ In his autobiography, Shepard recites the principle cause of the problem that led to the Antinomian Controversy. He recites the trouble suffered by the churches and the whole country, naming Hutchinson and Cotton as the source of it. In his opinion, the principle cause of the trouble was Cotton’s rejection of works as an evidence of justification.

The principal opinion and seed of all the rest was this, viz., that a Christian should not take any evidence of God's special grace and love toward him by the sight of any graces or conditional evangelical promises to faith or sanctification, in way of ratiocination (for this was evidence and so a way of works), but it must be without the sight of any grace, faith, holiness, or

as a state of tranquility, a sense of divine comfort or consolation. It was, at bottom, an inner sense of being.

⁵⁶ While at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Shepard had earnestly sought to experience the presence of God. He never enjoyed that experience. Being devoid of any sense of the Holy Spirit’s seal, he was highly suspicious of those who claimed assurance on that basis. Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 281.

⁵⁷ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 27.

⁵⁸ Stoeve, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 44-47.

⁵⁹ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 45. The questions suppose that the witness of the Spirit—on which Cotton built his doctrine of assurance—ought not be tested in light of one’s works of sanctification. This was *the crux* of the debate.

special change in himself, by immediate revelation in an absolute promise.⁶⁰

In Shepard's view, justification changes our legal status and sanctification changes our character. The implanted "graces of sanctification" are empirical evidence of justification. Those who discover works of sanctification in themselves may reasonably take assurance of their justification before God. The works themselves do not produce justification but merely declare the fact. They often presented their view as a syllogism:

He that is truly sanctified is justified.
But I am such,
Ergo, I am justified.⁶¹

E. BOTH VIEWS FAIL

Shepard and Cotton both made a critical error by requiring the believer to look to himself, either his works or his inner self, for the source of assurance.

Shepard's challenge to Cotton was valid. If the inner witness of the Spirit is the basis of assurance, what happens to assurance when we no longer sense that witness? How do we know that the ensuing doubt of God's love is only doubt rather than evidence that we are in fact reprobate? Because assurance rested entirely upon internal awareness of the Spirit's activity, it was entirely subjective.⁶²

Cotton's challenge to Shepard was also valid. "If a man has only his own sanctification as [proof] of his justification, then his faith is not set on Christ's righteousness, nor on the free promise of grace, but only on his own works."⁶³ By pointing to Christ Cotton came close to moving from intuition to the view that assurance is the essence of faith.

⁶⁰ Michael McGiffert, *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 67. This was a clear departure from Calvin's warning that in the matter of sanctification, "if you contemplate yourself, that is sure damnation," *Institutes* III.ii.24. Kendall observes that the one thing "Calvin does not do, then, is to urge men to make their calling and election sure to themselves," 25. It is hard to take seriously Stoever's claim that Cotton, who said virtually the same thing on assurance, is a "crypto-sectary" who had departed from Calvin on this matter.

⁶¹ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

Cotton professed himself unable to believe it possible for a person to maintain that grace works a condition in him, reveals it, makes a promise to it, and applies it to him, and still not to trust in the work. If a person did not trust in the merit of the work, he would at least be tempted to trust in the right of it to the promise, and he probably would not dare to trust a promise unless he could see a work.⁶⁴

Cotton could have pointed out that when pressed, Shepard's view was also subjective.⁶⁵ When asked to distinguish works of believers from those of the unregenerate, Shepard turned within, to motive, attitude, and emotion. He acknowledged that while works may be deceptive, they might serve as reliable guides when understood in the context of proper spirit and motivation. Stoever helps us navigate Shepard's logic.

*That a person obeyed the commandments meant little; how and why he obeyed them were the vital points. Right, sincere, sound sanctification... involves the entire man, body and soul, substance and faculties... It makes the sanctified wary of sin and desirous of living wholly after God... it makes him keenly aware of his own want of grace and of his dependence on Christ for strength. Those who have passed from death to life may know it, if not intuitively then by reflective examination of their behavior. The truly sanctified render universal obedience to God, simply because they delight to do so.*⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 55. In commenting on Cotton's views Stoever makes an amazing admission. "One cannot argue to justification from acts of faith and sanctification, as to a cause from its effects, because one cannot know, apart from the Spirit's revealing, that one's faith and sanctification are true, there being nothing distinctive about the works of either by which to recognize them. True faith of assurance rests solely upon its proper object—God's mercy and free grace offered in Christ—and then only as 'revealed to me in some divine testimony,'" 56. With some modification of this statement, Stoever might be mistaken for an adherent of free grace! God's revelation is the only basis of assurance.

⁶⁵ In 1578 Chaderton, Perkins' tutor at Cambridge, had observed "we can never thynke, will, speake, or doe any good thing with pure heartes." See Winship, *Weak Christians*, 466. The more closely we analyze our works to understand the *how* and *why* of our obedience, the more clearly we become aware of our impurity. It is a fool's errand to imagine that we can ever fully understand our motivation for doing anything!

⁶⁶ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 74.

Shepard's argument is self-destructive. His doctrine was faulty because he urged people to take comfort in gracious works, but only those done for the right reason! This left people at the mercy of internal emotional states.⁶⁷ When asked how one could know if he is elect, Shepard would reply that it was by means of the Spirit's work in the soul, expressed in good works. This led to the question of how one could know if good works were the expression of the Spirit's sanctifying work in the elect.⁶⁸ A believer "may know the blessedness of his estate 'by the peculiarness of a work within him.' The elect are distinguished by certain kinds of acts that are the effects of the Spirit's work; and *through these acts, judged according to the revealed word* [emphasis added], the Spirit's work can be known, even as God's power, wisdom, and goodness are known by their effects in creation."⁶⁹ Despite his best efforts, Shepard left a *subjective* standard by which to distinguish the believer's good works from those of a hypocrite. It is up to the individual to make an interpretive judgment of his own actions in light of how he understands Scripture.⁷⁰

Although Cotton and Shepard began their respective doctrines of assurance differently, both ended up digging in the same bottomless pit of subjectivity.⁷¹ Both walked into a theological *cul-de-sac* from which there was no escape by seeking knowledge of facts in the spiritual world

⁶⁷ "By the middle of the seventeenth century, New England clergy shared with many other Protestants a conception of the Christian life as a journey that required an incessant, never-ending struggle against sin." See Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, xix.

⁶⁸ Stoever, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven*, 120-121.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁰ The "hopeful saint...must examine his behavior rigorously in light of conscience and God's revealed will." See William K. B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy," *Church History* 44:1 (March 1975), 27. An additional argument that should have been raised against Shepard, *et al*, is the unquestioned assumption that the conscience is capable of understanding the motivation behind our acts.

⁷¹ For Shepard as well as Cotton, the most certain evidence of one's election was the "privy seal" of the Spirit, an inward witness of the Spirit to the soul that cannot be mistaken and is conclusive. Yet when it came time to qualify or quantify this privy seal, the objective criteria were *always* framed in terms of the Spirit's comfort, a change in behavior motivated by the Spirit, a change of character, and finally, a sense of joy in obedience.

(God's elective intent toward the individual) by working from data gathered in the natural world.⁷² Their epistemological folly left the question about the means of assurance unanswered.

III. A "MISSED OPPORTUNITY" FOR FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

Although the Antinomian Controversy was a dispute between Calvinists, many of them expressed views that should receive a warm welcome in Free Grace circles. Had they been allowed freedom of religious expression, perhaps Colonial America may have had the chance to embrace Free Grace theology! As things ended, an opportunity was lost. In this final section, the views of key figures are looked at with which Free Grace adherents may agree.

A. JOHN COTTON

Cotton was a Reformed theologian through and through. Nonetheless, some features of his thought were friendly to Free Grace positions. He objected to the notion that works have anything at all to do with accomplishing or revealing the Spirit's regenerating work. Human activity cannot reveal whether a person is regenerate. He flatly denied that gracious habits dwelt within the regenerate in such a way that they operated by their own power.⁷³ Without close personal communion with the Holy Spirit, believers are not capable of a godly and pleasing life.

Cotton's definition of faith is also familiar to Free Grace adherents.

The Spirit of God sent into the Soule worketh Faith, That is the Union... In this union the soule Receiveth Christ, as an empty vessell receiyveth oyle; but this receyving is not active, but passive. By this declaration of the union the spirit giveth

⁷² Cotton was working with data about the "immediate testimony of the spirit" which must eventually resolve itself into an *interpretation* of sensory and emotional data. Shepard was working with data points about one's observance of the law that must eventually be measured against some arbitrary standard. Whether the data set was of one's interior condition (Cotton) or one's exterior behavior (Shepard), sure knowledge of eternal truths cannot be discovered therein.

⁷³ Stoever, *Nature*, 28.

onely a being to Faith: but noe power to actual Receyving: for that cometh after, as a fruit of the union.⁷⁴

This definition of faith as the passive reception of something offered should be welcome in Free Grace circles, with appropriate caveats.

B. ANNE HUTCHINSON

The sketchy records that have survived indicate that Anne Hutchinson developed a robust doctrine of assurance through biblical study and personal reflection while she was in England. She determined that assurance rests solely upon God's promise.

Her original experience of assurance came through her understanding of an absolute promise found in Jer 46:27-28. She understood Jeremiah's utterance, "Fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith the Lord: for I am with thee" as a promise that she was among the elect. "The Lord shewed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants."⁷⁵ Although she understood this portion of the text in personal terms, it had prophetic significance. "I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee: but I will not forsake thee." She associated the warning with England's imminent destruction but took comfort in a promise of personal protection.⁷⁶

This initial sense of assurance did not last. To regain it she followed the puritan prescription by seeking proof of her election in the signs of her own practical holiness. In that process a lucid and remarkable insight occurred. She realized that in searching for assurance in her works she had turned away from grace. "She unconsciously expected God to save her not through his free grace but because of her own good works... She had shifted her reliance from Christ to herself."⁷⁷

Apparently, she learned the lesson well and began to administer it to others. Upon her arrival in the MBC both Wilson and Cotton questioned her as to her views on these matters. At that time, she insisted that sanctification could provide assurance only after justification was known.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 37. This last sentence may be Cotton quoting another authority; the manuscript is unclear.

⁷⁵ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 38.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 41. Presumably justification was known by virtue of faith in God's promises, as she experienced earlier in England.

During her residence in the MBC, she pressed the correct doctrine of assurance upon the women to whom she ministered.⁷⁹ Cotton later recalled that she “readily fell into good discourse with the women about their spiritual estates.”⁸⁰ She explained how easily they could fool themselves that they were saved by grace while trusting in their good works. They might engage in all the practices expected of godly laity: “secret Prayer, Family Exercises, Conscience of Sabbaths, Reverence of Ministers, Frequenting of Sermons, Diligence in Calling, Honesty in Dealing and the like.”⁸¹ They might even find “flashes of spiritual comfort in this estate”⁸² but without faith in God’s promise, they would remain among the unregenerate.

C. JOHN WINTHROP

In the midst of the mounting crisis, then governor John Winthrop wrote a lengthy theological essay in January 1637, prompted by “the new opinions which had broken out in the church of Boston, ‘that a man is justified before he believes; and that faith is no cause of justification.’”⁸³ Winthrop did not realize that these “new opinions” from the Boston church were nothing of the sort; they were standard Calvinist teaching. His reaction belies the degree to which he had been schooled in preparationism.

In response, he entered into a lengthy period of prayer, fasting, and Bible study to find illumination of the issues. The fruit of his effort was a lengthy treatise that included the “declaration expounding his conviction that faith must precede justification and is in part a cause of it.”⁸⁴ This promising beginning may have led to further reconsideration of preparationism and perhaps the Reformed doctrine of total inability. Sadly, he submitted this document to Pastor Wilson who then conveyed it to Thomas Shepard. Shepard recognized the danger inherent in Winthrop’s views. He persuaded Winthrop, whom he had already co-opted in the political trials, to quash its publication. The document has not survived and all that remains are notes in Shepard’s writings.

⁷⁹ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 309, 412.

⁸⁰ Winship, *Making Heretics*, 41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Pettit, *Hooker’s Doctrine of Assurance*, 140.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

D. JOHN WHEELWRIGHT

John Wheelwright was Anne Hutchinson's brother-in-law. In June 1636, he arrived in the MBC and became pastor of Eaxe Chapel at Mount Wollaston, Boston. He was soon embroiled in the controversy.

On January 19, 1637 the MBC held a fast to restore the peace that had been broken by dissension in the churches. Wheelwright preached in the Boston church that day. His sermon raised the Antinomian Controversy to a fevered pitch.⁸⁵ The sermon was preserved from shorthand notes taken by Robert Keayne,⁸⁶ and two versions of the manuscript are still in existence.⁸⁷ In it, he declared that those who have called for the fast had tacitly admitted that the Lord was not with them or with their teaching.⁸⁸

I wrap all up in one poynt of Doctrine, and that is this. The only cause of the fasting of true beleevers is the absence of Christ. Either Christ he is present with his people, or els absent from his people; if he be present with his people, then they have no cause to fast: therefore it must be his absence that is the true cause of fasting, when he is taken away then they must fast.⁸⁹

Wheelwright denounced those who turned first to their own works rather than to Christ, or who seek comfort in the fruits of their sanctification rather than in God's promises.

What is the course we must take? Must we especially looke after the removing those evill things and procuring those good things? This an hypocrite will do...and the Lord will grant the desire of hypocrites. What must we do then? We must looke first, at the Lord Jesus Christ, and most desire now that Jesus Christ may be received in other nations and other places, and may be more received amongst ourselves. We must turne unto the Lord and then he will will turne all into a right frame...

⁸⁵ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 152.

⁸⁶ Winnifred King Rugg, *Unafraid: The Life of Anne Hutchinson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 133.

⁸⁷ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 153.

⁸⁸ Adams called Wheelwright's sermon "perhaps the most momentous single sermon ever preached from the American pulpit." See Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History, Vol. 1*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 368.

⁸⁹ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 154.

So the children of God are a company, a generation that seeke the Lord and his strength evermore, they do not only seeke the gifts of his spirit, but the Lord himself, they doe not seeke after the strength that is in the Lord, they do not seeke only to know the Lord by his fruits and effects, but look upon the Lord with a direct faith they seeke his face.⁹⁰

Although Wheelwright's sermon seems mild, removed as we are by 370 years from the controversy, it was inflammatory and seditious. It led to his expulsion from the MBC.

IV. CONCLUSION

A full and lucid presentation of Free Grace theology was unavailable to the community of believers that had gathered at the MBC, but views that distinguish the Free Grace position were under discussion. Among them were the doctrine of assurance, the definition of faith, and faith before justification. An innovative form of Calvinism,⁹¹ remarkably similar to today's Lordship Salvation, discarded them all. Thus, it is fair to say that the MBC rejected key elements of Free Grace theology, and would have rejected Free Grace theology in its entirety.

It is also clear that the MBC ministers, following the lead of Perkins and Beza, had departed from Calvin's theology. Their views on preparation and assurance were not Calvin's theological legacy, and had he the opportunity to confront their views, would have rejected them.⁹²

The Antinomian Controversy demonstrates that data perceived in the natural world cannot produce certain knowledge of facts in the spiritual world. This includes data gathered by observing and interpreting one's practical obedience to the law, and data gathered by searching for evidence of the Spirit's activity within. Any attempt to develop assurance on anything other than revelation will inevitably fail because it is necessarily subjective. Assurance is *believing* God's promises.

⁹⁰ *John Wheelwright* [book on-line] (Boston: The Prince Society, 1876), 158, available from <http://books.google.com/books?id=zfUYwP1fGRwC&pg=PA1&dq=john+Wheelwright#PPA158,M1>; Internet; accessed August 7, 2007.

⁹¹ Kendall has demonstrated that puritanism was not the theological legacy of Calvin or the continental Reformers. Instead, it was the unraveling of Reformed theology.

⁹² This is Kendall's thesis. See Kendall, 18, n2.

In the course of this study three final questions about Lordship Salvation occurred.

First, it is evident that the Lordship position evolved out of covenant theology. This leads to the question of whether dispensational Lordship advocates find themselves in the odd place of holding a soteriology that is at odds with their eschatology.

Second, if God's elective intent toward any person is a fact that resides in the eternal, spiritual world, it appears that Lordship advocates have fallen into a philosophical or epistemological trap by attempting to discern that fact from data gathered in this created world. The history of philosophy has shown that one cannot begin with facts in the natural world and arrive at certain knowledge of *anything* in the eternal world.

Finally, if assurance is a product of Scripture (specifically of the promises in Scripture of everlasting life to all who believe in Jesus Christ), how should we evaluate a theology which claims that the promises of Scripture are insufficient? Lordship theologians are asserting that the promises of Scripture are inadequate for producing certain knowledge of the believer's final state. Such a view devalues the power and scope of God's promises, focusing instead on some inner, subjective experience or feeling, as well as an outer, subjective evidence of good works.

GRACE IN THE ARTS:

ANNIE DILLARD: MISTAKEN MYSTIC?

JAMES A. TOWNSEND

Elgin, Illinois

I. INTRODUCTION

When Annie Dillard won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, many Evangelical Christians thought they had discovered a kindred spirit. However, “Dillard has called herself a Christian mystic whose audience is primarily agnostic nonbelievers, [and] she considers herself an artist rather than a theologian or exegete.”¹ This is both her strength and weakness, for we are blessed by the artistry, but cursed by the ambiguity.

The principal problem an Evangelical Christian has with Annie Dillard’s publications is that instead of inching toward greater assured truth as revealed in Scripture, she focuses instead on the mystical aspects of Christianity. Particularly in regard to what is unrevealed, unknowable, or uncertain about the Bible, God, Christ, sin, and salvation.

II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Annie Dillard grew up in Pittsburgh, PA with the name Meta Ann Doak. Annie’s growing-up years are autobiographically recorded in *An American Childhood* and Annie’s writing reveals the influence of both parents. Her father was a lapsed Presbyterian, and her mother’s speech was “endlessly interesting.”²

In the religious realm, three situations in her younger years are noteworthy. The first is her brushes with the Catholic Church. She spoke (through her childhood thought-grid) of “gibberish” which the Catholic

¹ Linda L. Smith, *Annie Dillard* (New York: Twayne, 1991), 1.

² Annie Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 308.

school children “had to believe.”³ Through the filter of her Protestant schoolmates, Dillard got the notion that these faithless children “wrote down [in their workbooks] whatever the Pope said.”⁴ “Her perception was that the [teaching] nuns seemed to be kept in St. Bede’s [School] as in a prison.”⁵ Annie’s mother tried to disabuse the child of some of her stereotypical notions by taking her out and having the “black phalanx” of nuns say hello to her daughter.⁶ “No one knew what Mass might be; my parents shuddered to think.”⁷ Nevertheless, Dillard described her childhood Presbyterian church as “anti-Catholic.” Oddly enough, the adult Dillard ended up becoming part of the Catholic Church in 1988 at age 43.⁸

A second formidable factor in her younger years were summer Bible camps where she was required to memorize Bible chapters, sing hymns, and attend chapel.⁹ As a result of camp, Presbyterian Sunday school, and Thursday’s Bible-as-literature classes at school, Dillard “had miles of Bible in memory.”¹⁰ Such Bible passages and allusions spout up like underground geysers erupting later in her adult writings.

A third vignette involves her teenage rebellion and church dropout. During her teenage years she was suspended from school and wound up in juvenile court for involvement in drag racing. During this period she announced she was quitting the church and wrote the minister a letter. The assistant pastor, Dr. James H. Blackwood, met with the teenager and offered her some of C. S. Lewis’ writings (which the precocious Dillard found inadequate on the problem of pain).¹¹ Her church dropout lasted one month.

Dillard graduated from Hollins College in Virginia with a B.A. (1967) and M.A. (1968) in English literature. She married her creative writing professor while she was an undergraduate at Hollins, but got

³ Ibid., 303.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 304

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 310-11.

⁸ Pamela A. Smith, “The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence” *Cross Currents* 45 (Fall 1995), 341.

⁹ Philip Yancey, “A Face Aflame,” *Christianity Today*, May 6, 1978, 14. See also, Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 410.

¹⁰ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 411.

¹¹ Ibid., 511-13.

divorced ten years later in 1975—the same year in which she received her Pulitzer Prize (at age 30). Her second marriage was also to a college professor. They lived together for several years before marrying. She married for a third time in 1988.

Dillard is most widely recognized for her Pulitzer-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, but she wrote numerous other books as well. *Holy the Firm* is the most orthodox, while *For the Time Being* is her most troubling book (for an Evangelical Christian), since it takes a comparative religion approach to knowing about spiritual truth. *An American Childhood* offers a partial autobiography while *The Living* narrates pioneer adventures of families settling in the Pacific Northwest.

Dillard issued two volumes related to her authorial craft, namely, *Living by Fiction* and *The Writing Life*. Her *Encounters with Chinese Writers* collects her reminiscences and insights from the two-way cultural exchange she engaged in at home and abroad. Dillard also published two slender volumes of poetry: *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* and *Mornings Like This*.

III. DILLARD'S THEOLOGY

A. THE BIBLE: JUST ANOTHER RELIGIOUS BOOK

Annie Dillard's writing is very impressive. Frederick Buechner, himself a similarly gifted writer much relished by Evangelicals, said: "For sustained intensity [Dillard's] style is not easily matched anywhere in contemporary writing."¹² Furthermore, Dillard demonstrates a high degree of familiarity with the biblical text. For example, her book *Holy the Firm* borrows the tripartite pattern of (1) creation, (2) fall, and (3) redemption for a framework.¹³ Also Eugene Peterson tabulated seventeen allusions to and three quotations from the Bible in her *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.¹⁴ How many seminarians would have sought to make a point from the OT wave offering (as Dillard does)? It is rare for her to make a factual error with reference to the Bible.

To the knowledgeable, Evangelical, Christian reader, however, the problem lies not in Dillard's insightful usage or poetic license, but in her

¹² Buechner, cited in Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, "Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open," *Theology Today* (July 1986), 184.

more liberal approach to God's Word. She refers to "the Adam and Eve of legend,"¹⁵ and thinks the book of Genesis was not written by Moses, but was compiled by various men in the fifth century B.C.¹⁶ These are typical liberal opinions about Genesis.

Regarding the inspiration of Scripture, Dillard states that "God wrote no scripture, neither chapter nor verse. It is foolish to blame...Him for his admirers' claims, superstitious or otherwise."¹⁷ While few Evangelicals believe in a mechanical view of inspiration, it sounds like Dillard is denying that God is the ultimate Author behind the human writers of the Bible. If so, orthodox Christians have a bone to pick with her theology.

Because of Annie Dillard's deficient perspective on Scripture, she frequently speaks as if God were silent (or raises the question about God's silence). In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard declares: "We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it," with the aftereffect that God is "keeping mum."¹⁸ Later in the same book she asserts twice: "The silence is all there is."¹⁹ Earlier in the same volume she speaks of trying "to raise a peep out of anything that isn't us" and "pray[ing] till we're blue."²⁰

Dillard also confused general revelation (in nature) with special revelation (in Scripture). As a literary scientist, Dillard explores the realm of nature in great detail, only to raise the question of meaninglessness. Is God speaking in creation? In *Living by Fiction* she raises the issue:

Who will tell us the meaning of the raw universe? By the raw universe I mean here all that we experience, all things cultural and natural, all of the universe that is known, given, made, and changing: "the world, and they that dwell therein."²¹

As Dillard engages in her Thoreau, back-to-nature, re-enactment outdoors in Virginia (in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) she decides: "Revelation is a study in stalking. Pass the nets on the right side of the ship and ye shall

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 88.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90, 94.

²⁰ Ibid., 89.

²¹ Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 145.

find.”²² In her mind, “revelation” is evidently equatable with “illumination” or “insight.”

In this regard Dillard uses a wonderful illustration: “Nature is like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children: Can you find hidden in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra, and a boot?”²³ Yet Linda Smith deduces from Dillard that “a deity exists and that his nature can be discerned in his creation.”²⁴

Dillard is right that some truth about God may be deduced from the natural world (Rom 1:20). In fact, Linda Smith claims that Dillard’s assumption is “that God’s grace is revealed in the physical world in the manifestation of nature, a basic tenet of Christianity.”²⁵ The problem is, as Dillard all too well recognizes, that Lord Alfred Tennyson’s dictum about nature being “red in tooth and claw” is all too prevalent in the out-of-doors-world. Since this is so, what does it say about God?

In Philip Yancey’s 1978 interview with Annie Dillard, she said: “I approached the whole chaos of nature as if it were God’s book.” Yancey must have felt uncomfortable with this combined statement for he rejoined: “But only God can tell you about God. Nature merely tells you about nature. What if something you learned from nature contradicted Scripture?”²⁶

Oddly enough, Annie Dillard pinpointed the principal problem concerning natural revelation as well as anyone has. She wrote: “Like a blind man at the ball game, I need a radio.”²⁷ However, she never seemed to recognize that the Bible *is* the radio. Natural revelation must be subject to special revelation. The world of God must be deciphered by means of the written Word of God. Unless the Bible becomes our light-house guide, we are left to flounder at sea (among the anarchy of opinions), and there are treacherous, jagged rocks along the shore awaiting our fragile ships. Annie’s lack of dependence upon Scripture led her to some frightful ideas about God.

²² Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ Yancey, “A Face Aflame,” 17.

²⁷ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 37.

B. GOD: UNCARING OGRE

1. *The Agnostic Annie*

In an interview in 1978 Dillard declared: "I don't know anything about God, any more than anybody else does...I'm just writing...to turn your attention to God."²⁸ Again, in *For the Time Being* she reiterated: "I don't know beans about God."²⁹ In reference to her favorite (or most-quoted) modern thinker (Teilhard de Chardin), Dillard quotes him (without any critique) as saying, "I feel no special assurance of the existence of Christ."³⁰ What the paradox-loving Teilhard calls the "shadows of faith," she calls "doubt," for faith "is not assenting intellectually to a series of doctrinal propositions; it is living in conscious and rededicated relationship to God," although "the temptation to profess creeds with uncrossed fingers is strong."³¹ Nevertheless, Dillard can write that "the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, and God."³²

2. *God's Ogrish Aspect*

One of Dillard's central concerns is with the seeming callousness or cruelty of God. She stated to Philip Yancey: "When I worked on *Holy the Firm* and [a] plane went down [leaving a girl terribly burned], I thought, 'Oh no, God is making me write about this damn problem of pain again.'"³³ The sentence supplies us with certain presuppositions about her view of writing and about God when she deduces from the current catastrophe that "God is making" her write about the problem of pain.

The horrors viewed within nature in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* furnish Dillard with the "aspect of God...that challenges the narrator's view of a benevolent deity."³⁴ *For the Time Being* opens with elaborate detail from a photographic textbook on human beings who would be popularly described as freaks—humans with grotesque appearances due to birth defects. She also vividly describes how the Romans flayed the skin off of

²⁸ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 82.

²⁹ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Random House, 1999), 169.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³² Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 24.

³³ Yancey, "A Face Aflame," 17.

³⁴ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 29.

the eighty-five-year-old Rabbi Akira with a curry comb.³⁵ The reader is then treated to numerous statistics on millions of people tortured and killed by various tyrants. For example, in Communist China the toll numbered 72 million.³⁶

Later, Dillard writes:

Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, ‘All your actions show your wisdom and love.’ Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, ‘That’s a lie!’—just to put things on a solid footing.³⁷

Dillard cries out, “God, look at what you’ve done,...look at the...cruelty, the long damned waste! Can it possibly, ludicrously, be for *this*...that...with my innocent kind I play softball all spring?”³⁸ Here she sounds somewhat like Mark Twain—with humans being “innocent” while God becomes the ogre. Her conclusion in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is that the final understanding about God is that we are “dealing with a maniac.”³⁹ In *Holy the Firm* “we reel out love’s long line alone toward a God less lovable than a grasshead, who treats us less well than we treat our lawns.”⁴⁰ Similarly, she writes that “Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each of the 5.9 billion of us.”⁴¹ So to Dillard, God is uncaring and unloving toward most of humanity. Dillard’s view of a loveless God is further hampered by her view of Christ.

C. CHRIST: GOD-MAN

Dillard clearly believed that God became, in some fashion, a man. In *For the Time Being* Dillard relates her trip to the Holy Land and visiting the Church of the Nativity. She writes of Bethlehem: “Here, just here... two thousand years of Christianity began...where God emptied himself into man.”⁴²

³⁵ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 254.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁰ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 46.

⁴¹ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 209.

⁴² Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 79.

In *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* the narrator apprizes us “that God, in the form of Christ, really did come to earth” and die.⁴³ Linda Smith assumes that “Dillard’s identification of God with man is...embodied...literally in the Christian doctrine of the dual nature of Christ.”⁴⁴

However, in spite of these rather orthodox views, Dillard departs from mainstream Christianity by “seeing God in all humankind, not just in Christ.”⁴⁵ Therefore, Christ cannot be the embodiment of God’s love and grace to a sinful humanity. And indeed, Dillard sees Christ’s life and death as little more than a foolish waste. In *Holy the Firm* she asks, “Did Christ descend once and for all to no purpose, in a kind of divine and kenotic suicide, or ascend once and for all, pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder after him?”⁴⁶ So Christ is not really the embodiment of God’s love, but simply another example of how God doesn’t know what He’s doing.

D. SIN: INHERENT IN ALL

If God is a foolish ogre, and Christ’s life and death was a waste, then it is no surprise that Dillard seems to see God as the root cause of sin. She writes, “The world has signed a contract with the devil; it had to... The word came into being with the signing of the contract. ...Creation itself was the fall.”⁴⁷

Probably, this view of God and creation is due to her emphasis on creation as the primary source of revelation. She writes: “That something is everywhere and always amiss is part of the very stuff of creation.”⁴⁸ By extrapolating from Tennyson’s “nature red in tooth and claw” (with its created parasites and predators), Dillard informs the reader: “The world is festering with suppurating sores. ...The world is...a hungry old man, fatigued and broken past mending.”⁴⁹ This is not precisely the biblical portrait of universalized sin, but it does clearly indicate that we don’t live in Paradise.

However, it seems that although she talks about sin and the fallenness of all humanity, she does not seem to view sin as moral failure, but

⁴³ Smith, Annie Dillard, 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁶ Dillard, Annie Dillard, 100.

⁴⁷ Dillard, *Three* by Annie Dillard, 176, 209.

⁴⁸ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 139.

⁴⁹ Dillard, *Three* by Annie Dillard, 229.

as a result of evolution. Dillard writes, "It need not craze us...to know we are evolving, like other living forms, according to physical processes."⁵⁰ Then she refers to Teilhard's appraisal that such evolutionary winnowing is responsible for distress and death. Her conclusion is that "It is hard to find a more inarguable explanation for the physical catastrophe and the sufferings we endure at chance from the material world."⁵¹ Evolution, evidently, is Dillard's original ogre, and the negative things that are experienced in life are a result of the changes that occur through the evolutionary process.

Therefore, Annie Dillard does not seem to come close to a full-orbed biblical idea on the subject of sin. So if Dillard views God as a foolish ogre, Christ as a wasted life, and sin as a part of the theistic evolutionary process, it is no surprise that her view of salvation is warped as well.

E. SALVATION: AN AWARENESS OF GOD

In her 1978 interview with Philip Yancey, Annie Dillard announced that her intended audience in her writing was "the skeptic, the agnostic, not the Christian. Just getting the agnostic to acknowledge the supernatural is a major task."⁵² Therefore, her goal is not to explain how a person can get to heaven or into a right relationship with God, but simply to raise the possibility that the supernatural exists. She wants to "lead the reader to the awareness of God."⁵³

This is an important step in the evangelistic process, but the question must be raised whether Dillard's writings actually drew agnostics toward God. Is the agnostic likely to come away from reading Dillard with a warmer, attracting conception of God? Is the skeptic likely to have intellectual difficulties or objections resolved by reading Dillard? In this dark world has Dillard sent up flares that will point people toward the path to salvation? Some think so, since Linda Smith points out that Dillard annually received numerous letters from readers who were seeking spiritual instruction.⁵⁴

But while Dillard does raise some good questions, her writing is short on answers. For example, in *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, the strategic question is raised (in a Thoreau quote): "With all your science can

⁵⁰ Dillard, *For the Time Being* 87.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Yancey, "A Face Aflame," 15.

⁵³ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

you tell me how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?"⁵⁵ But no answer is ever provided on how light does come into the soul. It would have been helpful if she had referenced, or at least pointed her readers in the direction of the Bible as a source for answers to such questions. Instead, the reader is left with much redemption language that cannot be labeled as distinctively Christian.

Dillard does employ standard scriptural soteriological language from time to time. Linda Smith claims that Dillard brings "the reassurance that God's response to man's absurdity is...love and acceptance."⁵⁶ Smith also comments upon *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that, "In all mystical traditions death is the necessary condition for mystical regeneration and rebirth."⁵⁷ She quotes a Jewish evening prayer which says, "God, being merciful, grants atonement for sin and does not destroy."⁵⁸ Dillard sounds like Anselm in saying that "faith is the requisite of knowledge."⁵⁹ This is just a sampling of Dillard's salvation language (atonement, redemption, acceptance, faith, etc.).

Dillard also employs terminology explicitly related to the matter of *grace*. She relates how, as a child, she would hide a penny on the sidewalk, leaving a note close by which read: "SURPRISE AHEAD" or "MONEY THIS WAY." The passer-by might "receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe."⁶⁰ Here is language from the heartland of Protestantism. However, she employs the terms illustratively not of supernatural recreation but of bountiful original creation, saying, "The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand."⁶¹ So Dillard writes of the bounty seen around Pilgrim Creek: "I never merited this grace, that when I face upstream I see the light on the water careening toward me, inevitably, freely, down a graded series of terraces like the balanced winged platforms on an infinite, inexhaustible font."⁶² Such beauty and bounty makes the Christian heart leap with gratitude. "I have gluttoned on rich-

⁵⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁸ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 55.

⁵⁹ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 168.

⁶⁰ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 21.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.

⁶² Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 19.

ness" in creation, she tells us in her naturalist's reveries.⁶³ God's creating is "God's spendthrift and never-ending jubilee."⁶⁴ An underlying spiritual unity to this universe Dillard views (says Linda Smith) "as the grace of salvation."⁶⁵ One is left to wonder why Annie Dillard, who employs such grace-language with reference to other matters, is so reserved about using similar language with reference to eternal life.

Linda Smith writes of Dillard that "If one thing is clear in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, it is that the salvation of the individual requires involvement with and commitment to other people. ...More than the acceptance of any religious dogma, it is involvement with others that creates man's salvation"⁶⁶ So "relationships with people...perhaps even constitute relationship with God."⁶⁷ Smith also concludes that "Dillard intimates that humankind must somehow lift itself by its own bootstraps and...create its own meaning."⁶⁸ This is hardly consonant with salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

In fact, in *apropos* Roman Catholic fashion Dillard quotes: "'All depends on the preponderance of good deeds,' Rabbi Akiva had said. The weight of good deeds bears down on the balance scales. Paul Tillich also held this view."⁶⁹ Another rabbi (quoted by Dillard) declares: "It is the specific mission of the Jew to free the entrapped holy sparks from the grip of the forces of evil by means of Torah study and prayer."⁷⁰ Are such adulations of works-salvation likely to aid the agnostic in a God-search?

The closest Dillard comes to conveying a clear concept of NT salvation is when she (benignly) ridicules a local Virginia fundamentalist family. This family has an "8-foot aluminum cross" in front of their house which reads: "CHRIST THE LORD IS OUR SALVATION."⁷¹ The boy in the family feels pressured to ask Dillard, "Do you know the Lord as your personal Savior?" To this she rejoins: "Not only that; I know your mother." The mother also asks her, "Do you know the Lord

⁶³ Dillard, *Three* by Annie Dillard, 249.

⁶⁴ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 61.

⁶⁵ Smith, *Annie Dillard*, 60.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98, 100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁹ Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷¹ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 97.

as your personal Savior?” Dillard surmises that the woman must feel she has to ask everyone this question. Dillard responds, “She was stunned that I knew the Lord, and clearly uncertain whether we were referring to the same third party.”⁷² The family drove 120 miles to attend Jerry Falwell’s church, and the woman supplied Annie Dillard with tracts. In response to this, Dillard says (if she were reincarnated in a later life) she’d rather return as a palo santo tree “so that I could be...a perfect witness...mute.”⁷³

Two observations on this subject are worthwhile. First, Dillard’s reaction is part and parcel of her own cultural, anti-lowbrow mentality. For example, she spent a year “attending Mass at [a] Catholic church” and she records “how shockingly often have I exhausted myself in church from the effort to keep from laughing.”⁷⁴ In the same book she acknowledges: “I would rather...undergo the famous dark night of the soul than encounter the dread hootenany...”⁷⁵ She can’t help recording that at a baby baptism, the infant wore red socks and blue tennis shoes.⁷⁶

Secondly, her view of “mute” witness is perfectly in line with her view of God’s resounding silence (as deduced by her from nature and catastrophes). In her first blockbuster book Dillard remembers reading “about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest, ‘If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?’ ‘No,’ said the priest, ‘not if you did not know.’ ‘Then why,’ asked the Eskimo earnestly, ‘did you tell me?’”⁷⁷ On the basis of Romans 1–3 the priest’s answer is questionable. At any rate it is one of the rare instances where Dillard mentions the theological concept of “hell.”

To sum up, then, Annie Dillard proclaims the agnostic to be her target reader. And while she raises good questions to get the agnostic thinking, she does little to point the agnostic in the right direction. To the contrary, she often lays roadblocks instead. She offers glints of a hidden Maker and creation’s beauty, yet she states: “one of the few things we know about the Absolute is that it is relatively inaccessible.”⁷⁸ If we’re

⁷² Ibid., 97-98.

⁷³ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁷ Dillard, *Three by Annie Dillard*, 120-121.

⁷⁸ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 37.

talking about God (as “the Absolute”), then she has misdirected the reader, for God is unquestionably accessible through faith in His Son (John 5:37-40; 7:28-38; 14:6; Heb 11:6). Admittedly she is not writing specifically about eternal life, but she raises the question: “Is history purposeful? Is the universe of matter significant?” Her answer is far from an orthodox Christian one: “I am sorry; I do not know.”⁷⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

Liberal Harvard NT critic Kirsopp Lake once criticized Westcott and Hort’s textual theory of the NT as a “failure, though a splendid one.” A similar response flashes through the orthodox Christian analyst’s mind upon reading Annie Dillard’s brilliant poetic prose. Ingenious, full of flair, provocative—all these descriptive adjectives are apt descriptions for much of Dillard’s writing.

However, the orthodox Christian is saddened by Dillard’s non-acceptance of fully inspired Scripture and (barely) theistic evolution. Though various other Christian writers have also embraced similar views, for the most part, these other writers held fairly orthodox views concerning God, Christ, and salvation. Here is where Annie Dillard moves further to the left of, say, C. S. Lewis or G. K. Chesterton. She seems content to pass along any and all religious views (except more spacey New Age ones) without ever offering an evaluative adjective or tell-tale tidbit as to where she stands. Writers, such as Lewis or Chesterton, in many theological areas offer little that is objectionable. But with Dillard the orthodox analyst is left either shaking one’s head in bewilderment or sensing something positively negative in her provocative silence and transcriptions of various religious traditions.

There is nothing wrong in learning valued lessons from Communists, Hasids, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or whoever—if the lesson or experience is unobjectionable from a biblical standpoint. However, if the reader is left with the understanding of an ogriish orientation to God or a vague notion that all religions are pretty much acceptable, then this can hardly be labeled a biblical or Christian orientation.

So often the reader is left either in the regions of the murky or in the bog of the positively erroneous (if we take Scripture as our standard).

⁷⁹ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, 185.

With sad regret the orthodox Christian feels that Annie Dillard falls into the category of 2 Tim 3:7 (KJV): “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of [biblical] truth.”

BOOK REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

21 Things God Never Said: Connecting Our Misconceptions About Evangelism by R. Larry Moyer. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004. 176 pp. Paper. \$10.99.

There are so many misconceptions in churches today about how to evangelize and what should be said in evangelism that any book which helps clarify the offer of eternal life should be widely read and distributed. Moyer's book, *21 Things God Never Said* is one of those books. In it, Moyer takes 21 statements frequently heard from pulpits across America and in evangelism training classes and shows how these statements are misleading, unbiblical, confusing, and detrimental to evangelistic efforts.

Each of the 21 misconceptions is given its own chapter. Most, if not all, of these misconceptions are related to things that GES writers and speakers have been saying for years and so there is much that we have in common with Moyer in this book. For example, he devotes chapters to the unbiblical ideas that "If you want to be saved, just invite Jesus into your heart" (chap 4), "You're saved even if you're trusting something in addition to Christ for your eternal salvation" (chap 9), "If you doubt your salvation, then you're not saved" (chap 10), and "Unless you're willing to turn from your sins, you can't be saved" (chap 13).

It was wonderful to see Moyer's dependence upon the Gospel of John as the only evangelistic book in the Bible (pp. 14-15, 73). He also includes discussion of several passages that are often misused in evangelism, such as Rev 3:20 (p. 36), Ezek 3:18-19 (p. 46), 1 John 4:20-21 (p. 106), Mark 10:17-22 (p. 120), Rom 10:9-10 (p. 147), and numerous others.

Some *JOTGES* readers will take exception with Moyer on a few things he says, such as his understanding of repentance as a "change of mind" (p. 96), his preference for the word "trust" over the word "believe" (pp. 68, 82, 103, 170-71, etc), and his idea that election is God's choice of "some to be with Him forever" (p. 130). However, these are relatively minor issues within the Free Grace camp, and most will find

Moyer's book refreshing and helpful as he refutes some of the popular misconceptions in evangelism today. For this reason, I highly recommend this book.

Jeremy Myers

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

The Calvinism Debate. By David W. Cloud. Port Huron, MI: Way of Life Literature, 2006. 125 pp. Paper. \$4.95.

It is always a welcome sight to see new books written in opposition to Calvinism since for too many years Calvinists have had a monopoly on books on the subject. The latest work on the subject in question is *The Calvinism Debate*, by David Cloud. Unlike most recent books that offer an alternative to Calvinism, this new work by Cloud is a brief, popular critique of Calvinism. Cloud is the founder and director of Way of Life Literature and editor of the monthly *O Timothy* magazine. He rejects Calvinism because "it simply contradicts too many Scriptures" and "is built more upon human logic and philosophy than upon the plain teaching of God's Word" (p. 54).

Cloud's book consists of four parts. There is no index or bibliography. The first part of the book, which is titled the same as the book, is itself divided into five sections. Although these sections are prefaced with an introduction to the Calvinist controversy in history, it is much too brief. After a nice summary of the Five Points of Calvinism, Cloud makes some important introductory points. He mentions how Calvinism is an unsettled theology since "Calvinists are seriously divided among themselves and always have been" (p. 10). Also noted is the fallacy of requiring people to choose between Calvinism and Arminianism. In the next section, "Some Central Errors of Calvinism," Cloud presents eleven errors to prove his thesis. Cloud correctly points out here how Calvinists misrepresent their opponents by implying that non-Calvinists don't believe that salvation is entirely by grace and that non-Calvinists who believe that man has a free will are lining up with the church of Rome.

Part two, "Calvin's Camels," is a brief analysis of forty-two "great camels of God's Word" (p. 80). Cloud says that Calvinists strain at gnats

(“extra-scriptural arguments and reasoning”) (p.54), and swallow camels (“Scriptures understood plainly by their context”) (p.54). Key verses here include Matt 23:37; John 5:40; Acts 7:51; 1 Tim 2:4, 6; Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 3:9; and Rev 22:17.

In part three, “Calvinism’s Proof Texts Examined,” Cloud examines fifty-three of the chief proof texts used by Calvinists to support their teachings on God’s Sovereignty (12 verses), Total Depravity (7 verses), Unconditional Election (21 verses), Limited Atonement (6 verses), and Irresistible Grace (7 verses). There is an extended treatment of Rom 9:13-33 and Acts 13:48. Other key verses analyzed include John 6:37, 44; Rom 8:29-33; 2 Thess 2:13-14; and 1 Pet 1:2.

Just four pages in length, part four, “What About Hyper-Calvinism?” is the shortest section of the book. After referring to the claim of a Presbyterian Calvinist named Jeffrey Khoo regarding two characteristics of Hyper-Calvinism—the denial of common grace and the free offer of the gospel—Cloud goes on to show that there is no significant difference between Calvinists and Hyper-Calvinists. Cloud concludes: “Hyper-Calvinism vs. Calvin Calvinism is more of a semantics game than anything else... “Both twist the Scripture to fit their theology and read their theology into the plain words of Scripture” (p.125).

Because *The Calvinism Debate* is lacking in a strong introduction to the debate, it is more suitable for those who are already well acquainted with the history behind the now centuries-old debate over Calvinism. The strength of the book is its strong biblical basis. Cloud appeals to the Bible and the Bible alone instead of what non-Calvinists have written against Calvinism.

Laurence M. Vance

Vance Publications

Pensacola, FL

The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity. By Carl Raschke. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 235 pp. Paper. \$19.99.

While some reviewers have intimated this book is a tough read, the opposite is true. Raschke makes Postmodernism and Postmoderns easy to understand with his many clear statements.

Faith is not rational or propositional (pp. 168-69, 210). Faith is instead an encounter, an experience, “a total surrender of one's heart” (pp. 168, 210). “A rational ‘faith’ is not really faith at all. Faith does not require any kind of unimpeachable demonstration. It is a passion for God amid the contingencies of experience and the messiness of life in general” (p. 168). Certitude is the enemy of faith (pp. 82, 150, 168, 174).

The Bible has errors in it, yet it is authoritative (pp. 120, 134, 143). “The ‘infallible’ authority of Scripture, therefore, is not founded on the fact that it contains no ‘errors’” (p. 134). “The authority of the Bible does not rest on whether it is logically and seamlessly consistent and free of ‘errors’” (p. 143).

“A genuine systematic theology forged from the Bible is impossible” (p. 210).

“Postmodernity is all our doubts supersized” (p. 174). Raschke admits, “At first glance the prospect appears both repugnant and frightening.” For this reviewer, the more one looks at evangelical postmodernity, the greater the fear and repugnancy.

Raschke repeatedly touts charismatic Christianity and its ties to Postmodernity. “Charismatic Christianity is...thoroughly postmodern” (p. 157) and “is distinctly ‘postmodern’ in many ways” (p. 203). He gives detailed accounts of numerous charismatic services held in dark auditoriums with incense and strange music. He reports about an encounter he had with God. “I went to the front of the church and fell on my face...My storehouse was empty, and I became ‘available’ for the Spirit to work within me. I was never the same after that moment” (pp. 201-202).

We know nothing for sure, except the pronouncements that Raschke and other Postmodern Evangelicals so confidently assert.

Evangelical Postmodernity is filled with propositions, though they say that propositions are meaningless.

I highly recommend this book. It shows where the emerging church, and theological higher education, is going—into a theological black hole.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

Dare 2 Share: A Field Guide to Sharing Your Faith by Greg Stier.
Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2006. 274 pp. Paper. \$12.99.

Every pastor, youth pastor, and parent who works or interacts with teenagers must buy this book for their teenager, but read it themselves first. As the subtitle indicates, this book has practical tips and insights on how people (especially teenagers) can share their faith with others.

Greg Stier is the founder and president of Dare 2 Share Ministries and has spoken to hundreds of thousands of teenagers across the country. This book is a distillation of what he teaches, and has been included among the books distributed by Focus on the Family. The book focuses on the Dare 2 Share trademark GOSPEL acronym:

God created us to be with Him (chap 9)

Our sins separate us from God (chap 10)

Sins cannot be removed by good deeds (chap 11)

Paying for the Price for sin, Jesus died and rose again (chap 12)

Everyone who trusts in Him has eternal life (chap 13)

Life that's eternal means we will be with Jesus forever (chap 14)

In explaining how students can use this acronym to witness to their friends, Greg makes it clear that different styles and methods can be used (chap 6), but the message must not change, and the purpose of presenting the gospel is to bring a person to believe in Jesus for everlasting life. Chapters 13 and 14 were very clear that the condition for eternal life is faith alone in Christ alone, and that eternal life cannot be lost. Frankly, I was a little surprised that Greg was able to state this position so strongly in a book sponsored by Focus on the Family since James Dobson is elsewhere on record for speaking against eternal security.

I was also impressed by chapter 17, which lists four common evangelistic phrases which must be avoided because they are misleading and unbiblical. These four statements are: "Are you saved?" "Let Jesus into your heart," "Turn from all your sin," and "Just Say this prayer..." (pp. 129-31).

The book was also incredibly practical in that it described how to turn normal, every day conversations into spiritual conversations (chap 7) and the importance of helping new believers grow in their relationship with Jesus (chap 22). The book closes with fifteen short chapters on how

to witness to people of different religions and worldviews, which I found to be very helpful.

There were a few things that some readers might be slightly uncomfortable with, such as the repeated use of “trust” instead of “believe” throughout the book, his recommendation of the “chair illustration” for how people trust in Jesus (p. 123), and his belief that the numerous references to the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” and the “outer darkness” refer to hell, not to judgment at the inauguration of the kingdom (p. 15). But these are minor issues in Free Grace circles.

I recommend that churches and pastors looking to train their people on how to evangelize use Greg Stier’s book as part of their curriculum. Though written for teenagers, most adults will find it helpful as well.

Jeremy Myers

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did. By Randy Newman. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004. 269 pp. Paper. \$12.99.

The basic thesis of this book is that Jesus used lots of questions when He taught and evangelized and so should we. If we engage unbelievers in a dialogue, then we will have much more fruitful discussions, Newman contends.

I would have liked for the author to show examples from Jesus’ evangelistic ministry where he did the type of thing that Newman suggests. Newman could have easily shown from Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well in John 4 that Jesus sometimes had back-and-forth dialogue with people whom He evangelized.

Most of the book consists of giving examples of how to answer the tough questions. Newman discusses the charge that Christians are intolerant, that it makes no sense for a loving God to allow evil, that the Bible was written by men, that Christians are homophobic, and that some followers of Jesus are jerks. All of his discussions are back-and-forth dialogues between “Christian” and “Non-Christian.” In some cases there are two different dialogues presented, one bad and one good.

In terms of the Free Grace-Lordship Salvation controversy, the author is not crystal clear where he stands. Here are some of the things he says we must do to be saved/born again: “The only way people get to heaven is by accepting a gift—not by earning a reward” (p. 87). “Each person needs to trust in that means of reconciliation [i.e., Jesus’ death on the cross] for him or herself” (p. 97). There are no examples of the type of comments in this book that are typical in radical Lordship writers.

One of the longer presentations of the gospel was also one of the most confusing. Newman wrote,

We believe that there is a God and that He’s made Himself known to us so we can have a personal relationship with Him—one that would help us in this life and one that would last forever, in heaven. We also realize that we’ve all fallen short of any decent standard of goodness... We believe that Jesus is the answer for our problems... He died on the cross to do away with the penalty that we deserved for the problems we’ve created. Each of us has come to the point where we follow Him every day of our lives (p. 260).

According to that statement, what must a person do to have this life that lasts forever? Possibly the last line suggests you must “follow Him every day.” Or maybe that is just a statement of what some or all Christians do. It sure isn’t clear. Even eternal security is not clear in this statement. “A life...that would last forever, in heaven” is not the same as “life that lasts forever no matter what we do or fail to do before we die.”

If you overlook the fact that the good news is never clearly explained in this book, and if you simply view it as a helpful method of communication, this is an outstanding book. I recommend it for those who are well grounded in the faith-alone-in-Christ-alone message and who are looking for help in how to communicate to people who are not open to the traditional approaches to evangelism (e.g., “Could I read you this booklet for 15 minutes?”).

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism. By Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005. 272 pp. Hardback. \$24.99.

Dr. Earl Radmacher spoke with prophetic insight in 1990 when he wrote in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (33:1) that Lordship Salvation was paving the road back to Rome. This truth is seen clearly in Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom's book, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism*.

Their book begins by providing evidence for improving relationships between Catholics and Evangelical Christians (chap 1). The next two chapters offer an overview of what has happened within Catholicism and Evangelicalism to bring these two former opponents together in peace and unity. Chapters 4–7 then provide numerous quotes and accounts from Catholic and Evangelical dialogue and joint statements which show where Catholics and Evangelicals agree, and where there are still differences. The final two chapters are the authors' personal assessment of how things now stand in regard to the Reformation.

And here, essentially, is their conclusion: "If it is true ...that...justification is the article on which the church stands or falls, then the Reformation is over" (p. 232). They get to this conclusion by showing that although there are numerous areas where Catholics and Evangelicals do not agree—such as the papacy, the Virgin Mary, sacraments, and mandatory celibacy of priests (p. 233)—with regard to the pivotal doctrine of justification (p. 140), Catholics and Evangelicals now believe the same thing.

To begin with, the famous ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) dialogues affirmed that:

By faith, which is also the gift of God, we repent of our sins and freely adhere to the gospel, the good news of God's saving work for us in Christ. ...Faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life. We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) (p. 160).

But not all Reformed people accepted ECT. Knowing this, Noll and Nystrom go on to state numerous other examples of joint statements by Catholics and Evangelicals. For example, a joint document issued by

Reformed Baptists and Catholics contains the following statement on salvation:

Conversion is turning away from all that is opposed to God, contrary to Christ's teaching, and turning to God, to Christ, the Son, through the work of the Holy Spirit. It entails a turning from the self-centeredness of sin to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. Conversion is a passing from one way of life to another new one, marked with the newness of Christ. It is a continuing process so that the whole life of a Christian should be a passage from death to life, from error to truth, from sin to grace. Our life in Christ demands continual growth in God's grace. Conversion is personal but not private. Individuals respond in faith to God's call, but faith comes from hearing the proclamation of the word of God and is to be expressed in the life together in Christ that is the church (p. 89).

Aside from the word *process*, most people in the Lordship Salvation camp would probably agree with this statement. Reformed Baptists and Catholics go on to write that "Justification by faith brings with it the gift of sanctification, which can grow continuously as it creates life, justice and liberty" (p. 90). Few Lordship Salvation proponents would disagree with this.

So here is the logic of Noll and Nystrom: Today, both Catholics and most Evangelicals agree that justification which is genuine will begin by faith and manifest itself through a life of good works. While many doctrines still separate and divide Catholic and Evangelical theology, Luther's cry of *sola fide* is not one of them. Since the central rallying cry of the Reformation was *sola fide*, and there is agreement on this central point, the Reformation is indeed over.

What Noll and Nystrom fail to recognize is that the Reformation has not succeeded, but has been reversed. Only in that sense is the Reformation "over." The Reformation began as an attempt to reform the Catholic Church, and although the RCC has softened over the years, it has not changed. Instead, Reformed and Arminian theologies have simply returned to Roman Catholic theology. All three systems require works from believers for entrance into heaven. Though all three say that Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary, and salvation is by faith alone, all three also say that if a person does not have the necessary works which accompany justification, then that person's faith was spurious, and they are yet in their sins. Unless the person repents and has the fruit which accompanies salvation, they will not get into heaven.

Noll and Nystrom put it this way: “Catholics and evangelicals now affirm that a God-honoring, Scripture-based, and orthodox theology of justification by faith is found where the following two propositions are believed separately and together: (1) Salvation is an absolutely free gift from God. (2) There is no Christian salvation that is not manifest in good works” (p. 232).

I recommend this book. It contains a wealth of material showing how Catholics and Evangelicals are in basic agreement on justification. This should spur us on to fighting for the absolutely free offer of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. If the Reformation is indeed over, a new Reformation is needed.

Jeremy Myers

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham. By D. G. Hart. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 224 pp. Paper, \$24.99.

Hart has captured in this book the essence of evangelicalism from around 1942 to date. His assessment is powerful and, in this reviewer's opinion, right on the mark.

Hart shows how the term *evangelicalism* developed and what it means. He demonstrates that to be an evangelical means almost nothing in terms of what one believes (e.g., p. 125). For a time it meant that you believed in inerrancy, and the trinity. However, today, even those doctrinal distinctives no longer apply. Many who call themselves evangelicals do not believe in either inerrancy or the trinity. And many evangelicals would be horrified if you suggested excluding someone from the fold simply because they believed in limited inerrancy, or modalism (which denies the trinity).

According to Hart, “[Evangelicalism’s] design was to affirm a lowest common denominator set of convictions and practices” (p. 183). “Tolerance and civility” are valued much more in contemporary evangelicalism than zeal for sound doctrine (p. 71). Have you ever noticed that everyone from Roman Catholics to Mormons to Church of Christ to Oneness Pen-

tecostals all claim to be evangelicals? “Scholars were not the only ones to ask whether evangelicalism had any substance beyond vague and warm affirmations about a personal relationship with Jesus” (p. 15).

Seemingly anyone who says he has a personal relationship with Jesus is an evangelical, regardless of what he believes or does not believe. And that is the way many evangelicals evangelize as well. They tell people that if they believe in Jesus then they will gain a personal relationship with Him. Of course, they don’t say that this is an eternally-secure relationship, for most people don’t believe that and hence will not respond well to that message. That isn’t lowest common denominator evangelism.

“If being an evangelical means liking Billy Graham, with a spot in one’s heart reserved for James Dobson and Tim LaHaye, then evangelicalism requires very little from its adherents” (p. 124).

Hart spends a fair amount of time dealing with the influence of Billy Graham on evangelicalism. He writes, “So attractive has Graham been that George M. Marsden has offered a jargon-free definition of evangelicalism: ‘anyone who likes Billy Graham’” (p. 111).

Hart’s critique gets even stronger as he charges, “Like creation after Genesis 1:1, [evangelicalism] was formless and void” (p. 183).

The great number of people in America who call themselves evangelicals is in itself a problem rather than a blessing. Hart notes, “Its breadth has come with the price of shallowness, while its mass appeal has generated slogans more than careful reflection...Religious traditions [doctrinal formulations] are too narrow for evangelical purposes; they are too dogmatic and therefore too confining” (p. 187).

Hart’s solution is simple: let’s drop the name *evangelical* entirely. He urges a move back to local churches. Many evangelicals today have their primary affiliation not with a local church, but with a major parachurch ministry like those of Graham, Dobson, and LaHaye. “Before evangelicalism, Christians had churches to hear the Word preached, to receive the sacraments, and to hear sound counsel and correction. Without evangelicalism, Protestant Christianity may not be as unified (when has it ever been?), but it will go on. And without the burden of forming a nationally influential coalition, American Protestants in all their Heinz 57 varieties, from Presbyterian to Calvary Chapel, may be even healthier” (p. 191).

I highly recommend this book. It is a warning to *JOTGES* readers that we not become so enamored by numbers that we seek the lowest

common denominator as to what *Free Grace* means. If we are not careful, doctrinal beliefs will not be important in the Grace movement. Unity will be the thing. But as Hart shows, if movements are not built on sound doctrine, they are formless and void.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

He Saves: The Assurance of Salvation Through Faith by R. T. Kendall. Tyrone, GA: Authentic, 2006. 54 pp. Paper. \$5.99.

This short book by R. T. Kendall is apparently based on four sermons he preached from Rom 1:16. The titles of the four chapters are “What is the Gospel?,” “The Righteousness of God,” “Saving Faith,” and “The Wrath of God.” I was excited to read this little book because these are key issues in Free Grace circles and I wanted to know where R. T. Kendall stood.

However, I was disappointed with the book because the chapters were poorly researched, badly written, and disorganized. In Kendall’s autobiography, he writes that early in his ministry at Westminster he decided to start preaching without notes. If these four chapters are transcriptions of his sermons, it seems that without notes, Kendall’s sermons followed a “stream-of-consciousness” approach without any discernable outline or structure. This is what happens to most (but not all!) pastors who preach without notes.

Completely aside from this, Kendall does make some good statements in the book, but these are overshadowed by numerous statements that are unclear. For example, regarding the issue of assurance, Kendall writes that those who hold that good works are a necessary condition or result of faith “will never have assurance that [they] are saved. Who among us will ever feel holy enough to be able to say, ‘Yes, I now believe I’m saved’?” (p. 8). This is good, but only a few pages later, he contradicts himself when he writes, “Faith always produces obedience” (p. 19). He seems to recognize this contradiction and so goes on to clarify that “Jesus’s faith was a perfect faith, so it produced perfect obedience. We are therefore said to be saved by Christ’s obedience” (p. 19). Aside from the fact that this reveals the dubious concept of degrees of

faith, Kendall has not avoided the implication that even imperfect faith must result in obedience.

Things become even more muddled when he later explains how a person can be declared righteous. He tells his readers, “You can make him [sic] happy only by trusting in your heart that His [sic] Son died on the cross for all your sins. If you really believe that in your heart, you have satisfied his [sic] justice” (p. 24). I don’t think the goal of our faith is to make God happy, but more than that, how does one know if they have “really believed”? Further still, our faith will never satisfy God’s justice. God’s justice is satisfied through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is this issue of faith where Kendall is the most unclear. He talks about “temporal faith” (p. 29) being insufficient to save. Of course, later, he does define faith as “persuasion” (p. 38) that what God says in His Word is true.

In the chapter on the wrath of God, Kendall takes the traditional view that Paul is referring to hell, and not to temporal deliverance from divine discipline (p. 46). At the end of the chapter, he writes that those who want to escape the wrath of God (i.e., hell) can “utter this prayer from your heart: Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me. I need you. I want you. I am sorry for my sins. Amen” (p. 54).

Though I appreciate Kendall’s landmark book *Once Saved, Always Saved*, his writing and his theology seem to have degenerated since the time that book was first published; therefore, I do not recommend this new book.

Jeremy Myers

Associate Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

Spiritual Birthline: Understanding How We Experience the New Birth. By Stephen E. Smallman. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006. 171 pp. Paper. \$12.99.

One of the endorsers explains well how Smallman arrived at his thesis: “By applying a pastor’s heart and a willing ear to hundreds of testimonies heard over decades of ministry, Stephen Smallman has distilled the work of God in the soul” (Mindy Belz, back cover).

Smallman’s thesis is that spiritual birth is like physical birth. Actual physical birth occurs nine months after conception, after physical life began. So too, he suggests, spiritual “birth,” or coming out, occurs some time after a spiritual life began. A chart on page 24 compares physical and spiritual birth. Conception in the physical realm corresponds to life beginning in the spiritual realm. Pregnancy corresponds to “effectual calling.” Delivery, a new baby crying, corresponds to conversion: faith and repentance. Physical growth of the baby corresponds to sanctification in the Christian life.

In the chart, the author suggests that “spiritual birth—regeneration” occurs over time between the beginning of spiritual life and the time of conversion.

But wouldn’t this make spiritual birth a process over time, and not something that occurs at a point in time? Yes: “The first thing to note from the birthline is the obvious fact that spiritual birth, just like physical birth, is fundamentally a *process*” (p. 25, italics his). “The process of coming to conscious faith, once the work of God has begun, is what could be thought of as spiritual pregnancy... In the older language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the term for this is *effectual* calling, which simply means it *works*: when God calls, *we come*” (p. 27, italics his). “Spiritual pregnancy goes on as briefly or as long as it takes God to bring us to faith and repentance” (p. 27).

How long after spiritual life starts might conversion occur? The title of Chapter 2 gives the shocking answer: “The Birthline—A Sixty-five Year Pregnancy.” According to Smallman an Indian man in London came to faith in Christ sixty-five years after his spiritual life began (pp. 22-23)!

Frankly, this is very confusing. According to the author, spiritual life begins at a point in time. That starts a process called *regeneration* that lasts for years or decades. At the end of that time the process of regeneration has occurred.

While there is no condition of the new birth, according to the author, there are conditions for a person to “go public” (which Smallman also calls *being converted*). These include confessing Christ (pp. 16, 145), giving ourselves to Christ (p. 16), submitting one’s life to Christ (p. 78), confessing sin and receiving Christ as Lord and Savior (p. 80), trusting Christ as Lord and Savior (p. 16), repenting from sin and embracing Christ (p. 121), choosing to follow Christ (p. 126), and letting Jesus run our lives (pp. 147-49). What most Evangelicals would (wrongly) say are a variety of different ways to be born again, Smallman says are a variety of ways for a person who already possesses spiritual life to come out and finalize the process of regeneration.

Smallman repeatedly speaks of effectual calling (e.g., pp. 27, 77, 108, 130, 151). This calling is something which a person suspects, but can’t know with certainty (p. 149).

The most touching aspect of this book is that the author’s four children each give their own testimonies. These testimonies are well worth the price of the book. Each of the children look back over their lives and guess when they might have “gone public.” Since they believe that they were born again long before they went public, they clearly aren’t concerned about this coming out time. Listen to what Steve Smallman, Jr., himself a pastor, says: “Over the course of that summer God began to reveal to me, through a series of experiences, my profound spiritual bankruptcy and my real need for him to run my life. Was this my conversion? Possibly. But I have conscious recollection of my heart being warmed by sermons, songs, Christian fellowship, and the presence of God years before this time” (pp. 148-49).

Whenever we base our theology on our experience, or on the experience of others, we are in trouble. God has given us His Word, not experience, to show us the truth.

I strongly recommend this book to all discerning readers. It should be required reading for all soteriology classes.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society
Irving, TX

PERIODICAL REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

“Believers before the Bench,” Dr. William Arp, *Journal of Ministry & Theology* (Spring 2005): 30-50.

Given the litigious nature of modern society, Arp has written a timely article about whether Christians should ever sue each other in a court of law. The article is a well written exegesis and exposition of 1 Cor 6:1-11.

The author introduces the reader to the subject with a contemporary example of civil litigation, establishes the questions he will consider, sets the context of the passage he will discuss within the overall context of 1 Corinthians, and then proceeds with his analysis and conclusions. *JOTGES* readers will generally agree with his conclusions concerning Christians and litigation. He observes that Paul instructed the Corinthians not to sue each other in secular courts of law and instead should either take civil disputes to the local church community for resolution or preferably absorb a wrong committed in a spirit of grace.

The author includes numerous footnotes documenting his analysis of the Greek text. The footnotes supplement the author’s discussion and his own translation of the verses being considered.

In the introductory section of the article, the author cites two convictions he thinks were held by the apostle Paul. First, he observed that the Corinthians needed to realize they were “members of a redeemed community, a condition which should affect their behavior.” In other words, God’s children should behave in a manner respectful of their father, i.e., God. Also, the Corinthians needed to “realize that they are members of an eschatological community, a condition which also should affect their behavior.” I was particularly interested in this second observation since he described the Corinthians as “heirs of the kingdom of God which is an eschatological destination with specific application to their lives.” Unfortunately, the author did not develop this motif in a manner that *JOTGES* readers will appreciate.

The author's analysis of vv 1-8 is insightful and thorough. However, his discussion of vv 9-11 is wanting. He takes the approach that "the unrighteous" (v 9) are unbelievers "who will not inherit the kingdom of God." According to the author, those who persist in the sins described in vv 9-10 are unbelievers destined for eternal judgment and punishment. Unfortunately, he does not mention how much persistence in committing these sins is necessary to show one to be an unbeliever. Thus, he equates inheriting the kingdom with entering the kingdom. Unfortunately, the author does not see the difference between these. The author seems to think that Christians do not commit such sins. He thinks sin is a serious matter, and so it is. In v 9, Paul asks the Corinthians if they know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom. This rhetorical question is telling. He fails to see that eternal rewards are in view and that the Corinthian Christians are being warned by Paul that poor conduct will lead to a loss of rewards (disinheritance) at the Judgment Seat of Christ. It seems the author is trapped by a theology which does not allow for failure (by Christians) in this lifetime. He does not seem to grasp that the sins mentioned in the passage do not imply the soteriological significance that he attributes to them.

While I am thankful that he does not doubt the eternal security of the Corinthians, he fails to grasp the meaning of the term "inherit" and that poor conduct (as shown by the list of sins) can lead to a believer losing reward (inheritance) in the kingdom. Instead his argument is that Christians should not act like unbelievers who will be judged for their sins.

On this last point, he does not consider that unbelievers do not receive eternal judgment because of their sins; Christ paid that debt! Rather, unbelievers are judged because they do not have eternal life, having rejected God's marvelous gift. This distinction seems to escape the author too.

His analysis of v 11 is also troubling in that he attributes Paul's description of positional truths (washed, sanctified, justified) as being a deliverance from a "former lifestyle." Like many of those in the Lordship camp, the author blurs the distinction between justification truths and experiential sanctification truths.

Brad Daskocil

Board Member

Grace Evangelical Society

Long Beach, CA

“Remarks on the Interpretation of Paul and the Function of Romans 3:20 in its Context,” Bill Dumbrell, *The Reformed Theological Review* 64:3 (December 2005): 135-46.

Bill Dumbrell does a marvelous job in his treatment of Rom 3:20. All Dispensationalists will clap at Dumbrell’s strong position against replacement theology and understanding of Israel’s relationship to the New Covenant:

Jesus’ implementation of Jeremiah’s New Covenant [Jer 31:31-34] seems his major understanding of the meaning of his death. The New Covenant must be understood as the continuation of an arrangement with Israel, and not as a replacement for that arrangement (p. 135).

He also correctly distinguishes the “bulk of Israel” which rejected Christ over continuing believing Jews who accepted Him (Rom 11:1-10; Gal 6:16).

Furthermore, the author correctly interprets 2 Corinthians 3, though not all aspects, and explains that, contrary to the Judaizers’ thinking in Corinth that the Mosaic Covenant was still operative, the old covenant “was now defunct.” Thus ends the Mosaic age in order to introduce the New Covenant age, of which Paul became one of its primary ministers (pp. 136-37).

The relevance in mentioning the end of the old Mosaic era with the current era where the New Covenant reigns illuminates conceptually part of Paul’s concluding argument found in Rom 3:20. That is, since the Mosaic era is over after Christ’s death, Jews could not use “the works of the law” for salvation. Furthermore, Dumbrell clarifies that the law could not save but now brings wrath contrary to the OT era that was a “valid instrument of sanctification” (p. 137).

On one main point this reviewer takes issue with Dumbrell. It seems the author tries to wrestle with salvation by grace through faith versus passages that clearly refer to “judgment by works for those in covenant relationship” (cf. Ps 61:13 [LXX]; Prov 24:12; 2 Cor 5:10, etc.) and resolves it by explaining “in that case works are the continuing evidence of covenant maintenance, and where these are present, the prospect of final judgment may be faced with confidence” (p. 139). He, however, does not consider that the passages cited can refer to a believer’s appearance at the Judgment Seat of Christ to receive rewards. Nothing of works playing a role in evidencing true from spurious believers are found in these and

other texts. Reformed theology has read this idea into such passages, which exegesis has been prevalent for centuries.

Other than the disagreement noted, *JOTGES* readers will find this article helpful in understanding Rom 3:20. I recommend all teacher, pastors and students of Romans to read it.

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“The Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit,” William W. Combs, *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 57-96.

Nearly all believers have wondered about the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Though entire books can be written on the subject, William Combs has provided an excellent summary of the various views and the passages that must be considered when studying this thorny theological subject.

He begins the article with a survey of the history of interpretation and the various views that have been held from the early church fathers until now (pp. 57-71). Combs’ summary statement to this sections says it well: “There is an enormous diversity of opinion about the interpretation of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (p. 71). It is impossible in this review to summarize the wide variety of views.

However, what really matters is not what various people have thought and taught over the centuries, but rather what the Scriptural text says. This is what Combs devotes the rest of his article to. He looks at and discusses the primary text of Matt 12:22-32, and secondary texts like Mark 3:22-30, Luke 12:10, Heb 6:4-6, and 1 John 5:16. Of critical importance is Combs’ observation that in Luke 12, “Jesus is speaking *to* his disciples and also *about* them [in vv. 1-8]...but beginning in v. 8, Jesus continues to speak *to* his disciples, but not *about* them” (p. 82). This helps us see that “There is no reason to think that the disciples needed to be warned about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, no reason to think they would or could commit the sin” (p. 82).

Based on exegesis from the passages he looked at, he concludes that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is blaspheming the miracle-working power of the Spirit as seen in the miracles of Jesus Christ (p.

92). It is “not a one time act...is not a sin of ignorance...[but] is a conscious effort to deny the undeniable. The one who commits the sin is fully aware of what he is doing” (p. 93). It “is unpardonable because the person who commits it never repents of the sin [and] does not seek forgiveness” (p. 93).

Combs also states that since the statements of Jesus were directed at the unbelieving Pharisees, and since the type of miracles Jesus was performing—and which the Pharisees condemned—are no longer being performed, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be committed today (p. 96).

I appreciate how comprehensive this article is, and also how the view Combs adopts comforts and reassures those facing the fear of committing the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. His view is the one I held for a long time as it is the typical dispensational view (p. 67). However, I no longer fully agree with his conclusion that the sin cannot be committed today since it seems that the sin involves more than just a denial of the work of the Holy Spirit in the miracles of Jesus. The miracles Jesus performed were intended to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life (John 20:30-31). By rejecting the miracles, the Pharisees were rejecting what the Holy Spirit was trying to do *through* the miracles, namely, convince them to believe in Jesus for everlasting life (John 16:7-11). Combs is aware of this view, and cites numerous writers who hold it (pp. 70, 89-90).

For those interested in studying this difficult doctrinal issue, I highly recommend this article since it combines all the key views and passages with numerous footnotes into one place.

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“Bare Bones Inclusivism and the Implications of Romans 1:20,”

James F. Sennett, *Evangelical Quarterly* 77:4 (2005): 309-19.

Because people want to know what happens to those who never had a chance to believe in Christ, many have used supposed implications from certain passages to derive answers. One such passage is Rom 1:20. James F. Sennett interprets it as arguing for what he calls *bare bones inclusivism*. Before defining his view, he defines the common views that seek to answer the question: “What happens to people who do not have a chance to believe in Christ for eternal life?”

No doubt, readers will find Sennett’s view hard to understand because he seeks to debunk inclusivism while at the same time explaining and defending *bare bones inclusivism*:

In particular, one may be an inclusivist and still hold that non-Christian religions deliver no religious truth beyond that offered by general revelation *per se* and that their sacramental value is nil. The power of bare bones inclusivism derives no nourishment from any particular view of other religions. This fact may make it easier for some evangelicals to consider the inclusivist option (p. 311).

A further refinement from the old inclusivism view is that Sennett’s new position takes no stand on both issues that *only those who have never heard the gospel* and *only those who have not heard a clear gospel* are eligible for inclusivistic salvation. For these types of encounters he accepts them as legitimate candidates for inclusivistic salvation. This is not that different from that of the pluralism or inclusivism view, because the end result is still the same: if they do not cognitively believe in Christ for eternal life they can still be saved.

In summation, Sennett’s view is simply a refinement of the inclusivistic view that comes with a plethora of exegetical and theological problems. First, he claims that Rom 1:20 only addresses those who reject natural revelation and not those who accept natural revelation but have not heard the gospel. He does not deem these fit for condemnation and thus are candidates to receive eternal life (pp. 314-15). Sennett, however, fails to note that even those who do not reject general revelation are also condemned in sections of Rom 2:1–3:20, which is the group not specifically mentioned in 1:20. In fact, these groups not only accept natural revelation but special revelation. Their problem, just like the first group, is that they fail to believe in Jesus Christ as the only means to be justi-

fied. Of course, without first believing in natural revelation that points to a sovereign God, no one will take the necessary and logical step that points them to the need of having faith alone in the Savior, Jesus Christ. Sennett fails to comprehend and take into account the entire context before assuming his conclusion. This is not surprising since by his own admission his interpretation is not primarily exegetical but “philosophical” (see pp. 312-13).

JOTGES readers will find the following especially vexing:

Genuine faith is lived out not so much in the words that are spoken as in the obedience that is engendered. Obedience implies faith in that which is being obeyed. The candidate for inclusivist salvation is putting forth his best effort at obedience to someone or something he does not really comprehend. Therefore, there is as much reason to think of him as saved by faith as there is to think of the Old Testament saints as saved by their faith (p 317).

The *bare bones inclusivism* view does not add any convincing arguments to persuade any evangelical committed to *faith alone in Christ alone* as being the only way to the Father as John 14:6 exclusively states. In fact, apart from the refinements stated above, this new form of inclusivism is really the same as the old form of inclusivism with a couple of new garments.

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“*Pistis Christou* in Galatians 2:16: Clarification from 3:1-6,”

Debbie Hunn, *Tyndale Bulletin* 57:1 (2006): 23-33.

“*Pistis* in Galatians 5:5-6: Neglected Evidence for the Faithfulness of Christ,” Hung-Sik Choi, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124:3 (2005): 467-490.

One of the best verses to remember in theological studies is Prov 18:17: “The first *one* to plead his cause *seems* right, Until his neighbor comes and examines him.” Whenever a theological issue is being investigated, the best arguments from all sides must be considered before a decision is made. This practice can be applied to the current debate over

Gal 2:16 which has picked up steam over the past several years. The issue revolves around whether *pistis Christou* in Gal 2:16 should be an objective genitive, referring to the faith that Christians have in Christ, or a subjective genitive, referring either to the faith Christ has in God, or to Christ's faithfulness to God.

Hunn's article is a helpful contribution to this ongoing debate, and she correctly points out right from the beginning that "theology more than grammar has driven the debate from the start" (p. 23). Typically, those who argue for the subjective genitive do so from a Calvinistic theology in which humans cannot, in themselves, place faith in Christ. In response to this, Hunn states that "it is not the depth or the sincerity of their faith but the object of their faith that saves them" (p. 24).

On the other side of the debate are people who want Paul to be making a statement about a person's faith in Christ so as to make a clear contrast between faith in Christ and works of the law (p. 24). But whatever we want Paul to say, Hunn rightly points out that "this issue can only be settled by exegesis" (p. 25) and our findings should inform our theology, not the other way around.

Toward this end, Hunn looks at a close parallel statement of Paul in Gal 3:2, 5 which many other exegetes have overlooked. She argues that "a consecutive reading of Galatians will show that Paul continues the topic of *pistis Christou* in chapter 3 with the term *akoē pisteōs* ("hearing in faith"). After surveying the grammar and commentaries on Galatians 3, she summarizes Paul's point this way: "The comparison to Abraham's faith limits *pistis* in Galatians 3:2, 5 to human faith, in particular, the faith of the Galatian Christians" (p. 29). Based on this, she concludes that *pistis Christou* in 2:16 is an objective genitive, and also refers to faith in Christ (p. 33).

The second article by Hung-Sik Choi argues exactly the opposite, but from evidence in Gal 5:5-6. This article must be read by any who study the issue of Gal 2:16 if for no other reason than the extensive footnote citations this article contains.

Like Hunn, Choi also argues that "this issue must be settled by the exegetical study of the relevant texts" (p. 469), but his primary text is Gal 5:5-6, which is typically translated as "the Christians' faith expressing itself through love." But Choi argues that this phrase should instead refer to the faithfulness of Christ expressing itself through love. Regarding this view, he writes, "To our knowledge, no one has explicitly argued that it denotes 'the faithfulness of Christ'" (p. 470). So Choi is arguing

for a new translation of Gal 5:6 which is then used to support the subjective genitive view of Gal 2:16.

To get this view of Gal 5:6, Choi works his way through Gal 3:8 (p. 471) and 3:23-26 (p. 473). Choi's best argument is that the "faith" referred to in Gal 3:23-26 seems to refer to the "divine salvific act to bring to an end to [sic] the rule of the Mosaic Law" (p. 475). In other words, "if one understands it [i.e., "faith" in 3:23-25] as 'human faith,' it is difficult to think that 'human faith' had been absent before" (p. 476). Therefore, "*pistis* in 5:5 refers neither to the believers' confidence coming from the Christian's faith nor to the subjective condition of justification (i.e., the Christian's faith), but to the objective condition of justification (i.e., the faithfulness of Christ)" (p. 481).

Choi's conclusion regarding Gal 2:16 then is that if Gal 3:23-25 and 5:5-6 refer to the faithfulness of Christ, "then all the occurrences of *pistis* in Galatians...and its equivalents and the noun *pistis* that emerge in the context of justification probably refer to 'the faithfulness of Christ'" (p. 489).

However, Choi only refers to the use of *pistis* in Gal 3:2, 5 in a footnote where he is referencing another author (p. 475 n44). It seems that in order to make the claims Choi has, he must address Gal 3:2, 5. But he does not do this—not even in his section on Gal 3:8. It seems that Hunn was right when she wrote in her article that Gal 3:2, 5 is neglected evidence.

Furthermore, despite Choi's statement that arguments revolving around Gal 2:16 must be based on exegesis not theology, he reveals his theological bias when he writes, "it seems unlikely that human faith has soteriological power in Pauline theology" (p. 483).

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