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EDITORIAL

The historicity of a document is based upon the closeness in time of the writers to the accounts that they are recording. Either by eyewitnesses or by those who received what they wrote from eyewitnesses were the New Testament accounts of the life of Christ recorded (Luke 1:1-3; 3:1; John 19:35; 2 Pet 1:16; 1 John 1:3; etc.). The early church not only preached their testimony concerning Jesus Christ among friendly witnesses, but also among those who confronted them using aggressive and violent tactics concerning the fundamental precepts of the Christian faith. The disciples could not risk inaccuracy or manipulation of such vital propositions since those less than enthusiastic individuals – who regarded the Lord’s person and work as scandalous – could refute those precepts. The foundational element of the apostolic preaching was the bold and confident appeal to the experience and knowledge of their listeners. Not only could they proclaim witness of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but also could say, “just as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22, 32).

Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967) had an interesting relationship with the United States. When the Nazis rose to power, he was replaced as mayor of Cologne, and imprisoned for a brief time in 1934. The United States liberated Cologne, and reappointed Adenauer as major. Eventually, he formed the Christian Democratic Union as a new political party. Adenauer experienced an interesting life as statesman, with many challenges. Nevertheless, his answer to the question of the most important thing in the world was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He said, “If Jesus Christ is alive, then there is hope for the world. If not, I don’t see the slightest glimmer of hope on the horizon.” Adenauer confessed, “I believe Christ’s resurrection to be one of the best-attested facts of history.”

When Socrates faced death, he was asked, “Shall we live again?” The philosopher replied, “I hope so.” Conversely, on the night prior to his beheading, Sir Walter Raleigh recorded the following words in his Bible: “When we have wander’d all our ways, shuts up the story of our days; but from this earth, this grave, this dust, my God shall raise me up, I trust.” How would you respond to the question, “If a man dies, will he live again?” (Job 14:14). Job answered his question by stating, “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth” (19:25).

According to 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, the two vital truths of the Gospel message include: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Even a casual reading of the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts reveals the reality that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not only a vital element, but also was a primary emphasis in their witness. Such an emphasis
is not surprising because only a living Savior can offer salvation from the penalty and power of sin.

Since the time of the Enlightenment, the modern mind has attempted to be free from any semblance of religion. Fallen humanity attempted to erase the existence of God and the supernatural to be “captain of their own destiny.” However, in attempting to eradicate God, one eradicates the self in the process. The hope of the resurrection is vital because it results in present and future significance. The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures humanity that life is not abandoned to nothingness. The blessed hope of resurrection, in relation to the rapture, especially as the doctrine relates to the life of the church is the subject of Daniel M. Starcevich’s article “Living and Dying in Light of the Rapture.”

As dispensationalism emerged from within the niche of orthodox Calvinism, the next article, which is the third installment in Drew Curley’s series addressing New Calvinism, proves helpful for understanding contemporary innovations in Calvinist soteriology. One often encounters the notion that dispensationalism is restricted to matters of ecclesiology and eschatology, yet the theological methodology of the system must give emphasis to all aspects of theology, which seems evident in current soteriological debates.

We (the publisher) would be amiss if not encouraging our readers to interact with the propositions asserted in each of the articles, and thereby welcome additional research articles that provide greater clarity (where it would be relevant). Certainly, such practice ought to characterize all conservative evangelical scholarship (especially as the term “lordship salvation” is a connotation that insinuates much confusion, and is a source of discomfort for those who have engaged in the debate). The third article by Marcia Hornok reasons beyond such debates by arguing that the parable of the sower pertains to more than classifying someone’s eternal destiny.

Benjamin B. Warfield once commented, “It has been argued that the business of the preacher is to make Christians, not theologians; and that for this he needs not a thorough systematic knowledge of the whole circle of what is called Christian doctrine, but chiefly a firm faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and a warm love toward Him as Lord” (“The Indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the Preacher,” The Homiletic Review 33 [February 1897]: 100). He wisely rejoined, “We can not preach at all without preaching doctrine; and the type of religious life which grows up under our preaching will be determined by the nature of the doctrines which we preach” (ibid 103). May this Journal help us all undertake our life and doctrine in such a manner as to prove us “wise unto salvation” (cf. 2 Tim 3:15).

— Ron J. Bigalke, Ph.D.
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LIVING AND DYING IN LIGHT OF THE RAPTURE:

Daniel M. Starcevich

Death is an intruder who no one can escape; it is always unwanted, often unexpected, and sometimes shocking in its mode. When death encroaches, the survivors are left in grief, sorrow, and pain. The Lord Himself grieved deeply at the death of his friend Lazarus. Similarly, all will grieve when the interloper comes to friends and family. Grief is inevitable. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul admonished the readers not to grieve as pagans do (4:13). How then are Christians to grieve?

The purpose of this article is to explore how Paul’s eschatology was to contour the grief of the Thessalonians and how Pauline eschatology can structure one's own personal and pastoral response to death today. If Paul did contour grief by eschatology then it will first be necessary to establish a patent understanding of eschatological events, particularly the relationship between the rapture and the day of the Lord. An apparent understanding of the eschatological events at the close of the church age is widely recognized as dependent upon a resolute understanding of the timing of the day of the Lord. David Olander wrote, “The day of the Lord is so central that a thorough understanding is essential for any proper interpretation of eschatology.” Furthermore, Olander asserted, “It is critical to understand that the day of the Lord cannot begin until the church has been raptured or removed from the planet.” Similarly, with regard to the timing of the Day of the Lord, Charles Ryrie commented, “The question of the beginning of the Day of the Lord is a watershed between pre- and posttribulationism.”

A concise description of the order of the prophetic events at the close of the church age and the start of the seventieth week of Daniel are provided in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, in which Paul instructed the readers

* Daniel M. Starcevich, M.S., Th.M., advising professor, Tyndale Theological Seminary; engineering director, Raytheon Missile Systems

2 Ibid.
concerning the relationship between the rapture of the church and the day of the Lord. Paul’s purpose was not only to instruct but also to provide affectionate pastoral care. He regarded this suffering church as a model of faith, was maternally affectionate toward them, and had generously and selflessly spared them any financial burden by supporting himself through working “night and day.” He longed to see them in order to strengthen them in their faith, commend them for their love, comfort them in their grief, and to develop their understanding. Paul did not write only to instruct, nor did he write only to comfort; rather, he combined plain eschatological instruction and applied it to pastoral concerns in order to provide lasting help to the Thessalonians (cf. 1 Thess 4:13—5:11).

Consequently, it is apparent that understanding the relationship of the day of the Lord to events at the close of the church age and the start of Daniel’s seventieth week is critical to an informed eschatology and effective pastoral ministry. Indeed, separating sound theology from pastoral care is detrimental to the church. On the one hand, theology lacking a pastoral focus does nothing to edify the church (Eph 4:13), and falls short of Paul’s instructions to “be shepherds of the church of God which He bought with His blood” (Acts. 20:28b). Theology that does not result in care for God’s people is stillborn. Pastoral care without a resolute foundation in theology quickly descends into emotionally based existential sentimentalism, which, at best, provides momentary relief but ultimately lacks the foundation in truth which provides enduring comfort and guidance to those in need.

Therefore, this article will begin with an exegetical analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11. The chronological relationship between the events at the end of the church age and the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel will be examined in the exegesis. The article will also consider how Paul’s eschatology was applied pastorally to the Thessalonian church. Finally, the research will examine how this model of eschatologically based pastoral care can be applied in the church today. The exegetical analysis will focus upon the main line of reasoning throughout 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11. Technical details will be placed in footnotes so that the reader can focus upon the foremost points being relevant to theologically informed caregivers in the church.
THE RAPTURE IS A COMFORT (1 THESS 4:13-18)

God’s Concern Amid Grief (v. 13)

1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NA28)
Οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, περὶ τῶν κοιμωμένων, ἵνα μὴ λυπῆσθε καθὼς καὶ οἱ λοίποι οἱ μὴ ἔχοντες ἐλπίδα.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NASB95)
But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

The opening “but” indicates that Paul was contrasting what was subsequent with what preceded. The point of the comparison was what the Thessalonians knew and were putting into practice concerning brotherly love in verse 9, and their ignorance regarding the fate of the beloved dead at the close of the church age.

Pagan and Jewish ideas concerning the fate of the dead were generally pessimistic. With regard to pagan beliefs, Keener wrote, “Most Gentiles believed in a shadowy afterlife in the underworld and did not
Rapture

share the philosophers’ optimism or neutrality toward death.”

Similarly, in Jewish writings from the second century, possibly reflecting attitudes prevalent when Paul penned this epistle in AD 51, one finds the expectation that those who were alive to witness the coming of Messiah were more fortunate than the dead who would miss it. For example, in 2 Esdras 13:20 (NRSV), a text from the second century, it is written, “Yet it is better to come into these things, though incurring peril, than to pass from the world like a cloud, and not to see what will happen in the last days.”

During an earlier visit, Paul had instructed the Thessalonians that the Lord would return (2 Thess 2:1). However, it appears that detailed teaching had not been provided. Therefore, the Thessalonians grieved concerning the death of their beloved brethren with the mistaken thought that they would not see them until subsequent to Jesus’ millennial reign. Constable noted that this represents the consensus opinion regarding the source of the Thessalonians grief when he commented, “Pretribulationists and posttribulationists agree that the Thessalonian believers were grieving for two reasons. They grieved because their loved ones had died and because they thought the resurrection of dead Christians would take place after the Rapture.”

Their ignorance led them to grieve in a way that was more pagan than Christian and which reflected a sense of despair. Therefore, Paul’s purpose in informing them was not merely to give them new bits of theological knowledge and understanding, but instead his intent was that their new knowledge would result in an expression of sadness and distress toward the death of a loved one that was not like the pagans but instead thoroughly Christian.

God’s concern with the manner of grieving the death of loved ones was not new. For example, the Psalmist noted, “Precious in the sight of the

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7 The conjunction ἵνα introduces a purpose clause.
9 The expression καθὼς καὶ refers to the same way or “just as” the others; it is used with this negative sense in Ephesians 4:14 wherein Paul urged the readers to no longer live just as (καθὼς καὶ) the Gentiles live.
LORD is the death of His godly ones“ (Ps 116:15). His concern for their death extends to how their loss is mourned. Prohibition of imitating the funerary practices of pagans was present under the law. Leviticus 19:20 and Deuteronomy 14:1 both prohibited the covenant community from mourning like those outside the community. In both of these cases, it was, like here, founded in theological understanding. Clearly then God has always expected that what one believes concerning Him was to inform public expressions of grief.

The element that was to transform their grief from pagan to Christian was hope. Hope is not a sentimental wish for some improved situation or circumstance but rather a confident expectation fixed in unshakable truth. Confident hope was well known in the Old Testament. Job’s hope for life subsequent to death was resolutely founded in his Redeemer (Job 19:25-27). Similarly, Jacob had the confident expectation that he would be reunited with his son Joseph, who he thought had died (Gen 37:35). The way that King David grieved and mourned the death of his infant child was so unusual that the castle staff was surprised and wondering (2 Sam 12:19-23). In prior dispensations their hope was founded in the promises of God. Now, in the church age, believers have a new and better hope. The new source of hope is Jesus. In the Thessalonian passage, as will be demonstrated, there are nine references to Him. Hope in the church age then is based upon the facts concerning what Jesus will do, and those facts that He revealed to Paul.

Resurrection and Rapture (v. 14)

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NA28)
εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη, οὕτως καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἀξεῖ σὺν αὐτῷ.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NASB95)
For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

The first reason they were not to grieve like other men is presented as a logical deduction from the facts they already knew. Paul’s use of a first class condition means that he assumed they had already believed that the facts concerning Jesus’ resurrection are true. He used this construction to

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10 Γάρ introduces Paul’s first reason that the Thessalonians are to have hope. The construction is a first class condition; it is assumed to be true for the sake of the argument because it could be translated “since.”
encourage the Thessalonians into reasoning from the known facts. Paul was not excoriating this church for being unaware. Neither was he rebuking them for not yet having come into this level of understanding; rather, he was engaging them as brothers for whom he was concerned.

The fact of Jesus’ death and resurrection was the basis of the faith that Paul and the Thessalonians shared. The use of the term “death” rather than “asleep” with reference to Jesus is in contrast with verse 13. The term was used to stress the grim reality of his death. Bruce commented, “But the use of the straightforward verb ἀποθνῄσκειν (to die) of Christ is probably intended to stress the reality of his death, as something not to be alleviated by any euphemism.”

The simple yet brutal fact that Jesus died but rose again was the basis of their faith and the means to moving them from ignorance and unreasonable grief to knowledge and hope.

Having introduced this foundational truth, Paul moved to the conclusion in the next part of the sentence, which is that God will bring those who died in union with Jesus just as he raised the Lord from the dead. The Reformation Study Bible notes here that this is to be understood as bringing into God’s presence; however, this is incorrect for two reasons. First, it is God who is the subject of the verb ἀγω so the dead whom He is bringing are already in his presence. Second, verse 16 indicated Jesus would come from heaven with the dead so their spirits are leaving the presence of God not coming into it. Consequently, this is best understood to mean that the dead in Christ are returning with Jesus to be united with their bodies. Hope is, therefore, a reasonable conclusion deduced from theological facts. In this case, hope results from the expectation that God will raise the dead to new life just as he did Jesus.

Caught Up Together (vv. 15-17)

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (NA28)
Τοῦτο γὰρ ὑμῖν λέγομεν ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι εἰς τὴν παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν τοὺς κοιμηθέντας· ὅτι αὐτὸς ὁ κύριος ἐν κελεύσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σάλπιγγι θεοῦ, καταβήσεται ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον, ἐπείτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ... 

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12 The aorist passive form of κοιμάω indicates that belief at the moment of death is what is in mind.
13 The protasis is introduced by the phrase οὕτως καὶ which is variously translated “and so” (NIV), “even so” (KJV, NKJV, NASB), and “so also” (NET).
perileipómenoi ãma súν aútôi̇s ārpaγησόμεθa èn nefélai̇s eîs āpântēsin toû kuriōû eîs âéra: kai oûtwûs pântote súûn kuriôû ēsóμεθa.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (NASB95)
For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, Paul comforted the grieving Thessalonians by informing them of what will occur to both the dead and the living when Jesus returns (v. 13a). Motivated by pastoral care, Paul founded his teaching in the realities of Jesus’ resurrection (v. 14) and his word (v. 15). His resurrection by God means that the Almighty can and will raise those who have died so that they can be with Jesus and the living. Jesus’ word is the believer’s promise that He will return (v. 16a), resurrect the dead (v. 16b), rapture the living (v. 17a), and gather all to Himself forever (v. 17b).

By the Word of the Lord

The second reason
d they are not to grieve as pagans is because they have revelation received from the Lord. How exactly this revelation was received by Paul was not stated. One option was that a prophet of the church (Eph 4:11) had received this revelation. A second possibility is that there were written records of Jesus teaching that were considered authoritative but not included in the Gospels. A final possibility is that it was a direct revelation received by Paul from Jesus. The first option can be rejected since the detail and breadth of the teaching in these verses is new. Prophetic utterance was to be tested, but if the prophetic revelation was new and not originating in prior Old Testament revelation, then there would be no standard by which to judge it and it would have been rejected. The second possibility should also be rejected since it is mere speculation considering there are not any recognized examples of authoritative teaching from Jesus outside the Bible.

The last option, however, is to be accepted for three reasons. First,
this revelation elaborates upon but does not duplicate what is in the Olivet discourse in the Synoptic Gospels, particularly in Matthew. Bruce commented, “The writers’ reply to the question about the lot of the faithful departed seems to draw on a primitive Christian tradition of eschatological teaching which can be discerned also in the Olivet discourse of the synoptic Gospels, especially in its Matthaean form.”

Second, in his upper room discourse (John 16:12-15), Jesus had promised the apostles additional revelation specifically concerning what was to come, and this is consistent with that promise. Third, it is supported by Paul’s claim that the gospel he preached was received “through a revelation of Jesus Christ“ (Gal 1:12b). Paul apparently learned this from the Lord during his three-year sojourn in Arabia (1:11-12, 17b). Subsequently, by the time Paul presented himself to the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26, Gal 1:18), he had already been teaching of Jesus' return and the snatching away of his people.

That We Who Are Alive and Remain

The content of Jesus’ teaching is presented in verses 15-16a, followed by a narrative of future events in verses 16b-17. In outline, the teaching is fourfold:

1. Return: Jesus descends from heaven (v. 16a)
2. Resurrection: the redeemed dead will rise (v. 16b)
3. Rapture: the living are caught up with the dead (v. 17a)
4. Reunion: living and dead are with Christ (v. 17b)

In keeping with his pastoral intent, Paul did not elaborate upon these events as he did in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 35-53. Instead, he moved chronologically and directly to the comforting and encouraging news that there will be an everlasting reunion between all believers and their Lord.

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15 Bruce, Thessalonians, 95.
16 Two ὅτι clauses, one here and another in verse 16, suggest that this is direct discourse from Jesus being provided by Paul.
17 The term ἔπειτα at the start of verse 17 indicates chronological sequence; therefore, it is evident that Paul related that Jesus described the chronological sequence of events at the rapture.
18 Lewis Sperry Chafer noted three resurrections: “(1) Three resurrections are to occur successively in the order named (1 Cor. 15:20–24): Christ (His was fulfilled already), the saints, and ‘the end’ (resurrection).” The events concern the resurrection of the saints (Systematic Theology [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993] 7:267).
Return of the Lord (v. 16a)

Jesus’ return was described with the articular Greek term παρουσία, indicating that a particular or definitive arrival is in view: the return of Jesus. The term was used in pagan antiquity with reference to a hidden deity who made himself known through a display of power; it was also used with reference to the visit of a king or person of high rank. In this usage, the people who were being visited would greet the dignitary some distance from their destination and escort them for the remaining distance. Here, however, it is the appearing of Jesus that is being emphasized. In the Bible, the term is almost always used of Jesus’ messianic arrival in glory.¹⁹

A shout, a voice, and a trumpet herald the Lord’s return. The Greek term κελεύσματι translated “shout” is only used here and describes a shout that is a battle command. In this case, the command summons the dead and the living to join Jesus. The call is not the same as Jesus’ summoning Lazarus from his grave in John 11:43 because there the Greek term used describes a loud, harsh cry from Jesus perhaps expressing his own anguish toward the reign of death (v. 33). Here it is a forceful command issued to the church by Jesus to join Him.

The second audible and authoritative military like summons is the “voice of the archangel.” Michael is the only archangel identified by name in the Bible. In Jude 9, he is doing battle with Satan with regard to the corpse of Moses. He is also in Revelation 12:7 where he is commanding angelic forces at war with Satan and his fallen angels. However, he is not explicitly identified here. Hogg and Vine noted that there is no article before “voice” and “archangel” in the Greek, “so that the quality of the voice, its majesty and authority, is intended; but there is nothing to indicate that any particular angelic chief was in the writer’s mind.”²¹

The final sound is the trumpet of God; it is associated with the voice

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²⁰ The term κελεύσματι is a hapax legomenon. The standard Greek lexicon glossed a “signal, (cry of) command” (Bauer et al., Greek-English Lexicon, 2nd ed., 427).

of the archangel by the Greek preposition καί. Trumpets were frequently used as a summons to war (Josh 6:20; Judg 6:34). Keener commented, “In the Old Testament, trumpets (shofars, rams’ horns) were used especially to gather the assembly or give orders for battle; in this context, both connotations must be in view.” However, when associated with a shout of assembly, the trumpet call was also a summons to joyful worship (2 Sam 6:15; 1 Chron 15:28; 2 Chron 15:14; Ps 47:5; 98:6). Consequently, while the shout, voice, and trumpet may be issuing a military like call to assembly, it seems as if a summons to a celebration (viz. the coming marriage supper of the Lamb) is just as easily a possibility.

Resurrection (v. 16b)

Verse 16b describes the next step, which is the resurrection of the dead. Among dispensationalists, there are two views concerning who these dead are. One view is that the redeemed from every dispensation are raised. The original Scofield Reference Bible noted, “Not church saints only, but all bodies of the saved, of whatever dispensation, are included in the first resurrection.” However, this same note does not appear in the New Scofield Study Bible published in 1967. The other view is that only believers from the church age are included in this resurrection. Olander commented, “The church, only the believers of the entire church age, living and departed, will be raptured unconditionally.” The latter view is to be accepted because 1 Corinthians 10:32 shows that God has separated humanity into three groups: Jews, Greeks, and the church. He has a separate program for each, and the former view combines the plan for

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22 Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 593.

23 The summons to marriage supper is not to be confused with the second coming of Christ. The marriage supper is recounted in Revelation 19:7-10, which is followed by Jesus’ physical return to earth in verses 11-16.


26 Within the New Testament, the mystery of the church that God was forming a separate people for Himself during this age has been revealed (Eph 2:11-16; 3:4-6). The church although originally composed of Jewish apostles (Acts 1:2, 13), and brothers (v. 15), and Jews who came to faith through the preaching of the apostles (Acts 2:41) later incorporated Gentiles (Acts 10:44, 15:19). Therefore, the separation of the believing Jews and Greeks into a new group called the Church occurred over a period of approximately 20 years.
Jews and the church without warrant. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul later identified this event as the “blessed hope” for the church (Tit 2:12).

Rapture and Reunion (v. 17)

The next event has been termed “the rapture” of the church. The term is derived from the Latin word rapiemur, which was used in the Vulgate for the Greek term ἁρπάζω. The word means to grab or seize suddenly so as to gain control of someone. What was depicted was a forceful seizure by God of the living (v. 14).

The dead are raised and the living are seized, in order that they might both be gathered together “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” Although a plain reading of the text clearly indicates that this will be a literal event, some have suggested that this should be understood in a metaphorical way. The latter notion is evident in John Barry’s note regarding this verse, wherein he remarked, “Paul could be suggesting that believers will literally be united with Christ in the air (the rapture view), or simply that believers will be united with Christ in bringing God’s presence, which is in heaven (the “clouds”), fully to earth.”

The metaphorical sense should be rejected in favor of the literal view since there is nothing in the text or context suggesting that Paul was spiritualizing the return of Jesus for the church.

To summarize, the second reason the Thessalonians were not to grieve like those who do not have any hope was because Jesus himself had promised to personally return, raise the dead, rapture the living, and gather all into a heavenly reunion where they would forever be together. What a wonderful comfort the pastoral application of correct theology to a grievous situation this would be for the Thessalonians! Paul’s teaching was to be the basis of the comfort that the Thessalonians were to provide to one another (v. 18) so that they would not grieve as those who have not hope, but rather would grieve as is appropriate for those who have been redeemed and informed (v. 13b). Finally, Jesus’ bodily ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9-11) provides assurance of his bodily return for his people.

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Comfort One Another in Death (v. 18)

With verse 18, Paul was approaching his conclusion concerning grief. Based upon what has been taught in verse 14-17, the Thessalonians were urged to comfort each other in their grief. The comfort was to be founded in “these words” spoken by Jesus; that is, their words of comfort were to be securely based upon Jesus’ teaching, which forms the basis of an accurate theology concerning the fate of the dead at his return. Eschatology was the source of Paul’s pastoral care for this grieving church.

The Greek word translated “comfort” is παρακαλέω; it has a root meaning of “to call alongside.” The second person plural active voice of the imperative verb means that they were to take the initiative to come to each other’s aid in times of grief in order to relieve each other of sorrow or pain (this is the way the term is used in 2 Cor 1:11 where Paul wrote that the comfort believers have received from God equips them to help others who need comforting). The picture herein is one of mutual love, mutual support, and mutual ministry founded in God’s Word and focused upon God’s future work through Jesus. As one person quipped, “life with Christ is an endless hope, without Him a hopeless end.”

COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE (1 THES 5:1—11)

In verse 1, Paul progressed the discussion from the rapture to the new topic of the day of the Lord. Tracy Howard denied that a change in topic occurs at 5:1. He commented that one of the mistaken assumptions made by exegetes “is that 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 5:1–11 describe two entirely different eschatological events. Coupled with this is the assumption that Paul describes both events through a diachronic time scheme. However, Paul in no way attempts to differentiate two events in

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28 The term ὥστε introduces an independent clause containing the imperative verb παρακαλέτε.
29 G. Curtis Jones, 1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1986) 195.
this passage.\textsuperscript{30} What Howard failed to note is that the Greek construction that delineates the start of this section was used 7 times by Paul and in every case it begins a new topic.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, one can safely conclude that a new topic begins here as well.

**Abrupt Judgment concerning the Unexpected (5:1-2)**

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 (NA28)

Περὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων καὶ τῶν καιρῶν, ἀδελφοί, οὐ χρείαν ἔχετε ώμην γράφεσθαι, αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἀκριβῶς οἴδατε ὅτι ἡμέρα κυρίου ὡς κλέπτης ἐν νυκτὶ οὕτως ἔρχεται.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 (NASB95)

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.

The “times and epochs” form a couplet. Used independently, the former refers to a period of time during which an activity or event occurs. In 1 Corinthians 16:7, for example, it is used with reference to the period of time Paul planned to spend with them, and, in Galatians 4:4, with reference to the time when God had determined for the birth of Jesus. The latter refers to a period characterized by some aspect of special crisis. In Romans 5:6, it refers to the time that Jesus died for the ungodly (cf. Rom 3:26; 8:18; 11:5; 2 Cor 8:14). The couplet appears in Acts 1:7 and is used by Jesus with reference to the time when the kingdom would be restored to Israel. Overall, this expression is probably a hendiadys with the referent being a specific period of time in God’s eschatological plan: the day of the Lord (v. 2).

In contrast to 4:13, where the Thessalonians required further instruction, they needed no more teaching concerning the day of the Lord. Since that is the case then why mention it again? Two reasons may be suggested. First, the prior discussion of the rapture required a recapitulation of the teaching concerning the day of the Lord so that the Thessalonians were lucid with regard to the distinction and relationship between these events. Second, the pastoral intent of the letter required Paul to provide comfort and encouragement to the church – whose hope


\textsuperscript{31} Περὶ δὲ is a preposition and postpositive conjunction used 7 times by Paul (cf. 1 Thess 4:9; 5:1; 1 Cor 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).
and confidence could be stunned under the pressure of persecution – if they did not understand the critical transition between the end of the church age and the resumption of God’s program for Israel.

The reason they need no further instruction was that they were fully aware that the day of the Lord would arrive unexpectedly and without warning (v. 2). The imminence of this day is suggested by the Greek usage behind the term “will come,” which might be better translated as “is coming.” Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Paul communicated that this day is drawing near and is, in fact, soon to burst upon the world; its abrupt and unanticipated arrival is captured in the metaphor “a thief in the night” and the amplifying phrase “suddenly” in verse 3.

**Excursus: The Day of the Lord**

The day of the Lord is a frequent topic in the Old Testament; it is depicted as imminent (Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Zeph 1:7, 14; Ezek. 30:3). Moreover, the day of the Lord is a time of God’s wrath (Lam 2:2) when sinners would be punished (Isa 13:9; Obad 15), unrighteous Israel and the nations would be destroyed (Isa 13:6; Ezek 30:4; Zeph 1:8; 2:1-3) but the righteous remnant would be protected (Joel 2:32; 3:16b). A type of its eschatological fulfillment was seen in the destruction of Jerusalem (Lam 2) and in starvation and drought (Joel 1:14-20). The same themes were conveyed in the New Testament wherein the day of the Lord is also the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:5), “day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14), “day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6), “day of Christ” (Phil 1:10; 2:16), and the “day of God” (2 Pet 3:12; Rev.16:14). Elwell noted, “the expression highlights the unmistakable appearance of God. God will make visible his rule of righteousness by calling for an accounting by the nations as well as individuals, dispensing punishment for some and ushering in salvation for others.”

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32 An explanatory γάρ introduces their reason they have no need for further instruction.

33 The lemma ἔρχεται is third person singular (middle or passive, present active indicative), and thus it could be translated as “is coming” or “is on its way.”

Annihilation For the Deceived (v. 3)

1 Thessalonians 5:3 (NA28)
ὅταν λέγωσιν· εἰρήνη καὶ ἁσφάλεια, τότε αἰφνίδιος αὐτοῖς ἐφίσταται ὀλέθρος ὡσπέρ ἡ ὠδίν τῇ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ, καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐκφύγωσιν.

1 Thessalonians 5:3 (NASB95)
While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

Paul continued his description of the teaching that the Thessalonians had already received.35 The distinctive feature in this verse is the contrast between the sense of ease and security on one hand, and the sudden destruction that will come upon them on the other. Ezekiel (13:10) had earlier condemned false prophets who had lulled Israel into deadly complacency with a message of false security by preaching peace when God’s judgment was imminent. Luke 21:34 also used the term “suddenly” with reference to the day of the Lord, where the warning is not to allow the pleasures of the world to distract them from the coming day. Another theme in this verse is the inevitability of the coming destruction. Bruce noted, “the point of comparison is the sudden onset of labor pains with their inescapable outcome.”36

Paul also introduced two groups of people here and continued to contrast them throughout verse 10. On the one hand, are “they;” and, conversely, there are "you," “we,” and “us.” The following table summarizes the contrasts between these groups; it is evident that “they” will enter the period termed the day of the Lord. Paul and the Thessalonians will not in any way experience the terrors that will be coming. The reason is because the church will have been removed when the events of 4:13-18 have been completed. Olander noted this point when he wrote, “After the rapture of the church, everyone who is left alive on the earth will go into the day of the Lord, that is His wrath.”37

35 ὅταν is used epexegetically and explains what the Thessalonians knew.
36 Bruce, Thessalonians, 110.
37 Olander, Greatness of the Rapture, 110.
1 Thessalonians 5:4-10 (NA28)

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-10 (NASB95)

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him.
You Are Safe in Christ (vv. 4-5)

Paul was certain of the security of the members of the Thessalonian church and reminded them of their security by continuing the contrast between them and those who are uninformed regarding the sudden and inevitable coming of God’s day of judgment. They were in a separate sphere of existence than those who would be surprised. In Ephesians 5:8, Paul wrote to that church that they “were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord.” Similarly, in Colossians 1:13, Paul wrote, “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” In the same way, the Thessalonians had been removed from the kingdom of darkness and were now in the kingdom of light. Therefore, since they are not imprisoned in ignorance then the day of judgment would not overcome them. To be overcome translates a Greek word (ἐφίστημι) that has the sense of being present in a place. In some cases, it has to do with being near a specific place (Luke 2:9; 24:4; Acts 4:1); in others with being in a place with the intention of attacking or harming (Acts 17:5); and, in still other cases it has the sense of being present and ready to accomplish a task (2 Tim 4:2). In this case, it has to do with not being present when misfortune comes (cf. Luke 21:34). Paul was, therefore, asserting that since they were in the light, then they would not be present when the day of the Lord suddenly comes upon the earth.

So Then Remain Watchful in Christ (vv. 6-8)

The church was not in darkness; therefore, Paul urged them to live a different quality of life than those who are. First, negatively he urged that they not sleep like those in darkness. The ones in darkness are the “others” (cf. NASB). They are literally “those remaining” (οἱ λοιποί), that is, those still on earth after the church has been taken in 4:13-18. In verse 7, they are those who sleep and get drunk, living a life of ease and pleasure even while inevitable destruction is approaching. In 4:13-15, the word κοιμάω was translated “sleep” and used as a euphemism for death or dead. In 5:6, however, a different word (καθεύδω) was used; it refers to being spiritually indifferent or lazy.

38 The ἵνα clause indicates the result of their not being in darkness.
39 The particle οὖν is inferential. Paul made an inference from the fact that they were not in darkness.
40 The hortatory subjunctives – καθεύδω, γρηγορέω, νήφω – are all equivalent to imperatives.
The second thing they were urged to do is to be alert or in constant readiness. The term is used eschatologically (cf. Matt 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35, 37; Rev. 3:2f; 16:15). The Thessalonians, knowing that the day of the Lord was inevitable, and knowing that the church will be removed prior to that day beginning, were urged to live in constant readiness for Jesus’ appearing and the summons to join Him (4:16-17).

The third thing Paul urged them to do is to be “sober.” In the Bible, this term is only used figuratively and usually joined with “mind,” as in the need to be sober minded (2 Tim 4:5; 1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; 5:8). Therefore, it does not appear that Paul was addressing a drinking problem present in the church but rather urging them to have a particular way of thinking, mindset, or worldview that is distinctively secured in their knowledge of Jesus’ coming and the sudden and inevitable divine judgment that is on its way. Imminency was not to be merely a theological construct or a desiccated doctrine but rather a way of life. The importance of this exhortation is seen in its repetition in verse 8.

In verse 8, being sober is due to the existential fact that the Thessalonians were now in this new sphere of life. They entered this new sphere of life when they put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation” (v. 8b). They put on faith, love, and hope when they believed in Jesus as their sacrifice for sin. In other words, since they are believers they need to act like believers by being sober minded. They were urged to get their thinking under control and align it with the new reality that they have been taught (cf. 2 Cor 10:5) and which was a natural result of their new life. To summarize, they were urged to live a life in active pursuit and exercise of spiritual realities that were to orient their manner of thinking or worldview while they kept themselves in constant readiness for Jesus’ return.

Live in Light of Your Destiny (vv. 9-10)

Echoing the point made earlier, that since they were now in the light they are to live in the light, Paul provided another reason they were to have a

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41 The adverbial participle of means (ἐνδύω) describes how the main verb has been accomplished. The aorist indicates that this action preceded the action of the main verb; however, Wallace indicates that cause can also be implied: “Sometimes means blends imperceptibly into cause, especially with aorist participles. In such instances, the participle may be used for an action that is both antecedent and contemporaneous to the controlling verb” (Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 629).

42 The ὅτι marks causality; it provides the reason that they are to be sober.
mind focused upon the coming of Jesus and the day of the Lord: it is because God has given them a better destiny. He has removed them from the sphere of those who will endure his wrath and placed them among those who will be “obtaining salvation.” The term translated “obtaining” has in view a particular event of acquisition, which is the rapture of 4:13-18. Bruce commented, “The salvation in view here includes salvation from eschatological “wrath.” Likewise, Constable noted, “God’s intention for them is not the wrath that will come on the earth in the day of the Lord, but the full salvation that will be theirs when the Lord returns for them in the clouds. The wrath of God referred to here clearly refers to the Tribulation; the context makes this apparent. Deliverance from that wrath is God’s appointment for believers.”

The deliverance from wrath by rapture is through the personal intervention of Jesus on their behalf. Jesus’ substitutionary death is the means of the temporal salvation from wrath that was now theirs. The goal of his death was to ensure that they would all be with Him forever (4:17). The scope of those saved from the wrath in the rapture is summarized by the phrase “whether we are awake or asleep.” Two views are held regarding how this is to be understood. The first view is that Paul was thinking with regard to physical life and death. In support of this view, Bruce quoted Bornkamm who demonstrated that this is the sense Paul used in 4:13-18, then commented, “The verbs γρηγορεῖν and καθεύδειν are those used in v 6 for moral watchfulness and carelessness respectively, but that is not their sense here. It is ludicrous to suppose that the writers mean, ‘Whether you live like sons of light or like sons of darkness, it will make little difference: you will be all right in the end.’”

The second view is that Paul had moral alertness in mind, as he did in verses 6, and 8. The notion is favored since it is aligned with the nearer context, uses the same lexical terms as those in verses 6 and 8, and supports Paul’s argument in this section which is that at the moment of belief they had been transferred from darkness to light. Constable

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43 The accusative (περιποίησις) followed by the objective genitive is used in the sense of an event of acquisition, gaining, or obtaining.
44 Bruce, Thessalonians, 112.
46 The preposition διά is used as a marker of personal agency.
47 The ἵνα clause introduces the purpose, aim, or goal of Jesus substitutionary death.
48 Bruce, Thessalonians, 114.
commented, “What did Paul mean by whether we are awake or asleep? Did he mean ‘whether we are alive or dead,’ or ‘whether we are spiritually alert or lethargic’? It seems that he meant the latter because he used the same words for ‘awake’ (grēgorōmen) and ‘asleep’ (katheudōmen) as he used in verse 6, where they clearly mean spiritually alert and spiritually lethargic. If so, then Paul’s point is that Christians are assured of life together with Him, whether they are spiritually watchful or not. That they might live with Christ was His purpose in dying for them. They will escape God’s wrath whether they are watchful or not (cf. 1:10).”

To summarize, Paul began this section with the assertion that the Thessalonians were now existentially different from those around them. They were no longer imprisoned by ignorance but instead had been made aware – in a profound way – of the sudden and inevitable day of the Lord (vv. 4-5). The believers were existentially different and because of this reality they were also to be experientially different; rather than live for ease and pleasure they were urged instead to live in constant readiness for Jesus’ return (vv. 6-8). Consequently, since their destiny was to be with Jesus forever, they were confidently to anticipate an eternity in fellowship with one another and with Him.

**Edify One Another (v. 11)**

1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NA28)
Διὸ παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους καὶ οἰκοδομεῖτε εἰς τὸν ἑνα, καθὼς καὶ ποιεῖτε.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NASB95)
Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

The closing echoes 4:18. In both places, Paul’s argument was founded in eschatology but his purpose is pastoral. The Thessalonians now know that all believers – the dead and the living – were destined to have Jesus rescue them (4:13-18). Additionally, this would occur prior to the coming day of the Lord. They were now set apart from the world of unbelief and would be removed from the earth prior to the coming time of destruction. Therefore, they were to live in readiness of the coming of Jesus to rescue them and they should align their thinking with the new reality. In light of all this, they were to love and support each other. Furthermore, Paul added that they were also to “build up” one another. The term (οἰκοδομέω) underlying

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this translation literally means to build a building; it is used here to mean help improve each other’s ability to live responsibly and effectively.\textsuperscript{50}

CONCLUSION

The approach adopted herein was to demonstrate the sequence of events at the end of the church age, particularly with regard to the day of the Lord. Another purpose was to examine how Paul applied eschatology to the church pastorally. From the foregoing exegetical analysis, it is apparent that the rapture, which is described in 4:13-18, precedes the day of the Lord, which is described in 5:1-11. The declaration is true for four reasons. First, Greek usage supports the assertion that 5:1 starts a discussion of a new topic and new phase in God’s endtimes plan and not the continued discussion of the rapture in 4:13-18. Second, the destruction of the day of the Lord will come upon “them” (5:2) who remain upon the earth (v. 6), which means that the Thessalonians will have already been removed. Third, the day of the lord is a day of wrath (v. 9), which God has not planned for the Thessalonians to experience (v. 9a). Finally, the salvation in view for the Thessalonians in verse 9b is a specific, saving act or event which corresponds best with the event of the rapture described in 4:13-18.

The analysis also demonstrates how (in both discussions) Paul’s purpose was to encourage and edify the Thessalonians. The rapture and the protection from God’s wrath were to motivate holy living in light of eternity. The Thessalonians were to take comfort in the knowledge that they would be with their loved ones and with Jesus forever (4:18). Their comfort was only magnified by the fact that the rapture would rescue them from the coming day of the Lord (5:11a). Additionally, in light of the existential difference Jesus had made (v. 4) they were exhorted to help each other live a new worldview (vv. 6b, 8a), both responsibly and effectively (5:11b).

The approach herein is a model for teaching eschatology in the local church. As an aspect of systematic theology, and as important as it is, eschatology will lose its impact and effectiveness if disconnected from the life of the church. Since the purpose of Jesus in providing teachers to the church was to equip the body (Eph 4:12), it is very important that theological teaching should be shown to support ministry within the local body. Furthermore, ministry that is not established in an accurate exegetical and theological understanding of God’s Word falls short of the equipping that Jesus desires for his church (2 Tim 3:17).

\textsuperscript{50} Arndt, et al., \textit{Greek-English Lexicon}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed., 696.
NEW CALVINISM, PART III:
A CALVINIST SOTERIOLOGY?

Drew Curley

Much has been written in recent years concerning the relationship between Calvin and those who are known today as Calvinists (i.e. the various Calvinisms). There are two basic approaches. The first is Calvin against the Calvinists as articulated by R. T. Kendall in Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649. His basic thesis: what is called Calvinism today is not the theology of John Calvin (this is especially true in regards to the doctrine of limited atonement). In response to this work, Paul Helm wrote Calvin and Calvinism, which sought to refute Kendall, and argued for the essential unity between Calvin and Calvinism. In a more recent work, Richard Muller agreed with neither Kendall nor Helm. Corresponding to this discussion is whether the entity referenced as reformed theology is truly the theology of the Reformation. Muller stated, “we have no indication from Calvin’s correspondence that his theology was viewed as the primary expression of Reformed thought in his generation.”¹ The terms Calvinism and reformed theology are not necessarily indicative of Calvin or the Reformation, and this is a point that needs to be understood.

Most new Calvinists are inclined to equate Reformation theology with Calvin and TULIP, which forms the basis for their ecumenical agreement. Despite this, there remains a great deal of theological development between Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion and the reformed response to the Remonstrants, known as the Canons of Dordt. As Kennedy observed, “there are striking dissimilarities between Calvin’s reading of scripture and that of the later Reformed tradition.”² Consequently, it will be shown that much of what is known as Calvinism follows in the line of others like Beza or Cocceius as much as it does from

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Calvin. No matter their origin, this theology eventually ruled the day in the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity, which are said to be the “north star” of Reformed Theology. At best, they only resemble Calvin in part.

**ARE THEY TRULY CALVINISTS?**

Are they truly Calvinists? Is it reformed soteriology? The questions are similar but not exactly equivalent. What is called Calvinism today is typically equated with reformed theology, but one may examine Calvinism based just upon its divergence from the theology of Calvin. When the new Calvinists refer to themselves as Calvinists, they are not affirming the entirety of reformed theology. The former president and chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, Michael Milton, acknowledged that “English speaking Christianity is seeing a great resurgence of Calvinism—it may not look like what we are used to, it may not pass muster with most of our faculty at RTS, or at Covenant or Westminster—but it is surely under the larger umbrella of Calvinistic movements.”

There is some degree of separation between reformed theology and new Calvinism indicated by this prominent theologian, but there is not a complete separation. The division epitomizes the view of new Calvinism by those who ascribe to the reformed theology; it is concluded by these Calvinists: new Calvinism is not Calvinism but simply Calvinistic. The assertion is an important semantic distinction made by Milton.

**Repentance/Regeneration**

One area where there is assumed to be agreement between modern Calvinists and the theology of Calvin appears when discussing the issue of repentance. In the typical Calvinist *ordo salutis*, regeneration is followed by repentance and faith. The logic results from their understanding of depravity that asserts that the unregenerate man is incapable of repentance and faith without the regeneration brought by the Holy Spirit.

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3 Carl Trueman, phone conversation to the author, 18 June 2013.
4 David Larsen, professor emeritus at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, believes this to be the origin of what is now known as Calvinistic theology, making it more Bezan theology codified at Westminster, which would align well with the theology of New Calvinism (phone conversation to the author, 12 June 2013).
Calvin, on the other hand, insisted that repentance must follow faith. He stated:

[W]e obtain by faith, both free reconciliation and newness of life. . .

. . . from faith to repentance. . . .

[R]epentance not only always follows faith, but is produced by it, out to be without controversy. . . .

[T]hose who think that repentance precedes faith instead of flowing from, or being produced by it as the fruit by the tree, have never understood its nature, and are moved to adopt that view on very insufficient grounds. . . .

[A] man cannot seriously engage in repentance unless he knows he is of God.6

Calvin also said, “in one word, then, by repentance, I understand regeneration, the only aim of which is to form in us anew the image of God.”7 If one holds faith to be the fruit of regeneration, then he is not being true to the theology of Calvin. In seeking to differentiate between false and true professions of faith, Calvin introduced, but did not develop the concept of temporary faith whereby any profession of faith and corresponding assurance of salvation is not by necessity true faith. As Thorson explained, “the problem began, Kendall readily admits, with Calvin himself—primarily from Calvin’s view of ‘temporary faith’ in the reprobate. This teaching sprang from Calvin’s observation of apparent believers falling away.”8 Arminius and his later followers eventually developed this view.

For new Calvinists, regeneration is the real instrumental cause of salvation because it is this, which ultimately produces faith.

[I]f there is true regeneration then these elements of the fruit of the Spirit will be more and more evident in that person’s life . . . genuine love for God and His people, heartfelt obedience to his commands, and the Christlike character traits that Paul calls the


7 Ibid. 3.3.9.

fruit of the Spirit, demonstrated consistently over a period of time in a person’s life, simply cannot be produced by Satan or by the natural man or woman working in his or her own strength.\(^9\)

Regeneration, though, does not entirely override the sinfulness of man. Only truly Spirit-filled believers have a heartfelt obedience to the Lord’s commands and even the holiest people in Scripture (Jesus excluded) are deeply flawed. The man previously described as the true believer is a myth. Even David, a man after God’s own heart, would not have qualified as regenerate.

**Volition**

A great amount of energy has been wasted in an attempt to undermine free grace theology. Opponents erroneously refer to free grace theology, as teaching that mere assent to Jesus is all that is required to possess a saving faith, which is a “straw man” argument. The crux of the difference between free grace theology and lordship salvation involves the latter’s understanding of the volitional aspect to saving faith. Free grace theology has maintained that to believe in Christ means more than to simply acknowledge his existence; it requires one to place their trust in Him and his offer of salvation. Lordship proponents, of whom new Calvinists comprise in part, believe that man is required to do something in order to trust in Christ actually. Their will or volition must be turned completely to Him. Is this in line with Calvin? He defined faith in the following way: “we shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ.”\(^{10}\)

Now, compare this with Sproul, who stated, “personal trust and commitment, *fiducia,* is the third element of saving faith.”\(^{11}\) Kendall believes this drift occurred early in the reformed tradition. He said faith can be defined in Calvin’s writings as “persuasion, assurance, or apprehension” while, in Beza, it is “applying or appropriating.”\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7.
There has been a subtle shift from *fiducia* as trust or confidence to also include commitment. For the new Calvinist, those not willing to count the cost and “take up their cross” cannot be saved. One wonders, why they do not rest upon the view that “*fiducia*, (is) a personal trust and reliance on Christ, and on him alone, for one’s justification.” Calvin affirmed this definition saying, “faith is a knowledge of the divine favor towards us, and a full persuasion of its truth.” The Westminster Catechism (86) states, “faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, (Heb. 10:39) whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel.” With this assertion being established, no new Calvinist would affirm Calvin’s complete doctrine of faith. In this same section, Calvin explained concerning faith:

> [W]ere it not true that many fall away from the common faith (I call it common, because there is a great resemblance between temporary and living, everduring faith), Christ would not have said to his disciples, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” (John 8:31, 32). He is addressing those who had embraced his doctrine, and urging them to progress in the faith, lest by their sluggishness they extinguish the light which they have received. Accordingly, Paul claims faith as the peculiar privilege of the elect, intimating that many, from not being properly rooted, fall away. . . . [Paul] compares a good conscience to the ark in which faith is preserved, because many, by falling away, have in regard to it made shipwreck.

In saying elsewhere that the will is not taken away by grace, but out of bad is changed into good, and after it is good is assisted,—he only means, that man is not drawn as if by an extraneous impulse... by the free mercy of God, the will is turned to good . . . a will which can neither be turned to God, nor continue in God, unless by grace; a will which, whatever its ability may be, derives all that ability from grace.

One can see from these statements where Arminius may have developed some of his doctrines. The Westminster Confession (14.2) explains the volitional element of faith in the following manner.

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14 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.12.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid. 2.3.14.
By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Calvin’s understanding of depravity is that people who have refused to acknowledge God finish with minds that are disqualified from being able to understand and acknowledge the will of God. Hodge explained that Beza’s understanding of total depravity meant man is “incapable of judgment or discernment.” 17 The notion is crucially important for understanding the nature of faith for new Calvinists. New Calvinism’s belief that faith is linked to commitment likely originated with Beza and was propagated by the Westminster divines. A new Calvinist affirms this same understanding, as follows:

[T]he approval of the facts of the gospel will also involve a desire to be saved through Christ. But all this still does not add up to true saving faith. That comes only when I make a decision of my will to depend on, or put my trust in, Christ my Savior. This personal decision to place my trust in Christ is something done with my heart, the central faculty of my entire being that makes commitments for me as a whole person. 18

Consequently, it remains apparent that what constitutes Calvinism is not the theology of Calvin. Moreover, it also appears that Beza, and later Westminster standards may have been equally influential in determining what is regarded today as Calvinism.

The Drawing of God

One specific area where New Calvinism diverges from the theology of Calvin is the proponent’s understanding of how God draws man to himself. John 6:44 is the primary text for this discussion because therein John used the Greek word ἑλκύω. The verb has the following possible meanings according to the standard Greek lexicon: (1) “to move an object from one

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18 Grudem, Systematic Theology, 712.
area to another in a pulling motion, draw;” (2) “to draw a person in the direction of values for inner life;” and, (3) “to appear to be pulled in a certain direction, flow.”\textsuperscript{19}

Sproul argued that drawing (ελκύω) “mean(s) to compel by irresistible superiority. Linguistically and lexicographically, the word means ‘to compel.’ To compel is a much more forceful concept than to woo.”\textsuperscript{20} Sproul and the new Calvinists define the drawing of God as literally the dragging of God, a word with striking negative connotation that does not align with the character of God. In addition to this, it is not what the word ελκύω actually means, but is instead forced upon it to support the author’s theological views. One need only look to Jeremiah 31:3, where this word is used in the Septuagint. “The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness’” (NASB). Song of Solomon 1:4 reads, “Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you” (ESV). One may find it interesting that the ESV, with its reformed leanings, chose not to translate it in this normative way. The concept of ελκύω comes from a loving place and is not forced upon anyone.

Calvin did not define ελκύω as the new Calvinists. He viewed this drawing of God as being a wooing. He stated, “(God) continues to visit miserable sinners with unwearied kindness, until he subdues their depravity, and woos them back.”\textsuperscript{21} “God is not left without a witness, while, with numberless varied acts of kindness, he woos men to the knowledge of himself, yet they cease not to follow their own ways, in other words, deadly errors.”\textsuperscript{22} Elsewhere, Calvin described the way in which God woos and overcomes the depravity of man’s heart is through the enlightening of the mind: “in order that the word of God may gain full credit, the mind must be enlightened, and the heart confirmed, from some other quarter.”\textsuperscript{23} A loving God woos; the deterministic force of deism draws a man through compulsion.


\textsuperscript{21} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 1.5.7.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 1.5.15.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 3.2.7.
Beza and Calvin

There is a great discussion being had within the reformed community concerning the relationship between Calvin and Calvinism, and much of this is focused upon the relationship between the theology of Beza and Calvin. There arose a period of development between the life of Calvin and the confessional reformed tradition. When one examines this period, a conclusion must be made concerning the relationship between Calvin and subsequent Calvinism. When one examines the writings of Calvin and Beza, it appears that there were some fairly major differences between Calvin’s soteriology and Beza’s, which later came to be codified in the various reformed confessions. Kendall explained: “While a strong doctrine of predestination tends to characterize the soteriology of Calvin’s leading contemporaries in the Reformed tradition on the Continent, it appears Beza was the first of these to make the doctrine of predestination central to his system.”24 The characterization is something echoed in contemporary new Calvinism which equates true Calvinism with the doctrine of predestination.

Kendall viewed Beza as being the instigator of limited atonement, and this has been a highly controversial conclusion. Apparently, Calvin pictured the atonement through the lens of Christ’s role as high priest. As the blood of the lamb was shed for all without exception, the sacrifice of Jesus was made for all indiscriminately. As the high priest offered the actual sacrifice to the Lord and interceded for man, the sprinkling of the blood becomes applicable only for those whom the priest is interceding. The blood is spilled for all, but only some of it is applied to the mercy seat. Calvin himself explained:

[I]n order that the atonement might take effect, he performed the office of an advocate, and interceded for all who embraced this sacrifice by faith25 . . . yet I approve of the ordinary reading, that he alone bore the punishment of many, because on him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that “many” sometimes denotes “all.”26

In examining reformed thinkers subsequent to Calvin, Stewart claimed:

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24 Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism, 29-30.
26 Ibid.
[T]he vast majority of older writers surveyed here preferred the language of "particular atonement" or "particular redemption" to the acronym's suggestion of an atonement that was "limited". But more than this, it is evident that in keeping with Dordt's original insistence that – as to the sheer value of Christ's dying, his death was "abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world" older writers often took pains to spell out the senses in which there were universal benefits in that particular redemption won by Christ.27

Importantly for this discussion is the fact that Beza's understanding of faith is based almost entirely upon his doctrines of predestination and assurance. Consequently, it is said that Beza understood assurance to be based upon self-examination. Many new Calvinists propagate this today.

[T]he doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are "backsliding" or straying away from Christ. Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and life of obedience to him, they may not be saved—in fact, the evidence that they are giving is that they are not saved, and they were never really saved. Once they stop trusting in Christ and obeying him (I am speaking in terms of outward evidence) they have no genuine assurance of salvation, and they should consider themselves unsaved.28

Unfortunately, what Grudem calls a Calvinist and an Arminian “will both counsel a ‘backslider’ in the same way . . . ‘You do not appear to be a Christian now—you must repent of your sins and trust in Christ for salvation.'”29 One is reminded of the repeated efforts of Luther to find this assurance based upon his outward conformity to Christ. He always lacked this assurance until he saw the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. In addition to this, most Baptists today know of someone who has struggled with assurance and has been baptized three times, or is known for repeatedly coming forward during the altar call. However, “Calvin firmly opposed any such attempt to base our assurance on something within

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29 Ibid.
ourselves.” Kendall believed this type of Puritan mindset is a departure from Calvin by asserting, “while Calvin thinks looking to ourselves leads to anxiety, or damnation, Beza thinks otherwise. Sanctification, or good works, is the infallible proof of saving faith.” The proposition is known in reformed theology as the reflex act of faith. Hodge explained:

The second objection was answered by distinguishing between the direct and the reflex act of faith. By the direct act of faith, we embrace Christ as our Savior; by the reflex act, arising out of the consciousness of believing, we believe that He loved us and died for us, and that nothing can ever separate us from his love. These two acts are inseparable, not only as cause and effect, antecedent and consequent; but they are not separated in time, or in the consciousness of the believer. They are only different elements of the complex act of accepting Christ as He is offered in the Gospel.

The Canons of Dordt (Art. XII) explained the act of faith as follows:

Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God’s Word—such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.

The stated assertion is an example of the effect being deduced from the conclusion. For example, I am not hungry; therefore, I must have eaten. In this situation it is said, “I have the fruit of regeneration, therefore I am saved.” The proposition is not logically valid; it begs the question, not to mention the negative conclusion is worrisome. Assurance based in the subjective experience of man is something Calvin was ardently outspoken against.

[I]f we are to determine by our works in what way the Lord stands affected towards us, I admit that we cannot even get the length of a feeble conjecture: but since faith should accord with the free and

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31 Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 33.
simple promise, there is no room left for ambiguity. . . .

The believer finds within himself two principles: the one filling him with delight in recognizing the divine goodness, the other filling him with bitterness under a sense of his fallen state; the one leading him to recline on the promise of the Gospel, the other alarming him by the conviction of his iniquity; the one making him exult with the anticipation of life, the other making him tremble with the fear of death. This diversity is owing to imperfection of faith, since we are never so well in the course of the present life as to be entirely cured of the disease of distrust, and completely replenished and engrossed by faith. Hence those conflicts: the distrust cleaving to the remains of the flesh rising up to assail the faith enlisting in our hearts.

In addition to this, Beza is said to be the originator of supralapsarianism. Rogers stated, “Beza was the first supralapsarian among the Reformers who rooted all theological affirmations in God’s eternal decrees.”

Supralapsarianism is something that is not to be found in Calvin’s theology, but is evident in new Calvinism.

IS THERE A CONSISTENT SOTERIOLOGY?

Answering the question of whether there is a truly consistent soteriology within new Calvinism is easier said than done. Despite this, it is possible to observe some beliefs that are characteristic of the movement. Moreover, it is especially telling when new Calvinists assert doctrinal stances regarding matters frequently debated among evangelicals. For example, one of the stances taken by new Calvinists involves complementarianism over egalitarianism. In terms of soteriology, it is best to begin with their understanding of sanctification. As discussed extensively later, sanctification is viewed as proving holiness and providing the believer with assurance. The following statements are indicative:

[W]e believe that true Christians born again of God’s Spirit will be kept by God throughout their life, as evidenced by personal

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33 Calvin, Institutes, 3.2.38.
34 Ibid. 3.2.18.
35 Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 104.
36 The issue is not one that is worrisome, but it is mentioned because it demonstrates that the movement does make significant theological stances at times.
transformation that includes an ever-growing love of God the Father through God the Son by God the Spirit, love of brothers and sisters in the church, and love of lost neighbors in the culture.\textsuperscript{37}

[W]e also believe that these, the elect of God whom he gave to the Son, will persevere in belief and godly behavior and be kept secure in their salvation by grace through faith.\textsuperscript{38}

[G]ood works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace.\textsuperscript{39}

Lordship salvation is a necessary component of their soteriology. Calvin though argued:

[I]n every age there have been some who, under the guidance of nature, were all their lives devoted to virtue. It is of no consequence, that many blots may be detected in their conduct; by the mere study of virtue, they evinced that there was somewhat of purity in their nature . . . some have not only excelled in illustrious deeds, but conducted themselves most honourably through the whole course of their lives.\textsuperscript{40}

Calvin admitted there was many unregenerate men who appear to be holy based upon the evidences of their outward appearance. They even may excel at this, and this may even occur throughout the entire course of their lives. Anyone attempting to understand the truly Calvinist doctrine of total depravity needs to read and understand Calvin’s explanation of it. Man, whether unregenerate or regenerate, cannot be experientially righteous.

In addition to this, there is a definitive stance taken with regard to the extent of the atonement. New Calvinists wholeheartedly ascribe to the doctrine of limited atonement, as evident in the following assertions: “his determination to save his redeemed people”\textsuperscript{41} and God has “set his saving love on those he has chosen and ha[s] ordained Christ to be their Redeemer.”\textsuperscript{42}

The propositions correspond with their anthropocentric understanding of perseverance of the saints (i.e. “where it [the Gospel] is

\textsuperscript{37} Together for the Gospel, “Affirmations & Denials,” Article VII.
\textsuperscript{40} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 2.3.2.
\textsuperscript{41} Together for the Gospel, “Affirmations & Denials,” Article VII.
received, believed, and held firmly, individual persons are saved.”\(^{43}\) When reaching its most consistent conclusion, salvation ultimately becomes dependent upon man’s efforts to produce holiness in his life through the Holy Spirit and to hold fast to his faith and repentance until the end of his life. The theology is not that of Calvin. For him, faith was confidence in the work of Christ not in the fruits of regeneration or in one’s perseverance.

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\text{[O]ur faith is not true unless it enables us to appear calmly in the presence of God.}
\text{Such boldness springs only from confidence in the divine favor and salvation. So true is this, that the term faith is often used as equivalent to confidence.}^{44}
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The confession is true \textit{sola gratia, sola fide, and solus Christus}. Where these new Calvinists have diverted from Calvin’s theology is part of what makes them unique. While the broad nature of the movement and lack of definition does not easily allow for a detailed doctrinal summary there is a degree of uniformity.

\textbf{CASE STUDY: JOHN PIPER}

Each major section of this research detailing theological trends within new Calvinism will have a corresponding case study. The purpose of these case studies is to demonstrate how the specific theological beliefs held by one, several, or all new Calvinists have deficiencies related to the \textit{sine qua non} of new Calvinism. Each of their unique tenants has some troublesome element that needs to be addressed and corrected.

In many ways, John Piper is the figurehead or father figure of new Calvinism.\(^{45}\) Piper’s popularity amongst young people, as well as veteran theologians, is remarkable. What is perhaps surprising to many is that his views do not align well with the traditional reformed faith.\(^{46}\) Therefore, it

\(^{43}\) Ibid. 7.
\(^{44}\) Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.2.15.
\(^{45}\) His views are in some sense representative. One may object that his view of future justification is not indicative of New Calvinism as a whole, but an appendix of reviews from major New Calvinists can be seen to demonstrate that they are supportive of this controversial work.
\(^{46}\) As previously discussed, the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity define reformed theology. Although not one version of reformed theology is held universally, it is broadly reflected by the covenantal system, which is represented systematically in the Westminster Confession, which is a general
must be asked: is he a wolf in sheep’s clothing or has he simply allowed the pendulum to swing too far in one direction?

Caution should automatically be heightened when a well-known liberal seminary produces an outspokenly conservative theologian. Indeed, it is a challenge to think of any truly biblical theologian who was the product of a seminary after it became liberal. Although he is viewed as a conservative Calvinist, his theology does not correspond with the core of Calvinism and his view of the gospel, at times, is more consistent with Arminianism. Although he never expressly states that one can lose their salvation, he continually urges the believer to produce good works in order to be considered (in the future) as having eternal life, which is an extreme form of perseverance. Piper’s general outlook is to witness the believer increasing in holiness, which is evidenced by increased righteous behavior rather than an increased awareness of their sinfulness. One author has stated the following in reference to a theological system.

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\text{[G]enerally, its theology has been marred by a denial of imputed sin and substitution in the cross by affirming a governmental approach (to the atonement). Grace and simple faith have been undermined by adding continuance in works as a condition for justification, which leads to legalism in both salvation and Christian growth. There is also a strong tendency towards sinless perfection.}
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The statement could easily characterize Piper’s view, but it is actually an evaluation of Arminianism and not Calvinism.

Piper preaches grace, but he betrays the biblical understanding of it in favor of a works-based religion. In this, he not only departs from the great doctrines of the Reformation but returns, in part, to Roman Catholic theology. Nowhere is this more evident than in his view of justification, especially in his teaching with regard to the future aspect of justification. In light of this, it may be best to classify Piper as being in a theological class by himself, called limited atonement Arminianism. Other new Calvinists can be classified in the same manner.

Confession that is affirmed by most reformed theologians, and is usually known as federal theology.

47 The statement is not meant in reference to the theology of Arminius, but as Arminianism is most commonly defined by Calvinists.


49 The assertion herein is in regard to Romanism as opposed to those within the Roman Catholic Church who affirm more evangelical doctrines in contradistinction to the church’s hierarchy.
Redefining Terms

In a theological dispute, it is very possible for two people to embrace widely different understandings of Scripture while simultaneously affirming a common statement of faith. What most often differentiates opinions in theological matters involves how a theologian chooses to define terms. Defining terms is a major component of theology in general. Liberals have often used the redefining of traditional doctrines to demonstrate tacit agreement with historic orthodoxy while simultaneously subscribing to unbiblical beliefs. History is replete with examples of such practice. Piper, unfortunately, is no different in this regard.

Piper redefines concepts like justification in his own way. In so doing, he is able to affirm a belief in justification by faith alone, while developing a theological system based upon the concept of future justification that inevitably produces justification by works. One must be alert when reading Piper (or anyone), being careful to discern the redefining of commonly agreed upon theological definitions. The distinction between biblical concepts and Piper’s redefinition of these theological terms is what makes his theology so dangerous. The concern does not even take into account the effect of his widespread popularity.

Justification

The most notable inconsistency in Piper’s theology concerns justification. Some may say that a theological “straw man” will be constructed that misrepresents Piper in order to refute him because of his vociferous insistence that man is justified by faith alone. Assuredly, this is not the case. Instead, it is being argued that Piper has a true system of theological beliefs that are carefully disguised by wording that is commonly used in historic Protestant doctrines. One should be alarmed when Piper makes statements like: “some have so changed the ordinary meaning of the word

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50 A more recent new Calvinist supported work, Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2013), is a great example. J. D. Greear’s definitions include the following: “eternal life is not just a reality we enter into when we die; it is something that comes into us now, and its evidences appear everywhere. Seeing those evidences assures us eternal life is in us” (p. 24); “salvation is a posture of repentance and faith that you begin in a moment and maintain for the rest of your life” (p. 5); “repentance is belief in action” (p. 40); and, “belief is the assumption of a new posture toward the Lordship of Christ and His finished work on the cross” (p. 40).
‘righteousness’ that in the act of justification, it no longer refers to anyone’s
right attitude or right action but only to a courtroom verdict of acquittal.”\textsuperscript{51}

Piper’s statement was made to the Evangelical Theological Society. What Piper argued was that being justified is being more than declared righteous; it is being righteous, which is what the Roman Catholic Church teaches. There are times when Piper articulates an orthodox understanding of justification, but there are often times when he subtly betrays orthodoxy in his theological stances. There remain subtle, telling statements, which is especially true concerning the doctrine of justification.

Many applaud Piper for his defense of orthodoxy, specifically related to the doctrine of justification, against the New Perspective on Paul school in his disputation with N. T. Wright. There is still cause for great concern, which is evident in statements concerning “God’s future time of judgment when our justification will be confirmed.”\textsuperscript{52} When Piper titled one of his works \textit{The Future of Justification}, he was not simply writing concerning the future of the doctrine of justification within Protestantism but was actually writing from a perspective that believes justification is a future occurrence. His conclusion is due to a misunderstanding of δικαιοῖο, which is believed to occur in the future; it is best not to think of justification in this manner because in its biblical usage, δικαιοῖο only occurs in the future form when speaking hypothetically regarding the possibility that an unbeliever could become justified (cf. Matt 12:37; Rom 2:13; 3:20, 30; Gal 2:16). The justification occurs when one has turned to Christ in faith, not when a believer will be justified in the yet future.

What Piper has chosen to do is regard justification as an event in the life of a believer that is still to come, which is the crux of the issue.\textsuperscript{53} If the notion were correct, it would mean that the present possession of justification for the believer is only true in theory. What Piper is opposing is that justification by faith alone is an accomplished fact, which was the


\textsuperscript{52} John Piper, \textit{The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright}, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007) 184.

\textsuperscript{53} The notion was a highly controversial teaching by Norman Shepherd, the former professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia). Many within the reformed tradition have taken a stance against Shepherd but have not held Piper to the same standard.
principle upon which the Reformation was fought. He diverged from orthodoxy by asserting that the believer’s actual justification is accomplished subsequent only to this life when works of obedience verify it. Essentially, this means that one’s justification is only true hypothetically until it is verified by obedience at the end of life; it is at this point that a believer’s previous faith is credited, in the past tense, as salvific, which differs only semantically from the Roman Catholic teaching of justification by works.

The believer then is instructed to live the Christian life in light of the future possibility of justification and the future possibility of God’s grace, all in the hope that such obedience will be sufficient to be judged worthy of salvation. God regards a person’s works when He reflects upon past acts of faithfulness and determines if it is saving faith. Lest the reader think that this is an argument based upon a “straw man” that has been built, the following is a recent quote by Piper, reproduced in its entirety, from the Desiring God National Conference.

When Paul says “work out your salvation” the word (Greek katergazesthe) means “produce it,” “bring it about,” “effect it.” Peter O’Brien in his Philippians commentary sums it up with the words, “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort.” As dangerous as this language is, it is biblical. “Bring about your salvation.” “Produce your salvation.” “Effect your salvation by continuous, sustained, strenuous, effort.”

The believer produces salvation through his own effort, which is justification by works. Piper frequently affirms justification by faith, but in following lordship salvation to this extreme, he is forced to make a distinction between salvific faith and non-salvific faith. The believer is said to be justified by saving faith which itself produces sufficient obedience to be judged worthy. The obedience is not simply the effect of justification but the cause of it. In another work on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, Piper looked to William Wilberforce’s discussion of the practical errors of Christians in his day. Wilberforce claims that others in his day were “making the fruits of holiness the effects, not the cause, of our being

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justified and reconciled.”\textsuperscript{55} Piper stated that this is a statement with which he “profoundly agrees.”\textsuperscript{56}

The statement is puzzling regarding how one can say that personal holiness is the cause of justification while maintaining that justification is by faith alone. One should perceive that one of the errors upon which this is based, among other things, is a failure to truly understand the depravity of man. In this part of Piper’s system, the gospel no longer remains good news and assurance is all but discarded. Moreover, it is likely due to the inherent difficulties of this doctrine that Piper minimizes it and does not address it as freely and thoroughly as he does other doctrinal matters.

To avoid the charge that this is simply divorced from context, it is necessary to discuss Piper’s teaching on the subject of future justification more thoroughly. In a well-known Christianity Today article, he said that there is a “final judgment [which] accords with our works.”\textsuperscript{57} The assertion in itself is not unbiblical if one is referring to believers being judged according to their works and rewarded for their faithfulness based upon the stewardship of what they have been given at the Bema Seat of Christ; however, this is not what Piper intended. He stated further that it is this final judgment according to works where “evidence and confirmation of the true faith and union with Christ” will be brought forth and judged.\textsuperscript{58} His focus remains upon the efforts of man as opposed to the finished work of Christ. According to this sentiment, it is not enough to believe in Christ and to trust in the provision He offers for salvation. One must show, produce, be something, but Scripture explains that it is sinners who are justified.

Faith, in Piper’s definition, is only that which can be confirmed by obedience. How much obedience is enough to confirm faith? Logically, it follows that the believer cannot be justified until after his or her life has completely ceased. There is no assurance and no justification in this life; of course, this is not biblical. Romans 5:1 reveals that δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως (we have been justified by faith). Δικαιωθέντες is an aorist participle, a verbal noun identifying the subject as those who have been justified or the justified ones.

According to Piper, the justified one is not actually justified in any real sense; it is not a present possession and will not occur until the Lord justifies them in the future judgment, which is according to their works.

\textsuperscript{55} John Piper, Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness? (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002) 25.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
Why need a Reformation at all if this is your teaching? Reconcile with Rome and start judging people according to their level of obedience, the evidence of their righteousness, prior to considering them saved. Piper concluded one section in his response to N. T. Wright by stating, “without validation transformation, there will be no future salvation.” Yes, obedience may demonstrate faith but it is not contingent upon obedience. Obedience or practical righteousness should always be seen as the outworking of justification, not the basis for future justification. In this, he moves beyond the traditional lordship position and makes the future justification contingent upon transformation of life.

Piper took great liberty with theological terms as they are generally understood within evangelicalism. The error in his understanding corresponds with what is called Arminian or Wesleyan theology. Essentially, God is not sovereign, and man is capable of cooperating with God to earn his salvation. As much as Piper proudly asserts that he is a 5-point Calvinist, he does not always believe in divine monergism, valuing the efforts of man to be obedient to Christ. Man, in confirming his justification, works alongside God and in cooperation with Him to achieve salvation. In this sense, the news is not good. As mentioned previously, a misunderstanding of depravity causes this and it is not the biblical gospel, which is one reason why Piper’s theology is a case study for this specific section. In the Desiring God statement of faith, it is affirmed: “we believe that justifying faith trusts in Christ not only for the gift of imputed righteousness and the forgiveness of sins, but also for the fulfillment of all His promises to us based on that reconciliation.”

One should look especially towards the latter part of this statement and the claim that it makes: it is said that justifying faith trusts in Christ for the fulfillment of all his promises to us. One resulting issue is that there are many promises in Scripture other than the promise of eternal life for those who have faith. Must one believe in all these things in order to be justified? Piper would certainly not say that this is a requirement for faith but it is a true reflection of justifying faith, which is reminiscent of the approach snake-handling churches take to the promises of God. Piper might say, “it is this type of faith that trusts in the promises of God that justifies.” To affirm this consistently, one would be forced to side with the snake-handlers and say that indeed it is the type of faith that handles poisonous snakes that is truly justifying faith. In his desire to defend the church against

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59 Ibid. 35.
licentiousness, Piper ignores that a childlike faith saves. His justification is man-focused; it becomes focused upon what someone has done to prove his or her faith, not Christ focused in what He has done for, apart from, and even in spite of someone.

**Future Grace**

The concept of future grace is an important aspect of Piper’s theology. He expounds upon it in depth in his work *Future Grace*, wherein he reveals his true soteriology. Piper believes that truly justifying faith is future-oriented; it looks forward to the future aspect of God’s declaration of righteousness. Piper proceeded to the extreme in saying, “you can’t be a Christian without faith in future grace.”\(^61\) What is future grace? The answer is not a peripheral matter but is central Piper’s theology; it is also one of the gravest errors he makes. According to him, the grace, which God shows to the believer, is not a present reality but it will be shown in the future declaration of righteousness by his grace. Piper would say the believer is presently justified but in truth he really argues that he is not justified until a future time when God will look retrospectively, affirm the believer’s faith and will declare him to be justified based upon reviewing the past. Therefore, grace is conditioned upon obedience.

Piper tries to defend himself against this charge because only a works-based salvation teaches that obedience is a condition of salvation. Nevertheless, the salvation of a believer, in his teaching, is depending upon works. What is needed for the application of grace is a “lifetime of obedience.”\(^62\) The assertion is not *sola fide* in any true sense of the term; instead, it is an “experiential righteousness that is not a ‘polluted garment’ . . . (that is) evidence of our being justified children of God.”\(^63\) While it is said that the justified believer is one who has experiential righteousness, Piper never explains precisely how much experiential righteousness is required to be justified. He never defines or qualifies this; instead he simply asserted, “true saving faith is effective in producing practical obedience to God.”\(^64\) Faith for him is obedience; it is more than just belief: it is faithfulness.

The gospel according to Piper, although orthodox in parts, also involves a justification that is conditioned upon practical obedience that


\(^{62}\) Ibid. 115.

\(^{63}\) Ibid. 151.

\(^{64}\) Ibid. 164.
characterizes the life of the believer. One can see that he is attempting to answer the question: why are there so many sinners in the church? His answer is a return to the Roman understanding of justification by works, despite the fact that he affirms justification is merely conditioned by works. When something is said to be an inevitable outcome or a condition, then it logically becomes a requirement for the condition to be satisfied. He stated:

[A]ll the forgiveness and help of God are gracious and unmerited. But they are not all unconditional. Our election and our regeneration are unconditional but subsequent blessings like ongoing forgiveness and guidance and help in trouble are conditioned on our covenant-keeping.65

Notice that Piper claimed a believer’s ongoing forgiveness is conditioned upon covenant-keeping; it is possible, according to his theology, to have unforgiven sin in the life of a believer, which is due to man’s inability to keep this imaginary covenant. He does not always affirm this assertion. At times, he states, “the only sin we can fight against successfully is a forgiven sin.”66 Therefore, it demonstrates, at the very least, some inconsistency in his thinking.

Piper said in Future Grace, “future grace is free, inexhaustible, unmerited, unearned- and conditional.”67 The statement is so inherently contradictory that it borders upon the nonsensical. Unmerited grace cannot be conditioned. Justification conditioned upon anything but faith is merited, and thus a person’s faith cannot be regarded as meritorious because one simply accepts the offer of salvation, and does not work to earn it. The conditions Piper asserts for justification are extensive. He said:

[T]he conditions of future grace . . . are all of a certain kind. The ten conditions (are) loving God, being humble, drawing near to God, crying out to God from the heart, fearing God, delighting in God, hoping in God, taking refuge in God, waiting for God and trusting

67 Piper, Future Grace, 251.
God. The eleventh condition (is) keeping covenant with God, which I believe is a way of summarizing all the others.\textsuperscript{68}

Piper heaps conditions upon conditions. People assuredly will say that this writer is misrepresenting Piper's views because to them he represents a bastion of Calvinism and Christian orthodoxy. More examples are available. Piper stated explicitly, “the future grace of resurrection to life is given to those who have done good deeds.”\textsuperscript{69} Elsewhere he made the claim, “Jesus says that if you don’t fight this sin with the kind of seriousness that it is willing to gouge out your own eye, you will go to hell and suffer there forever.”\textsuperscript{70} Unfortunately, this writer knows of no one who has been willing to gouge his or her eye to prevent sin. Who could possibly be in heaven following this line of thinking? Piper also asserted, “if we don’t fight lust, we lose our souls.”\textsuperscript{71} The chronology of this statement indicates that it is possible to lose your salvation; otherwise Piper might have said if you do not fight lust, you are not saved (whether you agree with this statement or not).

Piper summarized his view in the statement, “the battle for obedience is absolutely necessary for our final salvation.”\textsuperscript{72} If there is no salvation until it is confirmed in the future, the believer can have no assurance. Piper depicts every person as bringing their deeds, which God will judge and determine if they are sufficient to make him worthy of salvation. Notice Piper’s teaching in one of the most influential Christian works of recent publication:

\begin{quote}
[T]hese are just some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to be saved in the fullest and final sense. We must believe in Jesus and receive Him and turn from our sin and obey Him and humble ourselves like little children and love Him more than we love our family, our possessions, or our own life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. This alone is the way of life everlasting.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

For one who ardently claims to be reformed in theology, the great Reformation doctrines of \textit{sola fide} and \textit{sola gratia} are abandoned, resulting in a synergistic view of salvation accomplished through the efforts of man.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid. 251-52.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 253.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 331.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid. 333.
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{John Piper, Desiring God} (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2003) 69-70.
\end{itemize}
Excursus: Romans 5:18

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men (NASB).

Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δὲ ἕνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἄνθρωπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δὲ ἕνὸς δικαιώματος εἰς πάντας ἄνθρωπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς (UBS4).

Romans 5:18 is crucial for a proper understanding of justification and therefore needs to be discussed. The verse affirms that through one transgression there was a singular act whereby sin that entered into the world and brought condemnation. Moreover, it is also through one act of righteousness that justification came. The verse contains ἕνὸς, the numeral one, which denotes the singularity of the action. The usage of δικαιώματος defines this singularity as an event of righteousness. Piper argued in his treatment of this verse that Paul is probably treating the entire life and ministry of Jesus as a single whole – as one great act of righteousness, rather than any one act he did in life. What act would you pick? If you said his death, would you mean the obedience of Gethsemane, or the obedience when the mob took him away, or the obedience when he was interrogated, or the obedience when he was crowned with thorns, or the obedience when he was flogged, or the obedience when he was nailed to the cross, or the obedience when he spoke words of love to his enemies, or the obedience when he offered up his spirit to his Father? So you see, even if you say the ‘act of righteousness’ is his death, you mean a whole cluster of acts of righteousness. You are treating many acts as one great whole – the death.74

The argument is a “straw man.” In accordance with Leviticus 17:11, “it is the blood by reason of life that makes atonement.” Christ’s death provides the propitiation. While it is true that one can speak of Christ’s death as comprised of many different elements, it is not his suffering, his being nailed to the cross, or any of these things which matter in terms of justification. The single act that matters for justification is his death. When Christ died, he took upon himself the sins of the whole world, and this is

the singular act to which Paul referred. Christ’s perfect life is unable to provide a provision for salvation.

If Piper were consistent in the way he understands ἑνός in the book of Romans, he would be forced to make certain theological concessions. Piper defined ἑνός using its non-normative sense and it is possible to define ἑνός in this manner. For example, one could say “give me that one” (pointing to a stack of cards) in reference to the plurality of cards collectively. The person would be referencing the one (stack) as opposed to others (stacks) but this only works when speaking of a collective singularity in reference to another collective singularity. Piper would argue that this verse references Jesus’ life in contradistinction to Adam’s life, yet this is not how Paul chose to use ἑνός in other portions of his letter. He used it in reference to one man (5:12, 15 [2x], 16, 17) or one transgression (5:16, 17, 18, 19). In the immediate context, Piper, if he were to understand this word consistently, would be forced to conclude that Paul was referring to the one lifetime of sin by Adam that resulted in condemnation. Additionally, if affirmed consistently, the use of ἑνός in 3:12 could speak of no one collective group of people who do good.

When examining a biblical word, it is best to understand its use within the context to see how the author intended it to be used. Piper made the assumption of its usage based upon his theological presupposition instead of basing it upon the natural reading of the passage. What Piper wishes to do is to see Paul’s use of the statement διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνός δίκαιοι (“the obedience of the one”) as referencing the lifetime of Christ’s obedience. Christ’s obedience in death, not his lifetime of obedience, provides the grounds for justification. Yes, a lifetime of obedience is required, but this is only because it is qualifies Him to be a sacrifice.

**Departure from Reformed Understanding of Justification**

Historical reformed theology does not understand justification in the same manner as Piper. Berkhof, for example, viewed justification as a momentary, punctiliar, judicial act that “is completed at once and for all time.”75 Evidently, he understood that there is no future element to justification. Berkhof is a great example because he represents the traditional covenantal system of theology. Dabney, as well, viewed justification as necessarily a past possession of a believer and not to be

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regarded in a future tense. Dabney’s position is against Piper’s future justification construction. Some may find it surprising but Charles Hodge asserted that justification “does not produce any subjective change in the person justified.” The reason is because of the distinction he made between justification and sanctification. He asserted that it is Romanism that views justification as an act of God “making the sinner subjectively holy. Romanists confound or unite justification and sanctification.” The same charge could be leveled against Piper from someone within reformed theology. Justification is a past tense occurrence for those in the reformed mainstream and one would be burdened to find someone speaking of justification as future.

**Imputation**

Piper’s inconsistent view of justification leads to a view of imputation that inevitably tends towards perfectionism. Although this is an accusation that he would undoubtedly reject, it is clear this is the conclusion one should obtain regarding his understanding of imputed righteousness, if it is held with consistency. His view is that the Christian, having received the imputed righteousness of Christ, will live righteously. Piper’s understanding of imputed righteousness is more than just judicial and includes an experiential element. His thesis arises from passages of Scripture that are misused or divorced from context. For example, in dealing with Romans 5:18, he stated, “one righteous act: the totality of Christ’s obedience.” He claims that the singular action of Adam brought condemnation to man and the lifetime obedience of Christ accomplishes justification.

Paul refuted Piper’s understanding of imputation. He stated, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:1-2). If context is discounted, one could easily conclude that the believer cannot live in sin, which is the teaching of the lordship position classically. Paul was not discussing whether the believer can or cannot live a life of sin; it is the preceding verse that dictates the context of Paul’s teaching. The verse specifically teaches that previously sin reigned (ἐβασίλευσεν ἡ ἁμαρτία)

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78 Ibid. 3:118.
79 Piper, “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ.”
and now it is grace that reigns (ἡ χάρις βασιλεύσῃ). What Paul was explaining in the verse concerns the fact that the believer no longer lives under the dominion of sin. Once saved, sin does not reign; Satan is no longer your father, and your will is not in bondage. The new believer now has the capacity to serve the Lord.

The shift that occurs in the mood of reigning is important to note. Death “reigned” (ἐβασίλευσεν) is in the indicative mood, whereas the fact that grace would “reign” (βασιλεύσῃ) is in the subjunctive mood. The difference is important because the indicative simply pictures the fact that sin is reigning in death while grace, in the subjunctive, indicates the possibility that grace might reign. Additionally, the use of the aorist tense does not truly indicate any time element to the verb. Sin reigning then does not necessarily mean that this is a past tense occurrence; it is best then to regard this as stating that sin reigns in death and grace might reign. Death does reign in the life of the unbeliever, but righteousness does not always reign in the life of the believer.

If one were to make the declaration that righteousness reigns (without exception) in the life of the believer, then this would eventually lead to some form of Christian perfectionism. A believer is imputed with Christ’s righteousness but this involves a change in standing or position, not a complete change in state. To teach that the imputed righteousness of Christ functions this way in practice in the life of the believer is an error with serious repercussions; it discounts John’s explicit teaching, “if we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). The argument is not to assert that Piper is not saved, but to demonstrate the gravity of this error.

What Paul taught in Romans 6 is that the old self is in bondage to sin until regeneration/conversion; after this, believers are freed from slavery and given new life, which enables them to serve God in their lives. Sanctification is, therefore, progressive in nature, in addition to its punctiliar aspect concurrent with salvation, which provides the context for Paul’s statement, οἵτινες ἀπεθάνομεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, πῶς ἔτι ζήσομεν ἐν αὐτῇ. He asked how the believer who has died to sin could live in it.

One needs only to look in the mirror to see a Christian who commits sin; it is not that the Christian has died to sinning, but that they have died to the ruling power of sin in their lives. They have been freed and empowered by the Spirit to overcome sin in their life, yet this does not mean that it must occur. Piper does not seem to remember this important verse. When teaching Romans 6, he paraphrased Paul as saying “because if you died to sin, you can’t go on living in it. Or to put it bluntly: Dead people
don’t sin.” In this sermon, Piper explained to his congregation the reasons why dead people do not sin.

He gave three reasons summarized in an orderly tautology: (1) when Christ died, believers died in and with Him; (2) when Christ rose, believers in some crucial sense were made alive in Him; and, (3) therefore, believers are commanded to become in practice what they are in Christ: dead to sin and alive to God. What this tautology really means, when coupled with his misunderstanding of Romans 6, is that a believer’s life will be characterized by righteousness because he has died to sin.

If one were to examine this belief, without any experience with the church of Christ, one would be forced to conclude that unbelievers are sinners and believers are easily identified because they all live righteously. The biblical truth is that the believer’s righteousness is primarily judicial; it is true as the saint is seen in the eyes of the Lord, and thus its truth is found in one’s standing and not necessarily in experience. Following Piper’s reasoning, by seeing the believer’s life one could easily determine the true believer based upon the evidence of their practical righteousness. One is reminded of the Pharisees who bore all the evidence of being righteous but who were whitewashed tombs of unrighteousness. The righteousness of Christ that is imputed to the believer does not make one a sinless righteous person; dead people do sin; otherwise, Paul’s original question (“how shall we who died to sin live in it?”) would have been pointless.

Piper claimed that Romans supports the first premise of the aforementioned tautology. Two passages state, συνέταφμεν οὖν αὐτῷ (6:4) and τοῦτο γινώσκοντες ὅτι ὁ παλαιὸς ἦμων ἄνθρωπος συνεσταυρώθη (6:6). There is undoubtedly a union that occurs between the believer and Christ because of the Lord’s death, which is readily apparent. What Piper argued is that it is the old sinful self, man’s Adamic nature, which has been crucified. Previously as an unbeliever, the unregenerate person was endowed with the sinful nature of Adam, but now as a regenerate person, he is given a new righteous nature; it is the very righteousness of Christ within the believer. The old sinful self, the Adamic nature, has been replaced.

To see the sinful nature of man suddenly eradicated is a great misunderstanding of depravity. The teaching withstands neither the testimony of Scripture nor the witness of experience. Instead, it should be pictured in the following manner. As an unbeliever, the unregenerate

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person has the old Adamic nature. He has only the capacity to serve sin and self in his life, yet this does not mean that he is unable to do good things or that he is as sinful as possible, but instead he cannot serve God in his actions. As a regenerate person, the new believer is given the capacity to serve God. He is given a new nature, which exists side-by-side with his old sinful nature, and these two natures are at war with each other. The old self remains, but now the regenerate person has been given the power, through the Spirit, to overcome it. Nevertheless, this does not mean that this will occur without exception, yet this is something that the lordship proponents universally fail to recognize.

Paul commanded believers, οὖν βασιλεύετω ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θνητῷ ὑμῶν σώματι (Rom 6:12). One is left to wonder why, if Piper is correct, Paul would command believers not to let sin reign if its reign had already been replaced with the reign of righteousness. Piper is thoroughly refuted by Paul’s statement “do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead” (Rom 6:13ff.). The biblical teaching is that believers still continue to sin.

In discussing Piper’s view of imputation overall, one is able to perceive that he viewed the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as something that involves more than just the concept that God looks upon forgiven sinners, and sees the righteousness of Christ instead of sinful creatures. Piper took this traditional understanding of imputation and redefined it to include not only its positional element, but also as having a practical element to the point of nearly being primarily experiential. The method by which this is accomplished is through an improper connection made with the doctrine of perseverance. Essentially, he claimed that the believer will preserve in faith and will continue to grow in Christlikeness throughout his life as a result of Christ’s imputed righteousness. While the sinless life of Christ is important, its true importance lies primarily in the fact that it enables Christ to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Vicarious Law-Keeping

One major element of Piper’s soteriology involves his focus upon Christ’s perfect life and his achieving law-keeping vicariously. The doctrine is a disputed point within the reformed theology. Essentially, what Piper argues is that Christ’s life provides the basis for justification in a sense beyond the fact that it is required to qualify Him as an unblemished sacrifice. Accordingly, Piper believes righteousness results from the life of Jesus, through union with Him. However, it would be better not to make
this assertion because it inevitably leads to the conclusion that the Old Testament believers could be justified on account of their works. The law would, therefore, be seen as a method of justification, but as Paul explained, the law was given that sin may be made known. The law was never a method of justification; salvation has always been through faith. Following this line of thinking, if asked during the Old Testament times what a person must do to be justified, then one should say that it was through obedience to the law. However, the law was a means to demonstrate obedience and faith under the dispensation of law, and was never a means of justification, even for Jesus.

The inconsistency is evident in Piper’s argument when he affirmed that justification could not occur by works while believing that it is Christ’s work, his active obedience, which provides the basis for justification. Scripture affirms, “no one is justified by the Law before God” (Gal 3:11ff.). Christ himself is not declared to be righteous by his works of the law, which He obeyed perfectly, but through his faith. His faith was demonstrated, in part, by his obedience to the Law. Understanding the Lord’s faith is an important distinction between covenantal and dispensational theologies.

Following more of a covenantal framework, Piper viewed the believer as being justified upon the basis of his faith, which results in the imputation of Christ’s obedience to him, which logically provides the foundation for the believer’s justification. The importance of the resurrection of Christ is minimized. One would be more accurate biblically to assert that the believer is justified on account of his faith in Christ. Christ was considered justified by his faith, shown perfectly under the Mosaic dispensation, and this was the dispensation under which Christ lived and ministered. His righteousness was displayed by his sinless life, but his righteousness was not limited to a strict obedience to the Mosaic Law and included his perfect trust and reliance upon the Lord. The believer is not justified on account of his or her participation in the works of Christ’s life but through faith. While the object of faith has changed, faith remains the foundation of justification, as it was for Abraham, as it was for Christ.

**Headship**

Connected to both the doctrines of imputation and vicarious law-keeping, is the doctrine of headship of Adam. Covenant theology has traditionally

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81 Charles C. Ryrie has ably addressed this issue in his *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007).
supported the federal headship of Adam, and this is of significance to the discussion concerning the New Calvinism for a few reasons. When one supports the concept of the federal headship of Adam, he supports covenant theology by laying the foundation for the covenant of works. There is also an important connection to be made between the believer’s relationship to Adam and his relationship to the second Adam. If federal headship were true, then all men after Adam would be responsible for Adam’s sins, which is clearly unbiblical. Deuteronomy 24:16 teaches, “fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.” Traditionally, it has been explained that Adam’s sin is imputed to his posterity both mediately and immediately. As Gomes explained:

The immediate imputation of Adam’s sin refers to the imputation of the guilt of Adam’s actual transgression in the garden to his posterity. Mediate imputation, on the other hand, refers to the imputation of guilt by virtue of the hereditary depravity of heart that inheres in all of Adam’s descendants, who derive their corrupt natures from Adam.\(^{82}\)

If federalism were the biblical teaching, then Christ too would have an Adamic nature, since Adam would represent Him on the basis of his humanity. In response to this, federalism has explained that it is the virgin birth of Christ that allowed Christ to be free from the Adamic nature based upon his lack of a seminal relationship to Adam. Would not this make Christ less than fully human to avoid being subjected to an imputed sin nature and an imputed guilt? Could not then man say to his Creator, “I sin because of the sin nature imputed to me, but Christ did not sin because He was not imputed with a sin nature?” The point is significant to comprehend fully. The seminal view of Adam’s headship is that man was present, seminally, when Adam ate the fruit. He then is born with a sin nature because of his participation in the sin of Adam.\(^{83}\) Hebrews supports this by explaining that Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek prior to his birth. The passage states, “for (Levi) was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him” (Heb 7:10). Likewise, Ezekiel 18:1-4 states,

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83 Additionally, this view is the one which best understands Eve’s relationship to sin because Eve first ate of the fruit. Moreover, since she was literally made of Adam, it is he who brought sin into the world. When Eve sinned, Adam sinned.
Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, ‘the fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge?’ “As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore.”

The Lord holds man accountable only for his own sins, which is why Paul made the point clearly in Romans 5 that all sinned in Adam.

To affirm federalism makes God the author of sin because, as a result of Adam’s sin, man is imputed with a sin nature. The sin nature, imputed to man, is the reason that he sins. Man is born in bondage to sin. As Shedd explains:

[T]he sin of Adam, consequently, is imputed to his posterity in the very same way that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer—namely, undeservedly or gratuitously. The posterity are not guilty in the sense of being inherently and personally ill deserving on account of Adam’s sin, just as the believer is not righteous in the sense of being inherently and personally deserving on account of Christ’s obedience.

Shedd refuted this notion as follows:

[A] mere and simple representative acts vicariously for those whom he represents; and to make the eternal damnation of a human soul depend upon vicarious sin contradicts the profound convictions of the human conscience. To impute Adam’s first sin to his posterity merely and only because Adam sinned as a representative in their room and place makes the imputation an arbitrary act of sovereignty, not a righteous judicial act which carries in it an intrinsic morality and justice.

The common sense understanding of God expressed here has been confused in the teaching of federalism.

In practice, the distinction between federal and seminal headship is also significant when one begins to view the saint and his solidarity with the second Adam: Christ. Moreover, it results naturally from federal theology that when Adam sinned, all men became sinners by nature.

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84 What is especially significant regarding this passage is that it refutes Israel’s false idea that they were being punished for the sins of their ancestors.
85 Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 435.
86 Ibid. 448.
Likewise, when the second Adam came, He became the representative or federal head of a new people. Man is no longer under the headship of Adam, but under the headship of Christ. As one transitions from one head to another, it naturally follows that the old imputed nature too has been abandoned, and this misunderstands total depravity by teaching instead a single nature view of man.

Man was a sinner in Adam but becomes righteous in Christ. The new nature completely replaces the old. When Christ becomes the federal head of the born again believer, they will act in Him. The Reformation Study Bible even teaches, “inherent in this teaching is the thought that the restoration provided in salvation must follow the pattern, but reverse the content, of the original constitution of humanity before God.”87 In contradistinction, seminal headship views all mankind as participating in the sin of Adam. Man is born a sinner because he sinned in Adam, and because man is present in the seed of Adam, upon conversion the nature of man is not changed. The biblical teaching is that the saint remains a sinner by nature, but now has been given a new capacity to act in a way that may please God. He is freed from the bondage to sin but the sin nature remains.

As Romans 5:14 explains, between Adam and Moses men did not sin in the likeness of the sin of Adam, which is because the sin of Adam was a violation of law, a direct command of God and not a violation of the covenant. In federal thinking, man could have eternal life if he obeyed the covenant of works. After all, this is how they understand Christ as meriting eternal life on the saint’s behalf. Sin is seen as a violation of the covenant of works. If this is the case then man did sin in the likeness of the sin of Adam from Adam’s time until Moses’.

**Ordo Salutis**

Piper’s view of the gospel betrays an ordo salutis that is much different from the traditional Protestant understanding of salvation. What is most startling regarding this conversion process is how regeneration fits the equation. Piper is forced to say that God will only make a believer regenerate on a retrospective basis after his life is complete. Regeneration

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is necessary in order for the believer to live a life of obedience, but they can only be regenerate after their life is completed in good works and perseverance. There is a logical inconsistency in his ordo salutis since regeneration must also occur prior to faith.

**Bema Seat of Christ**

The error in Piper’s ordo salutis is forced because of the way that he views the judgment seat of Christ (βῆμα). He regards the Bema Seat as a time when the believer will be judged according to his works, as well as a time when unbelievers will be separated from believers. He claimed that the Bema Seat is intended “to declare who is lost and who is saved [whereby] our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ’s courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real.” If one is not declared to be righteous (the biblical understanding of justification) until the judgment seat of Christ, until then one’s standing in Christ can only be hypothetical. Regeneration must then be given to the believer in retrospect.

In regarding the Bema Seat as a judgment involving both rewards and salvation, Piper inadvertently equated the Bema Seat with the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 22. Piper has not spoken directly with regard to the Great White Throne judgment, but his description of the Bema Seat includes aspects of both judgments. He used several verses to support his understanding of the Bema Seat, and one is Romans 2:5-7. He argued from this passage that those who do good works would receive eternal life and those who do not will receive condemnation (which is undoubtedly true). While it is true that those who persevere in good works will receive eternal life, it does not automatically follow that those who receive eternal life must persevere in good works. John explained that those who believe already have eternal life (John 5:24).

Eternal life cannot be gained or lost at the judgment seat of Christ. Another text where Piper found support is John 5:29 (“those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment”). The passage must be allowed to speak for itself. The assertion is true that those who do good deeds will receive eternal life, but this is based upon their faith. Paul recognized this in the letter to the Ephesian church, explaining that the believer has been created for good works, which God has prepared for him (cf. 2:8-10). Piper also

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looked to 2 Corinthians 5:10 for support: “for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

The text explicitly mentions the Bema Seat of Christ, but it only involves rewards. The text never states that the Bema Seat will be a judgment separating the believers from non-believers. The crown of righteousness does not concern salvation but rewards (2 Tim 2:4). Commenting on this verse, Calvin asserted, “a man is justified freely through the grace of Christ, and yet that God will render to him the reward of works; for as soon as God has received us into favor, he likewise accepts our works, so as even to deign to give them a reward, though it is not due to them.”

The confusion of the Bema Seat and the Great White Throne judgments forces Piper to see the justification as a future event, and this leads to confusion regarding the nature of justification. Piper attempted to explain that the future judgment of Christ will determine whether “we are already enjoying our pardon.” A difficult picture emerges when attempting to image anyone standing before the Almighty God attempting to confirm his faith by giving the evidences of his deeds for this understimates the true holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin. The only thing anyone could likely say to Christ sitting on his throne, if they are able to say anything at all, is “O’ wretched man that I am!” (Rom 7:24, KJV).

**Influences**

Where did Piper arrive at such an unusual view? As mentioned earlier, it is not at all common for a liberal seminary to produce a truly conservative scholar. During Piper’s studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, Daniel Fuller mentored him. Daniel Fuller’s views certainly influenced Piper’s theology. In order to emphasize this point, the following quotation will be reproduced in its entirety.

[O]n this particular point, I agree with what [Fuller] wrote in *The Unity of the Bible*: A faith that looks back to Christ’s death and resurrection is not sufficient. . . . Forgiveness for the Christian also depends on having, like Abraham, a futuristic faith in God’s

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90 The bewilderment may actually be the reverse and he reads these judgments in light of his understanding of the concept of future justification/grace.

91 Piper, “What Happens When You Die?”
promises. Thus we cannot regard justifying faith as sufficient if it honors only the past fact of Christ’s death and resurrection but does not honor the future promises of God, thus mocking his character and integrity.\(^{92}\)

One would not go too far in assuming that Piper’s view is a reflection of Fuller’s since they are so unique. Where there is a departure from the traditional protestant understanding, they are similar.

Another influence on Piper’s thinking may be the lordship views of men like John MacArthur. Piper’s views are different from other lordship proponents. MacArthur argues that true biblical faith is a belief that submits to the lordship of Christ. For MacArthur, faith is belief plus submission. Piper embraces this line of thinking one step further in what may be accurately called hyper-lordship salvation. For him, truly saving faith includes not only belief but also a life of obedience deemed worthy of salvation at the judgment seat of Christ. One can clearly see why this view could be called hyper-lordship salvation for it is in actuality more difficult to be saved in this system than in lordship salvation.

A third major influence seen in the writings of Piper is Jonathan Edwards. Although many regard Edwards as a reformed theologian par excellence, his theology diverged from traditional Reformed theology on several points. More often than not, these divergences from Reformed theology are common to both men. For example, Edwards did not hold to covenant theology as the majority of those within the reformed camp. He also put more emphasis upon the believer’s union with Adam and his subsequent union with Christ.

Union with Christ became the essence of faith and not one of the results of it. Salvation is a person’s choice to unite himself with Christ. When the distinction is blurred between justification and sanctification, as it is with federalism, it is not difficult to see how this leads to certain conclusions tending towards Christian perfectionism. Edwards, and Piper subsequently, believed that it is the believer’s union with Christ and the imputation of his righteousness that makes the believer live righteously. The experience will occur with inevitability and the believer will be saved based upon the ultimate fulfillment of these conditions. If the Christian is not living in this way, it is evidence that there is no union with Christ in his life, and he will not partake of eternal life. Fortunately, this is not the biblical teaching.

Scripture sees a believer’s union with Christ to be the result of salvation. The union is judicial, and it only has practical implications, not

\(^{92}\) Piper, *Future Grace*, 205-06.
necessarily practical results. Edwards and Piper both downplay the judicial elements in salvation and focus upon the practical or real elements associated with it, which some reference as applied soteriology. Salvation is the means of becoming righteous in deed, which in turn will provide the basis for justification (which is highly circular in nature). How does one avoid the charge of teaching works-based salvation? Evans observed: “Edwards struggled to formulate his soteriology in such a way that works of evangelical obedience and perseverance in faith stand in a positive relation to justification but without making obedience and perseverance the meritorious condition of that justification.”

Piper perceives himself as one of Edwards’ theological descendants. The observation with regard to Edwards is an accurate representation of Piper because he falls prey to this same error. In trying to avoid licentiousness, and ensure that only the worthy are saved, they both make works the basis of justification. The notion can be summarized succinctly in Edwards’ statement that it is the “righteousness belonging to (man) that entitles him to the reward of life.”

Luther and Calvin would most certainly object: salvation, which is entitled, cannot be a product of grace alone. To be entitled to something is to merit it. Waldron summarized these combined influences: “Fuller’s assumption is apparently that works were an inextricable part of perseverance and consequently a condition of justification for Edwards.” Piper, three hundred years later, continues the errors of Edwards.

**Faith**

Piper’s misunderstanding of the doctrine of justification causes him to have a wrong definition of faith. As mentioned previously, true biblical faith in Piper’s theology comprises not only belief in Christ but also a union with Him that results in a life characterized by obedience (which is partly a vain attempt to ascribe faith’s authorship to God instead of man). Many within Reformed theology attempt to make the faith in Ephesians 2:8-9 the gift of God in salvation, despite the fact that πίστεως is feminine, while τοῦτο is neuter.
Faith in Ephesians 2 refers to salvation as a whole. Calvin described this false view of faith saying: “my readers will pardon me if I stay not to dispose of such absurdities; their own weakness, without external assault, is sufficient to destroy them.”\textsuperscript{96} Zeller observed, “if faith is the gift of God, then why do I need to have faith? A question that (Reformed theology) has never been able to answer.”\textsuperscript{97} Like others who call themselves by the name of Calvin, Piper falls prey to this error.

The problem arises for Piper that saving faith is not limited to obedience in the eleven categories previously mentioned. Instead, it seems as if he continually adds requirements for salvation. Many of these conditions are highly subjective and others downright impossible. In speaking of his beliefs, Piper stated, “I say that saving faith must include ‘delight’ . . . I think that without it, faith is dead.”\textsuperscript{98} His assertion should not be too surprising considering the fact that his own ministry and theology revolve around his mantra that “God is most glorified when we are satisfied in Him.” One is left wondering if there was ever a recording in the New Testament of a person actually delighting in the Lord. The story of Mary and Martha might be the lone exception.

Delighting in the Lord is not a major point of theology, and it is certainly not a condition of salvation. If this were the case, then people would need to be telling others that they are not saved because they do not delight in the Lord. Piper defined what delighting in the Lord is to him, stating “the essence of saving faith is a spiritual apprehension or tasting of spiritual beauty, which is delight.”\textsuperscript{99} Certainly, one can reason that the thief on the cross was saved because this fact was recorded in Scripture, but can anyone say with any kind of certainty that this man tasted spiritual beauty? One assuredly cannot come to this conclusion without making assumptions and performing eisegesis.

Piper also said, “believing that Jesus is the Son of God means ‘embracing’ the significance of that truth—that is, being satisfied with Christ as the Son of God and all that God is for us in Him.”\textsuperscript{100} Piper was not saying that part of believing in Christ means trusting in Him alone for the entire provision of salvation, which is certainly true. If this aspect of Piper’s gospel is true, then no one can be saved because no one is able to be satisfied in all that God is for us in Christ. No one is ever completely satisfied because there always remains a part of us, the flesh, which desires

\textsuperscript{96} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.18.10.
\textsuperscript{97} George Zeller, phone interview with the author, 26 June 2013.
\textsuperscript{98} Piper, \textit{Future Grace}, 201.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. 204.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. 160.
to move forward without God. Piper’s view of saving faith greatly misunderstands depravity and conversion biblically.

Piper does not limit saving faith to belief and obedience but adds delight or satisfaction, in addition to his eleven other conditions. He needs to heed his own warning that “if we go wrong on the nature of faith, everything in the Christian life will go wrong.”101 His definition of faith is only one symptom of a much bigger problem. Without reserve he claimed, “salvation is owned by faith . . . our salvation will accord with our deeds.”102 His assertion is a return to Romanism and has no place in Protestantism. One is left wondering how Piper preaches on Acts 16:31 (“believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved”), and if he is really thinking when he preaches that one cannot really be saved now. One must first live an obedient life, and then God will look upon that person and see that they have truly believed, and only then will they be saved. He denies the punctiliar aspect of conversion. How great this error is.

Sanctification

Having established that Piper’s views contain a great deal of error involving the doctrine of justification by faith resulting, in part, from a lack of proper understanding of Romans 5, it is not surprising that Piper’s views regarding sanctification are in error resulting in or from a false understanding of Romans 6. Having frequently taught this chapter of Scripture, his essential understanding of it is that a believer will prove his union with Christ by demonstrating the righteousness of Christ in his life. Sanctification becomes the basis for future justification and not the result of justification. The notion is inconsistently held, and Piper recognizes that sanctification must be based upon the work of justification, but he does not regard this justification as a completed work. His overall view is based upon a misguided understanding of God’s sovereignty where God is very mechanistic and his creation functions deterministically by his decrees. Man, even regenerate, is simply the agent of God’s actions in his self-glorification.

Piper does not distinguish the true spiritual warfare that occurs in the life of a believer but chooses to observe practical righteousness as an accomplished fact and an inevitable characterization of the life of a believer. For Jonathan Edwards, this was called experiential piety. Piper confuses the inevitable outcome of the future aspect of sanctification

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101 Ibid. 209.
102 Ibid. 365.
(glorification) and the results of experiential sanctification. As Walvoord observed concerning sanctification, the sin nature defined as “a desire and predisposition to sin” remains alongside of the new nature, which is “a predisposition and inclination to righteousness.” A sanctified believer is the one who has an inclination towards sin, which is at war with his new nature, in addition to an inclination towards righteousness. Piper completely misses this part of sanctification. He also fails to take into account that it is possible for the justified believer to be carnal or to grieve the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 3; Eph 4:30).

Piper’s view of sanctification causes a fundamental misunderstanding of Romans 8:13. To begin, σώζω does not always refer to being saved in the spiritual sense; it frequently refers to being saved from physical death. The Septuagint often used this term in the Psalms when David testified to being saved from his enemies. In the same way, ἀποθνήσκω does not always refer to spiritual death; it is not used in this sense in Romans 8:13. Based upon this text, Piper claimed, “if we surrender to the flesh and decide we don’t want to make war on sin any more, we will perish. We will show that our sins were never canceled.” As opposed to understanding the believer as saved, he assumed death is spiritual death and life refers to eternal life, which is not supported by the context. The result is that sanctification is the believer’s act of continually persevering in faith to prove his justification. One could easily define sanctification in his view as the inevitable conquering of sin in the life of a believer resulting in glorification, which is reflected in the statement that “conquering canceled sin is essential if we are to be finally saved.” The assertion demonstrates that sanctification is the basis of the believer’s future justification. Piper contradicted himself in the very same speech and stated, “the pursuit of sanctification can only happen on the foundation of justification.” The latter statement is part of the biblical depiction of sanctification.

Desiring God Ministries recognizes the possible theological inconsistency and asserted, “final salvation in the age to come depends on the transformation of life, and yet does not contradict justification by faith alone.” The statement is incongruent with the Reformation concept of justification by faith alone and extends even further than the commonly

104 Piper, “Act the Miracle.”
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Desiring God Ministries, “Affirmation of Faith.”
repeated phrase “we are saved by faith alone but faith that saves is not alone.” In choosing the word “depends,” Desiring God Ministries claims that salvation is determined, based, or contingent upon transformation of life. In the Reformation concept of sola fide, even amongst strict Calvinists, transformation of life is understood to be a logical outgrowth of saving faith and not dependent upon a transformed life. Calvin himself asserted:

[T]he moment you decline from it you have fallen into unrighteousness. Hence it appears, that righteousness is not obtained by a few works, but by an indefatigable and inflexible observance of the divine will. But the rule with regard to unrighteousness is very different. The adulterer or the thief is by one act guilty of death, because he offends against the majesty of God.108

If any obedience is required for future justification, then complete obedience is required. In terms of sanctification, sanctification must always proceed from justification and cannot precede it. Faith must always come first.

Another drawback of Piper's understanding of sanctification is that he overemphasizes the experiential aspect of sanctification, failing to take into account the positional element of sanctification. Nowhere in his affirmation of faith does he recognize that the believer has been sanctified. He did affirm that “sanctification, which comes by the Spirit through faith, is imperfect and incomplete in this life.”109 The assertion is definitely true in a limited sense but only as it relates to experiential sanctification; it completely ignores the idea that the believer is sanctified in this life positionally.

Piper does believe in the positional element of sanctification but his error in the overall understanding of sanctification leads to tremulous conclusions. For example, in the preaching of 1 Corinthians 1:2, Piper recognized that believers have been positionally sanctified and because of this are to be motivated by the fracture they have made with the past.110 From here, the believer is exhorted to be retrospective toward his positional sanctification in addition to being proleptic toward his future justification. The idea is not held with consistency and in most instances he proclaims a more orthodox understanding that sanctification proceeds

108 Calvin, Institutes, 3.18.10.
109 Ibid.
from justification saying, “without a once-for-all justification through Christ, the only thing that our striving for holiness produces is despair or self-righteousness.”\textsuperscript{111} One must ask how he can teach that sanctification is past, justification is future, and that sanctification must proceed from justification. One can clearly see that shortcomings of his myopic approach to soteriology. In addition, it is said that an increase in holiness results in an increased awareness of one’s sinfulness; it is more accurately said that experiential sanctification results in an increased awareness of one’s unrighteousness, which motivates godly behavior. The latter can only come from the former, and this is a more biblical portrayal of the experiential aspect of sanctification in practice.

**Carnal Christians**

Piper views Christians as experiencing a continuum of increasing and decreasing spirituality. After conversion, they continue to grow in Christ’s likeness until they ultimately persevere in faithfulness at the end of their life. Although there may be missteps along the way, the general trend will be in visible manifestations of obedience. His method of thinking ignores the totality of Scripture, especially as it relates to the carnal Christian. He recognizes the fact that there is a category of believers consisting of those who are called carnal and he even recognizes that Christians can stay in this state for an extended period of time.\textsuperscript{112} One wonders how the carnal believer’s life could be judged and ultimately declared righteous if justification is based upon his works. Judgment that is based upon works will always result in condemnation; to assert otherwise underestimates the sinfulness of man and the sinfulness of sin. Rewards are a notable exception to this in that there is no condemnation, no negative aspect, only the withholding of rewards. Rewards will, therefore, only be based upon man’s stewardship of all that has been entrusted to him.

**Grieving the Spirit**

Correlating with the doctrine of carnality is the possibility that Christians can grieve the Spirit. Piper does recognize this possibility when preaching.

\textsuperscript{111} Piper, “God Sanctifies His People Palm Sunday.”

but it is not affirmed with consistency in his theology.\textsuperscript{113} The standard Greek lexicon asserts that grieve is used as severe distress and “in Polyaenus 8, 47 it is used of the severe humiliation or outrage experienced by a king who has been deposed by his subjects.”\textsuperscript{114} The definition of “grief” is not some light-hearted disappointment experienced by the Spirit due to the imperfectness of man; rather, it is a strong word describing God’s great vexing at man’s disobedience. Man is often shown to act in this way.

As noted previously, Piper regards the believer as characterized by a lifetime of obedience but he also affirms that the believer can have extended periods of rebellion against the Lord when he grieves the Spirit. What is the limit when extended periods of rebellion cause a life to cease being characterized by obedience? Apparently, the imposition of the restriction by Piper is based upon the believer’s ultimate perseverance; it is not how much obedience, but whether the believer returns to faith or remains in faith at the end. More clarity is needed on this issue to say the least.

To return to an earlier point, if saving faith is said to be contingent upon obedience to the covenant with God, then this is unfortunate because man is continually shown in Scripture to be unable to keep a covenant with the Lord. Covenants that are kept are always unconditionally based upon God’s faithfulness and not man’s obedience. While at times Piper addresses licentiousness by claiming that those whose lives are characterized by sinfulness were never saved, at other times he asserts that it is possible for one to having saving faith despite living a life that falls prey to the desires of the flesh for an extended period.

\textit{Hermeneutics}

Anyone who has spent time reading or listening to Piper knows the value he places upon the concept of Christian hedonism. In an almost mythical manner, this idea came to Piper. At times, this seems like it came to Piper as direct revelation by God himself. The concept is a derivative of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states “the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Piper adopted the answer and modified it by asserting, “the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.”\textsuperscript{115} Piper’s emendation directly relates to how he

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\textsuperscript{114} Arndt, et al., \textit{Greek-English Lexicon}, 604.
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\textsuperscript{115} Piper, \textit{Desiring God}.
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approaches hermeneutics because this concept compels his interpretative methodology.

Many within reformed theology today espouse a version of hermeneutics that is classified as historical-grammatical-theological. Broadly speaking, this method of hermeneutics attempts to use theology and read that general understanding into Scripture. The methodology is different from the historical-grammatical interpretation in that theology is not derived from exegesis but is one part of the exegetical process. Piper falls prey to using this school of thought in his exegesis.

After discovering the principle that God is most glorified when we are satisfied in him, Piper then reads this Christian hedonism into the Scripture. He finds many places that bear testimony to the truth of his understanding. The hermeneutic does not allow the text to speak for itself and remain true to its original context. Piper mentions Christian hedonism so frequently, and in so many different contexts, that it has become a sort of mantra for him and his followers. His approach is seen as well when he forces his understanding of future justification upon Scripture. One example is necessary. The Apostle Paul stated, “Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:26-27).

In the context of his statement, Paul was discussing himself possibly being considered disqualified. There is broad agreement, even with reformed thinkers, that Paul was thinking with regard to something other than eternal life. To say otherwise would be to assert that someone, even Paul himself, could lose his salvation. Piper in his exegesis of the passage stated that “to be disqualified means that Christ is not in you. The race has been run in vain. It was a sham.” According to Piper, the Apostle would be saying that if he (Paul) had not been disciplining his body, then he would not be saved. Paul’s life would be a sham. There is a difference between those who profess something and those who possess something, but clearly Paul was not referencing the possibility of losing his salvation because of failure in his life.

Depravity

Piper’s anthropology is interrelated to many of the matters already discussed, especially in regards to his understanding of man’s depravity. In an effort to appear conservative and orthodox, Piper attempts to take a Calvinistic approach to the “T” of TULIP. His outlook depicts God as overcoming man’s sinfulness in an almost mechanical manner. His definition of depravity simultaneously underestimates and overestimates man’s ability. Depravity means that man is unable to earn merit in God’s eyes, and hence is depraved or unable to attain the Lord’s holy standard. Depravity is total in that it affects all people and all parts of a person; it is also total in that there is absolutely nothing in unregenerate man that can merit him favor in the eyes of the Lord. According to Piper, man is totally depraved in that he is unable to obtain salvation. Salvation is the work of God and this is accomplished through God’s imparting of faith in man after regenerating him. One of Piper’s statements regarded depravity is as follows: “when we speak of man’s depravity we mean man's natural condition apart from any grace exerted by God to restrain or transform man.”

Piper's statement ignores the common grace God shows to man in using the Holy Spirit to restrain evil, but the major issue of his view is that it depicts God as eradicating the old sinful self. While the believer still wars against the flesh, Piper depicts this war as one that must be won in order for the Christian to be ultimately saved. He regards the believer’s union with Christ as producing a life characterized by righteousness. He stated:

[W]hen I embrace Jesus as my savior, I embrace my own death as a sinner. My sin brought Jesus to the grave and brought me there with him. Faith sees sin as murderous. It killed Jesus, and it killed me.

The essence of Piper’s argument is that – by union with Christ – the believer has died to sin and in dying to sin, depravity has been overcome. In contrast, Paul explained:

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For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me (Rom 7:18-20).

The old sinful self remains. The believer will at times lose his battle with the flesh, but this does not mean that he has lost his salvation or was never truly saved.

Part of Piper’s misunderstanding of depravity comes from using passages of Scripture to proof text his version of TULIP. For example, he claims that Romans 14:23 (“whatever is not from faith is sin”) asserts that all actions without faith are sin, which is not what the passage means within its original context. When reading the passage as a whole, and not simply as one part of a single verse, one can discern that Paul was discussing the eating of something that the eater believes (has faith) is inappropriate due to the pricking of his conscience.

**Security/Assurance**

There is much difference between the biblical understanding of eternal security and Piper’s doctrine of perseverance. Piper’s approach to perseverance is reminiscent of Puritanism. The Puritans attempted to live in strict obedience to God due to the constant fear that their life would be deemed unworthy to prove their salvation, and thus they were subtly trying to justify their salvation.

What Piper teaches is that it is the working for God that gives believers the foundation for assurance. Piper repeatedly exhorts his congregation to keep working. When the believer works, it is truly God who works in them, and this is to be motivated by the anticipation of future grace they may be shown by God. God graciously honors the earnest efforts of man. At times, Piper preaches that the believer can have assurance but it is founded in obedience, not based upon the truth of an already present justification. Works must confirm salvation. How are the deeds of those who believe different from the works of those who profess to believe but are not truly saved?

Piper depicts obedience as proof of regeneration, but he fails to take into account that the efforts of the unsaved may give them undue security. Is it simply the motives that separate them? Piper appears to teach that a non-believer can work, but they will not persevere in good work, and thus their work does not earn merit in God’s eyes. The important distinction for him is the believer’s empowerment by the Holy
Spirit to work, while the unbeliever is not empowered by the Spirit to work. While the assertion is certainly true, it is too subjective to be the basis for the believer's assurance. Otherwise, one will always be working, and will never have security and will be robbed of the great motivation of gratitude in the grace already shown. The Puritans succumbed to this notion.

One of the things Piper wishes to avoid is the debtor's ethic, which teaches that a debt of obedience is owed to God because of salvation. In this view, it is the repayment of a debt that motivates Christian obedience. What should motivate Christian obedience is not a sense of debt, nor the possibility of future grace, but a thankfulness or gratitude for the grace God has already shown. Gratitude is not the same as the debtor's ethic.

Piper also builds his own "straw man" while portraying free grace theology. He characterizes free grace theologians, especially Hodges, "as describing faith as intellectual assent." The characterization is a poor misrepresentation of the free grace position. Piper developed various tests for determining whether faith is salvific, saying, the "evidence [for our salvation] is that the current of our affection flows toward God, so that God is your delight." The assertion is based too much upon an emotional understanding of God and is not necessarily true of all Christians. Piper also said:

So whether we read Paul or whether we read John the question of assurance is answered in the same way: do we see the evidences of sanctification and belief in the truth. . . ? So if you obey the commandment to love and to believe, you can have assurance that God abides in you and that you are chosen by God and saved." Piper's tests are based in the positive abilities of man, and these abilities of man are empowered by the Spirit of God. The problem with this is its subjectivity and an overall outlook that fails to take into account the sinfulness and depravity of man.

When one examines the testimony of Scripture, one can see that its pages are replete with those who, while righteous because of their faith, were unrighteous in their actions. Peter denied the Lord. Ananias and

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120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.
Sapphira were judged and immediately put to death due to their rebellion. Abraham repeatedly tried to present Sarah as his sister. David, the man after God’s own heart, was an adulterer and murderer. What about the church in Corinth? How would these faithful people possibly be declared righteous by showing the evidence of their works? Works continually bear witness to the depth of man’s depravity; it is by grace alone that the believer is justified. Fortunately for them, the Old Testament saints were justified by grace – through faith – without obedience. They lived under the same dispensational arrangement as Christ, and even Adam did not fulfill the covenant of works. Calvin denied that theoretical covenant. “The promise, which gave him hope of eternal life as long as he should eat of the tree of life, and, on the other hand, the fearful denunciation of death the moment he should taste of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, were meant to prove and exercise his faith.”

He did affirm the “full assurance (πλεροφορία) which the Scriptures uniformly attribute to faith.”

For Piper, assurance is not something based upon the eternal security of the believer, but is a process; it is the “pursuit of assurance,” which is the cycle whereby the works of man progress him in such a way as to work all the more to continue persevering. The Puritan work ethic described herein is what Piper called “the fight to maintain the full assurance of hope.” The “fight” is a desire to put the Christian under some form of law as a rule of life instead of grace. Paul explained just the opposite: Christians “are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14). Piper admitted that his congregation struggles not just with the doctrine of assurance but also with personal assurance, which is not surprising considering his teaching as follows:

[And here I will only mention the subjective side of the problem, the more pastoral side—namely, the struggle for assurance. Suppose you say to me, what more assurance could a person get from the doctrine of imputation that he doesn’t get from the fact that, because of Christ, all his sins are forgiven? My response will be, don’t try to be wiser than God. The human soul is a great mystery. Who can understand it? Who are we to say that there are

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122 Calvin, Institutes, 2.1.4.
123 Ibid. 3.2.15.
not unique kinds of fear and doubt that, for reasons we may not fully understand, will vanish only before the teaching of Christ’s imputed righteousness, but would not budge before the teaching of the forgiveness of sins?¹²⁶

If the imputation of Christ’s righteousness could provide Christians with assurance, it can only be accomplished by living righteously and perfectly. As Packer observed, one “destroy(s) assurance by making final salvation depend upon ourselves rather than on God.”¹²⁷ Praise God that believers are not required to confirm their salvation by their actions.

**Excursus: Romans 7:14-25**

Piper’s interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 is such that he recognizes Paul as referencing the wretched man as himself while a Christian,¹²⁸ which is certainly true. He elsewhere asserted, Paul taught, “not that Christians live in continual defeat, but that no Christian lives in continual victory over sin,”¹²⁹ which is also true. The problem is that it highlights the inconsistency in his theology.

According to Piper, in looking forward to the Bema Seat as a judgment – dividing believers from unbelievers – those saved will be justified on account of their obedience. How does one determine when a person’s incomplete victory becomes sufficiently complete? Paul characterized himself in this passage not as obedient, but as ταλαίπωρος. Psalm 137:8 utilizes the same Greek word in reference to the evil daughter of Babylon. Isaiah used the word in reference to the destroyer Assyria (cf. Isa 33:1), which is more than just a believer who occasionally sins. The depth of depravity extends beyond the simple missteps of otherwise righteous people. The point is important because as Woods demonstrated, “a post-conversion view of Romans 7:14-25 leads to a dual nature view of the believer.”¹³⁰ If one were to conclude that Paul was referencing himself as a believer, which Piper affirms, it forces certain conclusions. One

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¹²⁶ Piper, “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ.”
¹²⁹ Ibid.
conclusion is a dual nature view of the believer. Believers simultaneously have the Adamic nature, in addition to a new nature. If this view is held consistently, then it should avoid the drawbacks of Piper’s understanding of experiential sanctification.

Two popular translations render the Greek text of Romans 7:18 very differently.

**NASB**
For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

**ESV**
For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

**UBS4**
οἶδα γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ οἶκεῖ ἐν ἐμοί, τὸῦτ’ ἔστιν ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου, ἀγαθόν· τὸ γὰρ θέλειν παράκειται μοι, τὸ δὲ κατεργάζεσθαι τὸ καλὸν οὐ.

Paul was clearly referencing himself in this verse, and it is subsequent to his salvation. He recognized the fact that the flesh – his sinful nature – remains subsequent to conversion. Calvin himself affirmed this by stating, “both terms, flesh as well as spirit, belong to the soul; but the latter to that part which is renewed, and the former to that which still retains its natural character.”

Paul lamented the fact that he still sinned (frequently), following his conversion.

*Kατεργάζεσθαι* is defined as accomplishing a result: by doing something, achieving, accomplishing, or doing. The passage refers to the idea that Paul, while having the desire to do good (ἀγαθός), did not live this way in practice. The statement was spoken by one of the holiest men ever to live. The reformed leanings of the *English Standard Version* demonstrate an imputation of TULIP into this passage by ascribing to unregenerate man an inability to do good when divorced from context. In reference to this passage, Piper stated, “this is a radical confession of the truth that in our rebellion nothing we think or feel is good. It is all part of our rebellion.”

When this is combined with his view of justification and sanctification, Piper believes man overcomes depravity subsequent to conversion. While it is true that man has been freed from the dominion of sin, it is not true

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132 Arndt, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 531.
133 Piper, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism.”
that the power or influence of sin in the life of the regenerate believer has been eradicated. Sin still exerts tremendous influence in the life of a believer, as Paul bore testimony.

Piper’s vision of man, bringing his works before God at the Bema Seat, underestimates sin, and limits the influence of depravity to having power only prior to conversion. One should applaud him for recognizing the fact that man is in rebellion against God prior to conversion, but even though man has been reconciled positionally to God subsequent to conversion, this does not mean that man cannot rebel against God experientially. Just because the regenerate man is now able to do good in the eyes of the Lord, does not mean that he will. Every time believers sin, whether great or small, it is a rebellion against God, which is the biblical depiction of the sin nature.

CONCLUSION

Despite all his theological flaws, there is one thing of great importance that the young Calvinists perceive in Piper that is commendable and worthy of careful contemplation, which is the passion that he evidences for God. Piper’s theology is not aloof and lifeless, as some have taken to characterizing many within reformed theology. He is not the typical “frozen chosen” predestinarian. He has a vibrant faith that is truly evident whenever he speaks. Authenticity is greatly significant to the postmodern generation. They see his passion and authenticity, and it is something that they desire to emulate, and this is an example from which many can learn.

Unfortunately, his gospel is not good news but a call to action. One is left wondering how it is that the just live by faith if they are not yet justified? In such a scenario, the gospel is a hopeless one, and it is not good news. There can be no assurance of salvation when the Christian life is one that is lived in hopeful expectation of a forthcoming salvation based upon future grace in a coming justification that will be retroactively applied to man. One is left wondering, how this is any different from Roman theology or even Islam? If justification is based upon works or is conditioned upon obedience, as Piper states, then all will be weighed and be found lacking. Belief in Christ is trusting in Him – his person and his work – and it is only upon this premise that no one will be found lacking because faith is based upon Christ, instead of man. Calvin himself asserted:

[L]et us not suppose, then, that the Holy Spirit, by this promise, commends the dignity of our works, as if they were deserving of such a reward. For Scripture leaves us nothing of which we may
glory in the sight of God. Nay, rather its whole object is to repress, humble, cast down, and completely crush our pride.\textsuperscript{134}

Luther translated 1 Corinthians 1:31 to say, “he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord, namely, that he has a gracious God” (\textit{Smalcald Articles}, 29). Works cannot be favorably measured against the ultimate standard of a holy God. New Calvinism, if it continues to follow in the footstep of Piper, will do great harm to the church. Although not all new Calvinists exclusively hold Piper’s theology, it remains an important case study for understanding whether new Calvinism is truly Calvinistic in any true sense of the word.

\textsuperscript{134} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.18.4.
EXCAVATING THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER:
Discerning Jesus’ Meaning

Marcia Hornok

Jesus’ remarkable statement concerning his first recorded parable, which He called “the parable of the sower” (Matt 13:18, NKJV), gave a significant warning: “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). In other words, if one fails to interpret the parable of the sower accurately, one will fail to understand the other parables Jesus taught. Jesus Himself explained the parable, and yet its meaning is much debated today.

Many Bible commentaries assert that Jesus depicted the responses that four different categories of people will have to the gospel, concluding, “The gospel will be rejected by most people.”¹ Some claim that only the last soil portrays a believer because it produces fruit.² Others assert that only the first soil type represents an unbeliever because the seed germinates in the other three.³ Therefore, the parable is used as a turning point for evaluating whether people are saved, unsaved, carnal, persevering, or even not saved, but think they are. The conflicting interpretations result from classifying the four soils as unbelievers and the seed as the message of the gospel. Is that what Jesus intended?

In an attempt to discern Jesus’ original meaning and applications, this article will demonstrate that the seed represents any truth from God, not merely the gospel, and the four soils represent four ways that all people — believers and unbelievers — respond to what they hear.

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¹ Norman L Geisler, Systematic Theology: In One Volume (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2011) 1365.
³ Zane Clark Hodges, The Hungry Inherit (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972) 60.
THE REASON FOR THE PARABLE

Prior to examining the text, it will be helpful to investigate why Jesus gave parables at a certain point in his ministry. Mark Bailey demonstrated that one must understand the setting of a parable, uncover the need that prompted it, and discern the central truth of the parable in its relationship to the kingdom. He wrote, “The central truth can be identified by understanding what question, occasion, problem, or need is portrayed in the historical setting. This question or problem will usually relate to Jesus’ disciples or to His opponents, and therefore is related to the revealing and concealing purposes of the parables.”

With this in mind, the occasion of the parable of the sower seems to be the rejection of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah-King. Toussaint noted this in Matthew’s wording, “on that day” — the day in which the Pharisees were openly hostile to Jesus. They accused Him of exorcizing demons by Beelzebub (Matt 12:24). Toussaint wrote, “It is evident that the kingdom could not come because of the opposition to the King; therefore, the King by means of parables instructs His disciples about the postponement of the kingdom.” (During this postponement, the “kingdom of heaven” would be characterized by seed-sowing, as amplified in the first three parables of Jesus recorded in Matt 13.)

“The content of the parables deals with the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens.” In defining “mysteries” or “secrets” of the kingdom, Toussaint said that the King is “instructing His disciples regarding a hitherto unrevealed period of time prior to the establishment of the kingdom.” Jack Dean Kingsbury stated, “In reaction to this rejection, Jesus presented the parables to show them [national Israel] they were no longer the privileged people in whom God would impart His revelation.”

Bailey concluded that the main interpretation of the parable emphasized “the responsibility of the audience to be eager hearers of the Word.” In support, he quoted Hagner, who stated, “The key issue is

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6 Ibid. 170.
7 Ibid. 171.
8 Ibid.
responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the message of the kingdom.”\(^{10}\) While most Bible scholars agree that Jesus was teaching with regard to hearing and responding to his words, they obscure it by their emphasis upon whether someone is saved or not, in response to hearing the gospel. For example, Robert Wilkin said, “The question is, what in the parable indicates which soils represent believers and which unbelievers?”\(^{11}\)

**Soteriology and the Parable**

The context does support a salvation application. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem had blasphemed Him, which Jesus said was unpardonable (Mark 3:29), and Luke preceded the parable by speaking with regard to Jesus forgiving the woman in Simon’s house: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:48-50). Some scholars, however, designate salvation as the central truth of the parable, not merely an application point. They then disagree concerning which of the four responses results in eternal life.

Many claim that only the people represented by the good soil are saved because they say that fruit is the necessary result of true conversion.\(^{12}\) The interpretation would be the position most Reformed theologians affirm and has also been called “Lordship Salvation.” Others say only the people represented by the hard soil are not saved because in the other three soils the seed germinates, producing life. Bible teachers affirming this interpretation have been designated as having a “Free-Grace” Soteriology.\(^{13}\)

The purpose of this article is not to join that debate but to argue that the parable has a much larger purpose than to classify individuals as to their eternal destiny. To accomplish this intent requires a look at the four responses Jesus detailed in the parable (see fig. 1).

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\(^{10}\) Donald A. Hagner, as quoted by ibid. 186.


\(^{13}\) To this writer’s knowledge, the major proponents of this view are the late Zane C. Hodges, Robert N. Wilkin, Joseph C. Dillow, and Charlie Bing.
Figure 1. Summary of Details in the Parable of the Sower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOIL IS:</th>
<th>SEED IS:</th>
<th>HEART IS:</th>
<th>TRUTH IS:</th>
<th>FRUIT IS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard seed falls by it</td>
<td>Stolen (enemy = Satan)</td>
<td>Closed (impenetrable)</td>
<td>Negated</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky seed falls on it</td>
<td>Scorched / Starved (enemy = flesh)</td>
<td>Careless (impulsive / indifferent)</td>
<td>Neglected</td>
<td>Aborted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorny seed falls among it</td>
<td>Strangled (enemy = world)</td>
<td>Crowded (inattentive / infested)</td>
<td>Neutralized</td>
<td>Abandoned “becomes unfruitful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good seed falls into it</td>
<td>Sustained</td>
<td>Cultivated (ideal)</td>
<td>Nurtured</td>
<td>Abundant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the most part, Bible teachers agree concerning how the four different soils respond to the seed. However, those who insist upon salvation as the main point must interpret the seed as representing the gospel message. John MacArthur stated this notion as follows:

The seed He spoke of was not literal seed, but rather the gospel: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom” (v. 19). The seed is the message about the King and His kingdom. Luke 8:11, a parallel account, is even more explicit: “The seed is the Word of God.” Thus the sower is anyone who plants the seed of the gospel by the word of God (cf. 1 Peter 1:23) in the heart of an individual.14

Howard Marshall also appeared to contradict himself when he (correctly) stated: “The ensuing interpretation makes clear that the parable is concerned with the way in which men hear the Word of God, and constitutes a summons to them to take care how they hear it.”15 However, he also stated, “There is stress on the fact that the seed represents the word of God. . . . Men are required to believe this word in order to be saved, and those who fail to believe or do not persist in belief are lost.”16

16 Ibid. 324.
Therefore, he implied the fallacy that believers can lose their salvation if they do not persist (persevere).

Zane Hodges wrote that the seed is the “Word of God! The gospel of God’s Son…! He was referring to the word of truth by means of which they were begotten to eternal life, as was also everyone who received that word in faith.”[17] Jody Dillo stated, “The parable of the four soils presents four differing responses to the gospel.”[18] He then argued that only the first soil represents unbelievers, and the other three represent Christians who are carnal (rocky and thorny soils) or mature (good soil).

WHAT IS THE SEED?

Although the previously identified scholars are well respected, and deservedly so, they limit the meaning that Jesus gave to the seed. When Jesus interpreted the parable, He stated that the seed is the “word of the kingdom” (Matt 13:19), the “word” (Mark 4:14), and (by direct statement in Luke 8:11) “the seed is the word [Gr. logos] of God.” If Jesus had been talking only with regard to becoming a believer in Him, then He could have said that the seed was the “gospel” (Gr. euanggelion). He had previously claimed to preach the gospel to the poor when He quoted from Isaiah in Matthew 11:5 and Luke 7:22. As a result of the terminology in the Synoptics, one can conclude that the seed refers to God’s word, which includes all truth from God. Sometimes the seed contains the gospel, which is part of God’s truth, but the seed should not be viewed as only the gospel of salvation.[19]

If the seed is not merely the gospel, why then does Luke 8:12 say of the first response, “so that they may not believe and be saved”? Sometimes the seed sown is the salvation message. If the hearer’s heart is “hard” at that time, he or she will not accept the truth and be saved. Consequently, this article has established that the parable’s context indicates that the “seed” includes the mysteries or secrets of the kingdom. Salvation by faith was not a previous secret, which was now being revealed, so Jesus must have meant more than people hearing the gospel. Therefore, the seed is any word or truth from God; it includes the gospel message but is not any word or truth from God; it includes the gospel message but is not

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[19] One may regard it significant to note that this parable is not included in the Gospel of John, whose stated purpose was so people would believe in Jesus and have eternal life (20:31).
limited to it. How one interprets the meaning of the seed also determines how one views the fruit.

**WHAT IS THE FRUIT?**

Many Bible teachers, who examine the passage as a classification of whether or not a person is saved, claim that the “fruit” in the fourth soil is evidence or proof of salvation. However, if the seed represents God’s truth, then what is the seedling that grows from that truth in three of the soils? Arguing from nature, a wheat seed produces only wheat fruit, which contains more seeds with the potential of producing even more wheat fruit. When the seedling that sprouts from the seed (truth) is nurtured, it produces fruit that will contain more seeds (truths, insights). For the metaphor to be consistent, the seed (the word) does not change metaphors and become a person who does or does not bear fruit. Therefore, Jesus was teaching that God’s truth produces more truth (insight, understanding) when it grows in a responsive hearer’s thinking, that is, in his heart-soil.

Regarding Matthew 13, Toussaint said, “The fruit spoken of in verse 23 is more revelation and understanding concerning the kingdom. . . . The Lord desires to conceal the truth from those who are not receptive and to reveal it to receptive hearts. . . . The principle taught by the parable is this: reception of the word of the kingdom in one’s heart produces more understanding and revelation of the kingdom.”

The viable aspect of God’s Word supports this. Being alive (Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:25), it germinates, grows, bears fruit, and reproduces itself when it finds a fertile environment in a hearer’s heart. However, it will be stolen, scorched, or strangled by a non-fertile heart response. The “fruit” then portrays a person’s growing knowledge of spiritual truth, which naturally develops from responding well to truth previously implanted. The seedlings do not survive in the first and second scenarios. The seedling in the third soil does not necessarily die, but it “becomes unfruitful” (Matt 13:22; Mark 4:19). The three ways of hearing do not nurture God’s truth, and thus, lose it.

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20 Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 178-79.

21 See also, 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NKJV) which states that the Word of God “effectively works in you who believe.”
WHAT WAS JESUS’ COMMENTARY?

Finally, in Jesus’ conclusion to the parable, He could not have been referring to salvation or the gospel. Each Synoptic account of the parable included his admonition: “For whoever has [truth from God, not salvation], to him shall more [truth, not salvation] be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him” (Matt 13:12; cf. Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18). Mark added, “Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given” (Mark 4:24, NKJV).

Jesus was not speaking with regard to getting more salvation or of having salvation taken. He was referring, in a broad sense, to the truth one either receives or refuses. When the religious leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah, He started teaching in parables, because only those who “had ears to hear” would understand their meanings. Jesus deliberately hid truth from his rejecters, which evidenced God’s mercy, not punishment. If He kept giving truth to those who denied or ignored it, they would receive greater condemnation (Matt 7:6, 23:14; Luke 10:13-16). God holds people responsible for the truth they hear.

The concept of using or losing the truth God gives is an important doctrine that Jesus presented in other contexts: the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), the parable of the faithful and wise steward (Luke 12:42-48), and the parable of the minas (Luke 19:12-27). The three parables, in addition to the parable of the sower, contain the same principle: if one uses what God gives, He will give more; if one does not use what God gives, it will be taken (Matt 13:12; 25:28-29; Mark 4:24-25; Luke 8:18; 12:48; 19:24-26).

Perhaps one of the stewardships (minas, talents) which God entrusts to people and for which He holds them accountable, involves the truths of God that they hear and read. When they respond properly, He reveals more. When they do things that kill God’s truth, they eventually lose even what they used to have, which occurs when a servant is not “good and faithful.” Furthermore, it also occurs when one’s heart is too hard (wayside soil), too shallow (rocky soil), or too distracted (thorny soil), regardless of whether the hearer is saved, unsaved, carnal, or persevering.

Jesus’ interpretation demonstrates that the seed that germinates cannot equal merely the epiphany of salvation (although at times it does). In context, the seed germinating has the broader meaning of a light being illuminated; it does not limit itself to the spiritual birth of salvation. Likewise, the fruit produced cannot equal a believer’s works, thus proving
his or her salvation. In context, the fruit results from responding positively to the light (God’s revealed truth) so that God illumines more truth.

**CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT FOR A NON-SALVIFIC EMPHASIS**

**The Lamp Illustration**

Jesus included an illustration that gives greater clarity to the context of hearing and nurturing God’s truth. Jesus said, “Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light. For nothing is hidden that shall not become evident, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light. Therefore take care how you listen” (Luke 8:16-18, cf. Mark 4:21-22). First, Jesus compared his teachings to seed, then to a lamp that will not be hidden. The verses immediately follow the parable concerning hearing (understanding) God’s truth. Consequently, it seems logical that they refer to God revealing hidden truths (secrets) to people so they can share them to others. John A. Martin wrote:

> This short parable is a logical extension of the Parable of the Sower. The emphasis is once again on hearing or, as it is put here, on listening (v. 18). Just as one does not light a lamp in order to hide it (cf. 11:33-36), so also a person is not given “the secrets of the kingdom of God” (8:10) in order to keep them secret. The disciples were to make known the things Jesus was telling them. The people who followed Jesus were to consider carefully (v. 18) how they listened. If they heard and responded . . . then they would receive more truth. If they did not receive what they heard, they would lose it.22

One has the responsibility to share with others what God has revealed to oneself. When a person shares God’s truth (God’s light) with others, it bears fruit in their own life, then God measures more truth to them (Mark 4:24-25). Whatever measure (capacity) a person uses with God, He will use with them. If a person hides God’s truth from himself and others, He will start “hiding” it from them, as He did to the Pharisees and scribes. Louis Barbieri said, “The secrets of the kingdom would be given to the disciples but would be hidden from the religious leaders who rejected Him (13:11b).

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... In fact, even what they had previously known would no longer be clear to them (v. 12)... Since the leaders turned from the light they had been given, God gave them no additional light.”

By application, the lamp verses exhort people to share the truth of God freely. The more people use what God gives them, the more He will reveal for them to share with others. Some audiences will have ears to hear and eyes to see, and some will not.

**Jesus’ Mother and Brothers**

Besides shining the light of God’s truth to others, another way of ensuring fruit production is by doing or practicing God’s truth, which is reinforced by the incident with Jesus’ family. Someone told Him, “Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You.” He replied, “My mother and My brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:20-21; cf. Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35).

The theme of doing, not merely hearing, was a favorite with Jesus; it formed the conclusion to his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:24-27) as well as his foot-washing example in the Upper Room (John 13:17). Jesus did not insult or ignore his family; rather, He used the occasion to teach that those who hear and do His Word will have a family relationship with Him. His brother James eventually allowed this truth to implant into and penetrate his heart. In James 1:21-25, he recorded, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Martin wrote, “[Jesus] positively stated that His affiliation with those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice is like a family relationship. . . . Once again the importance of hearing God’s Word is central; this time, however, the admonition is that the Word must be ‘put . . . into practice.’”

In summary, the reason for parables, what the seed and fruit represent, the lamp lesson, and what Jesus said in relation to his family all point to more than a salvation emphasis. The four different soils do as well.

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23 Louis A. Barbieri Jr., “Matthew,” in ibid. 49.
24 Within Matthew and Mark, the interruption by Jesus’ family precedes the parable; in Luke, it follows it. Even though the chronological sequence does not agree, this event is part of the parable’s context.
WHAT ARE THE SOILS?

Unbelievers Who Hear

One may deem it as somewhat ironic that the parable which Jesus took time to interpret for his disciples has debated interpretations today. Jesus said, “Do you not understand this parable, and how will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). Those who view the primary interpretation as responses to the gospel have to understand the hearers as unbelievers (of course, it is true that some were). Warren Wiersbe insightfully demonstrated that the unbelieving woman from Samaria had all four heart responses when Jesus spoke with her.

Her heart was hard at first . . . She had no understanding of her need or what Jesus had to offer her. Her hard heart became a shallow heart. The Lord offered her living water, and she immediately replied, “Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw” (John 4:15). This was an emotional response that had no depth to it. The Lord knew this, so He immediately began to plow up her heart: “Go, call thy husband!” . . . What happened next? She developed a crowded heart—she began to argue about religion. The old weeds of prejudice and worldliness began to grow. Jesus refused to get into an argument over whether Jerusalem or Samaria was the place to worship. Her greatest need was to worship God in Spirit and in truth. At that point, the good seed that had been planted in her heart years ago began to grow. She said, “I know that Messiah is coming . . .” Jesus then revealed who He was, she believed, and immediately she began to bear fruit.26

Responding to God’s truth and being saved is a one-time experience. The parable deals with every experience of hearing, not merely the one that results in salvation. Each time God’s truth is disseminated, all who hear it have a choice to respond, with various intensity, or not to respond.

Believers Who Hear

This article has shown that the seed includes all truth from God, not merely the gospel. Therefore, the soil types include everyone who hears God’s

truth, every time they hear it. This means that believers are capable of having all four kinds of hearts. Indeed, the disciples of Christ evidenced all four responses to Jesus’ words.

**Hard Hearts**

After feeding the four thousand in Mark 8:17-18, the disciples “began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?’” If they were feeling haughty because they had the type of hearts represented by the good soil, which would be given the secrets of God, they no doubt had to connect this rebuke to the same one Jesus had given regarding “those who are outside” with hearts represented by the hard soil, who see but do not perceive and hear but do not understand (Mark 4:11-12).

In addition, even after witnessing all of Jesus’ ministry and teachings, they again suffered from hard-heartedness after His resurrection. “He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14).

**Rocky Hearts**

The shallow heart soil that kills the seedling when tribulation comes is evidenced by the experience the disciples had with Christ shortly after He started teaching in parables. They were in a boat with Jesus when a windstorm came down on the lake, and by all appearances they lost their faith, even accusing Jesus of not caring about them. Jesus rebuked the wind and then the disciples: “Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?” (Mark 4:35-40). On another occasion, Jesus said to Peter, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt 14:31). At times, the disciples’ heart soils lacked depth causing Jesus’ teachings to wither and die.

**Thorny Hearts**

In Luke 10:41-42, Jesus rebuked Martha for essentially having a crowded heart. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”
Luke 24 gives two more examples of poor heart responses to truth. He told the Emmaus disciples, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25). He then said to his followers who were in hiding in Jerusalem, “Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (Luke 24:38). Wiersbe understood how believers can have poor-soil hearts.

Those of us who have experienced salvation need to learn from this parable the importance of cultivating our own hearts and planting the Word. Unless we spend time planting the Word (understanding it) and cultivating it (meditating and praying), we cannot be fruitful Christians. We must be certain that our soul is free from weeds, plowed up, and ready to receive God’s Word.

If a Christian neglects the cultivation of his heart, the soil will start to deteriorate. The good soil will soon become crowded soil. The weeds will sap the strength from the soil, and it will become shallow. Then it will become hard. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to warn Christians not to become hard hearted as they hear the Word of God (see Hebrews 4:7-16).

**The Nature of a Field**

As one field contains all four kinds of soil Jesus referenced, so every person, believer or unbeliever, will have one of four responses to God’s truth every time he or she hears it. The *Life Application Bible* identifies this notion in a footnote.

The four soils represent four different ways people respond to God’s message. Usually we think that Jesus was talking about four different kinds of people. But He may also have been talking about (1) different times or phases in a person’s life, or (2) how we willingly receive God’s message in some areas of our lives and resist it in others. . . . You may respond like good soil to God’s demand for worship, but like rocky soil to His demand to give to people in need. We must strive to be like good soil in every area of our lives at all times.

Perhaps Jesus was speaking with regard to each hearer being capable of the four heart responses; however, the Greek wording seems to support

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27 Ibid. 28-29.
the popular interpretation of the four soils as representing four individual hearers rather than four ways of hearing.

The late Zane C. Hodges wrote a response to this author in 2004. He asserted, “In Jesus’ own interpretation, it sure sounds like He has different groups in mind: ‘these are the ones’ (Mk. 4:13); ‘now these are the ones’ (4:18); ‘but these are the ones’ (4:20). It is hard for me to escape the impression that you have ‘re-interpreted’ the parable in a sense not indicated by the Biblical text at all.” In response to this author’s query to the late Roy Zuck, he generously checked “about 15 commentaries on Matthew, Mark, and Luke” and concluded, “The Greek words in Mark 4:15-18 and Luke 8:12-15 all refer to groups of people (but in Matthew 13:19-23 the words are singular).”

Perhaps more study is needed to discern whether the Greek phrasing in all three passages is definitive for a particular interpretation. For example, when Luke 8:15 calls the fourth soil “honest and good,” does it refer to a person who is honest and good or to an honest and good response? Do the soils represent people or responses or could it be both?

Although the soils may refer to different groups of people, not necessarily the same person who hears four different ways, it still remains that they are not merely unbelievers responding to the gospel. They include everyone who hears God’s truth spoken at any time in any form. Therefore, the main point of the parable is not concerned with who is saved and who is not. The central truth regards responding well to what one hears, which is why Jesus often warned, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt 11:15; 13:9; 13:43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Wiersbe concluded his commentary on Matthew 13:1-23 by saying, “It is important that we hear God’s Word, because ‘faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God’ (Rom. 10:17). Jesus said, ‘who has ears to hear’ (Matt. 3:9), ‘Take heed what you hear!’ (Mark 4:24), and ‘Take heed how you hear!’ (Luke 8:18).”

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29 Zane Hodges, personal correspondence to the author, exact date unknown (c. 2004). One wonders if Hodges had a need to defend his previously published interpretation of this parable.


Words related to “hearing” and “ears” occur twenty-one times in the Greek text of Matthew 13:9-23. The main idea of the parable involves hearing Jesus’ words and responding to them. His conclusion, “therefore take heed what/how you hear” supports this understanding. Interpretative confusion results from viewing the seed as merely the gospel and the soils as responses by unbelievers. However, when Jesus interpreted the parable for his disciples, He stated that the seed is his word. The word germinates, grows, bears fruit, and reproduces itself when it finds a fertile heart environment; it can also be stolen, starved, or strangled by a non-fertile heart response.

The main point of the parable then, does not involve taking soil samples of people’s hearts or being fruit inspectors to determine who is saved and who is not. Instead, the parable of the sower reminds one to evaluate oneself: what is one doing with data from God? When one hears a sermon, does one critique the delivery or heed the message? When one reads the Bible, does one interact with God and change one’s behavior? Does one share it with others? The parable also motivates one to keep learning God’s truth. Like a miner in a diamond-rich cave, the more one digs, the more gems God will illuminate. If one wants to get more from God, one must keep digging, practice what He revealed, and share it with others. The result will be fruit that bears more seeds for one to use and disperse.

In summary, Jesus’ interpretation of the parable of the sower is not primarily regarding salvation or even fruitfulness but what one does with truth he or she hears. When believers and unbelievers respond positively to God’s truth, He reveals more to which one must respond. Likewise, He hides truth from those who keep rejecting it. Jesus said when one understands this process, one will understand all the parables.

How does one maintain a positive response to God’s word? The context demonstrates that by giving it and living it (doing, not just hearing) one will produce fruit that multiplies, and this is the primary message Jesus conveyed in the parable of the sower.
BOOK REVIEWS


Robert Somerville is a professor of biblical counseling at the Master’s College as well as a fellow with the Association of Certified Biblical Counseling. He has counseled hundreds and taught many others how to apply Scripture to life’s problems for decades. Such people are not supposed to get depressed, but Dr. Somerville did — severe, clinical depression. Somerville’s book describes his journey through what he calls his “dark night of the soul” (pp. 17, 197). The expression is an unfortunate term that some are using today to describe depression; it originated with St. John of the Cross, in his book by that title, as the first step toward mystical union with God, known commonly as purgation. However, Somerville’s work does more than describe a man’s journey; it also offers extremely helpful insight and biblically accurate means of dealing with depression.

Each of Somerville’s ten chapters opens with a Puritan prayer and ends with a story of other Christians who have similar experiences. The individual whose life is being described wrote each of those stories. Somerville addressed a wide variety of topics including symptoms of depression (p. 18), the lack of hope (ch. 2), causes of depression (pp. 69-71), tools to avoid sinful responses which lead to depression (pp. 71-85), guilt (ch. 5), the physical components of depression and the need to care for one’s body (ch. 6), anxiety (ch. 7), how to express concerns to God using the Psalms as a guide (ch. 8), joy (ch. 9), and help for the caregiver (ch. 10), written by Somerville’s wife Mary.

Each chapter is biblically sound and offers practical ideas and suggestions. Scripture and ways to use it during times of depression are abundant. The book includes seven valuable appendixes, which explain the gospel, guide the reader in how to study the Bible, pray along with the Psalms, provide hymns of comfort, and point toward other resources that will provide aid for those who suffer from depression.

Throughout the volume, Somerville offered numerous exercises and projected that, if applied, would help a depressed person tremendously. However, very few in need will actually take these steps because the very nature of depression leaves most with little motivation or initiative. For this reason the best use of *If I’m a Christian, Why Am I*
Depressed? is as a resource for biblical counseling or a book study for a small group or adult Bible class. Homework assignments from the book could be given that should prove very useful. Somerville’s book is highly recommended.

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In 1991, Donald Whitney wrote Spiritual Discipline for the Christian Life. Often it is asked, if, and in what ways, Donald Whitney differs from those who promote mysticism and the ancient practices of Roman Catholicism among evangelicals. After all, he uses many of the same terms: spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, meditation, and so forth. At the same time, Whitney is a resolute evangelical who is presently a professor at Southern Seminary, has the endorsement of men such as Al Mohler and Bruce Ware, and has spoken at The Master’s Seminary. Where is his position on issues such as the spiritual disciplines?

Guilt by association must be avoided. His use of some of the common words found within the unbiblical spiritual formation movement may be questionable but does not definitively mean that he asserts the same. For example, Jay Adams wrote a book called Godliness through Discipline and Kent Hughes wrote The Disciplines of a Godly Man, and yet neither man has been linked to the Roman Catholic understanding of spiritual disciplines. In a private conversation with Whitney, he affirmed being against mysticism and not being in agreement with Rome. One must also recognize that because he quotes questionable sources, even in favorable ways, such practice does not necessarily imply that he agrees with all they teach. For example, he often quotes Richard Foster and Dallas Willard even though he differs significantly with much of their theology. There is no argument concerning the quotes he cites from those men. One must be careful to hear an author like Whitney and determine what he is really saying.

However, one cannot dismiss too lightly Whitney’s favorable endorsement of men such as Foster and Willard. Where some would find virtually nothing of value in Foster, and a lot that is dangerous, Whitney sees much that is helpful. For instance, in the 1991 version of Spiritual Discipline, he spoke of the “great contribution” of Foster’s Celebration of
Discipline (p. 23). J. I. Packer, in the foreword, told of Foster’s sounding the alarm concerning the spiritual disciplines as “a happy thing.” Quoting Carl Lundquist, readers are informed that by the closure of the New Testament the church had four spiritual disciplines: prayer, Bible study, the Lord’s Supper, and small cell groups. For argument’s sake, one may accept this notion. If so, should not the New Testament believer stop where the New Testament does? When one interprets the Scriptures with their own traditions, do they not invalidate the Scriptures (Matt 15:1-8)?

Lundquist tells readers that “the medieval mystics wrote about nine disciplines clustered around three experiences: purgation of sin, enlightenment of the Spirit and union with God” (p. 66). Lundquist is correct. The mystics did exactly this using the same three steps or experiences found in all forms of mysticism, but this is a bad thing. The reason it is not good is due to the fact that there is nothing like it taught in Scripture, and therefore, it certainly cannot be the basis to one’s spiritual life. Mysticism is something that should be exposed and rejected (and it was by the Reformers and their followers), until Richard Foster wrote his book. Lundquist, and apparently Whitney, do not regard Foster’s teaching on these subjects as unbiblical and dangerous. Lundquist even stated, “Today Richard Foster’s book, Celebration of Discipline, lists twelve disciplines—all of them relevant to the contemporary Christian.”

Foster clearly based his teachings from the mystics, and even added three disciplines to theirs. In all, Whitney quoted Foster six times and his spiritual twin, Dallas Willard, six times as well. As already mentioned, none of the quotes is wrong in itself; yet, it is disconcerting, to say the least, that not one mention is given of where these men were trying to lead the church: directly to Roman Catholic mysticism. If Whitney is not promoting Foster’s mysticism why does he not distance himself? Instead, Foster, Willard, and their contemporaries are quoted as experts with regard to spiritual disciplines.

Of a more positive nature, when Whitney defined and described the spiritual disciplines, he gave them a biblical treatment (in contrast to Foster). In studying Foster, he provided none of his twelve disciplines as a biblical description but managed to distort them by forcing them through a mystical grid. By contrast, most of Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life is simply good teaching on the traditional and biblical means of spiritual growth. Whitney offered fine chapters on the study of Scripture, prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, and more. With the exception of the chapter on fasting, in which Whitney did not prove his case biblically, each chapter is full of sound advice. Whitney’s soft mysticism is cause for concern. He wrote often of “hearing the voice of God” and other similar experiences
(pp. 44, 179, 184, 186, 193, 194, 195, 236, 237). By this, the author means
the inner voice, the prompting, and the inner “still, small voice of God.” No
example or instruction is found in the Word concerning such inner voices.

The revised edition is essentially the same with the following
differences: more content with an additional 10,000 words and some
reformatting (see especially the section on meditation, pp. 56-68), more
gospel material woven into each chapter, the removal of quotations from
spiritual formation leaders such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard
(although he used the same foreword by J. I. Packer who praised Foster),
and upgrading cultural and technological references.

Whitney wants to distinguish himself from the spiritual formation
movement leaders and, in fact, his work is very different from theirs. While
he often spoke of certain actions as spiritual disciplines (p. 160), at other
times he affirmed the need to discipline oneself for the purpose of
godliness (1 Tim 3:7) (pp. 4, 143, 169). As a result, he is more careful
regarding his language and, as previously mentioned, removed all but one
reference to spiritual formation leadership. Unfortunately, he made no
reference to this in the book or any discussion concerning the foundations,
teachings, and concerns of this movement. The deficiency leaves the reader
of the original book with questions as to why those quotes were used in
the first edition and why they have been removed, especially in light of
Packer’s foreword.

Reviewing the 1991 version of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian
Life* deserved a mixed review. With the revised and updated edition, there
is much to commend, and any Christian will profit from the vast majority of
the book. However, Whitney’s link with Foster and company is deeply
disturbing; it is as if he leads his reader right to the threshold of the
corrupting influence of classical mysticism and then retracts without
explanation. If he agrees with Foster’s brand of mysticism, he should say
so; if not, clarification is needed. Overall, this updated edition is a resolute
work on discipleship and spiritual growth, in addition to being an
unmistakable improvement over the original. The chapter on fasting draws
more from tradition and other spiritual leaders, such as John Piper, than
from Scripture. With the exception of that chapter, and the absence of
clarity on the spiritual formation movement, Whitney has given the church
an excellent tool to aid in spiritual maturity. The review of the original
version, having removed comments on spiritual formation leaders and
teachings, still is applicable.

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Understanding Scripture is a helpful volume dealing with the primary issues related to God’s Word. None of the editors contributes to the book, but seventeen other scholars do. Understanding Scripture is organized around seven parts with two or more chapters within each part. The parts are as follows: interpreting, reading, canonicity, reliability of manuscripts, archaeology, and original languages. In addition, the concluding part provides chapters surveying the history of salvation and discussing how the New Testament makes use of the Old Testament.

The book offers introductory material on these subjects and is not intended to be exhaustive. Those interested in deeper study of these topics will need to look elsewhere, but Understanding Scripture is a good starting point. A highlight was the discussion of the reliability of the biblical manuscripts including the types of textual differences among the manuscripts (pp. 101-17) and how textual criticism actually strengthens one’s confidence in the Bible as it is read today. When faithfully translated, the Holy Bible is the very word of God. Understanding Scripture has value for the individual who needs a better understanding of these foundational matters related to the Bible. The book could also be useful for a group study or as an introductory textbook for coursework.

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Progressing through The Tangible Kingdom, it felt as if the reviewer had read this book previously and, in a sense, had. Essentially, the same message was written in 1971 in David Main’s Circle Church, in Girard’s Brethren, Hang Loose in 1972, in Snyder’s The Problem of Wine Skins in 1975, again in Tucker’s The Church Change or Decay in 1978, Tillapaugh’s The Church Unleashed in 1982, and so forth. More recently, the works of Brian McLaren and Rob Bell have repeated the same themes, which are basically that the church is a mess, has lost its way, and must either change
or die. Fortunately, so the message goes, all these authors have discovered the “secret sauce” (as Andy Stanley calls it in his books), and they are here to share the ingredients. Halter and Smay follow this pattern completely (pp. xviii-xxii, 1-9, 11-28).

Even prior to reading the first page, the informed reader is expecting the authors to traverse this path for the book is published by Jossey-Bass, which has been on the cutting edge of the emergent church movement, and endorsed by Doug Pagitt, Jim Henderson, Mark Driscoll, and Brian McLaren, who are all critics of the traditional church and inventors of new models. While the replacement paradigm for the traditional church varies to a degree among these alternative leaders, there is a common theme. Whether the alternatives are some rendition of the seeker-sensitive model or the emergent paradigm, or something different, the common theme is that none of these models is erected upon a careful study of God’s model as found in Scripture. In other words, these church leaders’ ecclesiology is not developed from Scripture but from experience, pragmatism, and the teaching of men. Halter and Smay are no exceptions. While there is some attempt to base what they do and teach upon the Bible, most uses of biblical texts are either misinterpretations or divorced from context (pp. 25, 44-45, 136-37, 142-43, 168, 172). Careful study of what the Bible teaches regarding the church is virtually absent.

From the beginning, it is important to understand that the concepts being communicated in The Tangible Kingdom are not drawn from Scripture, which does not mean the authors have nothing of value to say. Halter and Smay have planted a church network called Adullam, composed of a number of “villages” (their word for their churches) in the Denver, Colorado area. Having reacted to both the traditional and seeker, consumer-oriented church, they regard Adullam as missional and incarnational communities (p. xix). Whether these are churches or missions, centered upon outreach, even the authors cannot seem to decide (pp. 6, 32-38, 54, 79, 113, 116).

The Tangible Kingdom was written just four years into their experiment and clearly lacks the perspective of time (pp. xx-xxi, 1-7). Currently, they perceive their ministry as messy, lacking organization and structure, and they are okay with this chaos (pp. 24, 109-11, 119). As a matter of fact, messy partly defines who they are. They are not concerned with polish, fancy buildings, or slick organization (p. 104). They are concerned with life and rightly so. They have a intense passion to showcase genuine Christian living among the “sojourners” of this world, people who are spiritually disoriented God seekers (pp. 2, 116), and believe the best way to do this is not by trying to attract them to church
services (pp. 93-99) but by allowing them to witness Christ at work in their lives. They wrote, “Influence doesn’t happen by extracting ourselves from the world for the sake of our values, but by bringing our values into the culture” (p. 31, cf. p. 33).

The authors call their approach “missional,” meaning to be sent, as opposed to attracting people to the church. Missional’s twin is incarnational (pp. 38, 42, 60, 125, 144). The authors believe that people in the first century were drawn to Jesus, although they think it was because of his personality not his signs (p. 46); and, thus, they should be drawn to the church (cf. pp. 41, 51) as we live incarnationally. Living in such a way means that people are attracted to and want to spend time with believers (pp. 77, 90). As missional believers, they are “replacing personal or Christian activities with time spent building incarnational relationships with people in the surrounding culture” (p. 127).

The missional ideas are the best part of The Tangible Kingdom and, if kept in biblical balance, are needed corrections to many traditional churches and Christians. For instance, it is too easy for most believers to become comfortable within their Christian subculture and to remain as distanced from unbelievers as possible. The authors encourage the church to challenge this mindset and actively look for ways to spend time with “sojourners” by showing them what a follower of Christ is like, which in turn will hopefully draw them to Christ Himself. There is much that is right regarding this overarching emphasis. The problem is in the details and methods espoused, which are now addressed in following.

While the authors made no attempt to develop an ecclesiology from the New Testament epistles, they do have a hermeneutic (albeit a distorted one), which forms their philosophy of the church. They distinguish between two kinds of believers: Jerusalem Christians and Galilee Christians. Jerusalem Christians are those who embrace the teaching of Paul, while Galilee Christians are those who follow the example of Jesus (pp. 19-21, 44-45, 137). Jerusalem Christians are fixated on doctrine and legalism (as the authors view it), while Galilee Christians are less concerned with correct doctrine and more concerned with attempting to live as Christ lived. The following statement clarifies their position.

Would Christians today be different if we only had the four Gospels to interpret? What if we all had to look at over all these centuries were the four accounts of Christ’s life? Would we be better Christians on the streets? I think we probably would. Sure we would be missing a depth of rich theology about Christ through Paul, John, Peter and a few others, but “What would Jesus do?”
would not be a wristband we wear but the constant attention of our lives. We would live like Jesus! [pp. 20-21]

Apparently, the Holy Spirit made a mistake by including the epistles in the New Testament. If believers merely followed the example of Jesus and ignored the doctrinal emphasis of the epistles, we all would be better Christians. After all, “incarnational life requires that we contextualize all the ‘warnings’ found in the epistles with the larger context of the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels” (p. 137). In other words, they have a hermeneutic which interprets Paul through the grid of the narration accounts of Jesus. The results are predictably a lopsided understanding of the Christian life and the function of the church. There are several examples of this in the book.

The authors misunderstand the purpose of the church gathered. They do not care if people come to the services (p. 88, 168-69), do not intend to feed people spiritually if they do come (p. 54), and minimize the value of meeting together as believers (p. 104). They magnify worldliness as the means of being missional. In order to live incarnationally, we apparently must live as much like unbelievers as possible to gain a hearing and their respect. For example, alcohol, pubs, and brewing beer are constant themes (pp. 5, 14, 19, 22, 35, 42, 61, 96, 129, 137, 139, 160). Tattoos apparently help too (pp. 71, 139, 154, 159). Those with other views concerning holiness are seen as narrow-minded, tense legalists that portray God “like an old senile, out-of-touch beat cop” (pp. 136; cf. pp 135-40).

In a related category is the promotion of a worldly church, although they would prefer the word “messy” (pp. 24, 109-11, 119). A vital component in the Adullam system is incorporating unbelievers into the ministry of the church (pp. 27, 96-98, 116-20) including places of leadership such as teaching (p. 118) and involvement in worship (pp. 117-18). Their philosophy is encapsulated in the slogan, “Belonging enables believing” (p. 98). The notion becomes messy, once again, such as when their unsaved keyboard player began to act upon his latest heroin fix during the worship service (pp. 119-20). Leadership is supposedly held to a higher standard (p. 118), yet one wonders what this means when one of the village leaders (pastors) decides to marry a Denver Broncos’ cheerleader (p. 117). The fact that this pastor’s wife will be exposing her nearly nude body as she dances in sensuous ways before a national audience is no problem for Adullam; it is just part of being missional, incarnational, and demonstrating to the world that not all Christians are narrow-minded.
The authors present a confusing gospel. Virtually quoting Brian McLaren, the authors of *The Tangible Kingdom* do not focus upon who is going to heaven and who is not (pp. 19, 94, 143). They mock the idea that belief enables belonging, that is, that those who belong to Christ are saved exclusively by faith (p. 94). Truth, they believe, is not as important as whether people are attracted to it (pp. 41-42), and that will only occur when people are attracted to believers (pp. 42, 65). Their emphasis is not upon the gospel but on mercy ministries: “We really don’t need more converts; we need more people who are willing to act upon the basis that Jesus taught things like caring for the poor and oppressed” (pp. 54-55). They give Dallas Willard the credit for some of these ideas since he wrote, “It was never just ‘the gospel.’ It is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God” [i.e. a gospel that includes solving social concerns] (p. 84). The problem, as the authors see it, is that Western Christians do not even know what the gospel is, which the authors believe includes social justice, mercy ministries, incarnational living, and blessing people (pp. 90-91). For this reason, when one of the authors met an unsaved lady who was involved in all of these types of activities already, he had nothing to offer her. She was apparently living the “kingdom life” without Christ (pp. 86-91) (cf. pp. 115, 123, 143, 173). Evangelism is merely “changing people’s assumptions” in relation to what a Christian is (p. 160, cf. 178).

The authors are confused regarding holiness. The authors practice what they call “whimsical holiness” which they define as “participating in the natural activities of the culture around you” (p. 136), or simply “being like Jesus . . . with those Jesus would have been with” (p. 138). “Whimsical holiness” allows believers, in theory, to be with people without casting any judgment upon them (p. 138). In practice, this means that in order to attract people to Christ, it is acceptable, even recommended, that believers engage in the activities and amusements that unbelievers enjoy. For example, gambling is not only acceptable (pp. 71, 159), but one of Adullam’s worship leaders is a poker dealer at a casino (p. 139). One person is showcased who uses his resources, gained from building casinos (which rob people of their money, not to mention the lewdness and other forms of corruption involved), for missions in South America (p. 154).

Whimsical holiness includes, at best, a yielding view of moral concerns. For example, one couple in their church who were “growing in faith” were sleeping together prior to marriage. The authors convinced them to cease sexual activity until marriage because it was causing confusion and internal conflict (p. 53). No mention is made of this being a sin against God, a lack of obedience, or something for which repentance was needed. The authors proudly affirm that it is not uncommon for
believers in their church to live together prior to marriage. To tell people this is an ungodly arrangement would identify you as a WestMod (or Jerusalem) pastor or Christian who believes the Bible is authoritative and that new Christians understand the faith story; it would necessitate removing First Corinthians from the Bible, they believe. After all, people were sleeping together at Corinth (p. 66). Of course, they do not mention that Paul condemned this practice. The author’s type of whimsical holiness would allow a neighbor lady to approach one of the authors, as a trusted friend, to ask what he thought of her newly enhanced breasts (pp. 138-39). One would think that even the majority of moral unbelievers recognize that there are some things that are inappropriate, such as evaluation of the physical anatomy of someone other than a spouse, but this is seen as honest conversation by Halter and Smay (p. 139).

Some of the authors’ views seem to be a backlash against their holiness upbringing (pp. 135-36) coupled with the influence of everyone from Mother Teresa (p. 151) to Brian McLaren to Henri Nouwen (pp. 44, 144), as well as charismatic teachings (pp. 84, 128-29). In addition, Adullam is culturally not biblically based. The authors use considerable space plotting how Western, Eastern, and postmodern worldviews affect the processing of truth and how the church must keep pace with the culture (pp. 61-81). If the church does not change, it will die (pp. 59, 94). “What worked in the past simply does not work today, and we must adjust to culture” is the message (pp. 108). No mention is made of the timeless truth and instruction of Scripture as being the final authority. Culture, not God’s Word, rules when it comes to the church. While The Tangible Kingdom’s emphasis upon spending time with unbelievers and living the life of Christ before them is of great value, the philosophy and views throughout are toxic. Extreme caution and discernment are needed.

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