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Imputation: The Sinner's Only Hope

Thomas K. Ascol

J. I. Packer calls justification by faith the “storm center of the Reformation.”¹ Justification was at the heart of the gospel of God’s grace that the Reformers rediscovered and began to proclaim. Those 16th century Protestants recognized the importance of this teaching and saw what was at stake in having it firmly established in the church’s confession. Luther’s oft-quoted dictum declares justification to be that article by which the church stands or falls. If you are wrong on this doctrine, it does not matter how much you may have right. Luther went on to call it “the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness.”² His fellow reformer, John Calvin, in his reply to Sadoleto, said, “Wherever the knowledge of it [justification] is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown.”³ Three hundred years later Charles Spurgeon went so far as to say: “Any church which puts in the place of justification by faith in Christ another method of salvation is a harlot church.”⁴ If for no other reason than out of respect for those fathers in the faith who have gone before us, we ought to think very clearly about and care very deeply for the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

In recent years there has been a growing number of respected teachers who are giving up on this doctrine—at least on the way that it has been understood by our Protestant and Reformed forebears. Because this doctrine is so crucial and the growing challenges to it are so sincere (and, at some points, severe), all those who love the Word of God—and especially those whose calling it is to teach it—must be willing to reconsider what God has revealed to us about the way sinners are justified. If Luther, Calvin and Spurgeon are correct, then to misunderstand this doctrine is to contribute to the adulteration of the church.

Justification answers the most fundamental religious question that can be asked: How can a sinner ever become right with God? The answer that Luther and the other Reformers in the 16th century discovered from their study of the Word of God was this: Sinners are made right with God only by trusting in Jesus Christ alone.

God justifies sinners through faith alone. He declares them righteous in His sight when they submit themselves to Jesus Christ the Lord through faith.

This is simply the meaning of the word *justify* in the Bible. As Packer writes, “Justification is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9–24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself. This justifying sentence is God’s gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:15–17), his bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 5:21).”⁵

The mechanism, or spiritual dynamic, that enables the righteous God to make such a declaration is imputation. Whereas justification is the declaration itself, imputation addresses the basis on which that declaration is made. God pardons sinners, He accepts them, puts them into a right relationship with Himself, by imputing righteousness to them. Or, as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it: Those whom God calls, He freely justifies “by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith” (WCF 11.1).⁶ Answer 33 in the *Shorter Catechism* reads similarly: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

Given this understanding it is not too much to say that if justification is the heart of the gospel, then imputation is the heart of justification. So we should be alarmed when we hear statements from respected Christian teachers that are dismissive of imputation or, worse yet, reject it all together.

Consider, for example, the words of Mark Seifrid of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

It is fair to say that something of the “Christ-centered” understanding of justification which Luther and Calvin grasped was lost in subsequent Protestant thought, where justification came to be defined in terms of the believer and not in terms of Christ. It is worth observing that Paul never speaks of Christ’s righteousness as imputed to believers, as became standard in Protestantism.⁷

If Paul is silent on imputed righteousness then generations of Protestant churches and confessions and catechisms and theologians have seriously misrepresented him in their teaching on justification.⁸

Robert Gundry is even bolder in his assessment:

It is no accident, then, that in New Testament theologians’ recent and current treatments of justification, you would be hard-pressed to find any discussion of an imputation of Christ’s righteousness. (I have in mind treatments by Mark Seifrid, Tom Wright, James Dunn, Chris Beker, and John Reumann, among others.) The notion is passé, neither because of Roman Catholic influence nor because of theological liberalism, but because

of fidelity to the relevant biblical texts. Thus New Testament theologians are now disposed to talk about the righteousness of God in terms of his salvific activity in a covenantal framework, not in terms of an imputation of Christ's righteousness in a bookkeeping framework.

What a pity, then, that in its insistence on an imputation of Christ's righteousness as the pivot of justification by faith, "Celebration" is deeply flawed at its self-proclaimed core! That doctrine of imputation is not even biblical. Still less is it "essential" to the Gospel. If *sola scriptura* outweighs all human traditions, including Protestant tradition, the doctrine that Christ's righteousness is imputed to believing sinners needs to be abandoned.⁹

Is the insistence on the imputation of Christ's righteousness "a pity"? And is it true that Paul "never speaks" of imputation, but that rather, it is simply an invention—something read into Paul—by post-reformation Protestants? If so, then the implications are staggering. If we have been wrong on imputation, then we have been wrong on the heart of the heart of the gospel.

Rather than try to engage directly the modern critics of imputation (which are not much different from ancient critics who have been energetically engaged and, in my opinion, amply refuted by the likes of John Owen and Frances Turretin), I will attempt to give in this article a positive exposition of the doctrine from the relevant Scripture passages. What I hope to do is show first that imputation is a biblical word and concept that relates to justification. Next I will consider the Apostle Paul's use of this concept in explaining justification. Finally, I will suggest why this is so important to sinners.

Imputation Defined by Scripture

General Use

When we speak of imputed righteousness in relation to justification what we mean is that the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ (that is not ours by nature and is completely outside of us, or "alien" to us) is credited to us in such a way that God now regards us as fully righteous.

This is an idea that is firmly rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew word *hashab* has the basic idea of employing "the mind in thinking activity," as in "making a judgment."¹⁰ It is often translated, "to count," "account" or "impute." For example, this word is used in Leviticus 7:18 regarding instructions about peace offerings: "And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offering is eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted, nor shall it be imputed to him; it shall be an abomination to him who offers it, and the person who eats of it shall bear guilt." The worshiper will miss the benefit of the sacri-

fice—it will not be *imputed* to him—if he does not destroy the uneaten portions on the third day.

The same idea is found in Genesis 31:15 as Rachel and Leah reason to themselves about their father's disposition toward them: "Are we not *considered* strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money." Though they were obviously not strangers to him, their father, Laban, regarded them as such.

When the Israelites began to commit adultery with Midianite women, Phinehas took a spear and impaled one of the men and his lover, ending the plague that God had sent. According to the narrative in Numbers 25, the Lord rewarded his action with promises of blessing. When the Psalmist recounts the event, he puts it like this: "And that was *accounted* to him [Phinehas] for righteousness to all generations forevermore" (Psalm 106:30–31).

The same idea is found in the Greek word *logizomai*. It is often translated "to count, consider, or impute." It is a word that comes from the world of commerce and accounting and means "to charge" or "to reckon." In Acts 19:27 Demetrius, a silversmith in Ephesus, spoke against Paul's preaching by saying, "And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be *counted* as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship." Paul demonstrates his gracious spirit in 2 Timothy 4:16 when he tells of his indictment in the Roman court: "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be *charged* against them."

This Old Testament and New Testament family of words communicates the concept of crediting something to a person's account, or regarding a person as if that which is charged to his account is true. To Demetrius, Artemis was the "great goddess" but, based on the preaching of Paul, she was being regarded as nothing. Those who did not stand with Paul were guilty—perhaps of cowardice, certainly of lack of loyalty and love—yet Paul does not want this guilt imputed to them.

Salvific use

Beyond this common use of the word and concept, the Bible describes three salvific relationships in which imputation operates. First, Adam's sin is said to be imputed to his posterity. Paul argues this point in Romans 5:12–19.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense.

For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

As E. H. Gifford notes, "The master-thought of the whole passage is that unity of the many in the one, which forms the point of comparison between Adam and Christ."¹¹ There is a clear solidarity between Adam and the whole human race. The nature of this solidarity is such that judgment and death have come on all men as a result of Adam's sin—"because all sinned" (v. 12). Five times from verses 15–19 the universal judgment of condemnation and death on all men is attributed to the one sin of the one man Adam. All men (in addition to bearing their own personal sin and guilt) are therefore said to be judged guilty and liable to death on the basis of Adam's sin. Adam is regarded as having sinned while standing as our representative, or as it is worded in covenant theology, our federal head. The judgment that results in universal condemnation is based on Adam's sin being imputed to his posterity. So in verse 19, it is proper to judge the manner by which many were made sinners by one man's disobedience to be the imputation of Adam's sin. This is confirmed in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive." Adam's sin is imputed to people because they are "in him" in a covenantal relationship. He stood before God not only as an individual man, but also as a representative of all mankind. What he did affected all who are in him.

Second, the Scripture speaks of the imputation of the elect's sin to Christ. All of the Scripture statements concerning our sin being placed on Jesus portray this kind of a relationship. In Isaiah 53 we are told that "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (v. 6) and that "He bore the sins of many" (v. 12). Hebrews 9:28 says that Christ was "offered once to bear the sins of many." Peter writes that Christ "himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). Each of these passages describe Christ taking our sin on Himself in His work of atonement. Granted, the method whereby He does this is not spelled out in such passages. However, Paul does identify the method in what is perhaps the most crucial text in this whole debate.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul provides important insight into the relationships between our sin and Christ, and His righteousness and us. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” While the word “impute” is not used in this verse, the context suggests that Paul is indeed thinking in terms of imputation. He describes the non-imputation of believers’ sin in verse 19: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them.” Verse 21 sets up a parallel idea between Christ being made sin for us and our becoming the righteousness of God in Him. The question is, “How did this exchange take place?”

Christ did not personally become sin for us. He “knew no sin.” In what sense, then, did He become sin? He did so representatively—as our substitute. He represented us on the cross by having our sins charged to Him and suffering the consequences for them. This is perhaps the most readily admitted relationship in which imputation operates.

The third relationship, however, is undoubtedly the most controversial and touches more directly on the nature of justification. Not only does Scripture speak of the imputation of Adam’s sin to us and our sin to Christ, but, as historic Protestant orthodoxy has always recognized, it also teaches the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Robert Gundry simply dismisses this idea as “unbiblical.” He argues that to insist on it as essential to the gospel is “flawed.”

Yet, even in the Old Testament divine righteousness is described as being provided for sinners. The idea is embedded in the very name of God—*Yarweh Tsidkenu*, “the Lord our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16). Isaiah 61:10 describes this provision in terms of clothing: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” God covers His people with righteousness.

This idea is fully revealed in the New Testament. When announcing the theme of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:17). After establishing the futility of trying to establish righteousness by our own works, he goes on to announce in Romans 3:21–22, that “now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.” All who believe receive righteousness from God. It is revealed “to” them and “on” them.

This divine righteousness is provided only in Christ and is received only through faith. The verses already cited indicate this and Paul states it specifically in Philippians 3:8–9, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.” Paul contrasts his own righteousness (from the law) to that which is “through faith in

Christ.” Further, it is “from God by faith.” Thus, Paul does not conceive receiving the gift of righteousness from God except “in Christ” and “by faith.” “The just shall live by faith.” In other words, the one who can legitimately lay claim to the title “just,” or righteous, is the one who lives by faith in Jesus Christ. This is what the gospel reveals.

Paul has this understanding in mind in Romans 5:12–19. He shows the parallel between Adam and Christ. Just as Adam’s work affected his posterity so has Christ’s work affected those who are in Him. Adam’s sin brought death (v. 15), judgment and condemnation (v. 16) to the human race. Christ’s work results in God’s grace (v. 15), justification (vv. 15, 18) and righteousness (vv. 17, 19) coming to sinners. The “gift” that came “by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ” (v. 15) “resulted in justification” (v. 16). In verse 17 this gift is called the “gift of righteousness.” It is through the gift of righteousness from Jesus Christ that justification comes.

When Paul concludes his argument in verses 18 and 19 he does so by reiterating that it is through Jesus’ “righteous act”—that is, the whole of His life and ministry—that the “free gift” (the gift of righteousness) comes to sinners. This, Paul says, results “in justification of life” (v. 18). “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (v. 19). Christ’s obedience will result in many being “made righteous” in the same way that all men were made sinners by the disobedience of Adam. In other words, on the basis of the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, righteousness is imputed to all who believe. This is the point of the parallel between Adam and Christ—just as Adam’s sin was imputed to all his posterity, so Christ’s righteousness is imputed to all who believe.

Consequently, it is impossible to concede the arguments of those who want to jettison imputation altogether or even remove it from its pride of place in the historic, Protestant understanding of justification. Both the word and the concept are clearly employed in the biblical explanation of salvation by grace.

Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness to the Believer In Paul’s Doctrine of Justification

As has already been demonstrated by the Scriptures that have been considered, the most prolific biblical exponent of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in justification, and consequently the subject of most of the modern studies that deviate from the historic view, is the Apostle Paul. By briefly tracing the contours of Paul’s thought in the first five chapters of Romans the role that imputation plays in his exposition of justification can be readily discerned.

Romans is Paul’s survey of the gospel, as he announces in chapter 1, verse 16. At the heart of this good news is the revelation of God’s provision of righteousness in justification (1:17). Paul’s explanation of this news (which was first revealed in the Old Testament, as his quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 indicates) includes two large categories.

Why we need justification

In Romans 1:18–3:20 Paul explains why we need to be justified before God. His basic answer is that we need this because sin has robbed us of the righteousness that God requires of us. This point is graphically described by elaborating the horrific tragedy of sin. Unrighteousness deserves God’s wrath (1:18) because of the guilt and foolishness that sinners incur. This is universally true leaving everyone “without excuse” (1:20).

From 1:18–2:16, the guilt and foolishness of sin are set forth. After announcing in verse 18 that God’s wrath is revealed against all present unrighteousness, Paul begins to focus first on the reality of this even for Gentiles, thus leaving all men, as he says in verse 20, “without excuse.” Despite the fact that creation testifies to the reality and character of God (1:20), people suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1:19) and have not honored God as God or given thanks to Him (1:21). Instead, they exchanged the glory of God for images of creatures (1:23) and the truth of God for a lie. Furthermore, they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator (1:25).

For all of these reasons God judged the unrighteousness of His creatures by justly, in displays of wrath, “giving them up” (1:24, 26, 28) to their own wickedness and foolishness. Sinclair Ferguson has suggested that there is a “subliminal motif” that runs through these verses which demonstrates the strict righteousness and justice of God in the ways that He pours out His wrath on sinners. If men are intent on worshipping objects rather than God, then He gives them up to be ruled and ruined by those very objects of their desires. It is a fascinating insight, worth meditating over and applying to our own day—a day of the manifested wrath of God in precisely the same way that Paul describes it these verses. The increase in sin is God’s judgment on sin. When seen in this light, the overthrow of moral restraints can no longer be regarded as the advance of freedom but rather as bondage of the most heinous sort. Those who keep pressing down that road and whom God keeps “giving over” to the just punishment of their sins are in desperate need of being rescued by an intervention that is both almighty and gracious—which is precisely what the gospel of sovereign grace does.

The situation is no better for those who possess written revelation from God. “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law” (2:12). It is not enough merely to possess special revelation regarding God’s requirement of righteousness. One

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must not only “hear” the law, but “do” it (2:13).

Paul makes the same point in his letter to the Galatians. “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” (Galatians 4:21). The law is strict and unyielding in its demands for perfect, perpetual obedience. “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’” (Galatians 3:10).

The need of those who have access to God’s special revelation is no less than those who do not. As Paul argues in Romans 3:9–10, Jews have no more native righteousness than Greeks because both are under sin. “As it is written, ‘there is none righteous, no not one.’” And furthermore, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23). Consequently, everyone is in need of a righteousness that God requires and that no fallen human can produce.

What is the conclusion of this desperate situation? As Paul puts it in 3:20, “that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world become guilty before God.” God created man in His own image so that we would live righteously and share in His glory. But sin ruined us. It has rendered us unrighteous and separated from God. Sin is not only wicked, it is tragic. And it has left us helpless ever to regain righteousness by way of the law.

How God Provides Justification

It is against this backdrop that Paul announces what, to those who have been convinced of their desperate condition as sinners, is the most amazing, hopeful message that could ever be heard: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law” (3:21). What is this righteousness? From where does it come? It is a “righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe” (3:22).

Objectively, this righteousness is provided “in Jesus Christ.” Romans 3:25–26 describe Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice on the cross as a payment for sin, Through this death God demonstrates His righteousness not only as the just God, but as the God who justly justifies sinners. Prior to Christ’s death a question could be raised about this. How could God justify Moses and not Pharaoh? Both were sinners. Both lacked the righteousness that God requires. Verse 35 explains that the sins of Moses (and all Old Testament believers) were “passed over” by God, awaiting their full payment in the death of Christ. Now that Christ has died, that question has been answered forever and, by the cross, God has demonstrated that He is both personally righteous and that He righteously justifies those who have sinned.

The law requires death for lawbreakers. This is its curse under which all sinners naturally find themselves. By enduring God’s wrath against our sin Christ has redeemed sinners from “the curse of the law” having become a “curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). This secures the just forgiveness of our sins because our sins have been justly punished.

But the law reveals that not only does God require the punishment of sin, He also requires perfect righteousness. This was His requirement of man before the fall and it has not changed since the fall. Therefore, the justification that is found in Jesus Christ is accomplished not only by His sacrificial death but also by His representative life. This is Paul's argument (as we have already seen) in chapter 5 of Romans. The "one Man's righteous act" (5:18) and "one Man's obedience" (5:19) are references not merely to the death of Jesus but to the whole of His work, including His obedient life. Just as the act of breaking the law brought judgment on all who are in Adam, so the act of keeping the law brings justification to all who are in Christ. And this justification comes through His perfect righteousness being imputed to us.

Both of these aspects of justification are brought together in the fourth chapter of Romans. Paul argues that to the one who believes, righteous is imputed (Romans 4:3–5). He uses Abraham as an illustration of his point. It was Abraham's faith, not his works, that gained him access to imputed righteousness. Thus the righteousness that was imputed to him was outside him. He received it through faith, just as the wages of a worker are outside of him and received as a result of his works

Additionally, to the one who believes, sin is not imputed. David is the illustration of this point (Romans 4:7–8). Note, however, how Paul introduces David's words in Psalm 32. The apostle quotes the first two verses of that Psalm as a description of the "blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (v. 6). Such a man's blessedness consists of having his "lawless deeds forgiven," "his sins covered" and having the Lord not impute his sin to him.

What is in Paul's mind here? Is he simply speaking of forgiveness and the imputation of righteousness as synonymous? That is not likely because of the way he goes right back to Abraham's example in Romans 4:9–13 to explain the blessedness David mentions in Psalm 32. As John Piper has put it, "Paul assumes there is no justification—no positive declaration and imputation of righteousness—where there is no forgiveness. Forgiveness is a constitutive element of justification.... Second, Paul assumes that if a saving 'blessing' is pronounced over a person, he must be counted as righteous. That is why he had no problem explaining David's blessing with Abraham's justification."¹²

Objectively, righteousness is provided in Jesus Christ. Subjectively, it is received through faith. This means that it is free—absolutely free. Righteousness is not given as a reward to faith as if believing merited it. Nor is it that God sees faith and the resulting inclinations and efforts that accompany saving faith and decides that those inclinations and efforts are enough for Him to judge a believer righteous. Rather, faith receives righteousness that is imputed to us.

The great Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield, wrote:

The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests.... It is not, strictly

speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith.... We could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures wholly to Christ himself.¹³

This is why Paul says in Romans 3:27 that God's way of making sinners righteous removes all ground from our boasting. Boasting is excluded, not by the law of works (which is certainly true, but it is not his point), but rather by the law of faith. The way of faith shows that this justification comes to sinners through sheer grace. As he says in Romans 4:16 of the righteousness that comes to sinners in justification, "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace!" Faith simply receives the gift of righteousness, it does not merit that gift.

Why is this so important?

The doctrine of imputed righteousness is important because it holds out the only real hope that real sinners have of finding real acceptance with the real God. There is an inveterate human tendency to think less of God than we should, in hopes that a less strident God will be more willing to accept less than perfect people. A God of strict justice and holiness is a fearful Being. How could sinners ever hope to be accepted by such a God?

That is the dilemma that the Bible sets before us in its teaching of salvation. God is strict in His justice and holiness. In fact, He is a consuming fire who is angry with the wicked every day (Hebrews 12:29; Psalm 7:11). It is amazing, then, to find this God coming to sinners in Jesus Christ and providing the very righteousness that He demands. News of such kindness engenders hope in the hearts of those who know themselves to be sinners.

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The real God requires perfect obedience—perfect righteousness—of His image bearers. But we are all failures—miserable failures. All of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). We are real sinners. But because Jesus Christ has secured a perfect righteousness through His life and death, God is able justly to justify real sinners. As Paul says, God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

A sinner does not have to pretend to be good enough for God. Nor does anyone have to wait until he is better before he can go to God for salvation. Are you ungodly? Then you qualify for the kind of salvation that God gives, because He justifies real sinners.

What an encouragement and aid this is in our evangelism. No one who is breathing should be past our prayers and our efforts to win to Christ. Why? Because God justifies the ungodly.

This understanding of imputation also holds out the only real hope that real Christians have of maintaining real acceptance with the real God. The reality of imputed righteousness is a real encouragement to ongoing sinners. Even as believers we must admit that sin is mixed with all we do. Even though we are justified believers, we still stumble and fall. We still make backward steps. What will keep a believer persevering in the face of remaining sin? Just this: the knowledge that the righteousness that renders us acceptable to God is not our own personal achievement. It is Christ's righteousness achieved for us.

What is a Christian to do when he stumbles and falls in sin? He must keep looking to Christ by humbly repenting and starting over. This is how we battle discouragement. This is what keeps us from losing hope. On the believer's worst day this thought can keep him from utter despair: Jesus Christ is my righteousness. To see, remember and believe that God has credited Christ's righteousness to us and has on that basis accepted us once and for all, is to find the strength and the direction to fight against every form of discouragement and temptation and frustration in life.

This is precisely what happened to John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. He was tormented with uncertainty about his relationship with God until this truth broke in on his soul. But when he saw it, it changed everything. Bunyan described it in these words:

One day as I was passing into the field...this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And me thought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just [in front of] him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today and, and forever." ...

Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [e.g. Hebrews 12:16 -17] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.¹⁴

This is the believing sinner's great hope—to see his righteousness firmly, securely resting at the right hand of God the Father in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ His Son. To have such a faith-directed vision is to be set free. ☺

Notes:

¹ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 164.

² Cited in R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 67.

³ John C. Olin, ed., *John Calvin and Jacobo Sadoletto: A Reformation Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1966), 66.

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1988), 116.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 164.

⁶ *The Second London Baptist Confession* of 1689 is more explicit, stating that God justifies sinners “by imputing Christ’s active obedience unto the whole Law, and passive obedience in his death, for their whole and sole righteousness” (11.1).

⁷ Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 173–174.

⁸ A significant debate erupted last year after James White reviewed Seifrid’s book. For White’s review and responses from Seifrid, see www.aomin.org/Seifrid.html.

⁹ Robert H. Gundry, “Why I Didn’t Endorse ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’ . . . even though I wasn’t asked to,” in *Books and Culture* (January/February, 2001, Vol. 7, no. 1), 9. This article can be found at: <http://www.ctlibrary.com/360>.

¹⁰ R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. and B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 1:330.

¹¹ E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London: John Murray, 1886), 115.

¹² John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 117–118.

¹³ Cited in R. C. Sproul, Jr., ed. *After Darkness Light: Essays in Honor of R. C. Sproul* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 87.

¹⁴ From John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*; cited in Piper, *Counted Righteous*, 124–25.

Recapturing the Complementarity Of Law and Gospel

Tom J. Nettles

[The following article is taken from the author's forthcoming Broadman Press book, *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*, to be released in late 2005.]

The Bible Establishes the Issue

Tension over the issues of law and gospel have penetrated Christian history from the first century to the present. Jesus had conflict with the Jewish leaders and teachers over their misuse of the law. His heightened sense of the righteousness of the law and His submission to its curse in no sense diminished, but only enhanced, its place in the display of God's righteousness through the gospel. Paul's letter to the Galatians attacks the misuse of the law by the Judaizers. Their low view of its demands allowed them to prescribe its keeping as an element of our righteousness before God (Galatians 3:2, 10–13). Paul had warned the Ephesians that false teachers would come in among them from their own number (Acts 20:30). His letter to Timothy indicates that this false teaching focused on a misuse of the law (1 Timothy 1:7). Paul reminds Timothy that the "law is good, if one uses it lawfully" (1 Timothy 1:8). Every erroneous teaching against which Paul warns Timothy to be on his guard can be seen as a failure to grasp the fundamental relationship between law and gospel.

The Witness of the Past

Within Puritanism and Baptist life, especially of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the relationship of the law to the gospel fueled many controversies.¹ In 1786, the Particular Baptist Association of Warwickshire wrote its circular letter on the subject of antinomianism. Its second sentence stated "Of all the errors with which the Christian church is, or ever has been, infested, none is in its nature more absurd, and in its consequences more subversive of all true religion, than the *libertine* doctrine of Antinomianism."²

Accusations of antinomianism filled the theological vocabulary of the eighteenth century evangelicals. Sometimes those that appeared to be polar opposites skewered each other with the barbs of the same accusation, “Antinomian!” In reality, a measure of truth resides in these epithets hurled from opposing camps. Andrew Fuller gives some insight into this phenomenon.

Let an attentive reader examine the system of Socinus, and even of Arminius, and he will find them agreed in opposing the native equity and goodness of the moral law. The former claims it as a matter of justice that allowances be made for human error and imperfection; and the latter, though it speaks of *grace*, and *mediation of Christ*, and considers the gospel as a new, mild, and remedial law, yet would accuse you of making the Almighty a tyrant, if this grace were withheld, and the terms of the moral law strictly adhered to. All these, as well as that species of false religion which has more generally gone by the name of *Antinomianism*, you see, are agreed in this particular. This last, which expressly disowns the moral law as a rule of life, sets up the gospel in opposition to it, and substitutes visionary enjoyments as the evidence of an interest in gospel blessings, in place of a conformity to its precepts. – This last, I say, though it professes to be greatly at variance with several of the foregoing schemes, is nearer akin to them than its advocates are willing to admit.³

Later, Fuller describes the confessional approach to the tri-fold use of the law with an emphasis on its evangelical use and its use as “the rule of life.” He asserted that “we may safely consider it as a criterion by which any doctrine may be tried; if it be unfriendly to the moral law, it is not of God, but proceedeth from the father of lies.”

Fuller was the heir of much clear thinking and skilful polemics on this issue. Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) in opposition to Richard Baxter focused on the law and justification. His sermons and treatises steadily insist on a right understanding of law, gospel, righteousness and holiness. Both the conviction of sin and understanding the necessity of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness come from a submission to the purity, spirituality and irrevocable standing of the moral law. Keach never retreated from preaching that “The righteousness, and Benefits of Christ’s Righteousness, is made ours, when we relye, or trust to God’s free promise as the immediate and sole Cause of Pardon and Life, (as all true Protestants formerly affirmed).” One of the views that Keach opposed asserted that justification comes from a new covenant of diminished expectations so that our faith is accepted as obedience to the law and thus justifies. So taught Baxter. Not so, taught Keach: “If Christ fulfilled the Law for us, then (say I) that Obedience of his, must be imputed to us, as if we had wrought it, and so we,

by the Application of the Righteousness, are justified in God's sight, from the Accusation of the Law, without any Works, or procuring Conditions, performed by us."⁴

John Gill (d. 1771), accused of antinomianism, does not seem to qualify as such. He heaped unmistakable disdain on all human works, all supposed works of the law, as containing any possible merit. Some moralists who thought the doctrine of imputed righteousness cut the moral nerve represented him as an opponent of the moral law. Related to justification, however, he clearly preached the law as the means by which a soul is brought into a state sensible of its sinfulness and condemnation. In addition, the law points to the righteousness and acceptability of the life and atoning work of Christ. Beyond that, though human good works even in the regenerate still are flawed and filled with sin, the law in the hand of Christ serves as a means of sanctification.

John Ryland, Jr. (d. 1825), in *Serious Remarks on the Different Representation of Evangelical Doctrine* engaged the dangers of antinomian doctrine. The antinomianism he opposed, while addressing the evangelical use of the law, concerned more pointedly the use of the law in progressive sanctification. Some had denied that such a spiritual reality as progressive sanctification existed and any use of the law for such a thing amounted to a denial of the gospel. Ryland responded,

What can be designed by denying that the law is a rule of life to believers? Do these men suppose we mean it is a rule by which they are to *merit* life? Our Lord knows we are as far from this imagination as they can be; and as careful to prevent others from indulging it. But we are fully assured the most effectual and scriptural way of cutting up all *illegal* hopes by the root, is showing the strictness, extent, spirituality, and yet the excellence and equity of the divine law; even that law, which is summed up by the Apostle in one word, LOVE; which our Lord divides into two great commandments, requiring supreme love to God, and disinterested benevolence to man; which is farther ramified in the Ten Commandments; and fully explained in the whole preceptive part of the divine work.

This was the law which the incarnate Son of God *delighted* to obey; it was in his heart, and he has promised to write it in the hearts of his people. Is it possible a genuine believer should despise it? What part of it is vacated by the interposition of our Redeemer? Which precept has he granted us a license to violate? Has he lessened our obligations to love God; or our obligations to love our neighbour? Or can we show our love to God, by having more gods than one, by idolatry, by profaning his name, or by neglecting the Lord's-day? Can we manifest our love to man, without regarding those relative duties which

are so expressly inculcated by Paul and Peter? Are we at liberty to kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet any thing that is our neighbour's. What duty is there required in the moral law, which the believer is not bound to perform? What sin is forbidden there, which he is at liberty to indulge?⁵

Richard Furman, preaching in Charleston in 1791, enunciated as a qualification for gospel ministry that one must have a clear understanding of how to “distinguish between the law and gospel.” He must “point out the ruined and guilty state of all, by nature, under the curse of a broken law; sound, as it were, Mount Sinai’s thunder in the sinner’s ear.” Sinners must know without equivocation that “by the deeds of the law, shall no flesh living be justified.” Just as clearly, however, the preacher must point out Jesus as the “Lamb, who taketh away the sins of the world,” one who is an almighty and willing savior.⁶

C. D. Mallary (1801–1864) gained a large hearing among his contemporaries for his profound godliness. Mallary was a part of the committee that prepared the “Address to the Public” when the Southern Baptist Convention was formed. Cathcart’s *Encyclopedia* describes him as a “man of most uncommon piety” who exerted “a more wholesome influence than any other man of the denomination in the State [Georgia].” He had “clear views of divine truth, and a deep experience of its sanctifying power in the heart.” Because he was “thoroughly instructed in the Scriptures,” he also was “profoundly conversant with the workings of experimental religion.” Peppered throughout his edifying book *Soul Prosperity*, one finds the importance of accurate appraisals of law and gospel. One section defines the relationship between obligation and dependence. Here he gives this clear analysis.

We are not to seek nor to expect justification by the deeds of the law; no, verily—that comes to us by the perfect righteousness of Christ. But shall we therefore encroach upon the strict claims of the law as our rule of life, as the guide and teacher of our inner man? Our want of conformity to its demands does not diminish its claims. Our attainments are one thing, our duty is another. The former are crowded with defects, and call for daily sorrow and for daily pardon; the latter calls for nothing less than a hearty and full compliance with all that God commands. A standard less elevated than this will leave us without chart or compass, throw every man upon his own dark, selfish, and capricious promptings, and by pulling down the views from [sic; from] the right mark, paralyze our efforts, reconcile us to dwarfish attainments, and at length fill the bosom with proud and swelling notions for having attained to a deceitful and imaginary perfection. What unscriptural reasonings sometimes creep into the bosoms of many that we

would fain call the children of God! ... Alas! Alas! These frames and feelings are often poor, rebellious, antinomian things! ... Away with all this carnal heresy! God's eternal word is the standard. As the creatures of God are we bound to respect it in all things; as redeemed by the blood of Christ, our obligations are infinitely augmented to respect to all God's commands.⁷

Richard Fuller (1804–1876) reflects a consensus on this issue for the Southern Baptists of the nineteenth century in a sermon entitled “The Law and the Gospel.” A picturesque and rhetorically powerful interweaving of the themes of law and gospel, the sermon presents a full exploration of both the evangelical and sanctifying uses of the law as it is seen in the context of the gospel. A succinct summary of these themes begins with the assertion that “the law has no efficacy to produce in us any conformity to the pattern it proposes.” Rather, the gospel “possesses this wonderful property,” that is, that it “charms away the power of corruption and transforms us to the righteousness of the law, at the very time that it absolves us from all the penalties of the law.”

Fuller's sermon, built on Romans 8:3, 4, pursues unrelentingly a display of the “wisdom and power of Jehovah” in devising a scheme of pure grace, “supra-judicial interference,” by which lawbreakers find release from their punishment though each one would confess: “But mine are sins thou must not, canst not spare while heaven is true, and equity is thine.” He then quotes from Romans 8:3, 4.

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Fuller's explanatory summary of his discussion crystallizes not only his sermon but the issue as it must be consciously addressed again as an element of Baptist witness.

But, now—here is our second reflection—where the sacrifice of Calvary is truly accepted as the expedient by which, in the jurisprudence of heaven, the judicial righteousness of the law has been abundantly fulfilled for us, it will also, along with the sense of pardon, send its sanctifying power into our nature. By a mysterious influence which the world cannot comprehend, which can be known only by experience, it will win the heart to love and obedience, and will thus fulfill the moral righteousness of the law in us. “Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea we establish the law.” Not only does faith repair the outrage done to the majesty of the law by

pleading the sublimest satisfaction, but it restores its dethroned supremacy over the heart and life.⁸

Fuller also reminded his generation, his church in Baltimore in particular, of the great personal comfort of the operations of grace to satisfy an outraged law. In 1861, November, as his daughter lay dying, she had the keenest consciousness of acceptance before God because of the work of Christ specifically in relation to the law. As Fuller told her about how solicitous the church had been for her in prayer and how highly she was esteemed in their eyes, she responded, “Do not my dear father, I beg you, utter one word about me. Speak only of Jesus, his blood and righteousness. I am a poor sinner saved by grace, who feels her unworthiness, and laments that, having so short a life, she did not devote it more entirely to such a Saviour.” When asked how such assurance brightened the hours in which she faced death, she responded, “How? Did he not die for me? Does not his blood cleanse from all sin? ... Washed in his blood, how can I doubt? Clothed in his spotless righteousness, what can I fear?” Fuller picked up this theme of his daughter’s dying confidence as one of the elements of his sermon. “In the satisfaction of Calvary, God’s justice is satisfied; for, on the very theatre which had witnessed the dishonor of the law, that law is vindicated and magnified: God’s holiness is satisfied.”⁹

The law therefore, in Fuller’s view, must have a three-fold fulfillment in the life of the believer. His sins, transgressions of the law, must be forgiven, his opposition to its holy character must be cured, and it demands for positive righteousness must be imputed. Fuller expresses this cogently in a sermon entitled “A Precious Saviour.”

To those who believe he is precious. They alone feel their guilt and corruption, the absolute necessity of a great atonement and the infusion of a holy nature by the Saviour. And they are conscious of something more. Even after pardon and the transfusion of a new principle of spiritual life, the Christian has to mourn over daily imperfections; and, at times, sin—though it cannot have dominion—breaks out with such alarming mutiny that he is kept low and abhors himself before God. He feels, therefore, the necessity of a righteousness not only imparted, but imputed;—a righteousness other than his own, if he is to stand perfect before inflexible Justice. Others are blinded, but he sees clearly that God must love us, or we are forever lost; that if God loves us, he must love our person, not our characters; and that, therefore, he must love us in Christ, clothed in his righteousness.¹⁰

The Message for Today

The struggles with law and gospel appear in the beginning of Baptist life and establish agenda of vital questions. The necessity of contemporary attention to the issue arises from two concerns, one ecclesiological, or the maintenance of historic Baptist identity, and the second, pastoral.

Moderate Baptists

As an issue of identity, antinomianism has made strange bedfellows with the moderate cause in Southern Baptist life. Though historically and doctrinally connected with hyper-Calvinism, the individualistic freedom from external guidelines propounded in antinomian views of assurance and sanctification have been attractive to at least one ardent defender of the moderate cause, Frank Louis Mauldin. The Particular Baptist preacher of the seventeenth century, Paul Hobson, espoused regeneration as an immediate indwelling of the Spirit resulting in a sinner's being "Christed." For Mauldin, this kind of immediacy gives just the right pretense for freedom. Christ's indwelling through His Spirit eliminates the validity of propositions and external guidelines. That false dichotomy between internal freedom and externally revealed authority summarizes the moderate assumptions about Baptist identity.

Mauldin summarizes Hobson's view of truth in its "Christological modes" for Christ is the "personal cause, object, and essence of truth." For this reason one may distinguish truth from falsehood "by means of an intimate acquaintance with Christ." Truth, according to Mauldin's view of Hobson, must not be equated with "comprehension, or with an intellectual assent to the truths of God;" just as surely eliminated is "a knowledge gained from properly understanding the law." No, none of the "speculative" ways of thinking will do for the apprehension of truth; rather it is a "supernatural light set up in the soule by God ; the life of which light hath his residence in God." Mauldin then makes this observation about Hobson's view as he makes his pitch for historic Baptist views of truth.

Hobson here pictures the relation of Christ and the Christian as that of an internal relationship, i.e., as a relation in which the terms related are affected or changed by the relation. In Christ, the believer is transformed into the very nature and glory of Christ. Hobson does not use figurative or metaphorical language in making this assertion. He speaks descriptively. In the internal relation to Christ, the old self is "annihilated, and all turned into Christ; He is removed from his former center, his owne bottom; there is a new ingrafting and being carried up into Christ, so that he is transformed into the hidden, divine, superexcellent glory, and riches and life of Christ." The believer is in actuality made one with "the truth."¹¹

That Mauldin is interpreting Hobson entirely accurately may be called into question. Though his language startles with its imagery, many seventeenth-century Puritans discussed God's operations on the soul in similar manner. Hobson, perhaps, contra Mauldin, uses language figuratively and metaphorically. His intent could easily be interpreted as the normal Puritan understanding of the immediacy of the work of the Spirit in regeneration and transformation of life. Suppose, however, that Mauldin is correct about Hobson. Hobson's view represents a fringe view of the Baptists that the majority disowned and fought against. If a person is "annihilated" and made one with "the truth" what need is there of law or Scripture? This kind of antinomianism was soon corrected by seventeenth-century Baptists. Ironically it found no quarter in the Calvinist resurgence of the late twentieth century but came to rest among the moderate wing of Southern Baptists.

American Baptist Churches USA

Churches of the American Baptists have fallen prey to this annoying error. The 1970–90's saw resolutions on human rights, freedom, Christian unity and human sexuality. With the intent of affirming "the denominations basic principles of freedom of thought and belief," these statements referred to John Bunyan, Roger Williams and Martin Luther King as embodying historically the concerns the resolutions addressed. Even the greatly agitated controversy over sexuality called for a new attempt to "consider prayerfully the mind of Christ." The urgency given this issue arose from the acknowledgement there "exists a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality." Dialogue should proceed under the banner of commitments to "freedom," "the principle of liberty of conscience," "free inquiry and debate without restrictions or coercion" and "openness of mind and spirit."

Though the Bible provides source material and stands ostensibly as "central to our lives," a clear divide between a settled word and the "living Christ" determines the burden of the interpretative task. "The Christian faith is centered in a person," they argue. "It is not a legalistic code which forms our faith; it is the living Christ."

For "legalistic code" one should read "the historic consensus of Baptists on theological confession through the centuries." Baptists of former generations shared certain theological presuppositions no longer held by many Baptists in the modern ABCUSA. The defining authority of objective truth has no place in their concept of freedom and contradicts, in their opinion, the ongoing work of Christ in his people. Glenn Hinson, a Baptist aligned with the moderate cause among Southern Baptists, stated this principle in saying, "The name Baptist refers to that version of Christianity which places the priority of voluntary and uncoerced faith or response to the Word and Act of God over any supposed 'objective' Word and Act of God."¹² The fight to be free from an objective word indulges the spirit and basic principle of antinomianism.

More definitive inconsistencies on law and gospel still unsettle conservative Southern Baptists. Pastoral concerns over issues of justification, sanctification, assurance and church discipline have direct connections with a healthy grasp of the conceptual relations between law and gospel. Some strategies of outreach and paradigms for church growth have pushed aside the law/gospel relationship for one that appears more immediately relevant. The minister's task, so it is assumed, is to present biblical principles as giving a sound foundation for day-to-day happiness and healthy relationships. Pressures of contemporary life, issues of personal insecurity and self-esteem, financial insolvency, perplexity in rearing children, marital unity, pleasing personal relationships and unresolved emotional conflict often dominate the sermonic menu of many evangelical and Baptist churches.

Though cloaked within an evangelical ethos and an ostensible commitment to biblical inerrancy and an undergirding motive of evangelism, the basic substance of biblical content, in such cases, goes little beyond the man-centered optimistic liberal message of the early twentieth century. Transcending the effectiveness of the liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick in this scheme of preaching and organization of church life would be extremely difficult. Fosdick presents a picture of the greatest diversity designed to fulfill everyone's perception of worship.

Indeed, we have deliberately sought to make our services of worship inclusive of varied religious temperaments, so that under Riverside's roof are housed week by week types of worship commonly housed under separate sectarian roofs. Each week we conduct one major congregational preaching service of the kind familiar in most nonliturgical Protestant churches; we conduct one liturgical service without sermon, composed mainly of music and litany; on every Sunday of the year we sponsor a Quaker service, run by the Friends themselves, some of whom are members with us; we conduct worship services where religious drama is central, and others where free discussion of religious problems is carried on. All these types meet real human needs and represent valid varieties of temperament, and we have put them under one roof.¹³

Did this grand scheme of broad appeal arise from a doctrinal commitment from Scripture? Fosdick says that in "implementing this idea we did not so much impose a prearranged program on the community as ask the community what it wanted from us." This diversity arose mainly, therefore, from the community's perceptions of its needs and desires. Some things, however, were prearranged: "bowling alleys, a gymnasium, a playground, theatrical stages."¹⁴

Even the major preaching service was held only because so many traditional Protestants felt more comfortable with the practice of that tradition. Fosdick did not see preaching as an ordinance of God mandated as central to every corporate worship experience. In fact, Fosdick did not “put preaching central in my ministry” but instead distrusted a “preacher to whom sermons seem the crux of his functioning.” Fosdick, though celebrated as a preacher, saw the task as “personal counseling on a group scale.” The task focused on dealing “directly with individual needs, ... with personality’s urgent needs, ... dealing privately and intimately with the deep-seated problems of those whose servant he is supposed to be.” The radio program, “National Vespers,” he saw as a “means of vital dealing with the problems of real people.”¹⁵

No serious evangelical would deny that a preacher must speak to the vital needs of his listeners. To define those needs, however, in terms of their own immediate perceptions, or in the categories of psychology, or in terms of present culture sidesteps the biblical analysis. The biblical message on law, that is, we all are under a verdict of condemnation and death, and gospel, that is, only one remedy will suffice for our deepest need, the Lord Jesus’ atoning work and resurrection, constitutes the only message of the Christian pulpit. One who focuses on issues of the present age and gives help only for the present age does nothing more than Fosdick did—a man who did not even believe in the deity of Jesus, or His substitutionary atonement or His bodily resurrection.

The approach of speaking immediately and fundamentally to felt-needs betrays the biblical framework for confronting human ills. The understanding of condemnation and its remedy of atonement and imputed righteousness so prominent as a biblical theme flows immediately from the law/gospel construct. Even so is it true for the divine purpose of mortification of sin and increase of holiness—law and gospel are at the center of that issue. Assurance of salvation, including the ground for rational investigation of internal evidences of regeneration, and an individual’s conformity of life to a biblical pattern of saving faith, comes only with serious consideration of the perpetuity of the law as an expression of the intrinsic holiness of God. Spiritual vitality and purity within the church suspend largely on these issues. It is in the context of law and gospel that doctrine and experience, both corporate and individual, radically and inextricably mesh.

Conclusion

A full and healthy recovery from the recent decades of doctrinal reductionism and corresponding heterodoxy awaits a renewed apprehension of the inter-connections of the biblical themes of law and gospel. Misperceptions and misapplications of this issue within the pale of the conservative movement of Southern Baptists could eventually be more crippling to the recovery of biblical Christianity than the active opposition of the moderate movement. ☛

Notes:

¹ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993). Kevan's knowledge of the primary sources is comprehensive and the arrangement of topics in this book makes for the greatest facility of studying systematically the relationship of law and grace in the Puritan era. He includes several Baptist writers, e.g. Nehemiah Cox and John Bunyan, in his study.

² "Circular Letter" The Elders and Messengers of the several Baptist Churches, etc. 1786, 1.

³ Andrew Fuller, *The Works of Andrew Fuller*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, n.d.), 2:661.

⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Everlasting Covenant* (1693), 29.

⁵ John Ryland, Jr., *Serious Remarks on the Different Representations of Evangelical Doctrine by the Professing Friends of the Gospel*, Part the Second (Bristol: J. G. Fuller, 1818), 47, 48.

⁶ Richard Furman, *Sermon on the Constitution and Order of the Christian Church* (Charleston, SC: Markland & McIver, 1791), 26, 27.

⁷ Charles D. Mallary, *Soul Prosperity: Its Nature, Its Fruits, and Its Culture*, reprint ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1999; originally Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1860), 199, 200.

⁸ Richard Fuller, "The Law and the Gospel," in *Sermons by Richard Fuller*, 3 vols. (Baltimore, MD: John F. Weishampel, Jr; Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society; New York: Sheldon and Company, 1877) 2: 108, 109.

⁹ Fuller, *Sermons*, 1:246, 248.

¹⁰ Fuller, *Sermons*, 2:333, 334.

¹¹ Frank Louis Mauldin, *The Classic Baptist Heritage* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1999), 30. Mauldin's citations and paraphrases of Hobson are from Hobson's work *A Discoverie of Truth* published in London in 1647 and *Practicall Divinitie* published in London in 1646. It is not the point of this discussion of Mauldin to correct what, in my opinion, are misapplications of Hobson, but merely to show the tendency to antinomianism of the Moderate view of freedom in Christ.

¹² E. Glenn Hinson in *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals?"* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 173.

¹³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 202.

¹⁴ Fosdick, 203.

¹⁵ Fosdick, 214-225.

The Moral Silence Of Divorce

Peter J. Yoder

I recently spent an evening with an engaged couple living together. Discovering sexual compatibility is not an uncommon practice in this generation, but I was surprised to see such a choice coming from two raised in the church. Jim and Sarah excused their living circumstances by way of finances—one apartment is less costly than two, but our later conversations proved the sexual motivation behind their lifestyle.

Many may think the couple's tragic pre-marriage choice to share the same bed is a consequence of several circumstances—their northern, high church upbringing, their adolescent friendships and their education to name few. While depravity and sin lie at the heart of their actions, Jim and Sarah, along with countless others, have found opportunity to reject traditional views of morality and an excuse to try to justify their sin through the open door of divorce. It is divorce—experienced by both Jim and Sarah's parents—that left them with a muddled view of morality.

The practice of divorce is becoming increasingly mundane and the dramatic decline in our culture's morality is increasingly impressive, but rarely are the two linked. We are quick to throw blame at the symptoms of our social sickness, but it is the faulty moral foundation upon which divorced parents are left standing that provides our culture with an excuse for immorality.

As divorce has become increasingly predominant, the ability to establish moral concern in the lives of children disappears. Virtues like fidelity and sacrifice which were understood as unwavering are now placed in the gray of today's morality. Consequently, though Sarah's parents opposed their daughter "living" with her fiancé, it was the moral silence of divorce that muted their cry. Ironically, in the evangelical church's reaction to this couple's lifestyle, its breath is wasted blaming the dead liturgy of the church, the corrupting influence of friends and the far left public education, while the unfolding moral degeneration caused by divorce struts through its pews.

What do I mean? Let us suppose Sarah's parents remained adamantly against their daughter's decision, even to the point of attempting to halt the ceremony. Sarah has only to sit her parents down and bring up their past. I imagine her to say, "Look, your ability to tell me what to do went down the drain when you

divorced. Am I to accept advice from you when your own lives are a disaster? Am I to abstain when you were unable to keep from committing adultery?"

Certainly, Sarah's actions will not correspond with her words; she will eventually seek the advice of the ones who raised her. But this scenario should not place our focus on the woman caught in adultery but on the family silently watching as she is being stoned. Fearful of exhuming their own sins from the grave of divorce, the parents are left paralyzed in the cause of morality.

In modernism, and those worldviews preceding it, arguments from fact—"do what I say, not what I do"—actually had some substance. There was an understood absolute that stood above the actions of men. Now, in this progressive postmodern culture, Christian actions are a life preserver in an ocean of relativism. Without buoyant action our words sink. How unfortunate this is! For, if we are honest, we realize the righteousness demanded by our peers is absent in our flesh. The harder we try to impress others with morality, and the harder we try to impress upon others morality, the more vile we look. Once again we are confronted with the heart of the Christian gospel: we are vessels in need of a foreign righteousness, compelled into a life of repentance and faith.

It is here, in the act of repentance and faith—by which our Christian pilgrimage started and continues—that the moral voice of those divorced is reclaimed. Repentance strengthens the vocal cords and makes sweet the words of those once oppressed by the fear of relived sin. As children see their parents dealing with the sins that led to divorce, they will begin to see morality as a divine product, not manufactured by the mind of man. Consequently, we as the church, finding reassurance in the cross, are to seek the reformation of society with lives of humble repentance.

There stands, though, a stumbling block before us. It has been the age-old enemy of humility and repentance, desiring in all circumstances to thwart virtue. Pride is its name, and its effects are ever-so subtle. It wraps itself around the naïve victim in such a way that not only does the strangling of humility go unnoticed but the resulting blindness to pride's deadening presence is embraced. Rightly said by Alexander Pope, "Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace."

This is the position in which our church finds itself. Pride has captivated our lives and strangled out repentance. Tied up in looking righteous, we would much rather point fingers at others than engage our own sin. For the sake of appearances, love without passionate concern for others becomes our mode of expression. It is a false love, seeking perfection in others' lives, while hiding our sin in the bottom drawer.

Still, Francis Schaeffer was correct in declaring, along with the breadth of Scripture, love is the mark of the Christian. Let us not, though, think love can be estranged from repentance. The mark of love must include the mark of repentance. A proud man's love only shovels dirt upon the grave while the repentant lover eagerly awaits the dry bones to come to life once again.

The question, nonetheless, rises as to how we proceed in actively pursuing reformation. Are we to once again climb upon our calloused soapboxes and scream out anti-divorce rhetoric? It is too late for that now. We are living in a society in which a large number of the children are growing up with step fathers, step mothers, or single parents.

If we desire a recovery of individuals, families, churches and a once prosperous culture, where life, marriage and purity are cherished, we must be faithful to preach the gospel, encouraging faith in Christ and repentance of sin in our churches, in our families and in the lives of divorcees. In the midst of our responsibility to live as salt and light, morally challenging our culture, we must be honest with ourselves. We must be honest with others. We are a church that walks with a limp and cannot strut without looking absurd. Once our culture sees the church openly engaging its sin, denouncing its own self-righteousness and fleeing to Christ as its only hope, we may once again see the church address the dire needs of culture with a stronger and clearer voice. ☺

Letters

Founders,

May you please thank Pastor Ascol for his explanation of why he has chosen to stay in the SBC. Dr. David Alan Black posted it as a link on his website today and it is a question that I am working through as a seminary student. I left the Southeast to attend a seminary in California that has no denominational affiliation. I came here too for the doctrine, the emphasis on expositional preaching and for the philosophy of ministry finding its feet in the local church. I have been considering the question of SBC local church ministry or a non-denominational local church throughout my training and Pastor Ascol's article clarified some conclusions I have made as well as pointed out the philosophical truth of the denomination. It is here that I have really struggled with the question of associating with churches that hold to a view of God and his gospel that I don't want to propagate. I'm still in consideration but Pastor Ascol's testimony is very helpful in my understanding.

In Christ and for His gospel,
W.T.

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Founders Journal,

I have been a Baptist since birth (63 years old). I have always gone to a Southern Baptist Church except for a period of time when I attended an Independent Baptist Church. I graduated from Atlantic Baptist College in

Chester, VA which is very much associated with the Baptist Bible Fellowship out of St. Louis, a very fundamental, Fundamental Baptist Association.

As I have grown older and really studied and reviewed my life, I am becoming more and more unsure of just about everything “Baptist” (ie. the basic doctrines). Point in fact, the doctrine of election. I have always been taught and believed that all are chosen to come to Christ. As you know anything can be proven from the Scriptures. I have always been taught that election and predestination were false if for no other reason than John 3:16 and of course quotes from Romans.

My thesis for graduation from Bible College was a comparison of John Calvin’s teaching concerning this very subject and Armenius’ [view]. In other words, a comparison of whether “once saved always saved” or having to be saved over and over and over.

From what I am reading here is that if one is really “saved” or “elected,” than one would devote their life to the service of Christ and always try to turn away from sin. If not, then maybe one isn’t “saved” or “elected”?

This is extremely important to me. I am not making light of this subject of election of only some and not others. I have always been taught and believed that God has called, or elected, that all should come unto repentance and believe. I would appreciate your input and/or advice.

W. K. via email

Response from the Editor:

Thank you for your thoughtful email. It is encouraging to hear from a saint who has walked with the Lord for many years and who is determined to continue to study His Word and learn. It is so easy simply to think that “I know all I need to know” and to not even entertain the possibility that God may have more insight to give us, and that we may actually have misunderstood some things in the past.

As I study Bible doctrines one verse that greatly motivates and encourages me is John 7:17. It is a wonderful promise to those who are interested in something more than mere theoretical knowledge.

Election is a wonderful teaching of Scripture. It is a love story—God’s love for His people from before the foundation of the world. The little booklet that we have available for free on our website entitled, *A Southern Baptist Looks at the Doctrine of Election* is a great help in studying this doctrine. It sets forth the view that was almost unanimously held by Southern Baptists in former years. Sadly, many modern Southern Baptists have departed from this understanding.

Your question about how the elect will live once they are converted is a good one, and is addressed in the booklet. Basically, the Bible teaches that those who are born again will live like it. 1 John is a great book to study for insight on this point. This does not mean that real Christians will never backslide or that professing Christians will never fall away completely from the faith. Remaining sin in a Christian can wreak havoc in a believer’s life if it is not constantly mortified. We must take this seriously—as Jesus instructs us to do in the Sermon on the Mount when He advises that it is better to cut off the right hand or pluck out the right eye than to go to hell with hand and eye intact. Also, there is such a thing as false

faith. Simon Magus in Acts 8 is an example as is Judas. Again our Lord addresses this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21–23.

I hope this helps a little. May the Lord bless your continued study of the Scriptures.

In Christ,
Tom Ascol

News

Southern Baptist Founders Conference

The national conference for 2005 will be held July 12–15 at Riverbend Community Church in Ormond Beach, Florida. The theme is *The Gospel and the Family*. Keynote speakers will be Tedd Tripp and Paul David Tripp. This year we will also be offering sessions for youth and children. The youth sessions will be taught by Michael Harsch, who serves as Pastor of Students at Riverbend Community Church. The youth will focus on the theme: *We are Family: Ten Reasons God Gave Us Our Families*. Cindy Malott, the Children's Ministry Director at Riverbend will coordinate all of the children's sessions. The children will participate in a *Reformation Celebration: A Look at the Life of Martin Luther*.

Register early! The first 240 paid adult registrants will receive a \$25 rebate.

For more information, call (386) 362-5239

Or see our website online: www.founders.org/conferences/sbfc_fl/

New Books by Dr. Tom Nettles

Christian Focus Publications has just released the first volume of a three-volume set by Dr. Tom Nettles: *The Baptists: Volume 1 Key People involved in forming a Baptist Identity*

The nature of Baptist identity has come to a place of critical importance in Baptist studies. What exactly constitutes a Baptist? Tom Nettles seeks to answer this fascinating question through examining the lives of some of the most high profile and influential Baptists in history. From John Spilsbury to William Carey we are taken on an enlightening journey through the origin and expansion of the Baptist Church.

Retail: \$29.99 (392 pages, hard cover) ISBN: 1 85792 995 0

This fall Broadman Press will release another new book by Dr. Nettles: *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*. One of the chapters from this book is included in this issue of the *Founders Journal* (see page 14).

Book Reviews

John Thornbury, *A Pastor in New York: The Life and Times of Spencer Cone*. Evangelical Press, 2004, hb., 218 pages.
\$25.99. ISBN 0-85234-512-7

Reviewed by John Divito

When thinking of the great Baptists throughout history, many great people come to mind: men such as C. H. Spurgeon, William Carey and Andrew Fuller, among others. However, one that has all too often been forgotten is Spencer Cone. And when one considers that in his day he was one of the most well known Baptists in America, this problem is even more troubling. John Thornbury has sought to bring this forgotten pastor to a new generation of believers in his book *A Pastor in New York: The Life and Times of Spencer Cone*.

Thornbury begins his book with the birth and childhood of Cone. Born on April 30, 1785 in New Jersey, Spencer Cone quickly became a promising student. Nevertheless, family difficulties and the eventual death of his father led him to a difficult life. Having to support the rest of his family from a young age, he was able to become employed as a teacher, and later became an actor. It was during this time in his life that Cone would come to the Lord. Through reading a biography of John Newton and his conversion, along with studying the Bible and attending church, he came to see his only hope for redemption in Jesus Christ. Cone trusted in Jesus alone for his salvation and was baptized in response.

It did not take long for Cone to be used by the Lord. A church in the area asked for him to give a talk, which led to him regularly preaching. For the rest of his life, Cone was a man behind the pulpit. As his popularity grew, he became the chaplain of the US Congress and eventually moved to New York to pastor. He gained a place of prominence among Baptists and was involved in multiple organizations and ministries. After serving several years at the Oliver Street Baptist Church, he went to the First Baptist Church where he spent the rest of his years in ministry. He was an ardent supporter of missions, was involved in faithful Bible translations and was committed to a faith rooted in doctrinal truth. After a long and fruitful life, Cone went to be with the Lord on August 28, 1855.

While not necessarily an academic or scholarly treatment, Thornbury's book is a well-written and fascinating look into the life and work of an important Baptist and follower of Christ. This book is great for devotional reading, with short chapters that make reading easy. Thornbury is an engaging, talented storyteller with the ability to draw the reader into the life of Spencer Cone. By the

end of the book, one would be hard-pressed not to respect and admire this great man of faith.

Another benefit of Thornbury's biography is his continual consideration of God's providence throughout Cone's life. His life is not just about a man committed to God; it is about how God used a humble servant in His own divine plan. Thornbury provides a wonderful perspective by showing how one person has been used by God for His glory.

Simply put, *A Pastor in New York* is a treasure. Thornbury is to be commended for bringing the life of Spencer Cone back to light. May we all endeavor to be faithful to Christ as Cone was. And may God continue to use Cone's life for the expansion and growth of His kingdom. ☺

Carol Brandt, *Old Paths for Little Feet*. Solid Ground Christian Books, 2003, pb., 116 pages. \$12.99. ISBN 1-932474-31-5

Reviewed by Celest Puls

Carol Brandt, a Christian parent and teacher wrote *Old Paths for Little Feet* as a tool to help parents and grandparents teach Christian doctrines to children. The "old paths" are applications of biblical truths. Jeremiah 6:16 says that if we walk in these old paths we will find rest for our souls. Brandt says that we must show our children these old paths, and in order to do that we need to know what things to teach and how to teach them.

The author focuses mainly on teaching sound doctrine. She says that just as your physical body needs bones and muscles for strength, your spiritual body needs doctrine and love for God to endure spiritually. We must give a right and balanced view of God to children of all ages. Even young children need to understand that they should love and fear God because He is merciful and just. Children should be taught that they are sinners before a holy God and that they are responsible for their sins. Brandt says, "Your child is free to be the sinful little person he is!" Even though our children cannot save themselves and we cannot save them, God can. We must teach them to seek God's salvation.

Along with instruction in what to teach, Brandt gives specific helps in knowing how to teach your children. She suggests that you find ways to make children feel welcome to be with you. Spend time with them and be intentional in creating opportunities to discuss and demonstrate truth. For example, Lottie Moon, a missionary to China, made cookies for her neighbors. In serving them and sharing in their lives, she found ways to bring the gospel. As we serve and

share in the lives of our children, we will find opportunities to talk to them and encourage them to listen and learn. Use stories, parables and proverbs to show the providence of God. Teach a proper fear of God by your own example. Be much in prayer for yourself and the children you teach. Study biblical doctrines for yourself so that you can pass them on to the children around you. Commit to regularly scheduled times of teaching. Teach the Ten Commandments to help children learn how to please God and to help them “avoid spoiling” their lives. As they read the Scriptures, they should ask themselves, “What does it say? What does it mean? How do I apply it?” Use confessions and catechisms to reinforce doctrines of Scripture. Teach the spiritual disciplines so that your children will learn self-discipline and wisdom as they pray, read and memorize the Bible, worship and serve others. As you instruct your children, remember God’s providence, goodness and control in their lives.

Brandt takes two chapters to point out the importance of being careful about a child’s confession of faith. Don’t give your children a false assurance of salvation, since you can’t truly know their hearts. Remind them of God’s promises of salvation and ask them to examine their own hearts. Also, do not be too quick to discount the salvation of children, thinking that they are too young to be saved. Continue to pray for them and teach them the gospel as you see them learning God’s truths.

This book was written as a signpost “so that our busy lives don’t rob families of the direction and nurturing they require.” It is written with short chapters that can be read fairly quickly. The chapters can be read in any order, so that a parent can go to a specific chapter to find help for a certain situation. The book is full of quotes from well-known Christian authors, as well as specific examples and applications for teaching various doctrines. It is a valuable resource for keeping our children on the “old paths” of truth. ☞

Sound Theology on the High Seas



Dear Friends,

Sound theology, God-centered worship, enriching fellowship, a relaxing environment and no cell phones! All of this and more are what you can look forward to on the first-ever Founders Cruise. I hope that you will plan to join us as we take advantage of this unusual combination of blessings to rest and recharge our spiritual batteries.

In Christ,
Tom Ascol

Founders Ministries is planning a Caribbean cruise November 12–19, 2005. The theme will be *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*. Speakers include Tom Ascol, Executive Director of Founders Ministries and Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida; Fred Malone, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Clinton, Louisiana and Roy Hargrave, Senior Pastor of Riverbend Community Church. Steve Camp, Contemporary Christian music artist, will be helping lead in worship.

A pre-cruise conference is also planned for November 11 and 12 in Tampa, Florida. The theme will be *What is the Gospel?* For more information please see online: <http://sovereigncruises.org/founders/Founders.htm>

Or call: (877) SOV-CRUISE

Email: sovereigncruises@yahoo.com

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