

Justification by Faith Alone, Chapter 3

Evangelicalism's Errors Concerning Justification

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Modern Evangelicalism has to a large extent lost many of the biblical doctrines that were emphasized by the Protestant reformers. In the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, the doctrine of justification by faith alone has been assaulted on all sides by a variety of false doctrines. Today, there are many Evangelicals and even many church leaders and pastors who could not explain the doctrine of justification. Doctrine is no longer considered important in many circles. Given the choice between a church with biblical worship and solid doctrinal and exegetical preaching and a church with a solid rock group, a comedian pastor, and a fun youth program, the vast majority of professing Christians choose the latter. “Evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of ‘life.’... For evangelicals today, this life is also an ‘essence’ detached from a cognitive structure, a detachment made necessary by the external modern world in which it no longer has a viable place, and it really does not require a theological view of life. Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest (or perhaps they can no longer sustain interest) in what the doctrines of creation, common grace, and providence once meant for Christian believers, and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ’s death, such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people.”¹ Thus, it is not uncommon to watch a “Christian” TV program or hear a sermon in which Christ’s work is not discussed and the gospel is not defined, and then hear the mantra, “accept Christ as your personal savior” or “let Christ come into your heart.” A Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Eastern mystic, Russian Orthodox, or any flaming heretic would have no problem asking Christ to come into his heart. But believing in Jesus and His objective work of redemption *according to the Scriptures* requires a change of mind concerning God, creation, sin, Jesus, etc..

The anti-doctrinal spirit of this age is only part of the problem. There are a number of doctrines and practices, which are popular among evangelicals, that tangentially affect the doctrine of justification. A brief consideration of each doctrinal perversion will assist one’s understanding of the current situation.

Dispensationalism’s Damage to the Gospel

Justification is a legal, forensic concept. In order to understand it one must have a biblical view of God’s moral law. God’s law reveals His nature and character, and defines justice and

¹ David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 131.

righteousness. What Christ accomplished by His sinless life and sacrificial death was the satisfaction of the penalty and the precept of the law. Thus, Christ's active and passive obedience is called "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 3:21-22; 10:3), "the gift of righteousness" (Rom. 5:17-18) or "the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4:13; 9:30; 10:6). Hodge says that justification "rests purely upon the state of the law and of the facts, and is impossible where there is not a perfect righteousness.... It pronounces the law not relaxed but fulfilled in its strictest sense."² Justification honors God's law in every respect because the law is not ignored, bypassed, or put away, but rather perfectly obeyed by Christ and perfectly satisfied, as regards the penalty, by His death. But what happens to justification when the ten commandments and the moral law are considered as something negative, intrinsically bad or harsh, and only for a past dispensation (i.e., for Israel only)?

1. The Law Is No Longer Preached

Dispensational theology has contributed to the perversion of the gospel in two major ways. First, it has radically changed the way in which the gospel is presented. The preaching of the law has been largely replaced with either a vague general reference to sin, or with a hedonistic offer of the gospel. The Protestant Reformers and the Puritans preached the specifics of God's law to emphasize God's holiness, to emphasize God's hatred of sin, and to convict people of specific sins so that sinners would understand their condition and guilt and flee to Christ. Such preaching is eminently scriptural. Jesus didn't make general statements about the sinfulness of mankind but was very specific in applying the law to the heart (see Mk. 10:17-21; Jn. 4:4-19). The apostle Paul said that "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). He pointed out that it was the law that convicted him of sin. "I would not have known sin except through the law...apart from the law sin was dead" (Rom. 7:7-8). The more a person understands God's specific requirements for him in thought, word and deed, the more that person will see that his only hope is Christ's imputed righteousness and bloody death. But for those who regard the law as something negative—as something belonging to a former dispensation—it would be illogical to spend time expositing an abrogated law. Thus, much preaching and many tracts simply say, "admit that you are a sinner." There is no conviction in such generalities. Furthermore, if the law has been abrogated, then why is the cross necessary? If the law is not based on God's nature and character, but is arbitrarily imposed on different dispensation, why is there a need for a divine satisfaction? "If the [moral] law were subject to change, or replacement, then it was futile for Christ to die if the law given to Moses has no permanently binding character. Where the law is denied, justification is eventually denied, because an antinomian religion has no need of a judicial act of God to effect salvation."³

2. The Hedonistic Presentation of the Gospel

² A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1992), p. 181.

³ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1983), p. 272.

The unbiblical view of the law has contributed to the hedonistic presentation of the gospel. Apart from the law and the doctrine of justification (in which Christ satisfies the just demands of the law against sinners), the gospel for many has become something which enables people to find prosperity and self-fulfillment. Christ is presented as a cosmic Santa Claus. “Much contemporary evangelism is done in the atmosphere of a ‘Christian’ rock concert, with all its accompanying beat and emotionalism. The music and general excitement make the hearers feel absolutely at home in the evangelistic meeting. The presentation of the gospel is often accompanied with hedonistic promises such as ‘Come to Christ so that you may experience life with a capital “L”’ or ‘Be released from the past so that you will be free to really do your own thing.’”⁴ At “healing” crusades, “Christian” rock concerts, prophecy conferences, “Christian” pop psychology seminars, charismatic entertainment television shows, etc., the candy-coated hedonistic version of the gospel is tacked on to the whole proceedings so as to “sanctify” a whole evening’s worth of theological nonsense and crass, mediocre entertainment. “Accept Christ, and have whiter teeth, a better car, a bigger house—your problems will evaporate.” Christ is presented as a Baal god who gives people bigger crops and happy livestock.

3. Easy Believism: The Antinomian Gospel

Dispensationalism has led to what has been called the “carnal Christian heresy.” The idea is that repentance is not necessary in order to be a Christian. Repentance is said to belong to the “dispensation of law.” It is said that one can have Jesus Christ as Savior while ignoring Christ’s lordship. Advocates for the carnal Christian heresy argue that if repentance is required, then salvation is not by faith alone, but also by works. Thus, one can find multitudes of people who claim to be evangelical believers who are leading lifestyles characterized by sin. There are many people who have been deceived by such teaching, and thus it is common to run into professing Christians who are adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, pot-heads, Sabbath-desecrators, thieves, idolaters, and so on. The idea that repentance is optional for believers is unscriptural for a number of reasons:

(1) The Bible repeatedly says that repentance is a vital element of the gospel message. “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk. 24:47). Christ emphasized repentance in His preaching (Mt. 4:17; Mk. 1:14-15). Jesus warned the apostles: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:5). The teaching that says repentance is only a Jewish message is refuted by the apostles’ preaching to the Gentiles. Paul says, I “taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, *and also to Greeks*, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 20:21). To the Greek Athenians Paul said, “Truly these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men [i.e., Jews and Gentiles] everywhere to repent” (Ac. 17:30).

⁴ Bruce Winter, “A Youth Pastor Speaks out on the Playboy Theology,” in Robert D. Brinsmead, editor, *Present Truth* (1973), p. 26.

(2) The Scriptures teach that repentance is connected with faith in Christ. When a person truly believes in Jesus Christ, he is not adding Christ onto his pagan, idolatrous worldview. Christ is not added to a pantheon of gods. Believing in Christ involves a change of mind about sin, about Christ, about self, and about God. Berkhof writes, “According to Scripture, repentance is wholly an inward act, and should not be confounded with the change of life that proceeds from it. Confession of sins and reparation of wrongs are *fruits* of repentance. Repentance is only a negative condition and not a positive means of salvation. While it is the sinner’s present duty, it does not offset the claims of the law on account of past transgressions. Moreover, true repentance never exists except in conjunction with faith, while on the other hand, wherever there is true faith, there is also real repentance. The two are but two aspects of the same turning—a turning away from sin in the direction of God.”⁵ A person turns to Christ because he recognizes his guilt, defilement and hopelessness. The Holy Spirit uses God’s word to give the person a knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), a godly sorrow for offending a just and holy God (2 Cor. 7:9-10), and a desire to turn from a life of sin unto Christ (Ac. 2:38). This change of mind comes from a regenerate heart and is a gift from God (Ac. 5:31; 11:18). “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”⁶ Just as no one is saved without the instrument of faith which lays hold of Christ; no one is saved without a change of mind regarding sin and Christ. Furthermore, just as one must look at a person’s life in order to see if he has genuine faith (1 Jn. 1:6; 2:3-4; 3:10; Jas. 2:14-26); one must also look at the fruits of repentance to see if genuine repentance has occurred (Mt. 3:8; 7:16-20).

Saving faith involves more than an intellectual assent to certain facts or propositions; it also involves trust. When a person believes in Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures, he wholeheartedly trusts in Him for salvation. True faith is a trusting, committed faith. True repentance involves a change of mind regarding Christ. A person is no longer hostile or indifferent regarding Christ but regards Him as the pearl of great price (Mt. 13:46); as the most important person in the universe. Jesus said, “If you love Me keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). John wrote: “He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:4). To believe is to know and to know is to love. If we do not obey, then we really do not love. If we do not love, then we really do not believe. True belief cannot be separated from a loving commitment toward Christ.

(3) The carnal Christian heresy presupposes that Christ can be received piecemeal: that people have the option of believing in only part of Christ or in looking to only a part of His ministry. But Jesus the Savior cannot be separated from Christ the Lord. To be saved, a person must believe in Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures. Christ is offered in the gospel as prophet, priest, and *king*. Paul repeatedly connects Christ’s humiliation (His suffering and death) with His glorious exaltation (His resurrection, ascension and reign at the right hand of God).

⁵ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 487.

⁶ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 87.

“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Rom. 14:7-9).

The carnal Christian heresy is an implicit denial of Christ’s resurrection. It is the resurrected Christ who has all power and authority in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18); who applies redemption to His people. A Christ who is not King and Lord over all is a false Christ; a figment of one’s imagination. In his preaching Peter paid special attention to Christ’s resurrection and focused on His exaltation. “God has made this Jesus whom ye crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36). The preaching of the gospel involves Christ’s suffering and death and is climaxed by the empty tomb. The Old Testament Scripture most quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1, which speaks of Christ’s exaltation and lordship. Paul said, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5).

The book of Acts has a detailed record of the preaching and evangelism of the apostles and their close associates. Note that in not one place in the book can one find the expressions “accept Christ as your personal Savior” or “let Christ come into your heart.” In fact, the word “Savior” appears only twice in Acts (5:31; 13:23), while the title “Lord” occurs 92 times. The message of the apostles was: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:31). “How in God’s name did we come to huckstering off Jesus as some kind of hell-insurance policy, when the Bible announced Him as *Lord* and exalted Him to a throne? The New Testament preachers preached His *lordship*, and sinners received Him as *Lord*. There is not one New Testament example of Christ being offered any other way.... God-centered evangelism proclaims the Biblical message of the *lordship of Christ* at the outset, not as a second work of grace, or an act of optional consecration later.”⁷

(4) The Bible teaches that Christians have been bought with a price—the precious blood of the Son of God. Therefore, believers are not their own but belong to Jesus Christ. Paul said, “whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:8). He instructed the Corinthians to stop sinning with their bodies, because Christ bought them: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in you body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). If a person is a Christian then he belongs to Christ and must serve Him with both body and soul in every area of life. The professing Christian does not have the option of serving sin and self. Paul connects the death of Christ with His lordship over believers in such a way as to render impossible the idea that one can benefit from Christ’s sacrifice while repudiating Christ’s kingship.

(5) The Scriptures teach that people who habitually engage in wicked behavior are *not* Christians. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,

⁷ Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today’s Evangelism: Its Message and Methods* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), pp. 25, 27.

nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Paul says, “and such *were* [past tense] some of you.” Many people in the Corinthian church had lived a lifestyle characterized by sinful behavior, but once these people were converted, that wicked lifestyle was put off. Paul says that believers should not even eat with professing Christians who engage in such wicked behavior: “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor. 5:11). Hodge writes, “A man professing to be a Christian professes to renounce all of these sins; if he does not act consistently with his profession, he is not to be recognized as a Christian. We are not to do anything which would sanction the assumption that the offenses here referred to are tolerated by the gospel.”⁸ Spurgeon concurs: “If the professed convert distinctly and deliberately declares that he knows the Lord’s will, but does not mean to attend to it, you are not to pamper his presumptions, but it is your duty to assure him that he is not saved. Do not suppose that the Gospel is magnified or God glorified by going to the worldlings and telling them that they may be saved at this moment by simply ‘accepting Christ’ as their Savior, while they are wedded to their idols, and their hearts are still in love with sin? If I do so, I tell them a lie, pervert the Gospel, insult Christ, and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness.”⁹

The apostle John also repeatedly condemns the idea that someone can be a Christian yet continue in a sinful lifestyle. Christians still have a sinful nature, but it manifests itself in isolated acts of sin, not in a continuance in sin. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:3-4). A believer will sometimes fall into sin, but he will not walk in it. Present continuous tense verbs are used five times in 1 John chapter three to describe sinful non-Christian behavior: “Whoever commits sin, also commits lawlessness” (3:4). “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (3:6). “He who sins is of the devil” (3:8). “Whoever has been born of God does not [habitually practice] sin, for His seed remains in Him” (3:9). The person who continually walks in sin is lawless; does not have a relationship to Christ; is of the devil and has not been born again. Such teaching clearly is incompatible with the carnal Christian heresy (cf. Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2-6; Jas. 2:14-26).

(6) The Bible teaches that those who are justified are also regenerated and sanctified. Justification refers to God’s legal declaration based on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and should never be confounded with regeneration and sanctification; but although they are distinct, they cannot be separated. In other words, justification cannot occur unless a person is regenerated, for true faith cannot exist apart from the new birth. Moreover, everyone who is justified is sanctified. Regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit in man which changes a person’s

⁸ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1974), p. 90.

⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, quoted in Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today’s Evangelism*, pp. 25-26.

heart (i.e., the whole human nature). The carnal Christian heresy asserts that a person can be justified while retaining the old nature. According to Scripture, that is impossible. However (contrary to Romanism), regeneration, faith and sanctification are not grounds of justification. They are non-meritorious and do not contribute one iota to a person's salvation. Christ's merits alone are the ground. Christ "saves His people not only from the guilt of sin, but from its dominating power as well. If a believer is not changed, he is not a believer.... Justification with God is apart from the merit of works. That does not mean that justification is apart from the *existence* of works."¹⁰

The apostle Paul taught that union with Christ in death and resurrection is not only the foundation of justification, but of sanctification as well. Anyone who partakes of the benefits of Christ's death for salvation also must die to sin and walk in newness of life. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism unto death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.... And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:1-7, 18). John Murray writes, "if we have become identified with Christ in his death and if the ethical and Spiritual efficacy accruing from his death pertains to us, then we must also derive from his resurrection the ethical and Spiritual virtue which our being identified with him in his resurrection implies. These implications for us of union with Christ make impossible the inference that we may continue in sin that grace may abound."¹¹

Paul refutes all forms of antinomianism in Romans 6. Christ not only removed the guilt of sin by His atonement; He also overcame the power of sin. He destroyed the "old man" (that is, the totality of our corrupt natures). The Bible does not teach that sanctification leads to justification, but that justification leads to sanctification. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). "Believers are to look upon themselves in their true light, viz., *as dead to sin*, freed from its penalty and dominion. This is a freedom which belongs to them as believers...in virtue of union with him.... The old

¹⁰ John Gerstner, "The Nature of Justifying Faith," in Don Kistler, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), pp. 114-115.

¹¹ John Murray, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:219. Murray's analysis of the relation of sanctification to Christ's death is unsurpassed. Regarding verse seven, he writes, "The decisive breach with the reigning power of sin is viewed after the analogy of the kind of dismissal which a judge gives when an arraigned person is justified. Sin has no further claim upon the person who is thus vindicated. This judicial aspect from which deliverance from the power of sin is to be viewed needs to be appreciated. It shows that the forensic is present not only in justification but also in that which lies at the basis of sanctification. A judgment is executed upon the power of sin in the death of Christ (cf. John 12:31) and deliverance from this power on the part of the believer arises from the efficacy of this judgment" (Ibid, part I, p. 222).

man is crucified; the new man, the soul as renewed, is imbued with a new life, of which God is the object; which consists in fellowship with him, and which is manifested by devotion to his service, and by obedience to his will.”¹²

The carnal Christian heresy impugns the gospel of Jesus Christ. The idea that Christ lived a sinless life and died a sacrificial death on the cross to satisfy the precept and penalty of God’s law so that people could violate God’s law and continue to live in gross immorality is a blatant contradiction of Scripture and totally absurd. Salvation is deliverance from the guilt *and power* of sin. Christ secured both justification and sanctification for His people. People are not delivered from sin in order to commit sin, but to serve Jesus Christ and do good works for His kingdom! The imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers secures the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Thus, believers produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9) and do not walk in darkness. “For a professing Christian to live in sin, is not only to give positive evidence that he is not a real Christian, but it is to misrepresent and slander the gospel of the grace of God, to the dishonor of religion, and the injury of the souls of men.”¹³ How many multitudes have walked an aisle and prayed a prayer and have been assured of eternal life who do not have a true sense of the heinousness of sin, who do not understand at all the true gospel? They may have “accepted Christ” and signed a card, but they really do not know Him. They are on the broad path which leads to destruction. They have been told “peace, peace” when there is no peace with God. They have been duped by a message without God’s law and without biblical repentance. They will go to hell because they accepted the lie that one could own Christ as Savior while not submitting to Him as Lord. The biblical doctrine of justification contradicts the legalism of Rome and the antinomianism of Dallas.

Modern Arminianism’s Perversion of the Gospel

Modern evangelicalism is plagued not only by antinomianism, but also by Arminianism. Modern Arminianism teaches that as a consequence of Adam’s sin, all men are born with an inherent hereditary corruption. But the Arminian does not believe that fallen man is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1) and totally unable to respond to divine truth (Ezek. 16:4-6; Jer. 13:23; Jn. 6:44, 65; Acts 26:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:14). He believes that man is not spiritually dead but merely sick; that he has a free will, that is, a will that is capable of discerning spiritual truth without a prior work of sovereign grace (i.e., regeneration). The Arminian’s unbiblical understanding of the fall has led to the exaltation of the human will in the process of salvation. As a rock thrown into a pond causes ripples to radiate outward until the whole pond is affected, the heresy of free will has fatally influenced several important Christian doctrines (e.g., the atonement, the sovereignty of God, regeneration, faith, perseverance of the saints, etc.). Modern

¹² Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1835] 1989), p. 201.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 202. Peter’s argument for Christian sanctification is identical to Paul’s. “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God” (1 Pet. 4:1-2).

evangelistic techniques that are based on free will instead of divine revelation implicitly place God under the thumb of sinful man. Some of the particulars of the Arminian view of fallen man are as follows.

Decisional Regeneration

One of the most absurd theories to arise from the Arminian cesspool is the idea that man regenerates himself by “making a decision for Christ.” The Bible teaches that salvation is of the Lord (Jon. 2:9), that God takes the initiative and saves those who are lost and totally incapable of saving themselves, and that Jesus Christ sends the Holy Spirit to work directly upon the heart to regenerate a person and enable him to believe in the gospel. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it *wishes*, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it came from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8; cf. Jn. 17:8). Those who believe in Jesus Christ “were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of *the will of man*, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). The Arminian rejects the testimony of Scripture and instead argues that the sinner regenerates himself, and that man begins the work of conversion. “God helps those who help themselves. He is found only of those who seek Him.”¹⁴ In the Arminian system grace is no longer the unmerited favor of God to those who deserve to perish, but the aid of God so that man can save himself through an act of the will. The Arminian would rather pervert the doctrine of regeneration than give up the concept of free will and admit the sovereignty of God in election.

The absurd notion that man regenerates himself, or that man allows God to regenerate man by an act of the will, has led to a perversion of the gospel message. If (as many evangelicals teach) regeneration is not *solely* a work of God upon the human heart, and if God can only regenerate those who first exercise their free will in favor of Christ, then faith cannot be viewed as a gift of God. In the modern Arminian scheme, a man’s faith permits God to save him. Thus, faith is meritorious. Men are not saved through faith which is a gift of God, but because of their faith.¹⁵ A person’s decision for Christ is the key which unlocks the chain that binds God. Faith and repentance do not flow from a regenerate heart but are totally self-produced. Man’s decision is considered totally autonomous. God can attempt to influence man’s decision, but ultimately has no power over it. In the modern evangelical system, man’s choice has been exalted above all, even over God’s sovereignty. “God is merely the great resource which man can tap if he will. In such a perspective, man is sovereign, and God the resource and insurance agency serving and glorifying man, so that the whole world is turned upside down, and God made man’s servant and instrument. Man has become his own god and savior, and God’s function is to act as the insurance agency so that man may prosper.”¹⁶

In modern Arminian methodology people are often not told to look to Christ for salvation and assurance, but to trust in their decision for Christ. The *ground* of salvation is not Christ’s

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:713.

¹⁵ There are a number of passages which teach that faith is a gift from God (e.g., Ac. 16:14, Rom. 12:3, Eph. 2:8, Phil. 1:29). Passages which teach that repentance is a gift from God are Ac. 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25.

¹⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1983), pp. 14-15.

sacrificial death and sinless life, but the personal choice of an autonomous man. When people express doubts about their salvation, they are instructed to look back at their decision for Christ. “Do not doubt your salvation because you walked an aisle. You prayed a prayer. You signed a card. You made a decision for Christ.” Such thinking has more in common with magic formulae than biblical Christianity. Man controls a helpless God by an act of the will. “It is expressly declared that God cannot bless us in any way until we open the way for His action by an act of our own will. Everywhere and always the initiative belongs to man; everywhere and always God’s action is suspended upon man’s will.... But that only shows that our dependence must be in our trust, not in Christ. Christ cannot keep us in trust: but our trust can keep us in Christ.”¹⁷ In such a system the poor sinner is left looking at his belly button instead of Jesus Christ. If he is honest he is left in a state of despair, because the object of his faith is his feeble, sinful will. If self-deceived, he may have an assurance, but it is totally without foundation.

In modern evangelical theology people are taught that Christ died on the cross for all men without exception. They are also told that God’s election of certain people to eternal life is based on His foreknowledge of who will believe in Christ. Since, in the Arminian scheme, Christ’s death did not *actually* secure the salvation of anyone, and since God can *only* choose those people who first choose Christ, the most important factor in man’s salvation is man’s choice. Thus, when a typical modern evangelical is asked why he has a title to eternal life, he does not speak about Christ’s doing and dying as a substitute for His people or about God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of Christ’s work, but rather he will say, “I know I am saved because I accepted Jesus as my personal savior” or “I let Jesus come into my heart.” The gospel is reduced from the objective work of Christ sovereignly bestowed by God upon the elect to sovereign man letting Christ subjectively dwell in his heart. “God ‘has to’ do what we require. Not surprisingly, this view leads to a pragmatic concept of salvation: ‘what’s in it for me?’ What does God have to offer, as against the world? God and Satan are reduced to bidders for man’s favor, with man as sovereign, so that God is made into a tempter, trying to bribe man into salvation with enticing offers and pleadings.”¹⁸

The expressions “accept Christ as your personal savior” and “let Christ come into your heart” are not found in Scripture and were never used by Christ, the apostles or the evangelists. In Revelation 3:20 Christ said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” This passage is sometimes used to justify the expression “let Christ come into your heart.” The context of the passage, however, clearly indicates that Christ was speaking not to unbelievers, but to a backslidden church. Christ, therefore, is *not* saying “let Me come into your heart,” but “hear and obey and reestablish proper fellowship.” Christ is coming in to fellowship with His saint. He is not standing at the door of the spiritually dead sinner asking him to exercise his unrenewed will.

Another passage used to justify modern evangelical methods is John 1:12: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who

¹⁷ B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1932] 1981), 2:608, 610.

¹⁸ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 274.

believe in His name.” What does it mean to receive Christ? If one studies the gospel of John, does one find Christ and the apostles inviting people to receive Jesus into their heart? In the gospel of John, receiving Christ is synonymous with believing in Christ. Jesus said, “I have come in My Father’s name and you do not receive Me.... For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words” (Jn. 5:43, 46-47). The only way to receive Christ is to believe in Him. To receive Christ is to believe the words which He speaks and the scriptural testimony regarding Him. Believing in Christ means trusting Christ’s person, character, work and word. One believes that Christ can carry out His promises. He can save to the uttermost. Receiving Christ is not a formula in which man sovereignly controls the Lord of lords and King of kings, but is a wholehearted trust in the divine-human mediator Jesus Christ. While in the gospel of John people are never exhorted to receive Christ as their personal savior, the verb *pisteuo* (to believe) occurs 98 times. In evangelism, the Holy Spirit’s emphasis should be our emphasis. There is nothing wrong with the phrase “receive Christ,” as long as it is biblically defined.

The biblical passages which refer to the indwelling of Christ in the individual believer are never used in the context of an evangelistic formula, but are always used in the context of Christian sanctification and assurance. Paul says, “But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:9-10). Regarding verse 9 Shedd writes, “He is denominated the Spirit of Christ, because the exalted Christ imparts himself in and with the Paraclete (John xiv); and because, whoever has not this Spirit, is not a member of Christ.”¹⁹ Paul writes, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor. 13:5). Hodge writes, “Christ dwells in his people by his Spirit. The presence of the Spirit is the presence of Christ. This is not a mere figurative expression, as when we say we have a friend in our heart—but a real truth. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Ghost, is in the people of God collectively and individually, the ever-present source of a new kind of life”²⁰ Although the Bible teaches the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ in His people, sinners are never instructed to invite Christ in, but to believe “in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not the works of the law” (Gal. 2:19). Inviting Jesus in sounds nice, but it is very different than believing in Christ. “Given the sinful state of mankind, the pertinent question is not whether we ‘accept Christ,’ but whether God accepts us.”²¹

The shift in modern evangelical preaching and evangelism from justification by faith alone to the terminology of inviting Jesus Christ into the heart or accepting Jesus as personal Savior has led many Protestants down the road toward Rome and the Christian existentialism of the charismatic movement. The Bible emphasizes that Christ’s work of redemption for His

¹⁹ William G. T. Shedd, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1879] 1980), p. 237.

²⁰ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1974), p. 682.

²¹ Kevin Reed, *Making Shipwreck of the Faith: Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Together* (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), p. 22.

people is *objective*. It takes place *outside* the sinner. When a person believes in Christ, he is declared righteous by God the Father in the heavenly court. This also takes place *outside* the sinner. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *result* of justification and not the cause of it. Thus, the terminology of inviting Christ into the heart really has nothing to do with justification.²² The indwelling of Christ's Spirit is not what justifies. The work of the Holy Spirit in man is that of sanctification. Although many evangelicals probably do not intend to confound justification with sanctification in their evangelism, their sloppy biblical terminology does not differentiate between an imputed righteousness and an infused righteousness. Christ's objective work *for* His people is confused with His work *in* His people. This is the great error of Romanism. The ignorance of doctrine and use of unscriptural terminology by evangelicals have led many evangelical leaders and laymen to ask, "What is so bad about Roman Catholicism? My Roman Catholic friends have accepted Christ and asked Him to come into their heart. Aren't they Christians just like me?" The truth is not that Romanists are moving closer to a biblical doctrine of salvation, but that evangelicals have been moving closer to Rome. It is true that a number of Roman Catholics have become charismatics and adopted some of the modern evangelical slogans and terms, but they have *not* embraced the biblical doctrine of justification. Until they do, they have not yet accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. The sinful human tendency is to forget the objective gospel and to move toward a man-centered subjectivism. Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Mt. 7:15). Beware, their doctrine can devour you!

Many Evangelicals have not only perverted the gospel message, but have also developed a *ritualized* method of inviting sinners to Christ in their church services, "revival" meetings and evangelistic crusades. This ritual has been called "the invitation system" or "the altar call." In these services people are told to come forward to receive Christ. Whatever the intent of the preacher may be, the audience which hears the invitation to come forward or walk down the aisle equates coming to the front of a church with coming to Jesus Christ. This ritual was never practiced in any church (Eastern or Western) until after 1830, when it was invented by the Pelagian Charles G. Finney (1792-1875).

The altar call is unscriptural for a number of reasons. First, it introduces a man-made ritual into the public worship service. The Bible teaches that everything done in the public worship of Christ's church must have warrant from the word of God (cf. Gen. 4:3-5; 2 Sam. 6:3-7; 1 Kgs. 12:32-33; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; Mt. 15:1-3, 6; Col. 2:8, 20-23). In the days that Jesus walked the earth, He could invite sinners to follow Him physically (e.g., Mt. 4:19), but now that Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God the Father, following Jesus means to abide by His teachings; it is *not* a religious ritual.

²² There has also been a tendency among evangelicals to ignore justification and emphasize the new birth. People are often asked, "Have you been born again?" That question would be legitimate if evangelicals defined the new birth biblically. It would be the same as asking, "Has the Holy Spirit changed your heart, enabling you to repent and believe in Jesus Christ?" Evangelicals, however, do not define the new birth biblically. Their question basically means: "Have you accepted Christ into your heart and had a wonderful spiritual experience?" The focus is not on the objective work of Christ but on man's autonomous decision and the inward experience it produces.

Second, coming to Christ is something a person does by believing in Him. Associating a physical act with becoming a Christian has led multitudes of people who do not have genuine faith and are not real Christians to regard themselves as “saved” because they went to the front of the church. They obeyed a religious ritual. The invitation system has been a disaster because thousands of people think that they are saved when they are not, and are then told they are “carnal Christians” because their lives have not changed at all. Reisinger writes, “To call sinners to the front of the church is not a divine command, but many times those who do not go forward are led to believe that they are not obeying God. This is false psychological guilt, because no such thing was ever commanded by God or practiced in the New Testament. On the other hand, those who do go forward are often commended and are led to believe that they did something commendable, when in many cases they have only added to their religious deception.”²³

Third, the altar call introduces a mediator between the sinner and Jesus Christ. When sinners come to the front of the church to “receive Christ,” they are met by a minister or one of his associates and told to pray a certain prayer. The idea that a person needs to physically come to the front of a church and speak with the minister to accept Christ is Romish to the core. Spurgeon writes, “We must not come back by a rapid march to the old ways of altars and confessionals, and have a Romish trumpery restored to a coarser form. If we make men think that conversation with ourselves or with our helpers is essential to their faith in Christ, we are taking the direct line for priestcraft. In the Gospel, the sinner and the Savior are to come together, with none between.”²⁴ To teach—even implicitly—that it is essential that the sinner confer with the minister or receive a prayer from an elder to receive Christ is popish superstition and not true religion.

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²³ Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today's Evangelism: Its Message and Methods* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), p. 76.

²⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Minister in These Times: An All-Around Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth), p. 372, quoted in Reisinger, *op. cit.*, p. 75.