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**A Theological/Missiological Critique of
Salvation by Works:
Not My Works, But Yours Be Done**

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Introduction

“There are few errors that are more widespread and dangerous than the misconception that either works or religious rituals (or both) are conditions for salvation”¹, says Steven W. Waterhouse. It is widespread because it seems reasonable and lines up with our experience and our expectations. In other words, we judge God by our own standards, our own measure. Human beings have a tendency to listen to their own reasoning that says: God hates sin, so the only

¹ Steven W. Waterhouse, *Not by Bread Alone: An Outlined Guide to Bible Doctrine*. (Amarillo, TX: Westcliff Press, 2003), 142.

hope we have is to sin less and serve Him more. The logic of this, however, needs to be placed under the scrutiny of the One who has the “Words of eternal life”; we need to know *His* requirements. Now, the reasoning we apply is not independent of our experience. Usually, we accept others and are accepted by them based on merit. From Christ’s exhortation in Luke 6: 32-34, we see how natural it is to do good to those who do good to us or to those whose goodness we seek, to lend to those whom we trust will repay, to love those who have loved us or whose love we seek. Jesus used this reality to teach that “just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way” (Luke 6: 31). But, even more importantly, He taught his disciples that they should not determine how they will treat others based on how they are treated. He wanted them to understand that the world operated on a system of meritocracy, but they should operate on a system of grace.

But, Waterhouse is not only right about how widespread is “the error that works are conditions of salvation”², he is also right when he calls it dangerous. It holds danger both for the saved and the unsaved. It has eternal ramifications for the unsaved, for it can lead them to seek for God in ways in which He cannot be found, and so they never come into a saving knowledge of Christ. And, it may lead Christians to a less than fulfilling and “abundant” experience with Christ, robbing them of their joy and even of their capacity to live for God in a way that pleases and honours Him. It is, therefore, imperative that the misconception be debunked.

A. Arguments Affirming Salvation by Works

The notion that salvation can be attained and/or maintained by works has deep roots in history. Pelagianism and Arminianism are two prominent ideologies dating from the fifth and seventeenth centuries respectively which have espoused this. We will use them as a springboard from which to examine the idea that works are important for salvation.

Pelagianism

Pelagius did not accept the concept of a Fall. For him, there was no original sin. Adam and Eve’s decision to disobey God had

² Ibid.

consequences for them and no-one else. Every human being is born in the same innocent state in which Adam and Eve were created. Therefore, “a life of obedience to God, a life of moral perfection, is possible without any help from Jesus or without any help from the grace of God”.³ What grace does is facilitate righteousness,⁴ an important role, but an optional one. Michael S. Horton notes that “in his Commentary on Romans, Pelagius thought of grace as God's revelation in the Old and New Testaments, which enlightens us and serves to promote our holiness by providing explicit instruction in godliness and many worthy examples to imitate.”⁵ Pelagius argued that for God to command, He had to expect compliance, and for him to expect compliance, He had to recognise in humans the capacity to comply. According to Pelagius, “they err who say with Manicheus that a person is not able to avoid sin, as well as those who assert with Jovinian that a person is not able to sin. For, both destroy the freedom of the will. But, we say that a person is always able to sin or not to sin, so that we always confess that there is free will.”⁶ Christ, then, did not die a vicarious death. His death is for us an example as is His life. Thus, we must conclude that from Christ we can learn both what it means to live sacrificially and to give selflessly. When all is said and done, then, the nature of our relationship with God is dependent on how much we live according to the commands of God.

Not many professed Christians today confess that our works prior to salvation commend us to God⁷, but there are those who do. Their theology converges with that of Pelagius in the belief that God predestines those who obey His commands, and to them He mediates special grace. Among this group, are those who diverge from him in that they believe that our wills were weakened by sin and that Christ's death was necessary for our redemption. The operative word is

³ R.C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church.” *Modern Reformation*, Vol. 10, Number 3 (May/June 2001), (accessed on 14 November 2012) <http://www.bible-researcher.com/sproul1.html>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Michael S. Horton, “Pelagianism.” *Modern Reformation*, Vol. 3, Number 1 (Jan/Feb 1994), (accessed on 14 November 2012) <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=ArtRead&var2=448&var3=main>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ This needs to be qualified, for a number of Christians believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, but they may not consider this “works”.

“weakened”; we can still use our wills to seek God, thereby activating His gracious provisions, empowering us to live godly lives. This perspective has been categorised as Semi-Pelagianism or even Semi-Arminianism because of the convergence of important points.

Arminianism

Arminianism has been accused of being tantamount to Pelagianism. Though this assessment is understandable, there are significant differences between the two which make this association specious. The major difference is the position of works. It is true that, for both, works play a vital role in salvation. Like Pelagians, Arminians see the will as free to accept or reject the grace of God, even the grace to believe and repent. But, Arminians see faith as the real condition of salvation, in that every person is in need of repentance and only faith in Christ can effect this and lead to faithful obedience to His will. Arminius himself believed that free will could not be exercised outside of the grace of God to accept the salvation of God; however, there was nothing irresistible about God’s grace. Grace could not undermine the freedom of man to believe as he wills.

“Once saved, always saved” is another teaching rubbished by both Arminians and Pelagians. John Calvin’s concept of perseverance that puts the full responsibility on God to keep believers in the faith was countered by Arminians⁸ who contended that the will that was free to repent was also free to renounce its original decision. But, the belief held by Pelagius of the possibility of perfection was still not held by Arminius with regard to the Christian’s position at initial salvation. Still, faithful obedience is critical to “staying saved”. The view that it is possible to fall from grace is, as Waterhouse has told us, widespread. Even among believers whose denominations have as one of their basic tenets the eternal security of the believer is found the position that one can lose one’s salvation. They have conceded to the world’s system of meritocracy. Perhaps those of us who affirm the eternal security of the believer have not been vocal enough or consistent in our proclamation of that message and of its positive implications for holiness.

⁸ Arminius’s statements on the matter indicate his uncertainty about what the Bible teaches concerning eternal security.

B. Arguments Affirming Salvation by Grace Alone

An understanding of the significance of sin and the necessity and finality of Christ's redemptive work will help in an understanding of the place of works in salvation.

The Sinfulness of Man and the Holiness of God

The answer to the question of the state of man's will must be found in the Scriptures and not in logic or sentiment.

"All have sinned" is a statement found in the book of Romans, an epistle which presents what sounds like a counterargument to Pelagianism and Arminianism. But, since "all" does not always mean "all" in that its breadth is limited by its context, we have to consider Paul's use of the word to see if anyone is excluded. Early in his dissertation, Paul establishes the need for the gospel. He first makes the claim that salvation is available for Jews and Gentiles (1:16) and that faith is necessary for righteousness (1:17) and, therefore, necessary to avoid the wrath of God (1:18). He goes on to demonstrate that Gentiles are sinners, as evidenced by the laws that they do not keep: the law of their own conscience and the legal systems coming out of it (2:14, 15). He then explains that the privileged position of the Jews does not make them less culpable (3:1, 9); they too are law breakers (2:17-24), breaking the Law of God given to them directly.

Thereafter, Paul seems to dangle before us the possibility of good works bringing us eternal life in Romans 2:6-8, leaving us to think that there may be some who do not fall under the wrath of God as a result of their personal sins:

[God] will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

Then come the absolute statements: "there is none righteous no not one"⁹; "there is none who seeks for God"¹⁰; and "all have sinned", as well as a reiteration of the importance of faith (3:22). Thus, everyone who has not accessed God's salvation through faith in Jesus Christ falls into the category of "those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness." If there is none who is righteous and none who seeks God, there is none who, by their own

⁹ This pronouncement by Paul is actually a quotation from Psalms 14 and 53. Old Testament writers such as David understood the significance of their sin and how much it separates us from God.

¹⁰ God could not have foreseen people seeking him and so predestine those, for there were none such.

design, perseveres in doing good.¹¹ And, therefore, there is none who achieves “glory and honour and immortality”; they, instead, merit wrath and indignation. In such a context, how can one say anything less than that the human will is incurably sick? Jeremiah obliges: “the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9).

But, while Jeremiah’s “sick” may not stamp indelibly on our minds our absolute hopelessness, Paul’s use of the word “dead” to describe our condition is a graphic way of making that point. In Ephesians, we hear Paul tell the believers that they once were dead in sins. As in Romans, we notice a certain movement in his exposition. He moved from *they* “were dead in trespass and sins” to “*we* were dead in our transgressions”, and intervening was “we too *all* formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh ... and were *by nature* children of wrath, *even as the rest*”. Not just by act but by nature we all are sinners. The will of all human beings is free to do one thing: sin. John 8:34 tells us that those who commit sin are enslaved by sin. So, in summary, we can say that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23) because they are predisposed so to do (Ephesians 2:3) and so all are “the slaves of sin” (John 8:34) with wills completely subdued.

So, what is sin? There is no one word that fully captures what sin is. The Hebrew word *chata* (usually translated “sin”), with its Greek equivalent *hamartia* and *hamartano*, denotes missing the mark morally, “[failing] to live up to expectations”¹² or even “failure as a deliberate act”¹³. Waterhouse points out some other Hebrew terms for sin: *pasha* (transgression); *awon* (iniquity); *ra* (wicked)¹⁴. He notes that “the Old Testament terms for sin refer to a diversion from a standard. *Sin* is missing the standard. ‘Transgression’ is to rebel or deviate from the standard. ‘Iniquity’ is to alter the standard, choosing a perverted way of living.”¹⁵ Here are two of the Greek terms: *Parabasis* speaks to “a violation of the law”, so, as stated by Paul in Romans 4:15, where there is no law there is no ‘parabasis’. *Anomia* is

¹²Waterhouse, *Not by Bread Alone*, 74

¹³ Don McLellan, “Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Essential Elements in Atonement Theology” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29 (1) (2005), 6

¹⁴ Waterhouse, *Not by Bread Alone*, 74

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

lawlessness. “In other words, sin is equated with total disregard for the law. As far as the sinner is concerned, the law does not exist.”¹⁶ God’s standard is again undermined.

We have seen that *sin* is not easily defined; it is a complex and complicated matter. Sin speaks to intention and motive, as well as to actual deeds; it speaks to good not done, as well as to evil done. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ presents a standard that goes to the heart of the matter. Blessings are pronounced on those who have integrity, who have the right attitude, leading to the right action. He pronounces ‘curses’ on those who may perform right action but have impure thoughts (Matthew 5-7). In Romans 14, Paul also shows the importance of what motivates one’s conduct. Note Paul’s comment concerning the eating of meat: “He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin”. In other words, even if an act is not wrong in itself, if there is doubt that it is right or conviction that it is wrong, the actor has sinned. If there are so many aspects to sin and if some of them may be found even in the sub-conscious, who really can unflinchingly affirm righteousness outside of Christ? Outside of Him all our righteousness is as filthy menstrual cloths. God only accepts perfection.

Sin is what it is because God is Who He is. God uses his commands to set Himself apart.¹⁷ We see it from the beginning. He commanded Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, seemingly a simple directive, but, oh, how fatal the outcome was. It was a command that tested faith and love. God required devotion to Himself above all, but Adam and Eve failed. Their failure represented our failure. As if to prove the point, God gave commands to people throughout history to test the same qualities, only for them to fail over and over again. The most significant test of the recognition of God’s holiness¹⁸, since the one Adam faced, was the Law of Moses, so-called because Moses was its

¹⁶ McLellan, “Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation”, 6.

¹⁷ One word used to express this idea is *holiness*.

¹⁸ God specifically told them that His holiness drove His expectations of them (Leviticus 11:44; 20:26). The kosher laws, for example, had their practical element, but a major concern must have been the giving of an object lesson in the holiness of God.

instrument. This time the examinees were a whole nation. The result was abysmally the same.

The Law, in highlighting the holiness of God, played the role of pedagogue, but it was a role that did not produce students who met the standard of their teacher or their Father. A pedagogue was a household slave who was given direct responsibility for the training of the child of his master while he was away from home. As a pedagogue, the Law set a standard and sought to “punish and prevent transgressions”¹⁹. David J. Lull in his comparative analysis²⁰ of the function of the Law in relation to that of the pedagogue in the Greco-Roman world provides tremendous insight into the limitations, better yet, the inability²¹ of the Law to produce righteousness. Philo, Lull tells us, described “the role of the pedagogue as one of educating by means of reproach, punishment, reviling, and accusation.”²² This also was the Law’s approach. As we have seen so far, all those who failed to meet their obligation to fulfil its mandate, found themselves under a curse: “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them” (Galatians 3:10). Yet, knowing this did not enable the Jews to keep the Law.²³ It was a ‘master’ who sought to guide, and beat students who did not have the aptitude to perform. So, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:20). It is also true that “now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested” (Romans 3:21).

Carson presents two understandings of “apart from the Law”: (1) apart from the works of the Law and (2) apart from the system of the Law.²⁴ He argues for the latter. He contends that with Paul’s use of “now”,

¹⁹ David J. Lull, “‘The Law Was Our Pedagogue’: A Study in Galatians 3:19-25”. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105 (3) (1986), 489.

²⁰ Ibid, 481-498.

²¹ The Law was inadequate because human beings were inadequate. Despite this, it did serve a very useful purpose in preserving and ordering Jewish society.

²² Lull, “‘The Law Was Our Pedagogue’”, 490.

²³ Even when the psalmist says that one should hide/treasure God’s Word in one’s heart and one would not sin against Him, he has to confess his own failings.

²⁴ D.A. Carson, “Why Trust a Cross: Reflections on Romans 3:21-26” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28 (4) (2004), 348.

it is contextually inadequate to think that 'apart from law' is really a short-hand for 'apart from the works of the law' or 'apart from doing the law' or the like. After all, as Paul himself will point out in Rom 4, justification has always been by faith and apart from law. In fact, if, as most sides agree, the prepositional phrase is connected with the verb *πεφανερωται*, then another reading is possible: 'a righteousness from God has been made known apart from law' focuses attention not on the *reception* of righteousness, it is received by faith, but on the *disclosure* of this righteousness, it has been made known apart from law. In that case the expression 'apart from law' most probably means something like 'apart from the law-covenant'.²⁵

If we accept Carson's interpretation, however, we could argue that the Law has been replaced by another system. Having come to faith in Christ, we are no longer bound to observe the Old Covenant, but our works remain vital to our salvation. Paul, though, excludes works altogether in his discussion of the faith of Abraham and David. To a New Covenant audience, Paul explains that both he who was under Law and he who was under Promise (which Paul, in Galatians links to the New Covenant) were justified because of their faith and not because of their works²⁶. What was important, as David, realised, is that God did not take one's sin into account (Romans 4:8).

Sin has separated human beings from the holy God, but there is one way by which sin may not be put to their account and so their fellowship with God can be restored. That way is Christ. In sending His Son, Jesus Christ, God graciously took the initiative to redeem us. If He did not act, there would be no hope – absolutely none – for we could not help ourselves. God judges us by our works, but He saves us by His grace. “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Death is a payment for the work we have done; life is a gift through the work Christ has done.

The Finality and Sufficiency of Christ's Work

Christ's work on our behalf began at His Incarnation.

Although He existed in the form of God, [Christ] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Paul, himself, if left to his own devices, would have continued depending on his works to assure him of right standing with God. It was his conversion that led him to see his sinfulness in the light of God's holiness.

as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

Wayne Grudem posits that there are “two aspects of Christ’s work: (1) Christ’s obedience for us, in which he obeyed the requirements of the law in our place and was perfectly obedient to the will of God the Father as our representative, and (2) Christ’s sufferings for us, in which he took the penalty due for our sins and as a result died for our sins.”²⁷

Although His virgin birth ensured that He was not born with a sinful nature, in emptying Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, Christ opened up Himself to be tempted just as we are. The temptations of which we hear in the Gospels were mainly in relation to “the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness²⁸” (Matthew 23:23). But His devotion to God was constant, and His care for the physically, emotionally, and spiritually vulnerable and weak was unquestionable. Such was His concern for justice and His exercise of mercy that He was heavily criticised by the Pharisees whom He described as whitewashed sepulchres. They were outwardly attractive but inwardly corrupt. And, they pressured Him to be just like them. Satan’s temptation of Him at the beginning of His ministry was also aimed at getting Him to exhibit selfish ambitions. However, “Not My will, but Yours be done” was His attitude throughout His life. The Father’s will was His will. Christ passed the test Adam failed. So, the verdict was: “tempted as we are, yet without sin”.

As Grudem has said, Christ suffered for us and took “the penalty due for our sins”.²⁹ This, however, was not just the ultimate penalty of physical and spiritual death on the Cross. In taking unto Himself human frailty and limitations, Jesus Christ, in His daily activities and interactions, experienced the curse that our lawlessness brought on us. For example, He knew what it was to be thirsty and tired, having walked to Samaria from Galilee, and He knew what it was to endure

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1994), 570.

²⁸ These speak to what is in the heart of man. It is out of the heart that “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders”, etc. come (Matthew 15:19). As a man who was never weary of acting justly and of promoting justice, these sins were never committed by Him.

²⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 570.

emotional pain at the death of a friend such as Lazarus. We need to realise that these experiences, though the norm, are a consequence of the Fall. Significant also are those interactions in which He deliberately took on the uncleanness of those to whom He ministered. He touched lepers and allowed Himself to be touched by the woman with the issue of blood, though the Law declared them unclean. But, Jesus did not take on uncleanness without making clean the unclean. Those whom He touched He healed.

Ultimate wellness, though, could not come except through the shedding of blood, as stipulated under the Law. And so, Christ who before had experienced the consequences of the curse, in dying on a tree *became* “a curse for us – for it is written ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” He died a criminal’s death as “He who knew no sin” was made “to be sin on our behalf.” This meant complete alienation from the Father: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (Matthew). On the Cross, Christ experienced spiritual and eternal death so that we could have eternal life. On the Cross, He was made to be sin so that “we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Our salvation is based on an exchange. David had said, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and those whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account” (Romans 4:7-8) in anticipation of this exchange. It must have been for that reason, too, that Jesus says “Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

When a person trusts in Christ, **Christ’s righteousness** is “imputed” (credited) to the believer’s account. God views a believer’s position as “in Christ” and covered with Christ’s righteousness. On this basis, the believer is declared legally just. **It is Christ’s righteousness** (not human righteousness and merit) **that is the basis of a believer’s acceptance and standing with God.** Self-righteousness did not save in the first place, and it is not a basis on which salvation is continued ... So the real issue in a believer’s security is not the endurance of human righteousness but the **eternal nature** of Christ’s **righteousness.**³⁰

The exchange of sin for righteousness was an exchange born of grace because there is no way that it could be repaid. Any attempt to do so

³⁰ Waterhouse, *Not By Bread Alone*, 191.

is an insult to God. Both Paul and the writer to the Hebrews vehemently make this case.

As Paul sees it only someone who is bewitched could want to live under the Law, having experienced life in the Spirit. If works could save any at all, he argues, Christ would have died needlessly (Galatians 2:21). It is because law only puts one under a curse that Christ died in our place. Misdirected faith is sin. The list Paul gives in Galatians 5 of the works of the flesh seems a reasonable list, but he also characterises dependence on works as being of the flesh as well. Dependence on works is dependence on self. Our confidence must be in Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses a similar sentiment. Throughout the epistle, he/she speaks of the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. Whereas other priests had to make daily sacrifices which could only cover sin, not take it away, Christ's sacrifice dealt with the sin problem once for all. That perspective must have informed the stern warning in chapter six concerning a return to legalism, a return to "dead works". Having been enlightened to then fall away in such a manner, thus again "crucifying to themselves the Son of God" and putting Him to an open shame", is to remove oneself from the possibility of repentance. Some contend that Hebrews 6:4-6 teaches that we are not eternally secure. If that is so, the writer is contradicting himself. Throughout the epistle he/she gives words of encouragement and assurance founded in nothing else but the work of Christ.

Indeed, one's eternal security does not remove from one the judgment of God. Moses is an example. Because he "did not believe [God] to treat Him as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel" (Numbers 20:12) leading to his disobeying God by striking the rock (which Paul explains typified Christ) twice he never entered the Promised Land. He would die as had the rebellious Hebrews. Seemingly harsh, but God is holy and sovereign. Moses, however, was allowed to see the Promised Land, and we know that he is a part of God's Kingdom, based on the Transfiguration experience. God's judgment is not necessarily stayed by the admission of guilt³¹. It is hard to believe that Moses did not say, "Mea culpa". The children of Israel at Kadesh

³¹ See Numbers 13-14; Deuteronomy 2:19-46; 2 Samuel 12:1-25

Barnea and David when he was confronted by Nathan, however, are definite examples of people who admitted guilt but were still disciplined. Therefore, the fact that, in Hebrews 6, God does not allow “repentance” from those who have fallen does mean their eternal condemnation. The punishment would have to be temporal. The tenor of the epistle, primarily, and of the Scriptures as a whole indicate that if Hebrews 6 has believers in mind the judgment is just that – temporal.³²

One could ask: “Why are warnings necessary if one is eternally secure? Of what use, as well, is temporal punishment if Christ’s righteousness is ours eternally?” Paul and the writer to the Hebrews respond to these questions. Paul’s answers belie the criticism that he is antinomian. A similar criticism has been made of theology coming out of the Reformation. The polemic nature of the discussions between some Calvinists and Arminians, for example, show that the convictions are deep and the concern for heresy is great. In his review of French L. Arrington’s *Unconditional Security: Myth or Truth*, Paul Elbert explains Arrington’s position thus:

Unconditional eternal security can dangerously downplay the need to press on with a godly life and diminish the importance of discipleship, thereby giving a false, unbiblical, and ultra-rational assurance that may be a real hindrance in times of weakness (188). Col 1:22, 23 serves to score the final point that at Christ’s return a people holy and blameless, with faith firmly established and steadfast, will be welcomed by the heavenly Jesus into immortality.³³

Arlington’s Scriptural reference reveals that Paul is not antinomian. His perspective that works do not save either initially or ultimately come out of his recognition that Christ accomplished his purposes fully through His death and resurrection. And, his declaration that only a holy people will be “welcomed into immortality” is based on the same premise. In fact, Colossians 1:22 begins with the work of Christ: “[Christ] has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through

³² This is just one understanding that seeks to reconcile Hebrews six passage with the rest of the epistle. Some scholars argue that the writer has unbelievers in mind; others posit that the reference is to believers, but the situation recounted is strictly hypothetical – it is really saying if it were possible, and it is not, for believers to fall away, they could not repent thereafter.

³³ Paul Elbert, review of *Unconditional Eternal Security: Myth or Truth?*, by French L. Arrington, *Evangelical Quarterly*, 80 (1) (2008), 88-90.

death *in order to* present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach”.

Christ did not only die to free us from the penalty of sin; His death is also effectual in freeing us from the power of sin. As John explains in I John, a person who is born of God does not *practise* sin. She/he is not sinless, but her/his appetite for sin is diminished, and the appetite for righteousness is awakened. There is a new allegiance (Romans 6:18). The writer to the Hebrews concurs:

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:13-14)

To say that works do not save is not to say that works are not important. They are the evidence of salvation. Without them we will not feel assured; we will not be confident. Without the fruit of righteousness on what basis can we say we have truly believed? It is not the “sinner’s prayer”³⁴ that accesses eternal life. It is life-transforming faith. It is fruit-bearing faith, fruit produced in us through the Spirit. For what the Law could not achieve, the Spirit will. The Law was a guide; the Spirit is an Enabler.

Back to the question that was asked earlier. Why are there warnings to believers? Warnings are placed in the Word of God because we are expected to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Warnings are there because there is a penalty for not being obedient to the Law of Christ. The Father does chastise His children. But, it must be clearly stated that this is not eternal separation from Him. Warnings are there as a means of keeping us conscious of our responsibilities. We must remember sin affects the memory, and we are not yet sinless.

Christians should neither be doctrinal nor practical antinomians. Gert van den Brink defines practical antinomianism as “the practice of lawlessness, whereas ‘doctrinal antinomianism’ is—roughly stated—the theological system in which good works are radically

³⁴ In His parable of the Sower and the soil in Matthew 13, Jesus speaks of the rocky soil which represents “the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root” (vv. 20-21a). The good soil, however, represents “the man who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty” (v. 23).

excluded.”³⁵ There must be a prominent place for works in our theology. What must be clear, though, is that the place it occupies does not get us saved or keep us saved.

Conclusion

Many of those who claim that works are necessary for salvation have sincere concern that Christians persevere in their faith, living holy lives honouring to God. The mistake that they make is in assuming that fear of eternal damnation will make a difference. Experience should dispel this notion. So many who once fellowshipped in local churches have fallen into sin despite their own view that they could lose their salvation. Fear did not make the difference for them.

Others of us, who argue in favour of eternal security founded solely in the work of Christ, suggest that gratitude will cause the ‘saints’ to be faithful. Indeed, gratitude is important. How can we not be grateful for the sacrifice Christ has made on our behalf, taking unto Himself the wrath of God? As John Piper puts it, “gratitude is a beautiful and utterly indispensable Christian affection. No-one is saved who does not have it.”³⁶ But, he also makes a critical point: gratitude can lead to the debtor’s ethic and malfunction. We can try to repay God for his grace. By so doing we nullify grace.³⁷ If we began the race by faith, we should continue it by faith.³⁸

The idea that [many Christians] have of grace is this that their conversion and pardon are God’s work, but now in gratitude to God, it is their work to live as Christians and follow Jesus ... it was Jesus who drew thee when He spake “Come,” so it is Jesus who keeps thee when He says “Abide.”³⁹

Piper proposes that the greatest motivator to godliness is future grace.⁴⁰ By grace we are saved from beginning to end. As Christians

³⁵ Gert van den Brink, “Calvin, Witsius (1636-1708), and the English Antinomians”, *Church History & Religious Culture*, 91 (1/2) (2011), 229-240.

³⁶ John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living By Faith In ... Future Grace*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 1995, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 1-49.

³⁸ See Romans 1:17; Galatians 3

³⁹ Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, n.d.), 17-18; quoted in John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living By Faith In ... Future Grace*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 1995, 48.

⁴⁰ John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living By Faith*.

we would like to think that we love God without condition. But, even those who suffer tremendously for Christ's sake without any temporal benefits in sight, do so anticipating future reward.⁴¹ This is reasonable. The apostle Paul himself says if that if there is no resurrection from the dead, and "we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied (I Corinthians 15:19). And, we are not to be pitied because our hope is sure.

We are saved by grace through faith, not of works, so no-one can boast. All credit goes to Christ. We are His masterpiece, created in Christ to perform good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). All credit goes to Christ. To God be the glory. Amen.



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⁴¹ See Hebrews 11.