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**Sola Gratia and the
Judgmental Attitudes of Christians:
Implications for Pastoral Effectiveness**

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“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”
Mahatma Gandhi²

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See destinyfromthebeginning@hotmail.com.

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Introduction

One of the most frequently expressed criticisms of Christianity in modern times is that it cultivates moral scorn and divisiveness. These sentiments are essentially held in two schools of thought:

1. **First**, there are those who are deeply troubled by the judgmental attitudes of Christians and who believe that certain traditional doctrines and schools of thought are responsible for that. However, this conviction does not lead them to reject the Christian faith in toto.
2. **Secondly**, there are those who view Christianity as a judgmental religion in its essence. It naturally produces hateful and hypercritical people. They believe that Christianity or religious belief as a whole should be discarded as an outdated worldview of a past era in human evolution. In this article, we will address the first school of thought.

A. Personal Journey in Grace

1. My History in Seventh-day Adventism

Growing up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Caribbean, our denomination has affirmed the Reformation doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, and yet the assurance of salvation has proven to be an elusive congregational experience in the church’s history.³ In no small way, this elusiveness results from the difficulty of trying to hold together the doctrines of *sola fide* with the more traditional versions of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary/investigative judgment and its remnant eschatology.⁴ By definition, the remnant constitutes the saved amongst humanity. The defining mark of this group is that they manifest an intense degree of faithfulness and loyalty to God in the midst of a sin-enslaved world that persecutes them. In the final chapter of human history, the believers who remain faithful to the commandments of God, including the seventh-day Sabbath (Seventh-day Adventists), will be persecuted by the world governed by the anti-

³ That is, *sola fide*, “by faith alone”; and *sola gratia*, “by grace alone.”

⁴ A definition of the traditional doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary/investigative judgment may be found at the ministry for former Adventist established by Dale Ratzlaff, Life Assurance Ministries, See <http://lifeassuranceministries.com/investjudg.html>.

christ until Christ delivers his saints into eternal glory and judges the world at the second coming. As an adherent of traditional Seventh-day Adventism I viewed my faith as an indictment on Protestantism which had failed to complete the Reformation of the church by developing a robust doctrine of sanctification and rejection of the idolatrous practice of viewing Sunday as the Lord's Sabbath day.

This theology caused me deep anguish. Was I to think that every believer who attended church on Sunday was lost? Was I correct to believe that God's remnant would only consist of professing believers whose faithfulness was obvious and exceptional?

2. Realizing the Struggle between Grace and Duty

One lesson keenly learnt from my own ecclesial experience is the sobering reality that affirming the doctrine of "Righteousness by Faith," as we Adventists call it, does not secure an enduring and meaningful assurance of salvation. To make the point more generally, affirming the doctrines of *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *solo Christos* do not guarantee the eradication of legalism—given the fact that one's theology of grace has to give account for the warning passages in scripture and the reality of judgment according to works. Furthermore, attempting to affirm the unconditionality of grace in the midst of the frustration and angst of dealing with nominal and unremorseful professing believers is a task easier said than done.

3. Approaching a Balance Based upon God's Revelation

Without claiming any superior insight on the subject, my more reflective moments have led me to a train of thought regarding why so many of us desire to be grace filled and Christ centered but often end up being sectarian and judgmental. It seems to me that our failure to be a more gracious community is in part consequent upon the fact that our understanding of divine transcendence has not properly shaped our theologies of grace.⁵ We believe that through scripture, God has accommodated to our creaturely incapacity to know Him. His word enlightens our ignorance and permits us to make clear and certain (and perhaps at times even infallible) judgments about what the

⁵ See support of this in William Carl Placher's *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), esp. chapter 6, "The Domestication of Grace," 88–110. There indeed appears to be a relationship between the domestication of transcendence and the domestication of God's grace.

parameters and limits of God’s redemptive graces truly are, and what humans beings must and must not do in order to become the beneficiaries of God’s saving mercy. So, on the one hand, we affirm that God is unlike anything we know, that his ways are “above our ways,” incomprehensible, and that we cannot truly understand or fully grasp God’s essence.⁶ Yet, on the other hand, we believe that through God’s gracious self-revelation of his law and character, we can know God’s judgments and predict his actions. Consequently, our doctrine of divine transcendence has not deeply shaped our theology of the grace of God. In other words, saving grace is no longer an inscrutable mystery⁷

4. The Problem of Law and Idolatry

The Pauline Epistles and the Gospel narratives of Jesus have gifted to us a deep psychoanalytical insight into the way that we as human beings often engage in the idolatry of worshipping the law in the place of the law-giver.⁸

Any system of righteousness that is ultimately rooted in law will stir the very heart of man to rebel. This is the counterintuitive logic of the gospel. And one of the clearest ways in which the law has caused us as believers to rebel is through divisiveness and overly judgmental attitudes of exclusion (Gal 5:15). Testimony to this is found in Tony Richie’s article, “A Pentecostal Take on Islamophobia”:

Expulsion or banishment is at the core of the fallen human condition. Adam and Eve’s exile is decisive and definitive for us all. “Banished” (*ṣālah*) is the same language used of Abraham’s action that “sends away” Ishmael and other

⁶ See the article, “The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology,” Jonathan D. Jacobs; www.MarcSandersFoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Jacobs-Phil-Fundamentality-and-Apophatic-Theology.pdf. See also Karl Barth’s notion of God as, “wholly other” in *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, edited by Richard E. Burnett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 220–222. The term was first coined by Rudolf Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1958), but was later attributed to Barth for his role in developing the idea.

⁷ In Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan’s, eds., *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-first Century* (Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften; 2010), 45, the authors said: “Rahner believes that it is the anthropomorphic nature of the religion of this era, its abundance of man-made rules and regulations that make it difficult for people of the twentieth century to listen to, to believe in religion, and thus to have faith in God. Mystery is recognized as the missing link in Rahner’s world, but a mystery which is welcoming, some-what fathomable. Balance, as always is the key. Rahner is warning against a too facile attempt to explain all that is, for this is not what will lead us to God. This is an appeal to Christians to remember God in the midst of rules and regulations, to remember that faith is not built on law but on mystery.”

⁸ See for example, John 5:39 and Rom 10:1–10.

possible rivals to Isaac (Gen 21:14; 25:6). It describes the scapegoat that is expelled from the camp of Israel (Lev 16:10). Still stronger is “drove” (*gāraš*) in Genesis 3:24, which also describes God’s exile of Cain (4:14) and Sarah’s charge to Abraham to “get rid” of the slave girl Hagar with her son (21:10). It is the language of divorce and dispossession (e.g., Exod 33:2; Deut 33:27). Is it some small coincidence that these incidents involve irrational fear and implacable strife against the other? Perhaps deep in each human being resides an abominable instinct, arising out of fallen, sinful nature, which casts out and drives others away in twisted reenactment of their own haunting sense of exclusion, otherness, and alienation. Matthew’s Gospel teaches us that the danger of ultimate exclusion is not imaginary (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). But Jesus himself endured for us the darkness outside (Matt 22:53; 23:44; compare Heb 13:11, 13) and now all may stand before an open gate (Rev 21:25). If incessant anxiety over our innate sense of separation from God and each other is our damnation, then there is salvation too. Thus I agree with Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace*, on the essentiality of reconciliation for the reality of Christian salvation. Exclusivist tendencies often stem from unconscious psychological and sociological concerns over one’s own ultimate exclusion or inclusion. One who has the prerogative and power to exclude others does not see him/herself present among the excluded.⁹

Ritchie is typical of those striving to explain the ramifications of our fallen nature. Some tendencies to “exclude” certainly stem from our fallen nature and complicate our perceptions of God’s grace.

Chris Vlachos articulated well the problem of humanity and the law in his book, *The Law and the Knowledge of Good and Evil*.¹⁰ Vlachos focused on the law-critical statement of 1 Corinthians 15:56, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.” According to Vlachos, the law plays a “catalytic role” with regard to sin: i.e., while the law is not the cause of sin, it serves as a catalyst which exacerbates existing sin. For Paul, the catalytic function of the law was not only active at Sinai (Rom 5:20), but existed since Eden, where the prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge triggered lurking evil into action. By premising the catalytic role of the law in Eden, Paul was establishing the Edenic commandment-sin scenario as

⁹ Tony Ritchie, “A Pentecostal Take on Islamophobia,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* (Evangelicals and Islamophobia: Critical Voices and Constructive Proposals; Fall 2016), 40. See <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Evangelicals-and-Islamophobia-Fall-2016.pdf>.

¹⁰ Chris Alex Vlachos, *The Law and the Knowledge of Good and Evil: The Edenic Background of the Catalytic Operation of the Law in Paul* (Wipf and Stock, 2009). Vlachos also articulated this view in “Law, Sin, and Death: An Edenic Triad? An Examination with Reference to 1 Corinthians 15:56,” *JETS* 47, no. 2 (June 2004), 277–98.

See www.ETSJETS.org/files/JETS-PDFs/47/47-2/47-2-pp277-298_JETS.pdf.

archetypal: human failure occurs whenever the law encounters Adamic flesh. Such a theology of sin/law casts fresh light on Romans 6–7, where deliverance from the law occupies a central role in Paul’s discussion of sanctification. According to Vlachos, “If it were law that drew the serpent out of the bush, then it would be freedom from law that necessarily and inevitably de-fangs sin and leads to good works.”¹¹ Paradoxically, sin spawns in a “legal” climate (Rom 7:5), whereas righteousness flourishes in a “lawless” environment (Rom 7:6).¹²

B. Three Ways to a Higher Quality of Pastoral Care

1. Return to Transcendence

If we are to overcome our judgmental attitudes, we will have to find biblically grounded reasons for tempering our tendencies to hastily exclude professing believers from the family of God whenever their lives do not meet our approval. Given the course taken by this article, such biblical reasons can be found in nourishing our soteriology with a remedial dose of transcendence. The relationship between unfathomable grace and divine transcendence may be found in the dialogues between Moses and God in the Book of Exodus. In Exodus 3:14, at the scene of the burning bush, Moses asks God for His name. In response, God replies that, “I am that I am.” In further dialogue with Moses in Exodus 33, God accedes to Moses’ request to reveal His glory in a way that relates the Glory of God to God’s Name and Goodness. More particularly, God’s Name and Glory is revealed through His freedom to be merciful to whom He wills: “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Exod 33:19). On Exodus 33, O.T. scholar Peter J. Gentry states as follows:

In a chiasmic structure ‘A B A’ we have the word glory in verses 18 and 22 on either side of the explanation in verse 19: “I will cause my goodness to pass before you and proclaim my name.” This explanation reveals that the glory of Yahweh can be described or discussed under two categories: the name of

¹¹ Vlachos, *Law and the Knowledge*.

¹² Vlachos, *Law and the Knowledge*. See also the references to “law” in Gal 5:18–23.

Yahweh and the goodness of Yahweh. If we consider the initial request in v. 13, where Moses says “show me your way,” it would seem that the goodness of Yahweh in v. 19 is synonymous with the way of Yahweh in v. 13.

Exodus 33:13 show me your way
Exodus 33:18 show me your glory
Exodus 33:19 I will cause my goodness to pass
before you and proclaim my name
Exodus 33:22 when my glory passes by

We may conclude then that the glory of Yahweh can be described under two categories: the name of Yahweh and the way of Yahweh.... Yahweh says in v. 20, “you cannot see my face” and reiterates in v. 23, “you will see my back, but not my face.” The term “face” (פָּנֵי יְהוָה) here entails a different figure of speech from that used in v. 14. By means of anthropomorphism, an analogy is drawn between the knowledge one may have of a human by a frontal view in which one can behold the face and a view of the backside which does not reveal the person in the same way. Thus Yahweh is using this figure of speech to instruct Moses that as a human, he cannot have full knowledge of God, but he can nonetheless have a true knowledge, albeit a partial knowledge.

Exodus 33:20 “you cannot see my face”
Exodus 33:23 “you will see my back but not my face”¹³

In her lecture, “Naming God and the Techné of Language: Can we Name God Wrongly?” Cambridge theologian Janet M. Soskice also reflected on Moses’ encounter in dialogue with God in Exodus.¹⁴ She underlined the fact that God’s name—“I am who I am,” *ego eimi ho on*—had been turned into a metaphysical abstraction in some Christian schools of thought: mercy had been excluded from among the essential attributes of God (Exod 3:14). However, Soskice argues that *ego eimi ho on* should be more precisely read as, “I am with you and will be with you” (Exod 33:12–21). What God is in His eternal being we cannot know, but we can know God in whom He is for us. And who is God for us but the God of Mercy? Soskice references

¹³ Peter J. Gentry, “‘The Glory of God’: The Character of God’s Being and Way in the World: Some Reflections on a Key Biblical Theology Theme” *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (2016), 149–161; <http://equip.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/SBJT-20.1-Gentry-Gods-Being-Way.pdf>. Gentry raises an important question in this piece, “The revelation of the glory of Yahweh in Exodus 33–34 leaves the reader engulfed in mystery and creates a major tension in the storyline of Scripture. How can *hesed* and *’emet* describe the name or very being of God, since this Hebrew word-pair normally describes covenant relationships? A short answer is that the way God relates with His creation, e.g. in covenant, reflects and displays the nature of His being. In more abstract theological terms, God in His economy (i.e. what we see of His dealings in the world) is none other than God in His essence (i.e. how He is in Himself).”

¹⁴ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS2ESOb8KaI.

Walter Kasper's theological affirmation that through the Exodus dialogues between God and Moses, it is revealed that Mercy is the very Name of God not invented by man but given to us by God.¹⁵ Relating this insight to our discussion, if God has made His name and glory known to us through His freedom to have "mercy on whom He will," how can we use God's law to definitively shut each other out of the family of God? Would not this presume that we can see the Face of God contrary to the Exodus 33 narrative?

2. Emphasize Covenantal Relationship with God and His Faithfulness

Following from the above conversation on Exodus, we need to reconsider our covenant relationship with God as believers. For if, in some sense, we come to a partial knowledge of God's glory and God's name through His being in covenant with us, it begs this question: How do we understand our covenant relationship with God? In a gem of an article titled, "Covenant and Narrative, God and Time," Jeffrey J. Niehaus articulated that God has made covenants with humans which have been central to the progress of salvation history (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New covenants).¹⁶ The O.T. presents the divine covenants in a narrative structure in which all of God's covenants with humanity are conducive toward the new covenant. The new covenant is the one covenant that endures into eternity fulfilling whatever was required, hoped for, or promised in the earlier covenants which were in fact paving the way for the new and everlasting covenant in human time.

This raises a few interesting questions about the implications of biblical covenants. The O.T. covenants are patterned after that of the Suzerain vassal treaties common in the Ancient Near East. The Sinai Covenant (Exod 19–24; 32–34) is an example of such a suzerain-vassal treaty/covenant where much emphasis falls on the obligations of the vassal (Israel) to perform the will of the Suzerain (Yahweh); i.e, the vassal agrees to perform upon an oath to the suzerain. Failure

¹⁵ Cardinal Walter Kasper brought this point to life in his German publication on Mercy translated into English, *Mercy: the Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "Covenant and Narrative, God and Time," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, Vol. 3 (September 2010), 535–59. See www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/53/53-3/Niehaus_JETS_53-3_pp_535-559.pdf.

to pursue the obligations of the covenant would result in the nation (not just certain individuals) being laid open to the curses affixed to the covenant. On the other hand, compliance would guarantee the blessing mentioned in connection with rewards of obedience contained within that covenant.

The Noahic and Abrahamic covenants, and others like them, are not limited solely to the vassal's obligations (human obligation), but also entail unilateral obligations that the Suzerain (Yahweh) has freely entered into and has committed Himself to perform. What is peculiar (perhaps unique) about this type of covenant is that although it follows the Suzerain-vassal pattern, the emphasis is placed on the obligations of the Suzerain. As O.T. scholar David Noel Freedman writes concerning the Abrahamic covenant:

The covenant is formally of the suzerainty type, since the stipulations are imposed upon only one of the parties, who in turn is bound by oath. Strikingly, it is the suzerain who is obligated, not the vassal. The covenant is initiated by the suzerain, and is unconditional in the sense that no demands are imposed upon Abraham.¹⁷

The co-existence of these variations in the covenants creates a tension in scripture. For one thing, Israel was unable to keep its obligations to God under the Mosaic covenant and has been judged by God as deserving of the covenant's curses. Yet, God promised to fulfill His commitments to the Abrahamic covenant (and by extension, unfaithful Israel). So, on the one hand, we have Israel's breach of the Mosaic covenant which leaves the nation under the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy. Yet, however, through the Abrahamic covenant, God has promised to protect and preserve Israel without conditions. How can these two covenants stand together? Freedman answers that the tension is resolved by the new covenant itself:

In the new age of the covenant—the new spirit and the new life—the conflict between the two covenant types is resolved in reciprocal fulfillment. Yahweh's irreversible commitment to Israel flows into the blessings which he bestows on an obedient people who, through the power of his Spirit, fulfill all the requirements of the covenant.¹⁸

¹⁷ David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation," *Interpretation* 18 (1964), 425.

¹⁸ David Noel Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation, Vol. 1: Ancient Israelite History and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 178.

Freedman’s reasoning is that God’s faithfulness and enabling power are the cause and source of the believers’ covenant faithfulness; as such, God’s faithfulness and power are indispensable for affirming the doctrine of eternal security and the perseverance of the saints for many Baptist, Reformed and Evangelical theologians.¹⁹ It also provides a sound premise upon which a theology of *sola gratia* may be fashioned.²⁰

Yet, such grace-centered biblical and systematic theology does not and has not guaranteed grace-centered pastoral care. On many occasions throughout church history, the heirs of the Reformation, though affirming the assurance of salvation in *sola fide* and *sola gratia* have fallen into legalism. Take the Puritans as a case in point. Trevin Wax, Managing Editor of The Gospel Project for LifeWay Christian Resources, detailed in his article, “Beware the Puritan Paralysis,” the following about some forms of Puritan pietistic practice:

Though the Reformers sought to emphasize the assurance we can have because of God’s grace in election and salvation, their descendants sometimes undercut

¹⁹ For example in Gordon D. Fee’s *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996.), chapter 9, “Conversion: Staying In (Part 1) The Spirit and Pauline Ethics,” he said, “I grew up in a church where the buzz phrases ‘eternal security’ and ‘once saved, always saved’ were bad news. People who believed so, I was told, even if they did not intend it, encouraged ‘easy-believism’ and ‘cheap grace’; that is, people believed in Christ for salvation but failed to exhibit it in their lives. They were eternally secure, so why get uptight about how they lived? Only later did I learn that this language was a popular distortion of Calvin’s perseverance of the saints. Calvin believed (rightly so) that God enables his holy ones, his saints, to persevere to the end, and in that sense, they were secure-eternally. Unfortunately, what was sometimes advocated as Calvinism often did offer false security to unbelievers, people who wanted a passport to heaven without becoming citizens. Nothing could be further from Paul’s perspective. Salvation has to do with both getting in and staying in. To get saved means to be joined to the people of God by the Spirit; and to be saved means to live the life of heaven on earth, also by the Spirit—walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, sowing to the Spirit. The Spirit who implants the faith by which we believe (2 Cor 4:13) is the same Spirit whose fruit in our lives includes faith (Gal 5:22), meaning now ‘faithful walking in God’s ways.’ Merely optional righteousness is unthinkable. What does it mean, then, to live in the Christian community and in the world as the people of God? That is what ethics is all about, which is what this chapter is all about. To be sure, life in the Spirit means far more than just ethical behaviour. The whole of life under the new covenant is now lived in and by the Spirit, including worship, one’s relationship to God, and everyday life itself.”

²⁰ For an excellent work which defends the thesis that divine enablement is the basis of salvation in the N.T. corpus see Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark’s *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). This work seeks to answer the question, “Is the covenant relationship sustained by a sense of personal gratitude for God’s past gift of conversion—or is post-conversion faithfulness itself an ongoing gift from God?” The editors Talbert and Whitlark together with Scott J. Hafemann adhere to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Clifford A. Barbarick and Michael W. Martin may be classified as Arminians who like I. Howard Marshall take the assurance of salvation seriously.

the beauty of assurance by stressing the fruit of sanctification more than the fact of justification. Self-examination was a “descending into our own hearts” to root out every possible sinful tendency and desire. Beware the paralysis that comes from this type of introspection. If our goal is to discover, analyze, and root out every aspect of sinfulness in our hearts, then we will never come to the end of the task. Satan loves to take the tender conscience and stir up doubt of salvation, doubt of sanctification, and doubt of progression in holiness. Then, he turns the gaze of the introspective person inward, where the dark recesses of our hearts continue to lead to darker recesses still. Instead of living in the shining light of gospel truth, the gospel that dispels all this darkness and grants us a new heart, we travel deeper and deeper into the cavernous rooms of our remaining sin. Meanwhile, our missiological effectiveness is thwarted. We talk about grace, sing about grace, read about grace, and hear sermons about grace, but at the end of the day, we are paralyzed, not free.²¹

As Wax illustrates, a radical focus upon one’s failure to be absolutely holy in thought and practice can deeply undercut one’s assurance of salvation, and thereby undermine one’s belief in sola fide and sola gratia.

3. Acknowledge the Continuing Struggle with Sin Despite the Spirit’s Work in Covenant Relationship with God

At times, the practical result of affirming that the Spirit empowers genuine believers to fulfill the requirements of God’s law has been to restrict God’s saving grace to professing believers whose lives meet our own approval. However, if we are to truly return to God’s transcendence, it is incumbent upon us to interpret our salvation experience through the Christ event and not through introspective human reason. While we must strive to observe the work of the Spirit in our lives, our pneumatology must complement our Christology. In his monumental work, *The Doctrine of Justification*, James Buchanan made the salient point that one of the most subtle errors that diminishes the fruit of assurance which the Protestant doctrine of justification should bring is that of substituting the inner work of the Spirit for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us:

There is, perhaps, no more subtle or plausible error, on the subject of Justification, than that which makes it to rest on the indwelling presence, and the gracious work, of the Holy Spirit in the heart. It is a singularly refined form of

²¹ Trevin Wax, “Beware the Puritan Paralysis,” The Gospel Coalition (November 20, 2012). See <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/trevinwax/2012/11/20/beware-the-puritan-paralysis/>.

opposition to the doctrine of Justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ, for it merely substitutes the work of one divine Person for that of another; and it is plausible, because it seems to do homage to the doctrine of Grace, by ascribing to the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit the production of faith, and all the effects which are ascribed to it, whether these belong to our Justification or to our Sanctification. It is the more difficult to expose and refute error, when it presents itself in this apparently spiritual form, than when it comes before us in its grosser and more common shape, as a doctrine of justification by works, because it involves some great truths which are held as firmly by those who advocate, as by those who abjure, the Protestant doctrine of Justification. Yet, subtle and plausible as it is, and difficult as it may be to disentangle the error from the partial truth which is involved in it, nothing can be more unscriptural in itself, or more pernicious to the souls of men, than the substitution of the gracious work of the Spirit in us, for the vicarious work of Christ for us, as the ground of our pardon and acceptance with God; for if we are justified solely on account of what Christ did and suffered for us, while He was yet on the earth, we may rest, with entire confidence, on a work which has been already ‘finished’—on a righteousness which has been already wrought out, and already accepted of God on behalf of all who believe in His name,—and we may immediately receive, on the sure warrant of His word, the privilege of Justification as a free gift of God’s grace through Christ, and as the present privilege of every believer, so as at once to have ‘joy and peace in believing.’ Whereas, if we are justified on the ground of the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we are called to rest on a work, which, so far from being finished and accepted, is not even begun in the case of any unrenewed sinner; and which, when it is begun in the case of a believer, is incipient only,—often interrupted in its progress by declension and backsliding—marred and defiled by remaining sin—obscured and enveloped in doubt by clouds and thick darkness,—and never perfected in this life, even according to the low standard of a relaxed law, if that law is supposed to require any definite amount of personal holiness in heart and life. For these reasons, it is of the utmost practical importance, to conceive aright, both of the Mediatorial work of Christ, and of the internal work of His Spirit, in the relation which they bear to each other, under the scheme of Grace and Redemption.²²

In our efforts to guard the grace of God from licentious abuse, we sometimes interpret the new covenant as though it were a conditional contract: unless new covenant benefactors attain a certain observable degree of sanctification, their profession of faith is false or their salvation is lost. However, the new covenant is not a conditional

²² James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of its History in the Church and of its Exposition from Scripture, Lecture XV Justification; Its Relation to the Work of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867; Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006; 540 pp.), 387–88. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=PxDAAAAQAAJandprintsec=frontcoverandsource>.

contract. In the new covenant, we have the Son, who is as Isaiah prophesied, “A *covenant* of the people” (Isa 42:6, 49:8). John makes the same point when he says, “For the law was given through Moses; *grace and truth* came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17). In John 1:17, “grace and truth” (in Hebrew *hesed* and *’emet*) are shorthand for the whole nature of covenant (as a part-for-the-whole expression in the O.T.) and are now to be found in the Son, who in effect embodies the covenant, and thus also, God’s covenantal relationship with his people. The very God who is free to have mercy and compassion “on whom He will” in Himself embodies the new covenant! We must therefore exercise caution in reading the scriptures contractually and not in a covenantal fashion, for priority must be given to God’s grace (Rom 5:20).²³

This caution is necessary because the child of God still possesses his Adamic sin nature and needs the righteousness and mercy of Christ as much now as he did in his pre-conversion state. This truth has been ably educed by Greek scholar Daniel B. Wallace in his articles on Romans 3:21–26. In Romans 3:23, when Paul says that “all” have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we often take that verse as referring to man in his pre-conversion state. However, Wallace ably argues that the “all” of Romans 3:23 refers to believers only.²⁴ Therefore, Paul switches between the aorist (past) tense to the

²³ The difference between a contractual and a covenantal relationship with God was a key tenet of the theology of James B. Torrance and in recent times, by N.T. scholar Douglas Campbell in his *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

²⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, “What Does it Mean to be Justified? A Brief Exposition of Romans 3:21–26,” Part 1, <https://bible.org/article/what-does-it-mean-be-justified-brief-exposition-romans-321-26-part-1> (2007); “What Does it Mean to be Justified? A Brief Exposition of Romans 3:21–26,” Part 2, <https://bible.org/article/what-does-it-mean-be-justified-brief-exposition-romans-321-26-part-2> (2007). In part 1 of his article, Wallace argues, “Paul has just defined the ‘all’ in v 22: ‘all who believe.’ The same ‘all’ are most likely in view here too. Perhaps the reason that most interpreters see the groups as different is that Paul does not qualify the ‘all’ in v. 23, while he qualifies it in v. 22 (“all who believe”). Thus, two different ‘alls’ seem to be in view. However, it is typical of Paul and of Greek in general not to define the ‘all’ in the second mention. Greek is a more economical language than English and as such it does not need to repeat words and phrases as much as English does. As for Paul, his style is often to establish the meaning of the group in the first sentence, then simply keep the discussion with the ‘all’ for the rest. Verse 24 starts off with a participle in Greek; it is not a new sentence but is rather a subordinate clause to the preceding. (The NET Bible makes it start a new sentence but only because of the length and complexity of the Greek.) The implication? Those who are justified freely (v. 24) are the ‘all’ of v. 23. *If* the ‘all’ are *all* sinners, then everyone is justified. Salvation is universal, regardless of what one believes. But this view stands in direct contradiction with the testimony of the NT: ‘there is no other name under heaven by which people can be saved’; more specifically, Rom 3:22, ‘the righteousness of God comes... to all who believe.’ When Paul prays for his fellow Jews in Rom 9, he wishes that he could be sent to hell if that would save but one of them! Why would this even be contemplated if everyone is saved?”

present tense: “for all *have sinned* and *fall short* of the glory of God.” This tense change is significant. It indicates that all believers *have* sinned and *still continue* to fail to reach God through our own righteousness. *We are still totally depraved sinners!* “All have sinned and still continue to fall short.” How is such a motley crew to be saved? In part 2 of his article, Wallace continues, “How are we—whose past lives are summarized by sin and whose present lives are still mired in it—to be saved? Paul answers this in v. 3.24—‘being freely justified by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.’” Paul’s theological affirmation is that a man is saved on the same basis, both before and after conversion, “freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” because both sinner and saint suffer with the same sin condition and need the same kind of mercy now as we did before conversion.²⁵

It is for this reason that we must fashion our theology of grace in a manner that takes into account the mystery of God’s mercy and the continuing reality of sin in the lives of the redeemed. On the one hand, in Matthew 7:21, Jesus says that *not everyone who says* to me, “*Lord, Lord,*” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of the Father in heaven. However, in Matthew 13:8, Jesus also tells us that the seed which fell on good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. Now, there is evidence that even a thirty-fold harvest would have been a miraculous thing in ancient Palestine.²⁶ One might therefore argue that all believers must manifest a miraculously exorbitant degree of good works in order for their salvation to be genuine. But can we honestly trust ourselves to distinguish between a false believer and a genuine believer who is producing a thirty-fold harvest?

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13:24–30; 36–43 gives us just that sort of caution. In the Pauline Epistles we see the vice lists (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–5), and hear that those who practice such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God. The warnings are sober and must be heeded by all. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 6:15–20 Paul acknowledges that some believers have fallen into the

²⁵ Wallace, “What Does it Mean,” Part 2.

²⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 129, fn. 42. See R. K. McIver, “One Hundred-fold Yield—Miraculous or Mundane? Matthew 13:8, 23; Mark 4:8, 20; Luke 8:8,” *New Testament Studies* 40, no. 4 (October 1994): 606–8.

kind of sexual sin that is mentioned in the vice list (6:9–10), and yet the Apostle appeals to their new identity and union with Christ as the reason to flee such sins. In Galatians, Paul’s acknowledges that believers who desire to do good wrestle with their sin nature (Gal 5:13–18) and may be weak and in need of a fellow brother to aid them (Gal 6:1–2). In Ephesians 4:30, Paul acknowledges that believers may grieve the Spirit by which they are sealed till the day of redemption. In the Book of James, an epistle written to show that genuine faith is a faith that produces works, the author uses Rahab as an exemplar of saving faith while she is still identified with the lifestyle of a harlot! In Hebrews 12:14, we are called to pursue peace with all men and holiness without which no one shall see the Lord. Yet, the Hebrew Epistle reminds us that we all need the chastening love of God to produce that fruit (Heb 12:6–11).

On 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10, N.T. scholar Richard H. Bell argued for the assurance of salvation despite our moral lapses:

Paul is therefore not saying in 5:10 that whether we are alive or dead at the second coming we will be with Christ (even though he believed this was the case as 1 Thess 4:13–17 makes clear). His point in 5:9–10 is quite different. The meaning of the Greek verbs suggest the following. God has destined us not for wrath (i.e. not for condemnation) but for salvation. This is achieved through Jesus Christ who died for us. The consequence is that whether we are morally awake or morally asleep we may live with him. This is assurance indeed. Our salvation does not depend on ourselves. It depends entirely on God. All of us, if we are honest, know those times when we are “morally asleep.” God wants us to do good works. That is clear in Paul and clear in the teaching of the Reformers. But our salvation does not depend on good works. Even in those times when we are morally asleep we can be assured of our salvation.²⁷

Dispensationalist theologian, Charles Caldwell Ryrie gave a very balanced view on the subject of assurance of salvation and works as the evidence of the new birth in his now near classic *So Great Salvation*:

²⁷ Richard H. Bell, “Salvation from the Wrath to Come: An Exposition of Romans 5:9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:9,” *Testamentum Imperium* 1, (2005-2007), 5. The view espoused by Bell on which my argument relies appears to be the minority view of the interpretation of the text. See www.PreciousHeart.net/ti/2007/003_07_Bell_Romans_5_1Thess_5.pdf.

Another able defense of the minority view is given by Thomas R. Edgar in, “Lethargic or Dead in 1 Thessalonians 5:10?” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6, no. 4 (October–December 2000). See http://chafer.nextmeta.com/files/v6n4_3.pdf.

Every Christian will bear spiritual fruit. Somewhere, sometime, somehow. Otherwise that person is not a believer.... Having said that, some caveats, or cautions, are in order. First, this does not mean that a believer will always be fruitful. Certainly we can admit that if there can be hours and days when a believer can be unfruitful, then why may there not also be months and even years when he can be in that same condition? Paul exhorted believers to engage in good works so they would not be unfruitful (Titus 3:14). Peter also exhorted believers to add the qualities of Christian character to their faith lest they be unfruitful (2 Pet 1:8). Obviously, both of those passages indicate that a true believer might *be* unfruitful. And the simple fact that both Paul and Peter exhort believers to be fruitful shows that believers are not always fruitful. Second, this does not mean that a certain person's fruit will necessarily be outwardly evident. Even if I know the person and have some regular contact with him, I still may not see his fruit. Indeed, I might even have legitimate grounds for wondering if he is a believer because I have not seen fruit. His fruit may be very private or erratic, but the fact that I do not see it does not mean it is not there. Third, my understanding of what fruit is and therefore what I expect others to bear may be faulty and/or incomplete. It is all too easy to have a mental list of spiritual fruit and to conclude that if someone does not produce what is on my list that he or she is not a believer. But the reality is that most lists that we human beings devise are too short, too selective, too prejudiced, and often extrabiblical. God likely has a much more accurate and longer list than most of us do. Nevertheless, every Christian will bear fruit; otherwise he or she is not a true believer. In speaking about the judgment seat of Christ, Paul says unequivocally that every believer will have praise come to him from God (1 Cor 4:5).²⁸

Heeding Ryrie's wise insight, our grace should outweigh our judgment.

Conclusion on Our Pastoral Effectiveness

A return to a reliance on God's transcendence and the mystery of grace would enhance the field of pastoral theology! For one thing, it would compel us to deeply come to terms with the outrageous fact that we worship a God who desires a certain kind of obedience to His Majesty - which is, above all, a loyalty rooted in love (Jer 31:33-34; 32:40; Gal 5:6; 1 John 4:18). This kind of obedience cannot be nurtured if we readily retreat to the warning passages of scripture each time that a believer's life disappoints us. We therefore have to be more patient, gracious, and prayerfully reflective in the way in which we seek to foster sanctification, knowing all too well that genuine

²⁸ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Moody, 1977; Victor, 1989), 41-42 of chapter 5.

believers can and do struggle with sin.²⁹ This could only come from affirming a gospel message that gives priority to the mercy of God and therein lies the best way to enrich our pastoral effectiveness - a rejuvenated gospel of mercy.

In conclusion, if we as believers become more gracious in the way in which we address sin within the community of grace, bearing in mind our own depravity, there is a greater likelihood that that gracious encounter in community will spill over to the unbeliever (Luke 7:36–50, esp. 47). Finally, we would be equipped with a more coherent message and lifestyle in an age where pastoral theology, Christian living, and apologetics must go hand in hand.

Soli Deo Gloria!



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

²⁹ See Steven L. Porter's article, "The Gradual Nature of Sanctification: Σάπξ as Habituated, Relational Resistance to the Spirit," <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-gradual-nature-of-sanctification-as-habituated-relational-resistance-to>.