

**Journal of the**  
**GRACE**  
**EVANGELICAL SOCIETY**

*“Faith Alone in Christ Alone”*

---

**VOLUME 17      AUTUMN 2004      NUMBER 33**

---

<b>A Review of John MacArthur’s <i>Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus</i></b> EDITOR	<b>3-9</b>
<b>Soteriological Concerns with Bauer’s Greek Lexicon</b> MICHAEL D. MAKIDON	<b>11-18</b>
<b>TULIP: A Free Grace Perspective Part 4: Irresistible Grace</b> ANTHONY B. BADGER	<b>19-40</b>
<b><i>The Da Vinci Code</i> Phenomenon: A Brief Overview and Response</b> J.B. HIXSON	<b>41-48</b>
Grace in the Arts: <b>Mark Twain: A Bitter Battle with God</b> JAMES A. TOWNSEND	<b>49-76</b>
<b>Book Reviews</b>	<b>77-104</b>
<b>Periodical Reviews</b>	<b>105-111</b>

**Journal of the  
GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY**

Published Semiannually by GES

Editor

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Production

**Michael Makidon**

**Manuscripts, periodical and book reviews, and other communications** should be addressed to Michael Makidon, GES, P.O. Box 155018, Irving TX 75015-5018.

**Journal subscriptions, renewals, and changes of address** should be sent to the Grace Evangelical Society, P.O. Box 155018, Irving, TX 75015-5018. You may call us at 972.257.1160, fax to 972.255.3884, or email to [mike@faithalone.org](mailto:mike@faithalone.org). Subscription Rates: single copy, \$9.25 (U.S.); 1 year, \$18.50; 2 years, \$35.00; 3 years, \$49.50; 4 years, \$62.00 (\$13.50 per year for active full-time student members). Please add \$2.50 per year for shipping to Mexico and Canada and \$6.50 per year for all other international shipping. Members of GES receive the Journal at no additional charge beyond the membership dues.

**Purpose:** The Grace Evangelical Society was formed “to promote the clear proclamation of God’s free salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, which is properly correlated with and distinguished from issues related to discipleship.”

**Statement of Faith:** “Jesus Christ, God incarnate, paid the full penalty for man’s sin when He died on the Cross of Calvary. Any person who, in simple faith, trusts in the risen Christ as his or her only hope of heaven, refusing to trust in anything else, receives the gift of eternal life which, once granted, can never be lost.”

---

Third-class postage has been paid at Dallas, Texas. Postmaster: Send address changes to Grace Evangelical Society, P.O. Box 155018, Irving, TX 75015-5018.

---

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

©2004 Grace Evangelical Society

# **A REVIEW OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S *HARD TO BELIEVE: THE HIGH COST AND INFINITE VALUE OF FOLLOWING JESUS***

**ROBERT N. WILKIN**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, Texas

## I. INTRODUCTION

John MacArthur is the author of scores of books and commentaries, Pastor of Grace Community Church in Southern California, which averages 7000-9000 in attendance on any given Sunday, Radio preacher with the program *Grace to You* heard on thousands of stations in North and South America, as well as Europe, President of The Master's College and The Master's Seminary, and popular conference speaker.

A few years back I visited the *Grace to You* headquarters and spent several hours talking with Dr. Phil Johnson, the Executive Director of that ministry. During that time John MacArthur stopped by and we spoke briefly. He is a people person who has lots of charisma. In addition, as this and many of his other books attest, he boldly speaks what he is convinced is true, whether it is popular or not.

In this case, it appears that MacArthur wrongly thinks that what he is saying is a view held by a very small minority of people in Evangelicalism. The back cover has the following words in all caps at the top:

THERE IS NO USER-FRIENDLY, SEEKER-SENSITIVE  
GOSPEL. THERE IS ONLY THE TRUTH.

I believe that MacArthur is wrong in thinking his view is politically incorrect. In reality, I believe what he is saying is essentially what the vast majority of Evangelicals believe. While most do not state the case as strongly as he does, the truth is, most today do not believe in justification by faith alone. Most would indeed agree that it is *hard to believe*.

## II. THE THESIS OF THIS BOOK: BELIEVING IS FOLLOWING JESUS AND THAT IS HARD

The point of this book is well captured in the title and subtitle, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus*. MacArthur is convinced that it is hard to believe in Jesus. The reason it is hard is because he views belief in Jesus as not merely being convinced that He gives eternal life to the one who believes in Him. Rather, believing in Jesus is following Him. And following Jesus is said to be costly in Scripture.

The astute reader would wonder, then, about following Jesus. Is that not something that occurs *over time*? If so, don't the title and subtitle imply that one doesn't believe at a point in time, but instead over the course of a life of following Jesus?

As surprising as it might seem, that does indeed appear to be what MacArthur now believes. I will give evidence of that below.

## III. JUSTIFICATION IS NOT BY SIMPLE FAITH

The author strongly advocates justification by faith alone elsewhere in his books and sermons. And I'm convinced that even now he still would formally acknowledge that he believes that doctrine. However, I was only able to find a single direct reference to that doctrine (p. 187). By *direct reference* I mean a place where he mentions the phrase "justification by faith alone."

I also found a number of places where the author indicates that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. However, in all of these places the author is careful to indicate that this "faith" includes repentance, obedience, and surrender. For example, MacArthur writes, "Salvation is giving up your life and embracing His. It is taking Christ by faith, acknowledging the reality of who He is and what He did."<sup>1</sup> However, if you notice, even here where he says that salvation "is taking Christ by faith," we do not have anything that implies that this is faith *alone*. Notice that this is preceded by "salvation is giving up your life and embracing His."

Here's another example. "I pray that in Your grace, You would save, before it is too late, any who have been deceived into thinking they're

---

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003), 178.

true believers without any passion for the worship of the God and Savior in whom they say they believe.”<sup>2</sup> Here worship is somehow part of believing. Indeed, he goes on in that paragraph to say, “Lest the day come when, like the people of John 6:66, they walk no more with Him, and like Judas, they go to the place of everlasting judgment reserved for such traitors.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, “true” believing in Jesus includes persevering in one’s walk with Him.

Similarly, “The Bible clearly tells us that salvation comes through believing in Christ.”<sup>4</sup> This is in a chapter dealing with evangelism. But there is nothing in that context that indicates that simply by believing some facts about Jesus one is born again. Indeed, in the immediately preceding context MacArthur writes, “It’s absolutely critical that the world not only hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that people understand it accurately and believe it absolutely.”<sup>5</sup> Two things should be noted here. First, the accurate understanding of the gospel is, in MacArthur’s view, recognizing that it is hard to believe and that believing is following Christ to the end. Second, this gospel must be believed *absolutely*. In light of the entire book, that suggests a total dedication to Jesus and worship of and service for Him.

Speaking of “false Christians,” the author says, “They had no interest in repentance or obedience or submission (which, by the way, is why you have to preach repentance, obedience, and submission).”<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere does MacArthur attempt to explain how justification can be by faith alone, and yet also be by repentance, obedience, and surrender. If justification requires more than faith, then it is not by faith alone.

#### IV. TRUE FOLLOWING IS WHOLEHEARTED, SELFLESS, AND ENDURING

There are several chapters in this book which attempt to make as clear as possible what a “true follower” of Jesus is. For if believing is following, then we need to know what following Jesus looks like.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 175.

MacArthur realizes that Jesus had followers who didn't believe in Him. So in one sense his entire thesis makes no sense. For if believing is following then all who follow are believers.

This is where the author pulls out lots of adjectives. He speaks of "true disciples,"<sup>7</sup> "shallow followers,"<sup>8</sup> "superficial disciples,"<sup>9</sup> and "temporary followers."<sup>10</sup>

One would think that the author would acknowledge that if one has to follow his whole life and, not only follow, but follow deeply so as to be a profound disciple, then it would be impossible to know where you or anyone else is going until death. Yet MacArthur feels it is important to cling to the possibility of assurance.

In the chapters on "Traitors to the Faith," he writes:

Look at people who claim to be Christians, and see how deeply they worship the Lord. See how they sing the songs. Ask them what their prayer lives are like. How important is it for them to be in church on the Lord's Day? Is Jesus Christ the love of their lives? Is it obvious?

You can tell, if you look close enough. True believers show a deep humility, a sense of genuine respect for and awe of Jesus Christ. Are they marked by adoring wonder?<sup>11</sup>

I've not seen instructions like this before. I've seen lists to determine if you yourself are regenerate. But here is a foolproof way of telling, if you look close enough, who are born again and who are not.

Frankly, I think the author does not expect us to take him literally here. If that were the case, then we could grant others assurance, and this is something he tells us elsewhere we can never do. In addition, if followers must endure to be genuinely saved followers, how could I observe lifelong followers of Christ when they are still alive and potentially have years or decades left to live? Surely it is possible that they might cease following and hence prove to be what the author calls "temporary follower[s]"?

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 168, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 169.

## V. A LINEAR VIEW OF CONVERSION?

As mentioned above, MacArthur in this book seems to be saying that a person is born again over the course of his life and not at a point in time. I say “seems to be saying” because there are places in the book where he implies that justification occurs at a point in time. Yet there are other places where the author clearly states that justification is a lifelong process.

Consider the following statement:

Don't believe anyone who says it's easy to become a Christian. Salvation for sinners cost God His own Son; it cost God's Son His life, and it'll cost you the same thing. Salvation isn't the result of an intellectual exercise. *It comes from a life lived in obedience and service to Christ as revealed in the Scripture; it's the fruit of actions, not intentions.* There's no room for passive spectators: words without actions are empty and futile. Remember that what John saw was a Book of Life, not a Book of Intellectual Musings. *The life we live, not the words we speak, determines our eternal destiny.*<sup>12</sup>

If by “salvation” MacArthur means justification, which is clear contextually, then he is saying justification does not come until one has lived obediently! Note that this salvation is “the fruit of actions.” In other words, the salvation comes after the actions, not before. The expression “fruit of actions” clearly means that you don't have the fruit, the salvation, until you have the actions, the works. Note too that our eternal destiny is determined by “the life we live.” Thus until life has been lived, one's eternal destiny is still in doubt.

He writes elsewhere:

Entrance into the kingdom requires earnest endeavor, untiring energy, and utmost exertion, because Satan is mighty, his demons are powerful, and sin holds us fast. God can break that hold and free our hearts to respond. The kingdom is not for weaklings and compromisers; it is not for the half-committed, the lovers of the world, or the shallow disciples who want to hold on to the stuff that perishes. The kingdom is for those

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 93.

who are willing to affirm their desperate need for salvation from sin and seize the offer of grace.<sup>13</sup>

Admittedly the last sentence seems to imply justification at a point in time. But what of the sentences which precede it? To enter the kingdom requires three Es: earnest *endeavor*, untiring *energy*, and utmost *exertion*. Clearly the endeavor, energy, and exertion are not point-in-time events. They must occur over time. This is clear in that he says “*untiring energy*” is a condition for kingdom entrance. It is also important to see that even commitment is not enough. The “half-committed” won’t make it into the Kingdom. Only the fully committed over the course of their whole life will make it into the Kingdom.

It is widely agreed that Martin Luther held to a linear view of conversion. It seems that MacArthur has now adopted that view. Certainly that fits the view of assurance found in his other writings. One must continually look at his works to see how likely it is that he is going to make it. But, since any of us can fall away in the future, this assurance can not be certain until one dies.

## VI. WHO’S NOT SURE WHAT THE GOSPEL IS?

MacArthur indicts the Free Grace crowd for something that is true of himself. He has a great discussion of the fact that people can’t come to faith until they know what the gospel is.<sup>14</sup> He says, rightly, that this is one of Satan’s favorite strategies.

Then he goes on to indicate what the gospel message includes. He mentions making Jesus Lord of one’s life, faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone, repentance from sin, and the substitutionary atonement. The funny thing is that while he claims that we in the Free Grace camp have “fuzzy faith,” his own explanation of what is required to get into the Kingdom is exceedingly fuzzy. How can kingdom entrance be by faith alone in Christ alone and yet also require making Christ Lord of one’s life and turning from sins? How can it require only faith and yet also earnest *endeavor*, untiring *energy*, and utmost *exertion*?

And in what sense is the issue what must be *believed* if the heart of the issue concerns our *works*? A careful reading of this book shows that the author himself is not sure what the gospel is. He hopes that his

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 187-88.



readers will believe enough, commit enough, follow enough, and work hard enough for long enough in order to make it into the Kingdom. He doesn't want anyone to be a weakling who goes to hell because he failed to be strong enough in his devotion to Christ. Sadly, he has no way of knowing, contrary to his suggestion elsewhere as noted above, who will endure to the end and make it into the Kingdom.

## VII. CONCLUSION

*Hard to Believe* is, frankly, hard to believe. As one who has followed the writings of MacArthur since 1988, I find this book to be a somewhat radical departure for him. While we find the same calls for commitment and repentance and obedience, now we find that salvation comes from a life lived in obedience and service. This we have not seen from this author before. Now we find direct statements indicating that untiring energy, exertion, and endeavor are required.

The very title is a departure. Before MacArthur would accuse the Grace position of being *easy believism*, but he never dared suggest the obvious—that his position can actually rightly be described as *hard believism*. But with this book we now have a respected evangelical leader saying that belief itself is hard. And he says this is so not because the things to be believed are so difficult to accept, but because in his view saving faith is much more than facts to believe. Saving faith is a life of following Christ. It is hard work.

I find it ironic that one of the great modern-day opponents of works salvation is nonetheless himself now advocating works salvation.

This is a book which I believe every pastor and church leader should read and discuss. *JOTGES* readers will almost certainly want to read this book. If *The Gospel According to Jesus* moved you to greater fervor for sharing the grace gospel, *Hard to Believe* will raise that fervor to the red line. I suggest you read this book in small snatches. Otherwise you might find you can't sleep at night because of all the adrenaline rushing through your veins.

# SOTERIOLOGICAL CONCERNS WITH BAUER'S GREEK LEXICON

**MICHAEL D. MAKIDON**

Director of Publications  
Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, Texas

## I. INTRODUCTION

A good dictionary not only tells you what the range of meaning for a given word is, it also provides examples of the term's usage over a cross-section of literature. All who study the Bible are especially grateful to have dictionaries, or lexicons, which do just that.

While there are a number of dictionaries for the Greek NT,<sup>1</sup> one has stood out—*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Erwin Preuschen first published the German edition in 1910; however, during his second revision he was met with an untimely death. Walter Bauer continued Preuschen's work, publishing a second edition. Finally, Bauer published the third edition in 1937 with his name alone on the title page. He would later revise his work printing three more editions.

The first English edition (BAG) was printed in 1957 while Bauer was completing his fifth revision. Thus, it was based on the fourth German edition.

In 1979, after twenty-two years of silence, the University of Chicago published the second English edition of Bauer's Greek Lexicon (BAGD),<sup>2</sup> which was based on Bauer's fifth German edition. It has since served as the standard Greek lexicon for pastors, teachers, and scholars

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethelbert William Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, 8th ed. (London: Lamp Press, 1957); *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, ed. Harold Keeling Moulton, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); and *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Barclay Moon Newman, Jr. (London: United Bible Societies, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, eds. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

who teach the NT from its original language. With careful lexical and semantic descriptions, the second edition has served as a solid tool for understanding the usages of Koine Greek words.

In 2000 a third edition (BDAG) was printed—self-described as “revised and edited by Frederick William Danker based on Walter Bauer’s”<sup>3</sup> 6th German edition and the previous English editions (BAG 1957 and BAGD 1979).

Most assume that since Danker was involved in the second and third editions that the latter edition has not seen significant change. However, a recent article by Vern S. Poythress in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*<sup>4</sup> demonstrates that Danker has been greatly affected by political factors, revealing the need to take a focused look at this new edition in other areas of study as well. This article will compare and evaluate Danker’s revisions of three entries in BAGD that are of particular interest to soteriology.

## II. TO BELIEVE OR TRUST (*PISTEUŌ*)

Two significant changes between BAGD and BDAG occur under the word “to believe” (*pisteuō*).

BAGD offers several glosses: 1) Believe; 2) Trust; 3) To be convinced; 4) Entrust; and 5) Have confidence. With almost two pages of examples, it overwhelmingly reaffirms the biblical usage of *pisteuō*—to trust or believe in someone or something.

BDAG presents much of the same material as BAGD. For the majority of its discussion, the third edition remains equally clear. Nonetheless, a little leaven can ruin a whole batch of bread.

The first major change is the title and definition of section 2:

**BAGD** – *believe (in), trust* of religious belief in a special sense, as faith in the Divinity that lays special emphasis on

<sup>3</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), iii.

<sup>4</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “How Have Inclusiveness and Tolerance Affected the Bauer-Danker Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (December 2003): 577-88. Poythress demonstrates through quotes by Danker in the foreword and in individual entries that BDAG has been adversely affected by inclusiveness and tolerance.

trust in his power and his nearness to help, in addition to being convinced that he exists and that his revelations or disclosures are true. In our literature God and Christ are objects of this faith.<sup>5</sup>

**BDAG** – To entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence, *believe (in), trust, with implication of total commitment to the one who is trusted.* In our literature God and Christ are objects of this type of faith that relies on their power and nearness to help, in addition to being convinced that their revelations or disclosures are true.<sup>6</sup>

Danker has blended the two concepts of belief and commitment into one. The second major change is Danker's explanation in section 2b:

**BAGD** – (*oi*) *pisteusantes (those) who became Christians, (the) Christians, believers* Ac 2:44; 4:32; 1 Th 1:10a; 2 Cl 2:3; Hs 9, 19, 1.<sup>7</sup>

**BDAG** – (*oi*) *pisteusantes (those) who made their commitment = (those) who became believers, (the) Christians,* Ac 2:44 v.1.; 4:32; 2 Th 1:10a; 2 Cl 2:3; Hs 9, 19, 1.<sup>8</sup>

For good exegetical reasons, BAGD did not contain the addition “(those) who made their commitment,” which Danker equates with the phrase “(those) who became believers.” This is clearly a theological bias rather than a semantic or lexical decision.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> BAGD, “*pisteuō*,” 661.

<sup>6</sup> BDAG, “*pisteuō*,” 817, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> BAGD, “*pisteuō*,” 661.

<sup>8</sup> BDAG, 817.

<sup>9</sup> Although the verbs *to believe* and *to commit* do slightly overlap in meaning, they are generally two lexically different concepts. When one believes, he himself enters into the state of trust in something or someone. When one commits something to someone else, he trusts himself or another object to that person. While one can commit his eternal destiny to Christ (i.e., trust Him for eternal life), Christians generally speak of committing their life to Christ (i.e., deciding to follow Christ in obedience). The English word *commit* can employ either nuance. Unfortunately, Danker is not abundantly clear.

One of the texts Danker cites in support of this addition is Acts 2:44. Let's compare the NKJV versus an interpretive translation of vv 44-45 using Danker's concept of commitment:

**NKJV** – Now all who believed (*oi pisteuontes*)<sup>10</sup> were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

**Hypothetical Danker Version** – Now all who *made their commitment* were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

The second hypothetical translation, which employs Danker's view, is decidedly biased. It looks as if Luke was merely talking about people who were committed to each other. Danker has made an interpretive decision that is lexically unsupported. What Danker has done is import his theology into the lexical definition of *pisteuō*. This is not the job of a lexicographer—even a good translator should avoid this practice.

It is clear that these individuals, who were described as believers, were also committed to each other (vv 44b-45). Yet, to import a contextual concept into the lexical meaning of the verb *to believe* is truly biased translation, which hides the meaning of the verb *pisteuō* and Luke's stated intention—to describe them as believers. After all, he used the verb *proskartereō* (to be devoted or committed) in v 42. He could have easily used this verb once again, making an emphatic parallel.

If I wrote a letter to a Christian friend and said that there were believers in my church that fixed my plumbing, would the letter convey the same meaning if I merely said that plumbers came and did plumbing work at my house? Not all plumbers believe in Christ and not all believers are plumbers. For this reason, Luke specifically identifies the individuals in Acts 2:44 as believers who were also committed (v 42).

Danker also cites 2 Thess 1:10a as support for this gloss. Paul describes Christ's second coming as, "when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among *all those who believe*" (emphasis added). For Danker to equate *believing* with *committing*

---

<sup>10</sup> Literally "the believing ones."

further demonstrates his theological bias. These are clearly two different concepts.

### III. TO BE DECLARED RIGHTEOUS (*DIKAIŌ*)

BDAG's exposition of *dikaioō* is longer than that of BAGD due to some added material:

**BAGD** – of God's activity Rom 3:26, 30; 4:5 (on *dikaioun ton asebeē* cf. Ex 23:7; Is 5:23); 8:30, 22 (Is 50:8); Gal 3:8; Dg 9:5. For the view (held since Chrysostom) that *dikaioō* in these and other passages means "make right" see Goodspeed 143-6, JBL 73, 54, 86-91.<sup>11</sup>

**BDAG** – *dikaioō ergois* by (on the basis of) *works, by what one does* 1 Cl 30:3; cp. Js 2:21, 24f (***ergon 1a* and *pistis 2dδ***); *di eautōn dikaioō* by *oneself = as a result of one's own accomplishments* 1 Cl 32:4. (cp. *kata nomon* Hippol., Ref. 7, 34, 1).—Since Paul views God's justifying action in close connection with the power of Christ's resurrection, there is sometimes no clear distinction between the justifying action of acquittal and the gift of new life through the Holy Spirit as God's activity **in promoting uprightness in believers**. Passages of this nature include Ro 3:26, 30; 4:5...<sup>12</sup>

Given this usage of *to be declared righteous*, it is clear that for Danker justification and the promotion of "uprightness" are one and the same. The reference to *ergon* (1a) and *pistis* (2dδ) will provide further clarification. While Danker has not made any changes to these entries, the significance lies in the fact that they have been newly linked to *dikaioō*.

For the word *ergon* under "that which displays itself in activity of any kind, *deed, action*" (1a), BDAG states:

A similar contrast between the *poiētēs ergou* *doer who acts* and the *forgetful hearer* Jas 1:25, and between *erga* and a *pistis* that amounts to nothing more than a verbal statement 2:14–26.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> BAGD, "*dikaioō*," 197.

<sup>12</sup> BDAG, "*dikaioō*," 249.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., "*ergon*," 390.

This reference to righteousness further demonstrates Danker's view that justification cannot be separated from works.

Under the word *pistis* section 2dδ "state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, *trust, confidence, faith*," BDAG notes:

*faith* as fidelity to Christian teaching. This point of view calls for *erga* as well as the kind of *pistis* that represents only one side of true piety: Js 2:14ab, 17, 18abc, 20, 22ab, 24, 26 (*ergon* 1a); Hv 3, 6, 5; s 8, 9, 1ab.<sup>14</sup>

If there was any doubt what Danker meant by *commitment* in the previous section, this entry should clear it up. Faith under section 2dδ is defined as faithfulness to Christian teaching, which calls for work as well as faith. In Danker's view, there is a direct relation between justification (which combines God's acquittal of man and the Holy Spirit's work of bringing uprightness [faithfulness] in those He justifies), faith (fidelity or faithfulness to Christian teaching, which calls for work), and works, which cannot be separated from faith.

While neither the concepts of faith nor works were clear in BAGD, righteousness has been immersed in works in BDAG. This is a grave trend.

#### IV. TO DISOBEY, DISBELIEVE (*APEITHEŌ*)

The apostle John wrote,

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God...He who believes [*ho pisteuōn*] in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe (*ho apeithōn*) the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:18, 36).

It is clear in John 3 that those who believe have everlasting life but those who don't are condemned. Interestingly, John uses the verb *apeitheō* (to disobey, disbelieve) in v 36a in contrast to *pisteuō* (to believe) in v 36b. The following is BAGD's explanation:

**BAGD** – since, in the view of the early Christians, the supreme disobedience was a refusal to believe their gospel,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., "*pistis*," 820.

*apeitheō* may be restricted in some passages to the meaning *disbelieve, be an unbeliever*. This sense, though greatly disputed (it is not found outside our literature), seems most probable in J 3:36; Ac 14:2; 19:9; Ro 15:31, and only slightly less probable in Ro 2:8; 1 Pt 2:8; 3:1, perhaps also vs. 20; 4:17; IMg 8:2.<sup>15</sup>

Disagreeing with the previous version, Danker revised this paragraph to read:

**BDAG** – In a number of passages NRSV and REB [New Revised Standard Version and Revised English Bible], among others, with less probability render *apeitheō* “disbelieve” or an equivalent.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, John 3:36 and Acts 14:2 clearly juxtapose belief and disobedience (disbelief). Acts 19:9 has a clear contrast as well. Luke writes,

And he [Paul] went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, *reasoning* and *persuading* concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were *hardened* and did *not believe* [*ēpeithoun*], but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-9, emphasis added).

Luke's two contrasts are clearly evident (reasoning/hardened and persuading/disbelieving). If one will not respond to *reasoning*, he is *hardened*. If one will not be *persuaded*, he is *disbelieving* (disobedient to the message of eternal life).

## V. CONCLUSION

The job of a lexicographer is an arduous task. He first must compile the various usages of a word and then sort them into categories. His job is not merely to supply definitions but usages, which are demonstrated in their respective contexts. A lexicon serves as a tool for theologians and exegetes. Therefore, it should include raw data in need of interpretation.

For the most part, those who teach the NT from the original language have come to trust Walter Bauer's lexical work. Many take the research

---

<sup>15</sup> BAGD, “*apeitheō*,” 82.

<sup>16</sup> BDAG, “*apeitheō*,” 99.



for granted because of the sweat and toil men have invested in this project over their lifetimes. While much of the research is invaluable, teachers would be well advised to make sure that it corresponds with Scripture before making lasting judgments. The Greek words *pisteuō* (to believe), *dikaioō* (to be declared righteous), and *apeitheō* (to disobey or disbelieve) bear this out.

# TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE

## PART 4: IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

**ANTHONY B. BADGER**

Associate Professor of Bible and Theology  
Grace Evangelical School of Theology  
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

### I. INTRODUCTION

Can God’s gift of eternal life be resisted? Does God’s sovereignty require that He force selected people (the elect) to receive His gift of salvation and to enter into a holy union with Him? Is it an affront to God to suggest that the Holy Spirit can be successfully resisted? Calvinist or Reformed Theology, will usually reason that since God is all-powerfully sovereign and since man is completely and totally unable to believe in Christ, it is necessary that God enforce His grace upon those whom He has elected for eternal life. We will now consider the Calvinistic view and the Arminian response to this doctrine.

### II. THE REFORMED VIEW OF IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Hughes concisely says,

*Irresistible* grace is grace which cannot be rejected. The conception of the irresistibility of special grace is closely bound up with...the efficacious nature of that grace. As the work of God always achieves the effect toward which it is directed, so also it cannot be rejected or thrust aside.<sup>1</sup>

Steele, Thomas, and Quinn present a slightly longer explanation—the doctrine of “The Efficacious Call of the Spirit or Irresistible Grace” saying,

In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all

---

<sup>1</sup> P. E. Hughes, “Grace,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 481.

without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; however the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Reformation Theology distinguishes two separate "calls." The general, outward call (invitation) of the gospel is to all men. The special, inward call (application) by the Holy Spirit comes only to those who are elect.<sup>3</sup> Berkhof states,

Reformed theology, however, insists on the *essential* difference between common and special grace. Special Grace is supernatural and spiritual; it removes the guilt and pollution of sin and lifts the sentence of condemnation. Common grace, on the other hand, is natural...It works only in the natural, and not the spiritual sphere. It should be maintained therefore that, while the two are closely connected in the present life, they are *essentially* different, and do not differ merely in degree.<sup>4</sup>

Since, in this view, the elect are, before salvation, totally depraved (i.e., unable to believe), the special, invincible, inward call must occur. The gospel invitation or "outward general call, extended to the elect and non-elect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and are under its power. They are of themselves unable

---

<sup>2</sup> David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1963, 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence M. Vance says, "Besides the nomenclature of 'general' and 'effectual,' the common terms are 'external' and 'internal,' 'outer' and 'inward,' and 'general' and 'special.' Some Calvinists use all the terms interchangeably. There is one other set of terms that is perhaps more accurate, but this set is only used by non-Calvinists: 'insincere' and 'sincere,'" *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1999), 491.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 439.

and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and turn to Christ for mercy.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, and this is distinctive, regeneration must occur *before* one can come to Christ. Steele, Thomas, and Quinn state,

Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God’s elect to salvation, extends to them *a special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth...This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life. His will is renewed through this process so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice. Because he is given a new nature so that he loves righteousness, and because his mind is enlightened so that he understands and believes the Biblical gospel, *the renewed sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior*. Thus the once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward supernatural call of the Spirit who *through regeneration makes him alive and creates faith and repentance within him*.<sup>6</sup>

When Steele, Thomas, and Quinn assert above that, “The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth” they equate *conversion* (the reformation of one’s life, turning from sin, loving righteousness, etc.) with *regeneration* (the new birth).<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they conclude that the elect are first given a new

---

<sup>5</sup> Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 53, italics added.

<sup>7</sup> Chafer, after explaining the physical implications of the term *conversion*, i.e., that of being “turned about,” speaks of the spiritual implications. He quotes 1 Thess 1:9-10 and thus distinguishes *conversion* from *salvation* saying, “Being only the human action of mind and will, conversion in the moral or spiritual sense is not equivalent to salvation, which in all its mighty transformations is ever and only a work of God for the individual who exercises faith in Christ. This second and more important aspect of the term *conversion* may indicate no more than reformation. It is the foremost counterfeit of true salvation. When doing the work of an evangelist, it is possible to secure conversions which are self-wrought, moral changes quite apart from genuine salvation with its forgiveness, new birth, and imputed righteousness. The student would do well to avoid the use of the word *conversion* when salvation is in view.” (Lewis Sperry Cha-

nature and spiritual life through the new birth, and then, *because* of this newly imposed spiritual life, the elect sinner is *able* to believe the biblical gospel. Therefore, according to the Calvinist view, the supernatural impartation of life (i.e., regeneration) *precedes* belief in Christ.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) demonstrates this, as well,

I. All those whom God hath predestined unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; *yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.*

II. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man; who is altogether passive therein, until, being *quicken*ed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby *enabled* to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

III. Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

IV. Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never [sic.] so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess;

---

fer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 7:93). William Evans defines regeneration simply as "a spiritual quickening, a new birth," *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 152. New birth or regeneration may be the *basis* for a subsequent moral turn around, but it is not equal to conversion.

and to assert and maintain that they may is very pernicious, and to be detested.<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, therefore, the *effectual call* is what we might simply understand as *regeneration imposed*. The imposition of new life or *renewal* is, according to the view, an enablement. This enablement follows or coincides with the acquisition of new life with the result that the sinner, “being *quickened and renewed* by the Holy Spirit...is thereby *enabled*.”<sup>9</sup>

The Westminster Confession uses the phrases “effectually to call” and “effectual call” rather than “irresistible” in the explanation of the doctrine. It asserts that men may *freely* come to Christ only when *made* willing to do so. Only when man is quickened and renewed by the Spirit is he able to embrace the grace offered in the call of God. So, the assertion that the non-elect individual sinner can “never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved,” as per section IV above, follows logically from the idea that he has never been *made* to *freely* come. Having never been made to freely come, the sinner would not have actually resisted God’s will or His grace because such grace would never have been actually imposed upon him.

That men cannot believe *of themselves* and that they will not believe *apart from an overwhelming force* (the Holy Spirit) is the basis for the doctrine. God’s saving grace is irresistible only to those upon whom it is divinely imposed. The non-elect, those not so “effectually called,” and, indeed, those for whom Christ did not die are not actively rejecting the gospel call or resisting God’s grace because God is not extending such grace to them. There is nothing for them to resist.

MacArthur refers to this as an inevitable reception of God’s invitation,

“Called” refers not to an outward call, but an inward one. It speaks of when God turns around a person’s heart—a heart that could never turn to God, know Him, understand the Gospel, or know hope on its own. We know this refers to a saving call because of the context of Romans 8:30...The calling here

---

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 10. *Creeks of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 206, italics added.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

is an effectual call. It's not an invitation to just anyone; it's an invitation that will inevitably be received.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, God's saving grace is not resistible, but inevitable.

The Canons of Dort (1618-19) speak of Irresistible Grace and reject the idea of human freedom saying:

But that others are called by the gospel, obey the call, and are converted, is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as he has chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so he confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own dear Son...<sup>11</sup>

It would seem that Dort would argue against any freedom of the will (and thus, any responsibility) at all. Faith is not a human response to the offer of eternal life, but is rather *conferred* upon the elect who stand stonily before God.

Enns summarizes the position, "Common grace is extended to all mankind but is insufficient to save anyone. Through irresistible grace God drew to Himself those whom He had elected, *making them willing* to respond."<sup>12</sup>

### III. THE ARMINIAN VIEW OF RESISTIBLE GRACE

Steele, Thomas, and Quinn present a summary of the Arminian understanding that "The Holy Spirit Can be Effectively Resisted":

The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free

---

<sup>10</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1992), 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Canons of Dort, III, IV:10.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 491, italics added.

will limit the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is there a disagreement as to whether grace unto salvation can be resisted, but also a disparity as to whether both common grace and special grace actually exist as relates to the salvation experience. It would seem that, according to Arminianism, the outward, general call and the inward, special call are essentially one and the same. If God calls outwardly and also calls inwardly, one might ask "What's the difference?" Enns says that the opponents to the Calvinistic doctrine (i.e., those who hold to Arminianism) "might suggest that if grace is irresistible then God forces someone to come against his own will."<sup>14</sup> It is clear, that to Arminianism, human freedom is paramount. The teaching of "special grace" is thus the *problem* and is rejected by those of Arminian persuasion. Arminianism would hold that, "Through prevenient or preparatory grace,<sup>15</sup> which is given to all people, man is able to cooperate with God and respond to Him in salvation. Prevenient grace reverses the effects of Adam's sin."<sup>16</sup>

Arminianism recognizes to some extent the ill effects of Adam's sin on the race of humanity and provides (for lack of a better word) a *simple* answer. The Arminian answer is that God universally supplies what is called *prevenient* or enabling grace to everyone so that all who hear the gospel are thus enabled to freely respond. Thus the sinful, God-rejecting nature of humanity has been given enough grace to serve as an enabling factor so that man indeed has freedom of the will in the matter of believing or rejecting the gospel. The *simple* answer presupposes that man would be completely unable to respond to God *if* supplied no such prevenient grace. But if the doctrine of Total Depravity is erroneous (and a misnomer), and if total depravity does not necessitate inability to respond

---

<sup>13</sup> Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Enns, 484.

<sup>15</sup> "Prevenient grace is grace which comes first. It precedes all human decision and endeavor. Grace always means that it is God who takes the initiative and applies priority of God's action on behalf of needy sinners," (Hughes, "Grace," 480).

<sup>16</sup> Enns, 491.



freely, there would be no need for the doctrine of prevenient grace. Why not just say that man is not totally depraved and be done with it? If man, having been made in God's image, *is* indeed *able* to believe, it would not be inconceivable for man to freely respond to Him in whose image he was created.

#### IV. AN EVALUATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

##### A. IT IS BASED ON MAN'S TOTAL INABILITY TO BELIEVE

Palmer, in his chapter on Irresistible Grace under a section which asserts the scriptural basis of the doctrine says, "The Five Points of Calvinism all depend on each other. If **T** is true, then **U** is true, and so are **L**, **I**, and **P**. They all hang or fall together. Let us...see how irresistible grace depends on them."<sup>17</sup> A few pages later he says, "All the Biblical illustrations of the new birth, which presupposes man's total inability or depravity, indicate that man is unable to resist God's purposes in election"<sup>18</sup> and follows with several illustrations: First, he asserts, "The Bible claims that natural man is dead in his sins. He has no spiritual life. A dead man cannot resist the resurrecting powers of God."<sup>19</sup> He says that a "second illustration of God's work in man's heart is [physical] birth. Now it is obviously foolish to speak of anybody refusing to be born. People have no choice about being born."<sup>20</sup> Third, he suggests that, "Another illustration is creation (II Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:5; Eph. 2:10). Nothing that was ever created refused to be created."<sup>21</sup>

These illustrations are designed to argue for the inability of man to resist God's purposes in election. But, upon analysis, *none* of these illustrations correspond to the fact that man is made in the image of God and has the *responsibility* (and, therefore, an ability) to trust God. In response, his first illustration does not correspond because a physically dead man has no responsibility because he has no ability to think or reason. A living man does. While it may be said that the "natural man" (i.e.,

<sup>17</sup> Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1972), 60, emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the dead man in Palmer's illustration) cannot receive or understand the comparison and evaluation of spiritual things with other spiritual things,<sup>22</sup> it simply does not follow that the natural man cannot *understand* the gospel message. The problem is that the natural, unregenerate man *does* understand the gospel and, because he understands it, it *offends* him.<sup>23</sup> If he does understand the gospel (i.e., the outward call of God to humanity universally), then he must be able to respond. If he is able to respond, then he is not totally depraved in the sense of being totally unable to believe. If he is not totally depraved in that sense, then there is no need for the doctrine of irresistible grace (and, therefore, God can hold man fully accountable for his response to the gospel message).

The second illustration lends no support for total depravity either. An unborn child indeed has no ability to resist being born because he is not given an alternative. It is agreed that he has no ability to respond, but a living man who hears the gospel does have alternatives and a responsibility (and, thus, an ability) to trust God. An unborn child simply isn't in an arena wherein such freedom applies and to use an illustration that, again, is not analogous to the situation proves nothing. Palmer's illustration again fails to demonstrate his point.

Regarding Palmer's third illustration, it is conceded that that which does not exist has no power to resist being created by the fiat or decree of God. But that which does not exist is purely fictional, not actual. Only that which exists is real. That God's call is irresistible is in no way demonstrated by using this self-contradictory, even impossible, illustration.

A nonexistent entity is, at the very best, a figment of one's imagination. In fact, it is impossible to envision or imagine a nonexistent thing. What form would it have? What color is it? How big? But man *is* an extant being. Man could not be a nonexistent being because there *are* no nonexistent beings. A nonexistent being that exists is a logical contradiction. So, again Palmer's logically impossible illustration fails to support the contention that a spiritually dead man is unable to believe. Perhaps his dependence upon such non-decisive illustrations demonstrates the weakness of the point he is attempting to prove.

In relation to the idea of man's total depravity (inability), C. Gordon Olson points out:

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 2:13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rom 9:33; Gal 5:11; and 1 Pet 2:8.

There is a strong logical connection between the Calvinistic notion of man's total inability...and their doctrine of irresistible grace. Non-Calvinists also believe that man is totally unable to save himself, but we reject the idea that man is totally unable to repent and believe in Christ. Arminians have solved the problem with their doctrine of prevenient (preparing) grace, which does not have any inductive basis...I have...emphasized the importance of the convicting work of the Spirit as the key.<sup>24</sup> In any case, the Scripture is clear that man is responsible to repent and believe, thus implying the ability to do so.<sup>25</sup> In no case is irresistible grace a necessary or viable answer. It is a solution to a problem which does not exist!<sup>26</sup>

The problem does exist, though, but it exists because of adherence to the system of Calvinism rather than inductive research into the actual statements of Scripture. So, it seems that *neither* the Arminian imposition on the doctrine of prevenient grace nor the self-imposed Calvinistic assertion of man's total inability to believe (along with the imposition of eternal life as a means by which belief is possible) are viable options. The Calvinist asserts, regarding only the elect, that "they come *most freely*, being *made willing* by his grace" and "being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby *enabled* to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it."<sup>27</sup> This seems somewhat similar to what Arminians would call *prevenient* or *preparatory grace* upon all mankind, not just the elect. In both views, God must enable man.

If, as in the Calvinist view, the Spirit of God must quicken, renew, and enable a totally depraved [read, "unable to believe"] sinner to answer the call, what is the *practical* difference between that and the Arminian

---

<sup>24</sup> To use language of modern law, it would seem that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit gives *opportunity* for the one so convicted to plead either guilty or not guilty. A plea of guilty would bring an immediate reliance on the cross of Christ as its remedy, but a plea of not guilty would result in continued condemnation. Compare this with John 3:18.

<sup>25</sup> If *responsibility* does not mean *response-ability*, i.e., *ability to respond*, what, indeed, might the term mean?

<sup>26</sup> C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 235.

<sup>27</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 10, italics added.

teaching of prevenient grace whereby God just enables everyone? If the difference is seen as the sovereign imposition of eternal life upon the elect (for whom Christ specifically died), as per the Calvinist, versus the gracious preparation of all men (for whom Christ universally died), but without divine compulsion (as per the Arminian), fine! We've seen the distinction between the two theological systems. But why does the Calvinist feel the need to soften the term "irresistible" by using the terms "effectual" or "efficacious"? Why assert that the elect, being passive and having no say in the matter, cannot resist the Spirit, but assert, at the same time, that he can "come most freely." Obviously, the reason is the dynamic between God's sovereignty and man's freedom, but, as shown in a previous article,<sup>28</sup> these concepts need not be adverse, contradictory, or disparate. They can, and actually do, exist compatibly and non-contradictorily in complete accord with one another.

#### B. IT CORRESPONDS TO THE IDEA OF UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Palmer reasons:

If it is true that God has unconditionally elected some to be saved...then, of course, the Spirit has to work in an irresistible way. Otherwise, everyone because of his depravity would reject Christ, and then there would be no foreordination to eternal life. God could not be sure that those whom He elected would believe and be saved. The certainty of election means that the Spirit works certainly and that He accomplishes what God foreordained. Without the irresistible grace of God, there could be no foreordination or election.<sup>29</sup>

The key words in Palmer's statement may be, "If it is true..." because if it is not true, or more precisely, if Palmer's *understanding* of unconditional election is not true, then there would be no need to assert irresistible grace as a doctrine. Palmer uses John 6:37, 44 to argue that Jesus taught irresistible grace. It is admitted that Jesus said, "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Palmer would argue that the certainty of the result as well as the meaning of the term "draw" demonstrates the doctrine. Draw, he argues, is used of

---

<sup>28</sup> See Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 1: Total Depravity," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003): 35-61.

<sup>29</sup> Palmer, 61.

drawing fish irresistibly in a net (John 21:6, 11),<sup>30</sup> of Peter drawing his sword irresistibly to cut off Malchus's ear (John 18:10), Paul and Silas being drawn or dragged into the marketplace (Acts 16:19), and Paul being dragged out of the temple (Acts 21:30) by an irresistible mob.<sup>31</sup> "In each of these cases, the object is drawn irresistibly."<sup>32</sup> The force which extracts the fish, draws Peter's sword, and transports Paul and Silas couldn't be resisted. It was too great. He compares this with the compulsion the Father must use toward His elect.

Geisler's answers to the idea that "drawing" is irresistible are summarized as follows: 1) Words have a range of meaning and must be understood in the context; 2) Obviously, John 12:32 ("And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself") would not be taken as compulsive in nature, but would rather refer to a moral pull on one's life. So also Jer 31:3, "With loving kindness I have drawn you;" 3) The context of being drawn in John 6:44 is that of those who believe (John 6:40, 47, 65).<sup>33</sup> Based on these verses and John 1:17 Geisler explains that "From this it is evident that their understanding of Jesus' teaching and being drawn to the Father was accompanied through their own free choice."<sup>34</sup> Again, when considering unconditional election as a basis for the doctrine of irresistible grace, we are faced with a denial of man's freedom in the matter. Actual freedom is not only logical, but biblical.

Palmer argues that Jesus' statement that He has other sheep and that He must bring them into His fold as well (John 10:16) demonstrates: 1) He must irresistibly do so; 2) Jesus infallibly secures all His sheep; and 3) The means of His doing this is to send the Holy Spirit so as to draw them irresistibly.<sup>35</sup> The refutation to this is simply to point out that neither the verse nor the context say anything about irresistibility. The other sheep would necessarily become believers, but this verse does not address how or why they were to become believers. It certainly does not rule out human freedom in the matter.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 95.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>35</sup> Palmer, 62.

In using Rom 8:29-30 in his argument, Palmer says, “The word ‘called’ does not refer to an external, verbal call; but in accord with the rest of the New Testament, it means in addition to the external call the working of God of an inward affirmative response.”<sup>36</sup> But again, this begs the question. Not only does he *assume* a distinction between the general call by means of the gospel (externally) and a special irresistible call (internally), but he *assumes* that God’s foreknowledge and foreordination are something that has already occurred *exclusively* in the ancient, pre-creation past. In doing so, he ignores the dynamic of God’s timeless, eternal nature. God is no more ordaining things now than he ever has, or than He ever will. He is immutable and His counsels are eternal (i.e., without change and without time constraints of any kind. His eternal unchanging existence, simply does not follow any kind of past, present, or future distinction). Additionally, there is no valid reason to disallow God from sovereignly working out His plan within the progress of history in accord with His eternal, timeless plan. In fact, what He does today *is* His eternal timeless plan.<sup>37</sup>

Other passages are used to argue for unconditional election as a basis to support the doctrine of the irresistibility of grace. Passages such as Rom 9:15 (“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy”) and Rom 9:18 (“He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills, He hardens”) refers in context to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (cf. Exod 7:3-4). It is noted, however, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first (Exod 7:13; 8:15). God hardened Pharaoh’s heart further in accord with Pharaoh’s rejection of the truth. Additionally, Rom 9:19 (“You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will’”) is explained, first, by noting that the verse is a question, not an affirmation. Second, the question is that of an objector, not the Apostle. Third, Paul refutes the objector’s question and the implication by saying, “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God” (9:20) and, in doing so, demonstrates that the objector is actually in the process of resisting

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Anthony B. Badger, “Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 2: Unconditional Election,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Fall 2003):17-42.

God's will.<sup>38</sup> The idea that God's will cannot be resisted is disproved here!<sup>39</sup>

Thus, if God has indeed, according to His eternal purpose, conclusively and without regard for human freedom, selected only some for salvation, it could be argued that for the sake of His eternal purpose He *must* comply with His own decision and, thus, assure that His perfect plan will not be thwarted. If an elect person could be perceived as resisting His will in the matter of salvation, then certainly God's eternal purpose would be fragmented.

Therefore, God's sovereignty is perceived as being in danger of destruction by the Calvinist *only* if a person: 1) believes that election was a *past tense event*; 2) misunderstands God's attribute of eternity and, therefore, His timeless nature; and 3) has no perception that God is working out His eternal unchanging plan as time continues in a *present tense* mode. But if we understand election from God's eternally present nature, there is no valid threat to the idea of His sovereignty, the progression of His plan in time, or the ordained outcome of all things as He works toward the best of all possible worlds in which sin is defeated and in which He is freely and genuinely worshipped in spirit and truth. His sovereignty is not fragmented, but rather cemented, by his allowance of human freedom apart from the arbitrary imposition of life onto those who do not freely believe in Him. The only condition for salvation is belief and God responds to faith, but there is no biblical assertion that He must save *anyone* as a prerequisite of His victory or the maintenance of His sovereignty.

---

<sup>38</sup> See Geisler, 90-96 for a detailed consideration of these arguments and for a consideration of the following passages which are used to assert the irresistible nature of grace: Rom 9:21, 22; Luke 14:23; John 6:44; Jas 1:18; and John 3:27.

<sup>39</sup> To press the matter further, if the objector to whom Paul is replying is regenerated, he would be resisting God's will about a facet of the doctrine of salvation. If the objector is not regenerate, it could be said that a non-elect person could resist God's will and one would have to conclude that God's will can be resisted, but only by the non-elect. But in order to be a non-elect objector, the objector would have to, at least, *understand* Paul's assertion and this fact would demonstrate that the unregenerate objector was indeed able to understand *some* spiritual things, especially if he mentally processes those things while forming the objection.

## C. IT RELIES UPON THE IDEA OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

Palmer writes:

The Bible teaches that from eternity God foreloved certain people, and that He therefore sent His Son to die for them...Jesus actually did die for them. He did not just pretend to take away their sins. He did not theoretically go to hell for them. He actually did bear their sins and take their guilt away. It is either-or. Either Jesus saved them or He did not. Either He was an actual substitute or he was not. The Bible teaches He was.

If Christ has actually made them free from the guilt of sin, and if salvation comes only by faith, then it is necessary for God to send His Holy Spirit into their lives in order that they may accept the salvation that has already been worked out for them. Acceptance of Christ cannot be left partially to man for then all would refuse, and Christ's atonement would have been in vain. Thus limited atonement points to the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

This argument is similar in nature to the one relating to unconditional election. It also shows the inter-dependence of one point of Calvinism upon the others. The Calvinist argument here is that God's intention and purpose (to save only those for whom Christ died) would be thwarted if the Holy Spirit should fail to apply that benefit to each and every such selected person for whom Christ died. The only way to guarantee that God's intention is not defeated is to argue that the Holy Spirit must use irresistible, divine power in affecting that salvation upon the elected, specifically redeemed sinner. By arguing, as Palmer does, that Christ actually saved those so unconditionally elected, it is reasoned that if any or all of those would be *able to resist* the application of the same, then it would be possible that one or all of the elect for whom Christ specifically died might ultimately be lost. The argument may be framed this way:

1. God unconditionally—and with certainty—elected some to eternal salvation on the basis of Christ's historical, substitutionary death.
2. Christ died as a substitutionary sacrifice only for those whom God had so chosen and, in doing so, saved them.

---

<sup>40</sup> Palmer, 60-61.



3. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must, by His divine power, apply the benefits of Christ's death to save each person in the group of the elect, and only those individuals, or else God's intent and purpose in Christ's atonement would be thwarted.

When Palmer says that Jesus' death either saved them or it did not, he restricts our thinking (insisting on either-or) and refuses to consider any other possible alternative. We have dealt with this reasoning in a former article<sup>41</sup> and have shown that while Christ's death does, with certainty, save those who believe in Him, His death is of a *provisional nature* and is not *practically and personally* applicable, in an eternal way, until such time as a sinner becomes convinced of the gospel truth. In other words, Christ death does indeed save, but it doesn't save apart from a free response, i.e., personal faith in Him. It is pointless to say that Christ's death saves without including (and insisting upon) the human response that makes such deliverance possible. The distinction is this: We are saved *by grace alone* (God's kind and loving attitude toward humanity which rules out human merit) *through faith alone* (man's free response to the gospel message and to God's promise of eternal life) *in Christ alone* (because of His finished, bloody, sacrificial death—which is the *sufficient provision* and the *historical basis* for the gospel message). The elect are not saved by Christ's death apart from their personal faith in Him.

It seems regrettable that this would need to be argued or so specifically articulated at all, but, because the Calvinistic system of thought reasons otherwise, it must be done. That system *supposes* human inability to believe (rather than the actual inability of man to *do* anything to merit salvation, thus ruling out faith as a free response), *asserts* that God unconditionally chose those to whom He will show salvation mercy (again, apart from His knowledge/consideration of their faith as a free, personal response), *instructs* that Christ died only for that group so composed of selected persons (thus opening no way for a legitimate call for *all men* to believe), and *teaches* that God, by the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit, imposes eternal life upon the select group in order for those in that group to believe (thus extinguishing the idea of our personal

---

<sup>41</sup> See Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 3: Limited Atonement," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2004): 33-56.

responsibility to not only recognize our personal sin and guilt, but also to trust the Savior).

#### D. IT IS NOT A BIBLICAL PHRASE

The term “irresistible grace” is not found in the Bible. This fact doesn’t make it wrong because some theological words like “trinity” or “rapture” (neither of which are in the biblical text) reflect an accurate conclusion of theological thought. It does, however, require that the one who asserts the term or the doctrine support it with biblical ideas, words, or concepts. The fourth letter in TULIP, which stands for “Irresistible,” appears to be more of an accommodation for mnemonic purposes than a precisely correct way of conveying biblical truth. As such, it seems that the “I” goes too far. Buswell says,

Perhaps the phrase, “irresistible grace,” by which this doctrine is often designated, psychologically inclines the mind to a horizon entirely too limited. Of course, it is true that men resist the grace of God...

The plan of God is not symmetrical. Those who are lost are lost “because” they have resisted the grace of God in Christ (John 3:18)...It is better to call this doctrine “infallible” grace.<sup>42</sup>

But even calling it infallible grace may lead us astray. Again, there is no such term in the Bible called infallible grace. Irresistibility or infallibility are still terms which describe a theological conclusion. Geisler observes that, “some seem embarrassed by the term and use softer words like ‘effectual grace.’”<sup>43</sup> Palmer, himself, apparently understands the problem with the term *irresistible*. He softens the harsher implication of the term saying, “*Irresistible* means that when God has chosen some to be saved and when He sends His Spirit to change them from being hateful to being loving, no one can resist Him. He is irresistible. He does what He sets out to do.”<sup>44</sup>

He continues to say that we ought “not misunderstand the word *irresistible*. To some it may give the meaning of causing someone to do what

---

<sup>42</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1962), 2:145.

<sup>43</sup> Geisler, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Palmer, 57.

he does not want to do.”<sup>45</sup> He then gives what he considers to be *incorrect* analogies of what “irresistible” means. To him, *irresistible* does not mean: 1) an irresistible avalanche sweeping someone to his death; 2) an irresistible power of the state to imprison a preacher who opposes Communism; and 3) a young child being taken by an irresistibly strong kidnapper. Palmer, by this, argues that the term *irresistible* is not “God forcing people to do what they do not want to do”<sup>46</sup> and says that if the term *irresistible* causes misunderstanding, one might use terms such as “*efficacious*, or *effectual*, or *unconquerable*, or *certain*.”<sup>47</sup> It seems that Palmer and others do indeed see the problem with the term, but then rather than refute it, they go on to explain or soften it. Again, one might ask why use the term if it doesn’t actually suggest what is believed or asserted.

## V. CONCLUSION

Palmer, in our discussion above, has used three different sets of “threes” to illustrate or argue for the fact of irresistible grace. Please recall the argumentation by illustration and analogy. First, as noted above, Palmer used three illustrations to show that *man is unable to respond, believe, or resist* God’s purposes in election: 1) a dead man cannot do anything, therefore a spiritually dead man cannot believe; 2) an unborn child is unable to say whether or not he will be born, therefore a person cannot cause or affect the imposition of life by the Holy Spirit; and 3) a nonexistent being cannot speak to, and has no say in, the imposition of existence by the Creator, therefore, a man cannot and isn’t able to speak to or choose, one way or the other, as to whether he will be recreated or regenerated.

Then, he argued *against man being able to resist* the compulsion of God’s “drawing” the elect sinner to Christ by suggesting that: 1) fish are powerless to resist being extracted from a net; 2) Peter’s sword could not resist being drawn from its sheath; and 3) Paul and Silas had insufficient power to resist being transported by the mob.

Finally, he has argued that irresistible grace does *not* mean such things as: 1) an irresistible avalanche sweeping someone to his death;

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

2) an irresistible power of the state to imprison a preacher who opposes Communism; and 3) a young child being taken by an irresistibly strong kidnapper.

We might summarize His argument as follows: 1) Man has no ability and, therefore, cannot believe the gospel; 2) Man is powerless to resist the Spirit; 3) God doesn't make anybody do anything; and 4) He *makes* the elect believe in Christ in accordance with His sovereign plan. Rather confusing, isn't it?

Another question: How is it that irresistibility is *like* Paul being transported by a mob and, at the same time, *unlike* a modern preacher being arrested by Communists? Illustrations are fine things to aid in visualizing truth, but contradictory illustrations and concepts make us wonder if it is really truth that is being illustrated. Without doubt, the assertiveness of the Calvinistic system along with the weakness and somewhat convoluted reasoning brings the whole system into serious doubt.

Olson says this:

I would suggest that the doctrine of irresistible grace has been derived by Augustinians through a deductive process from the other points of the TULIP, rather than through a careful inductive exegetical study of all the relevant Scripture. The historical context of the favorite proof texts needs to be given weightier consideration, the presuppositions ought to be brought out into the open and examined thoroughly, and more careful study of the usage of the term "calling" needs to be done.<sup>48</sup>

Here's the question: How is it possible for someone with no ability to believe the gospel and with no ability or power to resist the Spirit's will to be personally *responsible* for believing or rejecting the gospel message? Faith is the single biblical condition for regeneration, but the Calvinist position insists: 1) that man can't believe and is powerless to do so and 2) that God must regenerate only those so elected for salvation *because* he has already elected some and He cannot fail.

A solution to the Calvinist dilemma might be to remove ourselves emotionally (and even theologically) from the matter and to reason together. That all men descend from Adam and are guilty of sin argues for man's lost condition and the universal need for eternal life. That the

---

<sup>48</sup> Olson, 253.

gospel message is intended for the whole world of mankind not only suggests that everyone needs eternal life, but also asserts its efficiency (as well as the sufficiency) to regenerate anyone and everyone in the whole world who hears that message and believes in Christ. The gospel message itself is indeed “whosoever will” (John 3:16). This fact in no way relegates the Holy Spirit to obscurity. The omnipresent Holy Spirit regenerates the sinner *as he believes the gospel*. Such regeneration is a divinely powerful act, but it is always performed in conjunction with faith in Christ. So, since the need is universal (sin), the message is universal (the gospel), and the condition for regeneration is universal (faith in Christ), it follows that the effect and efficiency of God’s plan in accord with the gospel offer to all is universal, as well.

Earl D. Radmacher clarifies this by affirming that, “the universal offer is also a genuine offer. The cross of Christ is broad enough and deep enough to cover all the sins of everyone who will come to Him.”<sup>49</sup> He continues, “Even though the offer of this great gift from God is genuine and available to all, many do not receive it by believing in Jesus Christ”<sup>50</sup> and quotes John 1:11-12 and 3:18-19 as support. The Bible simply places the responsibility of belief directly on the one who hears the clear gospel message. It disallows any excuse for unbelief. So, we might ask, what is the difference between the general, outward call of God and the specific, inward call? Radmacher continues to explain:

When Jewish leaders persecuted Jesus and sought to kill Him, He got to the heart of their problem: “But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” ([John] 5:40). The general call of the gospel becomes effective when it is joined with faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ; “He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 John 5:10).<sup>51</sup>

Notice the simple and clear wording when Radmacher says, “The general call of the gospel becomes effective when it is joined with faith.” The difference between the general call and the effectual call of God is this: The *general* call is the *message announced* to all, i.e., the invitation. The *effectual* call is the message believed, the *invitation received*, and

---

<sup>49</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 92.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

the correspondingly powerful work of the Holy Spirit that, at the time of faith, produces eternal life in the one who believes. The *effectual* call is the *gospel message joined with faith*, and the explanation need be no more complicated than that.

There is no necessity, either biblically, logically, or otherwise, to insist that the Holy Spirit imposes eternal life on anyone in an irresistible fashion, makes them willing, makes them willing to be willing, or gives them faith, etc. so as to fulfill God's sovereign plan. This is so because His sovereign plan insists upon human responsibility, and thus, human freedom. And human freedom is validated when one freely believes in Christ alone.

So, can the gift of eternal life be resisted? The biblical answer (which must be considered "outside the Calvinist box") is yes. The gifts of God, salvation or otherwise, are never imposed by an irresistible force, but are simply and freely received.

Does God's sovereignty or absolute control of the universe require us to conclude that He forces selected people (the elect) to receive His gift of salvation and to enter into a holy union with Him? No, because he has made mankind an offer which cannot be exceeded. God is not indebted to us, nor is He obligated to save us. Now, if Jesus' death was intended to benefit only the elect, the Holy Spirit would indeed be obligated to save those for whom His death was intended. But if Jesus' death was intended for *all*, God would in *no way* be under obligation.

Is it an affront to God to suggest that the Holy Spirit can be resisted? No, because, again, the question presupposes that rejection of the gospel offer for eternal life is the same as personal resistance to the Holy Spirit while the Holy Spirit is somehow pressing and pressuring the sinner for a decision. Rather, the rejection of Christ is indeed resistance to the *message* that the Holy Spirit has inspired. Radmacher notes:

In the general call in Philippi God led Lydia to listen to what the preachers said ("Lydia heard us," Acts 16:4). Then what happened? The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul." She listened to all four speakers intently, but the Holy Spirit used Paul's message to open her heart...In Lydia's case all the elements are present: the message of the human witnesses; the convicting of the Holy Spirit, the response of

the listener, the opening of Lydia's heart, the place of deepest reflection, and the effectual calling (salvation).<sup>52</sup>

It is also not a question of whether or not one *can* resist the power of the Holy Spirit if He decides to have His way, but a question of whether the Holy Spirit must *necessarily* override human freedom. The resistance of humanity before Jesus' crucifixion could have been alleviated by Christ simply praying for twelve legions of angels (Matt 26:53), but just because He had the power to do so, didn't mean that He imposed or activated that power.

It is not a question of whether the gift of salvation and eternal life is irresistibly imposed upon someone, but whether the gift is graciously offered by God and then received freely by man. It is not a question as to whether God's sovereignty is endangered, but whether His sovereignly designed plan for human salvation includes human freedom in such a way as to allow man to believe the good news.

Our responsibility, it seems, is not to conjecture about the invisible working of the Spirit of God, but for each of us to certify *with clarity* the message of the gospel to those who do not possess eternal life. If we maintain our personal integrity, nourish our walk with the Lord Jesus, and relinquish the supposed entitlements offered by the modern world, we will attain a dignified platform of life from which to present the gospel of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 106.

# ***THE DA VINCI CODE PHENOMENON: A BRIEF OVERVIEW AND RESPONSE***

**J.B. HIXSON**

Assistant Academic Dean  
College of Biblical Studies  
Houston, Texas

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*,<sup>1</sup> gives a fictional account of a Harvard researcher named Robert Langdon. In the story, Langdon is called upon to analyze Leonardo Da Vinci's work and decode its hidden mysteries. What he uncovers is an elaborate scheme of secret societies, religious conspiracies, and centuries old cover ups. His investigation does not sit well with the religious establishment and he quickly becomes a marked man. So goes the plot of this entertaining and influential novel.

Dan Brown's novel has generated no shortage of analysis. To date, the *Code* has been cracked, broken, solved, decoded, exposed, scrutinized, dismantled and otherwise deftly refuted in at least thirteen published books and hundreds more electronic articles on various websites.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Abanes, *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004); Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody's Asking* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind The Da Vinci Code*, ed. Dan Burstein (New York: CDS Books, 2004); Simon Cox, *Cracking the Da Vinci Code* (New Dehli: Sterling Publishing, 2004); James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004); Brandon Gilvin, *Solving the Da Vinci Code Mystery* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Hank Hanegraaff and Paul Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004); Steve Kellmeyer, *Fact and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* (Peoria, IL: Bridegroom Press, 2004); Martin Lunn, *Da Vinci Code Decoded* (New York: Disinformation Co., 2004); Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publisher, 2004); Carl Olson, *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in the Da Vinci Code* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004); Amy Welborn, *Decoding the Da Vinci Code* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday



Both evangelical Protestants as well as conservative Roman Catholic scholars have united to reject the myths put forth in *The Da Vinci Code*. At the same time, however, this national best seller has received widespread acclaim and become a cultural phenomenon. What is all the fuss about?

At a time when the distinction between truth and error is becoming increasingly blurred, books such as this one find a ready and willing audience. The pervasive pluralism that characterizes postmodernity usually leads to the creation of truth rather than the declaration of it. Such is the case with *The Da Vinci Code*. Although it is a novel, it has been hailed for its “historical accuracies.” Without taking the time to verify the radical claims of this novel, naïve readers are increasingly accepting its truth claims. Major media outlets have presented documentaries on the “real Jesus.” Enlightened liberal professors are telling their students that Brown may be on to something. And all the while an unwitting and ill-equipped culture is being duped.

The problem is the alleged historical accuracies are at odds with the only true source of absolute truth: God’s Word. Defending his book, Brown claims, “One of the many qualities that makes *The Da Vinci Code* unique is the *factual* nature of the story. *All* the history, artwork, ancient documents, and secret rituals in the novel *are accurate* as are the hidden codes revealed in some of Da Vinci’s most famous paintings.”<sup>3</sup> If Brown’s claims are true, then the Bible cannot be true. Indeed, Brown rejects the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Although he claims to be a Christian, Brown espouses an inclusivist soteriology saying, “We’re each following our own paths of enlightenment.”<sup>4</sup> He intimates that the “belief that all those who do not accept Christ as their personal savior are doomed to hell” is ridiculous.<sup>5</sup>

---

Visitor Pub., 2004); and Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See “A Conversation with Dan Brown” at [www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com), italics added.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.danbrown.com](http://www.danbrown.com).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## II. POINTS OF CONTENTION

There are several significant assertions that have come out of *The Da Vinci Code* and have the conservative evangelical community up in arms. These all flow from one central belief: that the Christian message as revealed in the Bible is false. It is the result of a conspiracy in which the real truth about Jesus has been covered up for centuries. Indeed, the book's marketing tag line reads: "The greatest conspiracy of the last 2000 years is about to unravel!" Enlightened thinkers should be wise enough to reject the simplistic claims of God's Word and search out the real story by finding and reading the hidden documents which prove that Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. Some of the more troubling claims of Brown's novel include:

1. Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and the mother of His children. Throughout history, church leaders kept this information hidden and perpetuated an enormous fraud upon the world by insisting that Jesus was the divine Son of God. The Holy Grail is not some elusive holy relic that has been the subject of much speculation and countless quests throughout church history. Rather the Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene herself who represents suppressed feminism.<sup>6</sup> The search for the Holy Grail is the search for the truth about Christianity's matriarchal roots.

The novel gets its name from the myth that Leonardo Da Vinci was aware of this conspiracy and gave the world a clue about it in his famous painting *The Last Supper*. As one faces that well-known painting, a "V" shape to the left of Jesus is evident. This "V" is said to be the symbol of feminism and the person seated next to it is said to be Mary Magdalene.

2. The novel also paints Christianity as misogynist. During the Middle Ages, the church hunted down and "burned at the stake an astounding five million women."<sup>7</sup> The church has consistently persecuted and demonized women in an attempt to hide the shameful fact that Jesus was really a feminist. "True" Christianity is militantly feminist but due to the cultural bias of the church throughout history this "fact" has been kept secret for hundreds and hundreds of years.

---

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 253.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

3. Jesus is not divine. “The early church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus’ divinity was invented by the church at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. The church father Constantine was the driving force behind the deification of Jesus.
4. The secret Gnostic Gospels are more accurate portrayals of Jesus than the biblical Gospels. The Bible is not the self-revelation of God to mankind, but rather the creation of man.<sup>9</sup> The NT is “false testimony.”<sup>10</sup>

Taken as a whole, these and many other absurd contentions in Brown’s book serve as a profound example of what happens when absolute truth is denied and pluralism is embraced. Books such as this one not only perpetuate pluralistic thinking, they flow from it. The reason *The Da Vinci Code* has sold more than 7.5 million copies<sup>11</sup> and been published in more than 40 languages around the world<sup>12</sup> is because it feeds postmodernism’s insatiable desire to tear down any and all truth claims. Although it is a novel, its theories are being blindly accepted by readers who are eager to believe that there is no grand metanarrative that serves as the basis for truth and provides the meaning of life. To the extent that *The Da Vinci Code* seeks to unravel the metanarrative of Scripture, it is welcomed into the postmodern milieu.

### III. A SCHOLARLY RESPONSE TO *THE DA VINCI CODE*

Of the many responses to *The Da Vinci Code* in print, there is one that has risen to the top. Darrell Bock, Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, has provided a valuable and credible critique of Brown’s novel. *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*<sup>13</sup> is a succinct, well-researched, scholarly answer to the theories put forth by Dan Brown. Bock exposes Brown’s claims as weak and largely

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>11</sup> AP article “Da Vinci Code Author: I left Out Material,” May 19, 2004 accessed at [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com).

<sup>12</sup> See [www.danbrown.com](http://www.danbrown.com).

<sup>13</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody’s Asking* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

unattested. He is to be commended for disproving Brown's claims by not only using the biblical record, but using much of the same extra-biblical evidence upon which Brown based his tenuous conclusions.

Bock begins his book with a look at the evidence regarding Mary Magdalene. He concludes that based on both biblical and extra-biblical evidence all that can be said of Mary is that she was "a faithful disciple, a witness to the cross, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. She was not a prostitute. She was not married to Jesus."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus was married at all. "Jesus could well be single and fit into the practice of pious Jews...there is good cultural precedent, as well as good evidence, to see that Jesus was single."<sup>15</sup>

Next Bock addresses the so-called "secret gospels" that contradict the biblical record. The claim in *The Da Vinci Code* that more than eighty gospels were considered for inclusion in the canon but only four were chosen "may be the most misleading statement of 'fact' in the entire novel."<sup>16</sup> The existence of more than eighty gospels is not attested in any historical record. Brown's appeal to the Gnostic gospels is nothing new. Liberal theologians have long sought to elevate such extra-biblical writings to authoritative status. Bock demonstrates that even in their own day the Gnostic gospels did not represent viable alternatives to the divinely inspired texts. Rather they were debated from the moment of their inception. "The impression that Christians shared a vast array of writings that some reduced in number to produce Scripture of their own later design ignores this debate's contentious nature from early on."<sup>17</sup>

Continuing his systematic dismantling of Brown's claims, Bock next addresses the canonization process for the NT Gospels. *The Da Vinci Code* gives the impression that this process was rooted in humanistic agendas and conspiracies. Bock ably demonstrates that early believers, from the first century on, attested to the authority and distinctiveness of the NT Gospels. In other words, there never really has been a question as to which gospels are authoritative and which are not.

When all is said and done, Bock determines that only two historical claims of the novel stand: 1) women were elevated by what Jesus taught;

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

and 2) Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute.<sup>18</sup> The plotline of *The Da Vinci Code* is not only historically inaccurate, when the evidence is evaluated, it is not even plausible.

For this reviewer, the most impressive and intriguing section of Bock's book is the final chapter entitled "The Real Jesus Code." In it, Bock eloquently confronts his readers with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. His assumption, it is presumed, is that many unbelievers who have been captivated by *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon might pick up a copy of Bock's book as well. Therefore, he seizes the opportunity to explain God's plan of salvation in hopes that some of his readers might become enlightened by the truth and express faith in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation.

Using language contextualized for his postmodern audience, Bock explains the concept of sin in the lives of human beings. "It is not a popular word in our culture,"<sup>19</sup> he admits. But our world is not a world of "virtual reality that pretends everything is pretty much okay. It is a world of reality that humbly faces the fact that left to ourselves and our independence, we will act in destructive ways."<sup>20</sup> He goes on to say, "Jesus came to show us how seriously God took sin and the restoration to life. Jesus also came to show that God loved us so much that God would give up a precious life into death so that we could experience life."<sup>21</sup>

Bock explains to his readers that there is a way out of this sin predicament. It involves "admitting our need for God and for forgiveness."<sup>22</sup> The only provision for our sin problem is Jesus and the forgiveness He offers. "The church has called this acknowledgment faith. It is faith in Jesus the Savior."<sup>23</sup>

One might raise several objections here. First, Bock's phraseology regarding "the church" is misleading. It is not simply the church but the NT itself that conditions eternal life upon faith alone more than 160 times.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 167.

Second, “admitting our need for God and for forgiveness” is not in and of itself faith in Jesus for eternal life. Multitudes admit their need for God and for forgiveness and yet do not trust Christ to give them that forgiveness. Faith in Jesus is being convinced He guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for salvation (John 6:47).

Third, Bock could be clearer in his expression of what Jesus promises to the one who believes in Him: eternal life. He does say that Jesus died “so that we could experience life.” But “*experiencing* life” and “having *eternal* life” are two completely different things. The closing words of his book are compelling, but fall short of clarity:

God says simply, “Believe in Him. Trust in the work He has done and will do for you.” What lies ahead of such an embrace of faith is a new and unending life of fellowship with God lived through God’s forgiveness and spiritual provision. That is the real Jesus code. That is something worth believing.<sup>25</sup>

Bock’s reference to “an embrace of faith” is more poetic than it is helpful. What does this mean, exactly? Why not avoid any potential confusion by saying simply “what lies ahead of such...faith is...unending life”?

Additionally, while the reference to “unending life of fellowship with God” approaches the biblical expression *eternal life*, this too could be stated more clearly lest the reader miss the precise nature of the gift that comes by faith in Christ, namely *eternal* life. While this reviewer appreciates the centrality of *faith* in Bock’s evangelistic appeal, he wishes it had been clearer with the inclusion of biblical language.

#### IV. A PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO *THE DA VINCI CODE*

What can the average believer do to combat the myths perpetuated by Brown’s popular novel? In the first place, we must funnel everything we hear or read through the grid of Scripture. Any truth claim that contradicts the claims of the Bible is to be rejected. If man is made to be the source of truth, *there is no truth*. Truth is absolute. It is not a creation. Hold fast to the authority of God’s Word. Do not be afraid to publicly reject the erroneous claims of this book even if it is counter-cultural to do so.

Secondly, much like the Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ*,<sup>26</sup> which itself is fraught with biblical inaccuracies and a dependence upon extra-biblical myths and yet nevertheless serves as a springboard for evangelism, likewise we should allow the phenomenon of *The Da Vinci Code* to serve as a starting point for sharing the gospel with unbelievers. As you see others captivated by the novel (which is after all engaging and well-written), seize the opportunity to present the true gospel: salvation is only by faith alone in Christ alone.

---

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The Passion of the Christ* see the articles by the present reviewer available online at [www.hixson.org/Studies.html](http://www.hixson.org/Studies.html).

# GRACE IN THE ARTS: MARK TWAIN: A BITTER BATTLE WITH GOD

JAMES A. TOWNSEND

Pastor  
Elgin, Illinois

## I. INTRODUCTION

“If the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American dream has any single literary laureate, it is Samuel Clemens, known...by his pen name, Mark Twain,” announced the *Family Encyclopedia of American History*.<sup>1</sup> With that assessment literary critic Edward Wagenknecht concurred when he penned: “Mark Twain is...incomparably the dominating personality in American literature, the mightiest figure in our American mythology...”<sup>2</sup> James M. Cox observed that in *The Green Hills of Africa* Ernest Hemingway asserted that “*Huckleberry Finn* was both the first and best book in American literature” so that “Mark Twain began to be viewed as the writer’s writer.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, William Faulkner told Japanese students that “Mark Twain was really the father of American literature...”<sup>4</sup>

Probably no one said it better than Twain’s long-time friend and contemporary critic William Dean Howells. At Twain’s funeral Howells acknowledged that he’d known America’s sages, poets, critics and humorists, “...but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.”<sup>5</sup>

Most likely few general readers, Christian or otherwise, are aware that the “Lincoln of our literature” was not merely mischievous but also

---

<sup>1</sup> *Family Encyclopedia of American History* (Pleasantville, NY: The Readers Digest Association, Inc., 1975), 232.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952), 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia of American Biography*, eds. John A. Garraty and Jerome L. Sternstein (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), 201.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Milton Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), 289.



malevolent. America's foremost humorist was one of God's most stringent critics. As time went on, his venom and vitriol grew against the biblical God. Especially in some of his later works (which were only published posthumously—by his decision) did his anti-God acerbity arrive at its acme.

## II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Mark Twain, born in 1835, was raised in Hannibal, Missouri. He “once claimed that at the age of two weeks [old] he knew the Bible well enough to protest being named Samuel after a boy whom the Lord ‘had to call... a couple of times before he would come!’”<sup>6</sup> (Twain is referring to 1 Sam 3:1-10.) While the statement reeks of typical Twain exaggeration, it does put its finger on an important issue—namely, that the Bible was ineradicably ingrained in Twain's system at an early age. Of his two parents, Mark's mother was the one who gravitated more toward Christianity. The Twain children read the Bible, had access to Sunday school literature, and attended Sunday school. Nevertheless, her periodic pipe-smoking, dancing, and other non-traditional habits marked Jane Clemens as something of a non-conformist among Presbyterians. She also examined odd forms of religion.

Mark's dad was a self-styled free thinker. Indeed, Edward Wagenknecht avers that “Mark's father and uncle were unbelievers, and neither Orion [Mark's brother, whose name is pronounced OH-ree-uhn] nor Pamela [his sister] grew up as a model of orthodoxy.”<sup>7</sup> “When he was dying [and Mark was twelve], John Marshall Clemens [Mark's father] was asked by a clergyman whether he believed in Christ and in the saving blood of Christ; he answered, ‘I do.’”<sup>8</sup> Without more biographical data and a transcript of the full conversation, it would be hard to assess the genuineness of such an acknowledgement by a lifelong free thinker.

The Clemens children started out attending the Methodist Sunday school, but after a few years Jane Clemens switched them to the Presbyterian Sunday school. Wagenknecht noted that “there was one Methodist Sunday School teacher—‘Richmond, the stone mason’—whom he loved

---

<sup>6</sup> Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 174.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

for his kindness.”<sup>9</sup> Chapter 4 in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* gives the reader some inkling of what Sunday school must have been like for the boy Samuel Clemens.

Most commentators refer to Twain’s Sunday school indoctrination which proved unshakable for him till his dying day. John Gerber asserted: “The Calvinistic doctrines of depravity and predestination created an intellectual context from which he never...escaped. Yet Samuel Clemens was never a believer in the orthodox sense...”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Twain reiterated that his was a “trained Presbyterian conscience.”<sup>11</sup>

In the summer when his father died, a measles epidemic was killing a child almost daily in Hannibal. Mark’s paralyzing fear of death was overcome when he climbed into bed with a friend who had the measles, and he nearly died. After two weeks, however, he reached a turning point and began recuperating.

By the time he was a teenager, Mark Twain had read the Bible through completely. When he was sixteen years old, his first article appeared in print. For four years during his early twenties (1857–61), he became first an apprentice, and eventually a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River (enshrined in his book *Life on the Mississippi*). Then in 1861–1862 he headed west by stagecoach (narrated in *Roughing It*), ending up as a newspaper reporter in Virginia City, Nevada (1862–1864) and San Francisco (1864–1865). By 1861 he had joined the Freemasons, and “Masonic beliefs...were at this period distinctly deistic...”<sup>12</sup> In 1866 Twain spent four months in what is now called Hawaii (then designated the Sandwich Islands).

In 1870 Samuel Clemens married Olivia Langdon. Wagenknecht observed that “when Mrs. Clemens, as a girl, was a helpless invalid, it had been a faith healer, a Dr. Newton, who had restored her to activity.”<sup>13</sup> Although Livy’s (or Olivia’s) family were church-goers, evidently their religion was of the liberal Protestant variety. Wagenknecht commented concerning Thomas K. Beecher (brother of Henry Ward Beecher), the Langdons’ pastor: “if there have not been many truer Christians than Thomas K. Beecher, there has certainly never been a more unconventional one in ecclesiastical life,” for he was “liberal...in his

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>10</sup> John C. Gerber, *Mark Twain* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 177.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 184.

interpretations of religion.”<sup>14</sup> Biographer Milton Rugoff stated: “It is impossible to classify Thomas Beecher because he was guided not by doctrine” and “had left behind his father’s Calvinism.”<sup>15</sup>

At the time when Twain “was engaged to Olivia Langdon, [he] came closest to making a real connection with organized Christianity,” although “he looked back on his early life as distinctly non-Christian in his character.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore in the effervescence of his engagement Clemens wrote to his fiancée:

...Livy, we’ll model our home after [your] old home, and make the Spirit of Love lord over all the realm... Turn towards the Cross and be comforted—I turn with you—What would you [have] more? The peace of God shall rest upon us and all will be well.<sup>17</sup>

During that romantic period Twain was reading the Bible nightly and praying, as well as corresponding with his sweetheart over sermons he’d been reading.<sup>18</sup> When the couple was first married, they read the Bible together, and he would say grace at mealtime.

That atmosphere didn’t last extensively, however, for soon he was announcing to Livy: “I don’t believe the Bible. It contradicts my reason.”<sup>19</sup> As the famous author was to say through the mouth of Tom Sawyer, “I...have got religion and wish to be quit of it and lead an honest life again.”<sup>20</sup> Irrespective of this temporary fervid religiosity Mark Twain exhibited shortly before and after his marriage, Allison Ensor concluded: “I believe that the evidence shows Twain’s orthodoxy reached its zenith late in 1868 and early in 1869 and was already declining before his marriage.”<sup>21</sup> If the last six words in the preceding sentence are true, Twain either put on a gallant last hurrah or tried a good deal of romantic self-convincing.

Edward Wagenknecht espoused the view that when Mark Twain abandoned all penchant for Bible-reading and hat-tipping in the direction

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>15</sup> Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 565.

<sup>16</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 112.

of Christianity, his wife did also. She informed him that if he were going to hell, she wanted to go with him! Later when he urged her: "Livy, if it comforts you to lean on the Christian faith, do [so]," she retorted, "I can't Youth [using her pet name for him]. I haven't any."<sup>22</sup>

Oddly, in light of his throwaway "faith," Twain became friends about that time (for the next forty-five years) with the Congregational minister from Hartford, Connecticut, who had co-performed their wedding. Reverend Joseph Twichell had attended Yale University, Union Theological Seminary, and spent 2 years at Andover Theological Seminary. As a Civil War chaplain, Twichell had already become broader in his thinking due to his association with his fellow chaplain, the Roman Catholic Father Joseph B. O'Hagan (later to become president of Holy Cross College in Massachusetts). When Twichell had to conduct the funeral of a non-Christian, he inquired aloud during the service what was "the distinctive feature of the religion of Christ?" He answered his own question by asking, "Is it not the simple appeal to love one another?"<sup>23</sup> No wonder the commenting biographer can therefore assert: "Evangelical Christianity was beyond the range of [Twichell's] personal experience."<sup>24</sup>

Toward the end of the Civil War, Twichell was forced to come to some doctrinal decisions about the controversial local Congregational pastor, Horace Bushnell. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* calls Bushnell "the father of American theological liberalism."<sup>25</sup> Bushnell's theology "disagreed with three basic Calvinistic propositions, the first of which concerned the means by which an individual became a true Christian" in that "total depravity, unconditional election, and prevenient and irresistible grace" presumed that each individual "must experience some kind of miraculous conversion."<sup>26</sup> This was the position he chafed against in his book *Christian Nurture*. Bushnell held that if a child grew up in a loving Christian home, he or she "would grow up never feeling that he had been other than a Christian."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> Leah A. Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell: Mark Twain's Friend and Pastor* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1966), 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Mark A. Noll, "Bushnell, Horace," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 181.

<sup>26</sup> Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

In Bushnell's book *God in Christ* he communicated that "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were *not* three distinct consciousnesses...Instead, they were 'instrumentally three'..."<sup>28</sup> For these theological positions (and others) the *Princeton Review* (and other Bible scholars) called for Bushnell to be tried for heresy. All of this theological upheaval was transpiring when Twichell came to be a Congregational pastor in Hartford, Connecticut. Upon study, Twichell "adopted Bushnell's theology almost in its entirety."<sup>29</sup>

Mark Twain's new publisher of *Innocents Abroad* lived right across the street from the church which Twichell pastored. In a social gathering Twain called the Congregational church the "Church of the Holy Speculators" (due to its wealthy members), only to be told that Twichell was standing right behind him at that very moment. As time passed, the Twichells and the Twains became fast friends. Mark Twain was to consider Rev. Joseph Twichell and the literary William Dean Howells his two best and longest friends.

On their 1878 trip abroad together in Europe, Twain was to tell Twichell: "I have been almost a believer, but it immediately drifts away from me again. I don't believe a word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book."<sup>30</sup> Twain's first biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, was to claim that by 1878 Twain and Twichell "ended all discussion of the personal aspects of religion..."<sup>31</sup>

In the ten-year period between 1876 and 1885 Mark Twain penned *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

Twain's life was also pocked by tragedy. He watched his brother Henry die from a steamboat explosion and wasn't sure that Henry's death might have been capped off by an overdose of morphine that he may have administered. He also felt responsible for the death of his first child (a little boy) since Mark had taken him out of doors and overexposed him in bad weather. By 1894 his lack of financial wisdom had brought him to the door of bankruptcy. In 1896 his daughter Susy died from meningitis. In 1904 his wife died after a siege of twenty-two months, and in 1909 his daughter Jean died on the day before Christmas.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 105-106.

Only his daughter Clara was to outlive the famed author. Twain was, of course, responsible for his wife's abandonment of any substantial version of Christianity. Eventually he "began to have terrifying dreams in which...he and his family are lost in the dark on board a ship with no pilot and no rudder."<sup>32</sup> What nightmares for a former riverboat pilot to have!

Mark Twain was to receive honorary doctorates (between 1901 and 1907) from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University.

By 1906 Twain had published privately and anonymously a piece that his wife had despised and which he called his "Bible"—*What Is Man?* Among his last and most bitter anti-God writings are *The Mysterious Stranger* (featuring a Satan character) and *Letters from the Earth*. Before dying, Mark Twain reportedly said to his daughter, "Good-by, dear, if we meet."<sup>33</sup> How different a tone is entailed in Twain's dying "if we meet" from 1 Thess 4:14 and 17 (*we believe that we who are alive will be caught up with Christians who've died to meet the Lord together*).

### III. A SHORT SURVEY OF HIS BOOKS

*The Innocents Abroad* (1869) is Twain's write-up of his trip overseas aboard an excursion ship (the Quaker City) bound (among other destinations) for the Holy Land. *The Innocents Abroad* is subtitled *The New Pilgrim's Progress*. It was really this book that rocketed Twain to fame as a national humorist. He felt that a sizable percentage of the passengers had a kind of prissy pseudo-piety. He called Palestine "the grand feature of the expedition."<sup>34</sup> However, any supposed innocence of expectations he had cherished about the Holy Land was diminished or demolished by the greed and gaudiness that hovered about the so-called "holy places."

A second travel book (*Roughing It*) materialized from his pen three years later. It traced his out-west trip and adventures there. John Gerber asserted: "Apart from *Huckleberry Finn*, *Roughing It* is Mark Twain's best compendium of well-crafted comic styles and devices."<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, for preachers the hilarious conversational interchange between a

---

<sup>32</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 48.

fresh-from-the-east reverend and a slang-spraying, rugged Scotsman (transcripted in chapter 47) makes an excellent introduction for a sermon on the provocative problem of cross-cultural communication.

Concerning *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its companion volume *Huckleberry Finn* Edward Wagenknecht observed regarding their youth-flavored orientation: "There is nothing in them that he did not understand better than any other under who ever lived."<sup>36</sup> Tom's Sunday school and church experience are undoubtedly reflective of Twain's own early memories.

*The Prince and the Pauper* (1882) also adapts itself excellently to preacherly purposes in speaking about the incarnation of our Lord. The pauper Tom Canty is a lookalike for the young regent, Prince Edward. When a mixup ensues after the two boys have changed clothes with each other, the prince learns at great length what it's like to live as a pauper, and the pauper experiences all the perks of living as a prince. In a way *The Prince and the Pauper* is a gigantic storybook commentary on Phil 2:5-11. Our Prince entered into the mammoth exchange of heaven's palace for our planet's pauperhood, experiencing the rigors of the lowest of the low. By contrast, Christians are elevated to the regal realms spelled out in Rom 8:17. Thus, Twain has provided preachers with a ready-made parable in this tale of exchanged identities.

*Life on the Mississippi* (1883) charts Twain's experience as a steamboater, this time navigating north-and-south on the famous river instead of stagecoach-and-sagebrush adventures going west (as in *Roughing It*).

His 1885 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may be Twain's most memorable book. It is "one of the most popular and respected works of fiction ever written. Abroad it has appeared in roughly 700 editions and has been translated into over fifty languages."<sup>37</sup> Several chapters in *Huckleberry Finn* (chs 34-39) would supply any preacher with a masterful illustration of what legalism is. Tom Sawyer proves to be a first-class legalist. He has the perfect opportunity to set the runaway slave (Jim) free. However, Tom flabbergasts Huck Finn by concocting all manner of rules and regulations which (according to Tom's romanticized fictional novel-reading, such as of *The Man in the Iron Mask*) must be carried out (by the book, so to speak). Thus, Tom is forever inventing ways to make freeing Jim harder (such as sawing off the table leg to which Jim is chained when he might simply lift up the table and in an instant Jim

---

<sup>36</sup> Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 95.

would be fully liberated!). In comedic fashion (for the reader) Tom prefers legalism to liberty, keeping Huck (the free spirit) exasperated. It is not comic, but tragic, when churches opt for a regeneration-via-regulations (which is really no regeneration at all) instead of the sheer simplicity of supernatural salvation.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) Twain treats us to yet another case of exchanged identity. By means of time-travel, Hank Morgan returns to King Arthur's England. In the story we have another case of royalty-stooping-to-poverty. However, King Arthur has the manners of royalty inbred in him so that his posing as a beggar becomes a highly difficult stunt to pull off. What a contrast with the One who was in very nature God yet absorbed fully the very nature of a slave (Phil 2:6-7).

*Puddn'head Wilson* (1894) is Twain's third treatment of the theme of transferred identity (as in *The Prince and the Pauper* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). In this third book the exchange is far deeper, not an exchange of royalty, but of race. John Gerber wrote: "For the first time in his fiction Mark Twain confronts the slaveholding South head on."<sup>38</sup> It was also in the year of 1894 that the famous author himself had to stoop because his publishing house went bankrupt.

Wagenknecht observed: "Though in 1904 [Twain] agreed with William Lyon Phelps that *Huckleberry Finn* was his masterpiece, he is officially on record as regarding *Joan of Arc* [1896] as worth all his other books together."<sup>39</sup> In terms of appraisal, Twain considered Joan of Arc (the person) so high as to be practically off the scale. Only Christ was (at that time) afforded a higher position. Twain had a penchant for thinking in superlatives, and it is probably not coincidence that in the same year his favorite daughter Susy died.

Mark Twain authored other books in addition to the nine volumes just surveyed. *What Is Man?* was published anonymously four years prior to Twain's death. While its title is drawn from Ps 8:4, the book's content is anything but biblical. It was the book manuscript that had most appalled his wife with its "nihilism."<sup>40</sup>

Baetzhold and McCullough observed concerning Twain's *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*: "Among the works published during Mark

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>39</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 120.



Twain's lifetime, it holds the record for the longest period between gestation and publication—almost forty years."<sup>41</sup>

*The Mysterious Stranger*, starring a Satan-figure, only appeared posthumously. It was also a mouthpiece for Twain's antibiblical embitterment, in which he concluded that life is really only a dream.

Twain's *Letters from the Earth* would have been so disturbing to the general reading public of the early 1900s that it was not published in its true text until 1962. Baetzhold and McCullough summarized its thrust by writing:

The dramatic opening sequence presents a scathing creation myth, portraying God as an absent-minded scientist, Satan as a skeptic, and humanity as a botched experiment. And the work as a whole remains as Mark Twain's final word on God, the Bible, the world, human nature, and the...religious beliefs of the human race.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, Twain deemed it prudent financially and popularitywise to keep a lid on much of his most anti-Christian writing during his own lifetime.

#### IV. TWAIN'S THEOLOGY

Dickens, Hardy, Hugo, Melville, Twain—all had imbibed a great deal from the matrix of an orthodox Christian perspective in their younger years. Therefore, the analyst must always distinguish between such writers' verbalizing of orthodox theology through the mouths of their characters and the author's true thinking on theological subjects. Although a Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn may take umbrage at Sunday school memorization, their shenanigans hardly qualify as blatantly anti-Christian vitriol.

##### A. OVERALL ORIENTATION

Mark Twain seemed to chafe at the Calvinistic version of Christianity he had imbibed at the outset, yet he could never shake it off totally. His famous line was: "mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 129.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Brodwin in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, ed. Louis J. Budd (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1983), 179.

Wagenknecht states matter of factly that “Mark Twain was not, in the theological sense...a Christian...”<sup>44</sup> John Gerber concurs: “Sam Clemens was never a believer in an orthodox sense...His religious ambivalences started early.”<sup>45</sup>

While Mark Twain claimed to “detest...theology,” yet “he remained a kind of crackerbarrel folk theologian throughout his career” according to Stanley Brodwin.<sup>46</sup> Despite this penchant, Twain read Twichell’s volume of Jonathan Edwards, though in the aftermath he claimed to go around wallowing “on a three days’ tear [like] a drunken lunatic.”<sup>47</sup>

By common consensus Mark Twain is branded a philosophical determinist. He viewed humans as “prisoner[s] of determinism,” for (he wrote) “every event, however slight, was embryonic in the first instant of life.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Gerber acknowledges: “He did believe in the doctrine of mechanical determinism...”<sup>49</sup> Another take on his “gospel” of determinism was to see it as “a vast, materialistic pantheism” where “man is himself a microbe, and his globe a blood corpuscle drifting with its shining brethren of the Milky Way down a vein of the...Maker of all things, whose body...is what men name the Universe.”<sup>50</sup>

In *Letters from the Earth* Twain penned: “The human being is a machine. An automatic machine. It is composed of thousands of...mechanisms...over which the man himself has no authority...no control.”<sup>51</sup> That statement reduces his determinism to a nutshell.

## B. THE BIBLE

Louis Budd noted factually: “Significantly, there are more biblical references in [Twain’s] collected works than references to any other literary work or figure.”<sup>52</sup> Illustrative of this reality is that when Olivia had accepted his proposal, Twain wrote Rev. Twichell: “Sound the loud timbrel!...for I have fought the good fight and lo! I have won!”<sup>53</sup> (How

---

<sup>44</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 195.

<sup>45</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Brodwin in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 200.

<sup>48</sup> James Hefley, “The Greatness, and the Sadness, of Mark Twain,” *Moody Monthly* (December 1985): 84.

<sup>49</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 150.

<sup>50</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 191.

<sup>51</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 238.

<sup>52</sup> Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 37.

many authors today could conflate Ps 150:4-5 and 2 Tim 4:7?) Edgar Lee Masters said: “At last he threw out the Bible, but it seemed to be attached to a rubber ball and was likely to bounce back into his lap at any time.”<sup>54</sup>

Mark Twain developed within the cocoon of a Bible-believing time and place. He remarked “that he was ‘compelled’ to read the Bible ‘un-expurgated’ before he was ‘15 years old’...”<sup>55</sup> Allison Ensor observed: “He had lived in a community where many people revered the Bible as the Word of God, as virtually a letter direct from the hand of the Almighty.”<sup>56</sup>

By contrast with that homebase “as early as 1870 he looked upon the Bible as ‘a mass of fables and traditions, mere mythology’ ([Albert Bigelow Paine’s] *Biography*, 411).”<sup>57</sup> To his first biographer (Paine) he said about the Gospels and Christ: “It is all a myth. There have been Saviors in every age of the world. It is all just a fairy tale like the idea of Santa Claus” (*Biography*, 1482).<sup>58</sup>

On Twain’s 1878 overseas trip he stated:

...I have been almost a believer, but it immediately drifts away from me again. I don’t believe a word of your Bible was inspired by God any more than any other book. I believe it is entirely the work of man from beginning to end—atonement and all.<sup>59</sup>

This is a statement formulated over thirty years prior to Twain’s death. Thus, “in the creed printed in [Thomas] Paine’s last volume [in Twain’s own library], Mark Twain takes up the position that the Bible was written wholly by man...not the outcome of special revelations.”<sup>60</sup>

Twain’s view of the Bible was not merely Bultmannian for he wrote during the years before he died that the Bible contained “upwards of a thousand lies.”<sup>61</sup> In fact, he went further to say that the Bible, particularly the OT, “is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere. It makes Nero an angel of light...by contrast.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 187.

<sup>56</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> Strong, *Joseph Hopkins Twichell*, 92.

<sup>60</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 194.

<sup>61</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 73.

<sup>62</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 319.

Twain wrote extensively about Eden, Adam, Eve, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, etc. Genesis was Twain's favorite biblical quarry. Naturally the Noah account is a favorite source of his for taking potshots (for example, drinking water issues and why dinosaurs were missing from Noah's cargo list while nuisance insects, cholera germs, etc., were aboard). All his hilarity was to arrive at the deduction: "we knew that Noah's flood never happened, and couldn't have happened [June 23, 1906]."63

Mark Twain reread the Joseph narrative of Genesis in light of the contemporary Rockefeller (who was "filthy rich" and taught a young men's Bible study). So Twain said that Joseph "skinned [the Egyptians] of every last penny they had...then bought the whole nation's bodies and liberties on a 'fair market' valuation for...the chains of slaves."64 Since Twain had jettisoned the Bible as *the Bible*, he spoke of *What Is Man?* as his "Bible."

### C. GOD

For about the latter half of his life Mark Twain kept up a sort of guerilla warfare against the God of the Bible (as he perceived Him to be). Certainly as a child he must have had a very somber dosage of the fear of God drilled into him, for there were electrical storms and local epidemics that filled him with a virtual terror of death.

Essentially he concluded that if the biblical God were the all-controlling God of Calvinism, then He should take the full brunt of responsibility for sin. Twain wrote that God should "recognize in Himself the Author and Inventor of Sin and...place the whole responsibility where it should rightly belong: upon Himself, the only Sinner."65

Christians showcase God's love, grace, and mercy, but Twain had really nothing good to say about the Bible's God. He asserted: "We brazenly call God the source of mercy, while we are aware...that there is not an authentic instance in history of His ever having exercised that virtue."66 (Note his thoroughly sweeping statement—"not an authentic instance...ever.")

The portrait that Twain painted of God was anything but pretty. He viewed this God as "...jealous, trivial, ignorant, revengeful..."

---

63 Ibid., 322.

64 Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 80.

65 Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 180.

66 Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 320.

irascible...fickle..."<sup>67</sup> He asked: "Do we know that He is just, charitable, kindly, gentle, merciful, compassionate? No. There is no evidence that He is any of these things."<sup>68</sup> In short, this God is a cruel fiend and an immoral monster. "He is destitute of morals—at least of the human pattern," said Twain.<sup>69</sup>

In *The Mysterious Stranger*, published after Twain died, he adopted the stance of solipsism, writing, "There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you."<sup>70</sup>

Under the rubric of "God" there are several subtopics worth considering—namely, Calvinism, Darwinism, and prayer. First, almost every Twain commentator alludes to Twain's upbringing under the pall of Presbyterian Calvinism. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom's pastor had droned on about "fire and brimstone and thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving."<sup>71</sup> The writer Owen Wister (who authored *The Virginian*) spoke of Twain's boyhood "boiling with curiosity...all in collision inside him with the Calvinistic dread of hell."<sup>72</sup> Of course, it is highly ironical that Twain, who would wield a rapier against Calvinism, would settle for his own brand of determinism.

Twain came to his popularity during the heyday of the Darwinian upsurge. In 1879 he was to meet Charles Darwin, and Darwin also was to read Twain's books. Twain wrote to his fiancée (January 8, 1870):

I have been reading some new arguments to prove that the world is very old and that the six days of creation were six immensely long periods...This writer mentions that there are stars within reach of our telescopes whose light requires 50,000 years to...come to our earth [so that the universe existed perhaps] a million years ago.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 180.

<sup>68</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 323.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Gerber, *Mark Twain*, 156.

<sup>71</sup> Mark Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, ed. Lawrence Teacher (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976), I:460.

<sup>72</sup> Owen Wister in *Readings on Mark Twain*, ed. Bruno Leane (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1996), 118.

<sup>73</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, xv.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* he asserted:

All that is original in us...can be covered up...by the point of a cambric needle, all the rest being atoms...inherited from a procession of ancestors that stretches back a billion years to the Adam-clan or grasshopper or monkey from whom our race has been so...unprofitably developed.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast with many Darwinians, however, Twain saw the animal-to-human trajectory as a moral *descent* rather than an *ascent*. In one spot Twain offered the opinion that man was probably “not made intentionally at all, but worked himself up from the primeval slime through some unhappy accident, much to the surprise and grief of the Creator.”<sup>75</sup>

In *Huckleberry Finn* as the trio of characters raft on the Mississippi River, Jim and Huck discuss the stars. “Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened.”<sup>76</sup>

Huck Finn also dispensed with the subject of prayer to God on a purely pragmatic basis. Miss Watson tried to teach Huck to pray, “but nothing came of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get. But it warn't so. I tried it.”<sup>77</sup> God didn't prove to be a dispensary for Huck's desired fishhooks.

The adult Twain asked, “When we pray...does He listen? Does He answer? There is not a single authentic instance of it in human history.”<sup>78</sup> Elijah (in Jas 5:17-18) and the apostles (in Acts 4:31) would dispute Twain's claim concerning “not a single authentic instance” of positively answered prayer.

Naturally Twain's view of God and evolution determines his perspective on humanity.

#### D. HUMANITY

Critic Edward Wagenknecht served up the opinion that “no man ever poured fiercer scorn upon his own kind” than did Mark Twain.<sup>79</sup> Twain declared that man “begins as dirt and departs as stench.”<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 224.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>76</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:831.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, I:755.

<sup>78</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 324.

<sup>79</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 117.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

In his philosophic determinism (dare we say, secular hyperCalvinism?) Twain announced: “Man is a machine, and not responsible for his actions.”<sup>81</sup> As such, humans have no free will according to Twain.

Through the mouthpiece of his fictional character in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* Twain pontificated: “Training is all there is to a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; There is no such thing as [human] nature. What we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training.”<sup>82</sup> Few major American writers have been more pessimistic than Twain was about the human race.

### E. SIN

Twain said on the subject of sin: “It was decreed that all of Adam’s descendants...should be punished for the [moral] baby’s trespass against a law of his nursery fulminated against him before he was out of his diapers.”<sup>83</sup> In *Letters from the Earth* he stated that God “elected to punish [Adam’s] children, all through the ages to the end of time, for a trifling offense committed by others before they were born.”<sup>84</sup> Consequently, the liberal Congregational pastor Joseph Twichell reprimanded Twain for being “too orthodox on the Doctrine of Total Human Depravity [in 1901].”<sup>85</sup>

The following statement from Twain’s invalid wife shows the extent to which his views on this subject affected those closest to him when she pleaded with him: “Why always dwell on the evil until those who live beside you are crushed to the earth and you seem almost like a monomaniac?”<sup>86</sup> Twain was personalizing when he penned: “The real life that you live is a life of inferior sin.”<sup>87</sup> In another place he wrote: “All our acts—reasoned and unreasoned—are selfish.”<sup>88</sup>

Yet, despite his statements about the sweepingness of sin, Twain could say (paradoxically) of his brother (Orion) who died in his seventies: “He was good, all good...; there was nothing bad in him.”<sup>89</sup> By contrast, when his brother Henry was about to die from the steamboat

---

<sup>81</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 327.

<sup>82</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:1035.

<sup>83</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 320.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>85</sup> *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 181.

<sup>86</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 161.

<sup>87</sup> *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 179.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>89</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 204.

explosion, Mark could write (in 1858): “Hardened, hopeless,...lost and ruined sinner as I am—I...have humbled myself...and prayed as never man prayed before that the great God might let this cup pass from me [and] spare my brother.”<sup>90</sup> No doubt this non-answered prayer colored his view on prayer (touched on earlier).

Oddly, the view on death that Twain espoused was a strange one. He wrote, “I think the dead are the only human beings who are really well off...”<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere he called death “the most precious of all gifts.”<sup>92</sup>

## F. SATAN

Most literary critics hold that Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a more potent and grander character than Milton’s God. Even so, Mark Twain showed an obsession with Satan, producing at least six pieces related to Satan from 1897 to 1905. In his autobiography entry of 1897-98, Twain admitted: “I have always felt friendly toward Satan. Of course, that is ancestral; it must be in the blood for I could not have originated it.”<sup>93</sup>

Twain alluded to an early fascination when he acknowledged in *What Is Man?*: “When I was a [childhood] Sunday school scholar, something more than sixty years ago, I became interested in Satan, and wanted to find out all I could about him.”<sup>94</sup> Satan is really the hero of *The Mysterious Stranger*.

## G. CHRIST

In an 1871 essay Mark Twain was still affirming: “All that is great and good in our particular civilization came straight from the hand of Jesus Christ.”<sup>95</sup> By 1878 Twain could say: “neither [William Dean] Howells nor I believe in...the divinity of the Savior.”<sup>96</sup> Even at that time he was still (though denying Christ’s deity) stating that Jesus ought not be referred to “lightly, profanely, or otherwise than with the profoundest

---

<sup>90</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 321.

<sup>92</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 204.

<sup>93</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 54-55.

<sup>94</sup> Mark Twain, *What Is Man? and Other Essays* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 307.

<sup>95</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 88-89.

<sup>96</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 191.



reverence.”<sup>97</sup> In 1906 Twain wrote: “Christ does not prove that He is God.”<sup>98</sup>

“Bernard DeVoto has noted, ‘throughout Mark Twain’s writing he confuses the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception with that of the Virgin Birth of Christ...’”<sup>99</sup> In Twain’s “Reflections on Religion” he suggested that the virgin birth account was “invented by Mary to conceal from Joseph her indiscretions. To top it all off, he declared that ‘you couldn’t purify a tomcat by the Immaculate Conception process’ [by which he meant the virgin birth].”<sup>100</sup>

Allison Ensor reasoned deductively:

Twain never denied [the resurrection of Christ] specifically, [but] when Twain told [Albert Bigelow] Paine that the whole story of Christ is a fairy tale of the Santa Claus variety, he was by implication including the Resurrection.<sup>101</sup>

As time went on, Twain concluded that Jesus (or the God of the New Testament) was “a thousand billion times crueller than ever he was in the Old Testament.”<sup>102</sup> That was because (as he asserted in *Letters from the Earth*) “the palm for malignity must be granted to Jesus, the inventor of hell.”<sup>103</sup> Anyone who questions whether Twain could be so malignant needs to read *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth*. It would be difficult to find a more rabid attack against the God of the Bible than in Twain’s perception.

John Seelye was not exaggerating when he declared that “Jesus Christ for Mark Twain was more expletive than redeemer, and who had a middle initial H—for Hellfire, not Humanity. For Mark Twain...was more of Satan’s party than of the Savior’s...”<sup>104</sup>

## H. SALVATION

In a totally non-soteric or non-religious context (relating to the Quaker City tourists’ arrival at Odessa) the passengers (Mark Twain

<sup>97</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 88-89.

<sup>98</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 327.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>100</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 76.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>103</sup> *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 184.

<sup>104</sup> John Seelye, *Mark Twain in the Movies* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 31.

traveled with) asked the consul (in *Innocents Abroad*) “what we must do to be saved” (as far as etiquette in the Russian court was concerned).<sup>105</sup> Obviously Mark Twain was acquainted with the language of Acts 16:30 and the world’s most vital question: “What must [we] do to be saved?” Presumably if Mark Twain was familiar with Acts 16:30, he could also have quoted Acts 16:31. Did he comprehend the NT’s formulation of salvation?

On one occasion Huck Finn found himself situated squarely amid a rural, gun-toting feud, but after church the gun-toters discussed the sermon “about faith, and good works and free grace, and preforeordination, and I don’t know what all.”<sup>106</sup> The heart of the question becomes: did Huck Finn’s inventor really understand “free grace” or actually not “know what all?”

In one of Twain’s famous cases of transferred identity, Huck Finn pretended to be Tom Sawyer (among Tom’s relatives). He described his sensation of joy “like being born again...”<sup>107</sup> In Twain’s *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* a “barkeeper got converted at a Moody and Sankey meeting,” was shortly killed, and so turned up in heaven.<sup>108</sup> These two cases illustrate Twain’s awareness concerning the subject of regeneration or conversion.

There are a number of places in Twain’s fiction where—in the parlance of the time—people “get religion” by means of an emotional experience at a revival or some other meeting. For example, Tom Sawyer makes up a pretend-letter where he writes: “I am one of the gang [of cutthroats], but have got religgion and wish to quit [the gang] and lead a honest life again...”<sup>109</sup> In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Roxy (the woman who was one-sixteenth black) “had been saved in the nick of time by a revival in the colored Methodist Church...at which time and place she ‘got religion.’”<sup>110</sup> Obviously this terminology (“got religion”) was then much in vogue.

Also in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* Judge Driscoll anticipates a duel in which he may be killed that very night. Out loud he speaks, will in hand, of his nephew Tom, saying, “I see that his reformation is going to be

---

<sup>105</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:225.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, II:825.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, II:907.

<sup>108</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 165.

<sup>109</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:939.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, II:27.

permanent.” Tom overhears this soliloquy, and so he says to himself, “I’ll gamble no more, I’ll drink no more...”<sup>111</sup>

In Twain’s narrated *Roughing It* Ollendorf, Ballou, and Twain get trapped in a snowstorm. They expect to die. In an emotion-laden scene Ollendorf verbalizes his forgiveness of Ballou. All three are crying. Ollendorf throws away his bottle of whisky, only wishing he’d lived long enough “to make a thorough reform of his character...by devoting himself to helping the poor, nursing the sick, and pleading with people to guard themselves against the evils of intemperance...” Ballou then throws away his pack of cards (though “he said he never gambled”). Then Mark Twain “threw away [his] pipe.”<sup>112</sup> However, at dawn the three companions discover that they have been only fifteen steps from a stagecoach station! Twain then discovers, “Alas, my regeneration was not complete—I wanted to smoke!”<sup>113</sup> As he sneaks out and lights his pipe, he finds Ollendorf drinking his whisky and Ballou playing solitaire. Thus, for Twain, “regeneration” was very much interwoven with “getting religion” and giving up drinking, smoking, gambling, etc.

The preceding paradigm seems to echo Mark Twain’s own premarital and early marital expectations. He had temporarily given up smoking and had gotten involved in reading the Bible. This was his “Christian” phase. However, that phase was hardly long-lasting.

In the *Autobiography of Eve* Eve finds Adam’s words written in sand: “I am sorry. I repent. Forgive!”<sup>114</sup> When Twain made his transatlantic trip, Mary Mason Fairbanks acted as his spiritual “mother,” and he assumed “the role of the reformed bad boy, a repentant prodigal...”<sup>115</sup> Allison Ensor said in reference to Mrs. Fairbanks: “he was making a genuine effort—trying too hard probably—to reform and become a Christian.”<sup>116</sup> Is that what Mark Twain really thought “regeneration” was—repentance (in the clean-up-your-act sense) and reform?

In *Tom Sawyer* Aunt Sally says, “I’m thankful to the good God...[who is] longsuffering and merciful [to] them that believe on Him and keep His word...”<sup>117</sup> Is Aunt Sally enunciating a formula for

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., II:84-85.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., II:677-78.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., II:679.

<sup>114</sup> Baetzhald and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 51.

<sup>115</sup> Allison Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 34.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>117</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:517.

salvation which involves keeping God's Word? In *Letters from the Earth* Satan says that "salaried teachers" tell earthlings that "there is a hell of everlasting fire, and that [one] will go to it if he doesn't keep the Commandments."<sup>118</sup> Is this item ("to keep the Commandments") yet another additive to the formula for salvation?

In his eventual philosophy of determinism Mark Twain declared "the basis or moral skeleton of the man was inborn disposition—a thing which is as permanent as rock, and never undergoes any actual or genuine change between cradle and grave."<sup>119</sup> Such a viewpoint obviously allows no room for any positional or experiential conversion.

Mark Twain was assuredly aware of the Protestant-Catholic controversy over the faith-and-works issue. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Mark Twain probably came as close as anywhere to addressing the salvation issue directly. Roxy tells about an out-of-state preacher who comes to her church:

He said dey ain't nobody kin save his own self—can't do it by faith, can't do it by works, can't do it no way at all. Free grace is de on'y way, en dat don't come from nobody but jis' de Lord; en he kin give it to anybody he please, saint or sinner—he don't kyer. He do j'is as he's a mineter. He slect out anybody dat suit him, en put one in his place, en make de first one happy forever en leave t'other one to burn wid Satan.<sup>120</sup>

One wonders if this scrambled-up version of Calvinism was Twain's recasting of the version of Christianity he'd received as a child. Biblically informed Christians agree with the novel's preacher that there is no such thing as self-salvation, that the Lord is its sole originator, and that it is by "free grace" as the only way. However, what does the preacher mean when he says "can't do it by faith?" Does he mean what J. I. Packer meant when he wrote that the notion that

believers are justified...on account of faith, Paul never says...Were faith the ground of justification, faith would be in effect a meritorious work...Paul regards faith, not as itself our

---

<sup>118</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 222.

<sup>119</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 226.

<sup>120</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:31-32.

justifying righteousness, but rather as the outstretched empty hand which receives righteousness by receiving Christ?<sup>121</sup>

Faith then is properly conceived of as the non-meritorious condition of justification, but not as the objective basis for the Christian's salvation. But Twain's preacher seems to be suggesting some kind of predestinarian salvation where *faith has no role whatsoever*.

Louis Budd owned that "the Lutheran and Calvinistic emphasis on 'Faith Alone' (*sola fides*) [and predestination]...were the theological principles [Mark Twain] must have been exposed to during his youth."<sup>122</sup> The same author proposed: "What [Twain]...came to reject—if he ever believed it—was the Protestant reliance on the Grace of God."<sup>123</sup>

Twain commented considerably upon Roman Catholicism, Mormonism (in chapters 12-16 of *Roughing It*), and Christian Science (in his 1907 book on *Christian Science*). He once said that "Catholics believe they can 'buy salvation with Masses.'"<sup>124</sup> Certainly *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* would not make for pleasant reading for any ardent Roman Catholic. Yet when his daughter Jean temporarily lived in a Catholic convent, he wrote that he would not "be the least bit sorry" if she became a Catholic, and that Catholicism "is doubtless the most peace-giving and restful of all the religions."<sup>125</sup>

Since Twain claims Roman Catholicism as "the most peace-giving and restful of all religions," this is an excellent fulcrum point from which to test its doctrine of personal assurance of salvation. And who better to test that claim on than upon Twain's heroine, Joan of Arc, whom he pedastalized in the way most Catholics would revere Mary?

In answering the court's interrogation Joan remarks: "Without the grace of God I could do nothing." Beaupere then asks her, "Are you in a state of grace?" She replies: "If I be not in a state of grace, I pray God place me in it; if I be in it, I pray God keep me so." Prior to her answer, the narrator remarks upon her dilemma that "the Scriptures had said one cannot know this thing."<sup>126</sup> Neither are the "ifs" of the virtuous Joan

<sup>121</sup> J. I. Packer, "Faith and Justification," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 596.

<sup>122</sup> Louis J. Budd, *Critical Essays on Mark Twain*, 185.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 197.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Samuel L. Clemens, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1896), III:148-49.

assuring nor does the narrator's claim about Scripture assure an inquirer, for it flies in the face of 1 John 5:10-13 (among other NT promises of assurance).

When it comes to assurances, Joan is asked how she knows certain future things. She replies, "I know it by revelation. And I know it as surely as I know that you sit here before me."<sup>127</sup> These solid assurances she claims to have received from St. Marguerite and St. Catherine in special revelations. Later Joan says, "I know that I shall be saved." Her inquisitor inquires: "Do you think that after that [special or private] revelation you could be able to commit mortal sin?" To this query she replies: "As to that I do not know. My hope for salvation is in holding fast to my oath to keep my body and soul pure."<sup>128</sup> Many evangelical Protestants have a problem with the biblicalness of her reply here. She does not say, "My hope for salvation is in Christ's death for me, His forgiveness, grace, etc.," but "My hope for salvation is in holding fast" to personal purity. The ardent evangelical Protestant desires one to affirm (with Edward Mote):

"My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness..."<sup>129</sup>

Christ's person and work are the only adequate undergirding for genuine salvation and assurance.

## I. ESCHATOLOGY

One would expect Mark Twain to parrot the terminology of the thought-world in which he grew up. For example, in a case of extreme sarcasm in 1873 Twain exclaimed: "How do we know but that [William Foster, a brutal murderer] is the Second Advent?"<sup>130</sup> In an unpublished pro-Boer article in the late 1890s Twain wrote of fearing "degradations ...which would...steep [the globe] in a sort of Middle-Age...slavery which would last till Christ comes again."<sup>131</sup> Obviously, in light of

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., III:164.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., III:192.

<sup>129</sup> *Choice Hymns of the Faith* (Fort Dodge, IA: Gospel Perpetuating Fund, 1952), 121.

<sup>130</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 119.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 236.

everything Twain believed about Christ, he was not using such an expression about the Lord's return in any kind of seriously factual manner.

In *Roughing It* Mark Twain referred to an admiral of the *Ajax* who roared out a greeting "in a way that was calculated to wake the dead and precipitate the final resurrection..."<sup>132</sup> The preceding expressions are a patently figurative borrowing. In *Huckleberry Finn* Aunt Sally informs Huck about a Baptist who was in a steamboat explosion "and died in the hope of a glorious resurrection."<sup>133</sup> In *Letters from the Earth* Twain speaks figuratively about an older male's sexual ability which is "laid to rest in the hope of a blessed resurrection which is never to come."<sup>134</sup>

Chapter 5 of *Tom Sawyer* refers to another eschatological phenomenon. The Presbyterian minister in his sermon "made a grand and moving picture of the assembling together of the world's hosts at the millennium when the lion and the lamb should lie down together..."<sup>135</sup> Here Twain paraphrases Isa 11:6 and conflates it with Rev 20:1-6.

Wagenknecht corrals Twain's position on a future afterlife as follows: "'As to a hereafter,' he told Paine [his biographer, who came to stay with him in 1906], towards the end of his life, 'we have not the slightest evidence that there is any...I have never seen what to me seemed an atom of proof that there is a future life.'"<sup>136</sup> Clearly Twain had ruled Jesus' testimony about any hereafter out of any court of evidence. Nevertheless, at the end of the preceding assertion, Twain added: "And yet—I am strongly inclined to [its] acceptance."<sup>137</sup>

Of course, wishful thinking about an afterlife affects even the most hard-boiled. When his daughter Susy died, Twain told his wife: "It has been the belief of the wise...of many countries for three thousand years; let us accept their verdict...I will try never to doubt it again."<sup>138</sup> Similarly, when his daughter Jean died, Twain said to his housekeeper, Katy Leary, "She's in heaven with her mother."<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>132</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, II:805.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, I:905.

<sup>134</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 248.

<sup>135</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:460.

<sup>136</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 195.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Allison Ensor noted:

Twain observes that there are only two really new things in the Bible—heaven and hell [(*Letters from the Earth*), 14]. He seems not to be aware that writers such as Homer and Plato had depicted places of punishment and reward [after death] long before the New Testament was written.<sup>140</sup>

Concerning the NT's (specifically, Jesus') view of hell, Twain penned: "Nothing in all history...remotely approaches in atrocity the invention of Hell" (*Letters from the Earth*, 335).<sup>141</sup> Also in *Letters from the Earth* he chafed that "billions of human beings [who]...lived and died without ever having heard of Him or the terms at all...are to be...burned throughout all eternity."<sup>142</sup>

Twain was never completely homogenous in the expression of his opinions, for he also wrote: "It is not likely that there will be a Heaven hereafter. It is exceedingly likely that there will be a Hell—and it is nearly dead certain that nobody is going to escape it."<sup>143</sup> In his term "nobody" in the preceding sentence Twain is typically his superlatively sweeping self. Even Matt 7:13 and 14 does not exempt everybody (in its notation of "few").

Edward Wagenknecht observed that "Mark Twain once confessed that, though intellectually he did not believe in hell, emotionally he was still often afraid that he was going there. 'Why, Youth,' [Livy] exclaimed, 'who, then, can be saved?'"<sup>144</sup> Thus, Twain was never completely able to exorcise his youthful fear of hell.

Mark Twain had grown up hearing the preachers he knew justifying slavery from the Bible. Hence, when the relatively uneducated Huck Finn finally decides not to reveal what he knows about Jim the slave and so to reduce him again to slavery, Huck goes against the consensus of the Bible-believing people he knows when he declares: "All right, then, I'll go to hell."<sup>145</sup> Through Huck's voice, Twain believed he was acting in a more morally enlightened way than many who claimed to have the Bible on their side. Of course, virtually all Bible-believing Christians today

---

<sup>140</sup> Ensor, *Mark Twain and the Bible*, 82.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Baetzhold and McCullough, *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 329.

<sup>144</sup> Wagenknecht, *Mark Twain*, 158.

<sup>145</sup> Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 124.



would abominate slavery, but Mark Twain lived through the Civil War era. It is immeasurably sad when people feel forced into a false dilemma, such as either to be pro-slavery or anti-Bible. Nevertheless, Twain's gravitation away from and antagonism toward the Bible and its God were decided in a considerably larger basis than a one-issue choice.

## V. CONCLUSION

Practically every Twain commentator alludes to Twain's birth and death as the coincidental timing of the arrival of Halley's Comet on both occasions. Mark himself wrote: "The Almighty has said, no doubt, 'Now here go those two unaccountable frauds; they came in together, they must go out together.'"<sup>146</sup> Both were brilliant, and each was considered an unorthodox phenomenon.

Paralleling Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain grew up within a cocoon of orthodox Christianity (though it may have been somewhat warped in its transmission), married a church-goer, became embittered, and launched attacks on the biblical God. Twain did not accept the Bible as God's unique revelation or believe that it was divinely inspired. Consequently he understood the God of the Bible to be malevolent rather than merciful. Indeed, he slanted his reading toward those biblical accounts that could be interpreted as leaning in the direction of a malicious deity.

The Calvinistic God that Twain cut his theological teeth on as a youngster was evidently One who "thinned" out the elect (as he put it) to a highly rarified few and who sovereignly selected these few and left the majority to roast eternally without any chance.

Furthermore, the same author who met Darwin and furnished him with amusing nighttime reading acknowledged in his *Autobiography*: "Man was descended from...animals..."<sup>147</sup> By this comment, Twain not only endorsed biological evolution, but also he subscribed to a sort of moral and mechanical devolution. At heart he became a biological determinist, reviving a secular brand of the theological Calvinism he had earlier rejected. Humans were for him machines without free will.

Since one can't alter a preprogrammed machine, for Mark Twain there was no viable reality to be signified by a conversion. From day one of birth, people are what they are and that's it.

---

<sup>146</sup> Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 288.

<sup>147</sup> Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. by Charles Neider (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 336.

Did Twain really grasp what the NT teaches about how to be saved? In his *Autobiography* he filtered through his mother's logic (concerning Satan) a statement about salvation...He asked: "What saves the rest [meaning all sinners, besides "the supremest" sinner, who is Satan]?" Then he asked, "Their own efforts alone? No—or none might ever be saved."<sup>148</sup> In this statement, at least, self-effort is ruled out as a means of salvation.

If the above paragraph were all we had to work with, we might conclude that Twain intellectually grasped God's method of salvation. However there are numerous other (more experiential) autobiographical data that point in a different direction—talk about repenting and re-repenting, reforming, "getting religion," etc. Sunday school, Twain declared (through the thought balloon of Tom Sawyer), was "a place that Tom hated with his whole heart..."<sup>149</sup> It's a telling statement from his early era.

Perhaps a paradigmatic and revealing excerpt comes from his childhood. He stated that tragedies "ought to bring me to repentance." Every night he got rescares about his unrepentance, but broad daylight always banished his fears of God's judgment. "Those were nights of despair...After each tragedy I...repented...only in my *own* interest." He continues to describe his earnest, reiterated repentances (at night). Yet he admitted: "In all my boyhood life I am not sure that I ever tried to lead a better life in the daytime—or wanted to."<sup>150</sup>

Although Mark Twain apparently could verbalize the Protestant doctrine of the new birth through grace alone by faith alone in Christ, he seemed to mix it up frequently with the baggage of a reformed life, being good, cutting out certain social vices, being repentant enough to operate on a consistent plane, etc. The majority of his later commentators and biographers believe that he was never a real Christian.

Twain resorted to a Satan-character more than once in order to articulate his views. *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth* are among his latest and posthumous publications.

While Twain waffled on the subjects of heaven and hell (since he hoped he'd see his deceased loved ones again), his overriding view in later life was: there is no heaven or hell. In fact, hell is the invention of

---

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>149</sup> Twain, *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, I:453.

<sup>150</sup> Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 45-46.

Jesus, who is not God. Someone who would come up with an idea so fiendish could hardly be thought of as merciful or as divine.

For someone who regarded the Bible as containing such detestable material, Mark Twain kept on interacting with that “damnatory” book. “I have always preached,” he proclaimed.<sup>151</sup> However, his preaching was corrosive. For Mark, God’s and Satan’s roles were almost reversed. The biblical God is the One who is hellish, and Satan is the one who takes that viewpoint to task.

When the Twains visited Europe together (in all spending nine years abroad), they were invited to dinner by the German Emperor. In responding to such fame, Twain’s daughter Jean quipped, “Papa, the way things are going, pretty soon there won’t be anybody left for you to get acquainted with but God.”<sup>152</sup> Evidently he never really did. How tragic!

---

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>152</sup> Meltzer, *Mark Twain Himself*, 214.

# BOOK REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

---

***The Grace and Truth Paradox: Responding with Christlike Balance.*** By Randy Alcorn. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003. 93 pp. Cloth. \$9.99.

Popular author Randy Alcorn has tackled an important subject. In the prologue of John's Gospel we are told that Jesus, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

This book could easily be called a pamphlet or booklet. It is just 4.5 by 6.5 inches. The actual text is printed in 3.25 by 4.75 inches. Thus this book is not much bigger than a stack of 47 3"X5" cards.

In spite of its size, this book contains some worthwhile material. In the first chapter Alcorn argues that to be Christlike we must be full of both grace and truth. The second chapter essentially covers the same ground with different illustrations. However, the title of second chapter is confusing: "Essential and Inseparable." The title says they are *inseparable*. Yet in the chapter, and in the whole book, Alcorn shows that one can have either one separately. What he seems to mean is that they can not be separated in order for one to be pleasing to God. For example, in the conclusion to chapter 2 he writes, "So we have to make a choice. Are we going to spend our lives trying to please the grace-haters or the truth-haters? Or are we going to seek to please the only One whose judgment seat we'll stand before: Jesus, who is full of grace and truth" (p. 26).

Alcorn has separate chapters on "What Is Grace?" and on "What Is Truth?" Unfortunately, both are short on biblical support.

The author doesn't discuss the field of meaning of *charis*, the Greek word translated "grace" in the NT. Its major meanings are "favor," "gift," and "thanks." We aren't told that. Instead we find anecdotes about people like Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* fame. Indeed, I couldn't find a definition of grace in the chapter or book. This is about as close as he gets to a definition: "What relief [it is] to realize that my salvation cannot be earned by good works—and therefore can't be lost by bad ones" (p. 32).

The same can be said concerning his explanation of truth. We find no definition, just illustrations and a few verses that have the word *truth* in them. Of course, truth is reality. It is the opposite of falsehood and unreality. Truth is what actually is.

Evidently recognizing the need for more explanation of what these terms mean, the chapters explaining the nature of grace and truth are followed by chapters entitled, "A Closer Look at Grace," and "A Closer Look at Truth." While there still isn't much help on what grace is, the closer look at truth suggests that lying is a big problem in America today and that lying is the opposite of telling the truth. He also discusses the postmodern understanding of truth that is prevalent on college campuses today: "*What's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me*" (p. 57, italics his). He then says, "Such silly statements are routine on some campuses. What's even sillier is that parents and students invest vast amounts of tuition money for the privilege of hearing them" (p. 57). This is helpful.

*JOTGES* readers will search in vain for clarity on the gospel. He does say that our salvation (he means justification) cannot be earned or lost by works, as I indicated above. In a few places he mentions faith as the condition of salvation. However, he never defines faith and never states precisely what must be believed. Worse still, in a few places he seems to throw in other conditions besides faith in Christ.

For example, he discusses a man who has trouble believing "that someone could live a selfish, no-good life, then repent on his deathbed and go to heaven. It just sounds too cheap" (p. 81). We would expect to find a discussion of faith as the only condition of eternal life at this point. Clearly the man speaking understood repentance as turning from sins. Yet we don't find this. Instead, after explaining that salvation is undeserved, Alcorn goes on to say that "any concept of grace that makes us feel more comfortable about sinning is not biblical grace. God's grace can never encourage us to live in sin; on the contrary, it empowers us to say no to sin and yes to truth. It's the polar opposite of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace'" (p. 82; see also pp. 66-67). Note this similar statement: "Grace raises the bar, but it also enables us to joyfully jump over that bar" (p. 67). While I certainly agree that grace doesn't encourage sin, Alcorn goes over to the commitment-salvation camp when he favorably cites Bonhoeffer concerning cheap grace and when he speaks of grace raising the bar.

Alcorn gives the story of him leading his own Dad to faith in Christ (pp. 58-60). The account is revealing. He indicated he prayed that his Dad would “turn to Christ.” He read from Romans 3 and 6 and showed him that we all are sinners and then asked his dad, “Have you ever confessed your sins and asked Jesus Christ to forgive you?” We aren’t told this is required for everyone, but that seems to be the point. Then Alcorn says, “My father prayed aloud, confessed his sins, and placed his faith in Christ.” While we can rejoice that Alcorn speaks of placing one’s faith in Christ, it is unfortunate that it is linked with confession of sins and that there is no explanation of what he believed about Jesus.

One other bit of confusion about faith in Christ came out when he implied that Pro-Life people are believers and Pro-Choice people are unbelievers! People in Alcorn’s church regularly picketed abortion clinics. One Sunday a few years ago “three proabortion groups decided to join forces and give our church ‘a taste of our own medicine’” (p. 24). Alcorn, the Pastor at the time, got donuts and coffee and spent an hour and half giving out food and drink and talking with protestors. Then some street preachers “with signs shouting hell and damnation showed up to take on the abortion activists. Their message contained truth, but their approach lacked grace.” Alcorn calls these street preachers “Christian brothers” (p. 25). And he calls the Pro-Choice picketers “radically liberal nonbelievers” (p. 25). Are we to understand that all Pro-Choice people are unregenerate and going to hell? Are those who say that those who favor abortion are damned to hell really giving a message that contains truth? Is that not a false gospel? While I am Pro-Life, I feel we must take great care not to even hint that one cannot be Pro-Choice and regenerate.

The relationship between grace and truth in justification and sanctification are important topics. While I wish for a better treatment of the subject, I recommend this book for the discerning reader. Possibly it will spur pastors and Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders to prepare and present messages that do a better job of explaining grace and truth.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*  
Irving, TX

***Holy Transformation: What it Takes for God to Make a Difference in You.*** By Chip Ingram. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003. 263 pp. Cloth. \$14.99.

Transformation—it's what we long for as Christians. And it is with much concern for the church that Chip Ingram, President of Walk Thru the Bible, has written a book to facilitate maturity in those who wish to be transformed.

He begins with an illustration of a worm morphing into a butterfly. The process is not easy, but the worm struggles through it and at the end a ground-ridden slimy worm is transformed into a free graceful butterfly (pun intended). Ingram writes, "The transformation implied by the difference between 'having life' and 'having it more abundantly' requires morphing. The caterpillar and the butterfly share the same life, but the butterfly has reached the 'more abundant' experience of life" (p. 25).

His second chapter is entitled "Morphing Is for Everyone!" It is his firm belief that: "If you are 'born from above,' your life can change" (p. 35). In fact, "Holy transformation is not something we simply hope will happen some day. It is God's clear desire for every believer" (p. 36). He believes that this growth only happens within the context of "deep, intentional, authentic relationships with other believers in some kind of small group...learning the Scriptures, sharing what God is teaching the participants, and with intentionally speaking the truth into one another's lives..." (p. 41).

His third chapter gives three reasons we fail to morph: 1) Spiritual Ignorance (pp. 57-63); 2) Spiritual Isolation (pp. 63-67); and 3) Spiritual Myopia (pp. 67-69). It was refreshing to see that he spent a good percentage of this chapter talking about our need for the Scriptures. Passionately, he states, "We are living today in an age of biblical illiteracy, and we are paying the price for it with confused and shallow spiritual lives" (p. 58). It saddens me when I hear of sincere Christians who want to be transformed, but refuse to read God's Word. Yet, I thank God for men like Ingram who call the church towards a higher calling. We should not be satisfied with biblical illiteracy for it is too high of a price to pay. He concludes this chapter by asserting, "Holy transformation requires biblical knowledge, authentic community, and a high view of God" (p. 70).

The next two chapters involve the key to morphing (pp. 71-86) and where the power to morph comes from (pp. 87-109). Much of the problem with morphing is that "people talk about wanting to change, but

when a genuine opportunity comes along they often decide to wait” (p. 71). Ingram spends the next fifteen pages or so developing the key to morphing—dying with Christ. He reminds the reader that we have three opportunities to obtain the power to live transformed lives by: 1) Knowing the truth (pp. 91-97); 2) Acting on the truth (pp. 97-101); and 3) Receiving it as a gift and taking it on as a responsibility (pp. 101-108). For those that want to tap into this power, Ingram includes a prayer at the end: “Holy Father, I’m going to get into Your Word regularly and get connected to a Bible-teaching church at a deep level. I’m going to discover my spiritual gift and practice it. Today is my last day in passive Christianity—I’m going to live by faith, trusting in You to transform me into someone who looks and acts a lot like Jesus” (p. 108). If this was the prayer of every believer, imagine the impact this would have on our local churches!

Next Ingram gives a glimpse of the transformed life (pp. 111-21) by including a letter of a man in his church who was transformed. What began as an undisciplined man was transformed into a mature follower of Christ. Also, so that the reader can test their own maturity, Ingram offers four tests of spiritual maturity. Do you: 1) Handle the Scriptures and spot false teaching?; 2) Speak truth in love?; 3) Participate fully using your gift in the Body?; and 4) Have “an ever-expanding love for God and others”? These are great questions that we should constantly be asking ourselves.

In the last half of the book, Ingram packs in tons of practical information. The seventh chapter (pp. 123-41) exhorts believers to learn from their leaders, be a minister, and have ministries that develop mature followers of Christ. If every believer sought to be a minister and every ministry in the church sought to produce mature disciples, our churches would be transformed as well! The eighth chapter seems to repeat some earlier concepts in chapter six. It deals with “How to Know if You’re Really Morphing” (pp. 143-62). Chapters nine and ten deal with overcoming the grip sin and a bad lifestyle can have on our lives. Lastly, in chapters eleven and twelve, Ingram explains that “transformation is a matter of spiritual training as opposed to trying harder” (p. 262). He explains this by offering the statement: “Getting and staying in shape isn’t about trying; it’s about training” (p. 228). While I’m still not sure if I know how he differentiates the two, the training program he sets up would be helpful for Christians seeking maturity.



While overall *Holy Transformation* is a very helpful and insightful work, there are several bumps in the road in regards to his gospel presentation. He often uses language such as “surrender to Christ” (p. 30), “Christ became Lord of my life” (p. 38), “asked Christ to come into my life” (p. 96), “come to Him repentantly, and ask Him to forgive you” (p. 96), and “personally asked Him to be your Savior and Lord” (p. 101). Yet, he also says “receive Jesus as your Savior,” (p. 88), “trusting Christ,” and “my admission of faith in Christ” (p. 96).

Although the gospel portrayed is usually fuzzier than it is clear, he does understand that even Christians need to be transformed. That is one important distinction that he does understand: “Holy transformation is not something we simply hope will happen some day. It is God’s clear desire for every believer. Unfortunately, the great majority of Christians do not understand what this involves, how it works out in daily living, or why morphing is an essential aspect of the Christian life” (p. 36). As Paul exhorted his fellow workers in Rome, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, *which* is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom 12:1-2). May we realize this truth of Scripture in our lives today.

**Michael D. Makidon**

Director of Publications  
Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, TX

---

***Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views.*** By Dave Hunt and James White. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004. 427 pp. Paper. \$17.99.

There has been a spate of “debate” books in recent years that present the viewpoints of different authors on key issues. The original book of this nature was probably *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (InterVarsity Press, 1977). In this work, four writers (George Ladd, Herman Hoyt, Loraine Boettner, and Anthony Hoekema) presented their viewpoint on the millennium (historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism), followed by responses from each of the other authors. Zondervan followed this with

*The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Zondervan, 1984), in which Paul Feinberg, Gleason Archer, and Douglas Moo debated the rapture. Other topics soon followed, including *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (InterVarsity Press, 1986). Zondervan now has a whole series of “debate” books in their “Counterpoint Series.” One of the most valuable “debate” books is *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* by Kenneth Gentry and Thomas Ice (Kregel, 1999). The back cover says that the book is “presented in a friendly debate format.” Such is not the case, however, in the newest book of this nature.

*Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*, by Dave Hunt and James White, is a lively, often heated (“Hunt remains doggedly impervious to instruction” [p. 141]), sometimes brutal (“White’s reference to God’s foreknowledge...borders on blasphemy” [p. 153]) exchange between two men who have each written books on the subject of Calvinism. White’s pro-Calvinism book, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Calvary Press, 2000), although written as a rebuttal of Norman Geisler’s anti-Calvinism book *Chosen but Free*, is nevertheless a full-fledged declaration of what he believes to be the truth of Calvinism. Hunt’s anti-Calvinism book, *What Love is This?* (Loyal Publishing, 2002), was written later, but is not an answer to White’s book, although he does quote him in many chapters.

*Debating Calvinism* is just that—the book reads like the text of an actual debate. The fourteen chapters of the book are bracketed by introductory and final affirmations of Calvinism by White and denials by Hunt. In between are seven chapters by White affirming Calvinism and seven chapters by Hunt denying Calvinism. The format is unusual in that each of White’s seven affirmations and Hunt’s seven denials is followed by the opponent’s “response,” then a “defense” by the writer who began the chapter, and then by the “final remarks” of each party. Thus, each chapter has five sections, with the initial writer having three opportunities to present his views and the respondent having two. The initial affirmation or denial ranges from nine to twelve pages. The “response” is always a little shorter at six through eight pages. However, the “defense” and “final remarks” are always uniform—four pages for the “defense” and two pages for each of the “final remarks.”

At 427 pages, *Debating Calvinism* is large enough for each author to fully present his views. Most sections of the book contain endnotes, which are appropriate since the book is not the actual text of a debate.

White's affirmations and responses are more organized than Hunt's, and contain section headings. Considering its size, the book is a quick read. The authors both quote an abundance of Scripture—White from the NASB and Hunt from the KJV—but the book should be read with a Bible in hand for those passages that are merely cited.

White's seven affirmations of Calvinism are predictable: four of them are part of the Five Points of Calvinism, even if only two have their official TULIP names: "Man's Inability," "Unconditional Election," "Particular Redemption," and "Irresistible Grace." The other chapters are on "God's Eternal Decree" (where he discusses the concept of the sovereignty of God and hardly mentions God's decree), "Jesus Teaches the Doctrines of Grace" (where he uses John 6 to make Jesus teach the three essential pillars of Calvinism: Unconditional Election [p. 118], Total Depravity [p. 121], and Irresistible Grace [p. 122]), and "The Golden Chain of Redemption" (where he makes Rom 8:29-30 teach the bogus Reformed notion of an *ordo salutis* which contradicts other related Scriptures and omits regeneration and sanctification). Surprisingly, White does not have the fifth point of Calvinism, "Perseverance of the Saints," as one of his affirmations of Calvinism, and rarely mentions the teaching.

In White's chapters can be found all the standard Calvinistic arguments that have been used for over four hundred years, all presented with the same tactics that Calvinists customarily use.

White accuses his opponent of holding misconceptions about Calvinism (p. 11), not understanding the Reformed Faith (p. 14), using strawmen caricatures (p. 14) and misrepresentations (p. 331), appealing to the emotions (p. 251), and practicing eisegesis (p. 164). He continually refers to Calvinism as the "Doctrines of Grace" (pp. 14, 117, 239, 418), implying that only Calvinists believe in salvation by grace. He distances himself from Calvin when it gets too embarrassing (p. 239). He downplays the connection between Calvinism and Augustine (p. 243). He implies that rejecting Calvinism means stealing glory from God (p. 115). Like Calvinists are famous for, he uses theological jargon like "monergism" and "synergism" (pp. 63, 64, 207), and a new term, "compatibilism," which he defines as "the biblical relationship of God's sovereign decree to the creaturely will of man" (p. 43). White even chides Hunt for not being familiar with the term (pp. 56, 331). He appeals to creeds instead of Scripture. His favorite is the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. The first and last quotations he uses in the first chapter are from this confession (pp. 35, 43), not Scripture. He also appeals to men instead of

Scripture. White introduces the testimony of Charles Hodge (p. 90), Jonathan Edwards (p. 115), and R. C. Sproul (p. 40) to support his positions. His favorite is Charles Spurgeon. Sometimes he uses extended quotes from Spurgeon to fill entire pages (pp. 172, 196). He even closes his “final affirmation” with a long quote by Spurgeon (pp. 420-21).

White is equally at home using the historical argument (“Christian theologians down through the centuries have believed” [p. 109]) and the guilt by association argument (“a belief he holds in common with Roman Catholicism, historical Arminianism, Mormonism, and all other forms of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism” [p. 347]). When it comes to scriptural arguments to support his position, White misapplies passages on Israel to NT salvation (pp. 69, 176), makes being “drawn” or “chosen” or “given” a reference to election to salvation (pp. 70, 92, 118), makes faith a work (p. 97), and makes the world the elect (p. 376). And these are just the misapplications and misinterpretations pointed out by Dave Hunt (pp. 79, 80, 101, 106, 130, 182, 385).

Hunt’s seven denials of Calvinism are “Calvin and Augustine,” “God’s Love and Character,” “Regeneration Before Faith and Salvation?,” “Turning the Bible into a Charade,” “God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Will,” “Salvation Offered to All,” and “Biblical Assurance of Salvation.”

In his first denial he surveys the often heretical teachings of Calvin and Augustine. White thinks this is “irrelevant” (p. 16), but Hunt points out that White himself calls Calvinism “Calvin’s doctrine” (p. 229) and Warfield stated that “the system of doctrine taught by Calvin is just the Augustinianism common to the whole body of the Reformers” (p. 229). Hunt’s second denial concerns the underlying theme of his book *What Love is This?* He considers God’s love and character to be the central issue. Hunt’s third denial shows that Calvinism, by its reversal of faith and regeneration, is another gospel. Hunt’s fourth denial, which White claims is “marked by shrill rhetoric” (p. 319), points out that the Bible is a charade if Christ commanded the gospel to be preached to every creature, yet man is dead in sin to the extent that he can’t believe it and God has already determined who is going to be saved and who is going to be lost. In his fifth denial, Hunt presents the biblical case for the free will of man. White confounds the issue by his constant reference to free will as “libertarian free will” (pp. 89, 218, 347, 413). Not only does it lead the reader to think of political philosophy instead of theology, it makes it seem like Hunt is espousing something different than biblical free will.

Hunt's sixth denial concerns the legitimate offer of salvation to all mankind—not just the “elect.” In his last denial, Hunt presents a contrast between the biblical and Calvinistic teachings on the assurance of salvation. He shows from Calvinistic authorities that Calvinists ultimately ground assurance of salvation in perseverance through good works. Hunt actually quotes more Calvinists than White, but obviously for a different reason.

Mention has already been made of the clarity of White's presentations. He comes across as more scholarly, more logical, and more organized than Hunt. Hunt does seem to misunderstand what White is saying on some points. However, Hunt has a knack for getting down to the real issue and stating it in simple terms. Some of Hunt's observations are quite profound. On the sovereignty of God, Hunt comments: “White begins his treatise with a ringing tribute to God's sovereignty. The Calvinist knows little else” (p. 47). On the inability of the sinner, Hunt concludes: “The conclusion to which White's argument leads is that all who are not among the elect given by the Father to the Son are *unable* to come to Him, *unable* to believe on Him, *unable* to be saved. The only thing anyone can do is to hope that he is among the elect and that a bolt from the blue causes him to believe” (p. 132). On Limited Atonement, Hunt points out that “if Christ's death automatically saved, the elect were never lost and didn't need to believe the gospel” (p. 194). Because Christ became sin (2 Cor 5:21), he also explains how “there is no way that Christ could pay the penalty for only a select group of sinners” (p. 194). On the teaching that the “elect” must be given faith to believe the gospel, Hunt remarks that “even if faith were a gift, a gift must be received and used” (p. 212). In reply to the teaching that regeneration precedes faith, Hunt perceptively inquires: “Why would a regenerated child of God need to be saved?” (p. 127). On the same subject, Hunt asks and answers an important question: “Why do Calvinists, in spite of so many Scriptures to the contrary, insist that God must sovereignly regenerate sinners *before* they know and believe the gospel? The answer is simple: If this were not the case, three of TULIP's five points would collapse: total depravity, unconditional election, and irresistible grace. The totally depraved are *unable* to believe and therefore *must* be regenerated without faith. Nor would unconditional election or irresistible grace be necessary if the unregenerate could believe the gospel” (p. 284).

*Debating Calvinism* contains a lot of repetition. Considering the format, both writers quote too many other authors, especially Charles

Spurgeon. Likewise, White refers too often to Greek and Greek grammar for a book of this nature. White is also very condescending in his approach. Hunt makes much of the errors of Calvin and Augustine, but since White is a Reformed Baptist, and would agree with Hunt in many of his criticisms, much of the time he spent on that endeavor could have been put to better use. Both writers are sometimes guilty in their “response,” “defense,” and “final remarks” of straying from the subject of the initial affirmation or denial. In fact, the “final remarks” really don’t add much to the substance of each chapter and could be eliminated altogether or their contents combined with the “response” and “defense.”

The book’s preface is too brief to be of any value. A historical introduction to the Calvinist controversy would have been better. There are no indexes, but the magnitude of Scripture references demands that there be at least a Scripture index. When quoting Calvin, both writers use the older English translation of Calvin’s *Institutes* by Henry Beveridge instead of the newer one by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster Press, 1960). Hunt does the same in his book on Calvinism, but White uses the translation by Battles in his. Although a bibliography would not normally be required in a book with this format, because both authors quote from many others, it would be helpful. At the very least a “recommended reading list” would be appropriate.

Although I noted only two errors in the text—both related to quotation marks—the endnotes are rife with errors and inconsistencies. Many of the publishers names are truncated. The subtitle of White’s earlier work on Calvinism is not even given in full. No edition is stated on most books that have come out in different editions. There are numerous other omissions and incorrect dates. Tyndale House Publishers is not located in Chicago (pp. 133, 237, 250, 264, etc.). The dates given for the NASB are incomplete, although they are properly listed on the title page in White’s book on Calvinism. Even the title page has factual error on it. It states that the book has a bibliography and index when it has neither.

This is not a book with detailed exegetical discussions—from either author. But unlike the other aforementioned “debate” books, it does in fact read like a real debate. However, there is no “winner.” Neither writer is at his best. For a complete picture of the position of each man the reader would do better to consult their respective books on Calvinism. *Debating Calvinism* is an interesting change from the usual books on Calvinism (pro or con) centered around the Five Points of Calvinism. It does in fact make you feel as if you just sat through an actual debate on

Calvinism between Hunt and White. Although it could serve as a brief introduction to the Calvinist controversy, the tone of the book might be too harsh for some. For those already versed in the controversy, the book contains much heat, but little light.

**Laurence M. Vance**  
Vance Publications  
Pensacola, FL

---

***Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel.*** By Richard Owen Roberts. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002. 368 pp. Paper. \$19.99.

When I saw the title, I knew I had to read this book. Repentance was the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Since it is central in the gospel debate, I have long been concerned about repentance.

The endorsers on the back cover are impressive. They include famed Reformed theologian J. I. Packer, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Al Mohler, Executive Editor of *Christianity Today*, Timothy George, and host of *Revive Our Hearts* radio program, Nancy Leigh DeMoss. There is also a foreword from Henry Blackaby, author of *Experiencing God*.

The Table of Contents shows that Roberts covers most of the bases, having an amazing affinity for the number *seven*. Eight of the fifteen chapters start with the number *seven*. (Wouldn't it have been better to have seven chapters starting with seven?) They are (with the Chapter number in parenthesis): Seven Myths of Repentance (4), Seven Maxims of Repentance (5), Seven Marks of Repentance (6), Seven Motives to Repentance (7), Seven Fruits of Repentance (9), Seven Models of Repentance (10), Seven Dangers of Delayed Repentance (11), and Seven Words of Advice to the Unrepentant (12).

When I looked further, I noted that essentially every chapter has seven points.

"Repentance and Its Accompanying Graces" (chap. 8), has seven "graces" (undefined what this means). So it easily could have been entitled, *Seven Graces That Accompany Repentance*. "Repentance in All Its Breadth" (chap. 13) has exactly seven "issues" concerning repentance. It could have been titled, *Seven Key Issues in Repentance*.

The first chapter, "Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel," has seven major subheads (Repentance: The First Word of John's Ministry;

Repentance: The First Word of Christ's Ministry; Repentance: The First Word of the Twelve; Repentance: The Focus of Peter's Preaching; Repentance: The Heart of Paul's Preaching; Repentance: The Last Call to the Churches in Revelation; and Repentance: A Source of Joy in Heaven).

There are seven headings in the second chapter, "Repentance in the Old Testament" and seven as well in the third chapter, "Repentance in the New Testament."

The last chapter, "Repentance in Dust and Ashes" (chap. 15) has only four parts. However, part one has seven acknowledgements, part three has seven incidents, and part four provides seven evidences.

The only other chapter, "Repentance and the Character of God" (chap. 14) essentially has seven subpoints. Roberts talks about two rounds of attack which Job underwent at the hands of his friends. He then pinpoints five effects of these two attacks.

One wonders if Roberts hasn't had to add things in or leave things out to force nearly every chapter to have seven points. While seven is the perfect number, the author seems to be pressing to make everything come out seven.

The arrangement of these chapters does not seem to follow any logical order. Roberts covers the same ground in many different chapters.

The bottom line for the author is that one must turn from his sins to escape hell. Evangelism must have calls to turn from one's sins or else it is not a saving message.

But what about the many passages in which the only condition of eternal life is faith in Christ? Roberts' answer is fascinating: "Some have reasoned that, because a call for faith sometimes appears in the New Testament without any mention of repentance, it is faith alone that is necessary for salvation. But it can also be said that there are occasional Scriptures in which repentance is demanded with no mention of faith. Are we about to insist, then, that it is repentance alone that is necessary for salvation? Certainly not. But the argumentative persons may want us to note that there are more mentions of faith and belief without repentance than there are of repentance without faith and belief. Does that then suggest that biblical issues are settled by majority vote? How absurd" (p. 68).

Several points are remarkable in that statement.

First, note his first question. "Are we about to insist, then, that it is repentance alone that is necessary for salvation?" While his answer is



“Certainly not,” there are many who answer that question in the affirmative, with the proviso that there are multiple ways to come to Christ. Many NT scholars now say that there are different conditions of eternal life given by different NT authors. Some NT authors say you must simply believe. Others say you must commit or repent or be baptized.

Second, note how he fails to explain how the many places where faith alone is mentioned can be accurate. If today we must preach repentance to be clear, why not then? How could Paul say “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” if that isn’t enough? How could the Lord Jesus fail to tell the woman at the well that she needed to turn from her sins? How can he explain, for that matter, why the words *repent* and *repentance* don’t occur even once in John’s Gospel, the only evangelistic book in the Bible.

Third, notice that it is “argumentative persons” who bring up the fact that faith is the only condition for eternal life in myriads of passages. Why does this make them argumentative? Are they not being observant? Are we not called to search the Scriptures to evaluate any doctrine (Acts 17:11)?

Finally, note his clever question, “Does that then suggest that biblical issues are settled by majority vote?” He doesn’t ask *Does that then suggest that biblical issues are settled by the clear teaching of the preponderance of Scripture?* “Majority vote” sounds like we are talking about the majority *of people*, not passages. If a large number of texts teach that the only condition of eternal life is faith in Christ, then should this not lead a person to wonder if there are any texts which list any other condition? Maybe we’ve misunderstood texts reputedly teaching that we must turn from our sins to have eternal life. But the author doesn’t entertain that possibility.

Another example of his approach to the subject is found in his chapter on seven motives to repentance. The sixth motive is given as “God’s Warnings” (pp. 167-68). I found it interesting that the only warnings mentioned here concern eternal condemnation. Why no mention here of warnings about temporal judgment? Also interesting is the fact that of the four texts he cites as warning the need to repent to escape eternal condemnation (Matt 13:41-42; Mark 9:42-48; Luke 12:4-5; Heb 10:26-31), none of them mentions repentance! With 55 NT uses of the words *repent* and *repentance*, if repentance is a condition for escaping eternal condemnation you think one would be able to come up with quite a few passages which actually mention repentance and eternal life or

repentance and eternal condemnation. That the author doesn't give us even one is telling.

One final example of the way in which Roberts handles the text concerns the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. The jailer is given as one of the seven models of repentance. But is this warranted by the text.

Paul tells him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." He said nothing about repentance. Not only that, but Luke doesn't indicate that the man repented.

Roberts laments: "The simplicity of the answer given to the jailer's question and the swiftness of his response and baptism have led some zealous persons to an unfortunate conclusion about whether repentance is always essential to salvation. Without giving any adequate consideration to the setting itself and to the wonderful circumstances surrounding this clear-cut example of repentance and faith, they have made a universal out of a very singular incident" (p. 232).

Again we find those of us who believe that turning from sins is not a condition of eternal life labeled as "zealous persons." We fail to give "adequate consideration of the setting itself."

And what in the setting tells us this is a repentant man? Was he a God-fearing Gentile like Lydia earlier in the chapter? Was he in a synagogue or place of prayer when he asked what he must do to be saved? Was he a man, like Cornelius, known for his prayers and almsgiving? Well, no.

Roberts finds him to be a "clear-cut example of repentance and faith" because he heard Paul and Silas singing in jail, because he was awakened by an earthquake and discovered all the prison doors open, and because he was about to kill himself (p. 233). Wait a minute. Since when has suicide been proof of repentance?

We could grant that if the jailer repented, he did so after he was preparing to take his own life. A repentant person doesn't willingly commit the sin of suicide. If he did repent after that, what evidence is there? Does the man indicate he will turn from his sins and serve God? No. Frankly, there is absolutely no evidence that the jailer repented. He believed and was baptized.

An unbiased reading of Acts 16 would find one clear-cut example of a repentant person, Lydia, who came to faith, and one clear-cut example of an unrepentant person, the jailer, who came to faith. Thus Acts 16 shows that repentant or not, all who believe in Jesus have everlasting life.

One finds very little in the way of exegesis in this book. The author is not trying to explain texts. He is instead preaching. My guess is that most or all of the chapters in this book are converted topical (rather than exegetical) sermons. I like the author's zeal for God and for holiness. I like the conviction with which he writes. I am saddened, however, that his conclusions are not consistent with the Word of God or the Gospel of Grace.

I feel compelled to mention the way he closes one of the chapters. After discussing seven myths of repentance, he warns the readers that they personally might be guilty of sending people to hell: "Now let me ask, 'Do any of these myths fit you?' Is it possible that what you have been calling repentance is nothing other than a foolish and grievous myth? What about your church? Have you considered the likelihood that many in your church have embraced the myths of repentance and are clinging to the repentance that leads to eternal death rather than the repentance that leads to salvation and eternal life? Is it possible that they have missed the way of life because of your careless and shabby treatment of eternal things? In the final judgment, will their blood be on your hands?" (p. 103).

Wow. I do not happen to believe that the eternal destiny of people is in our hands. However, we surely will give an account for how we have taught the word of God. (Of course, believers will not experience "final judgment." That is for unbelievers only [Rev 20:11-15; cf. John 5:24]. Believers will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ.) I fear that Roberts' words may come back to haunt him, as he has indicted himself, since his own view of repentance is not the way to eternal life, but to eternal condemnation.

*JOTGES* readers who want a detailed presentation of the traditional view of repentance will want this book. It clearly presents the turn-or-burn view position—and in great detail.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

---

***Faith Victorious: Finding Strength and Hope from Hebrews 11.***

By Richard D. Phillips. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing 2002. 234 pp. Paper. \$12.99.

This book is based, according to the author, on a series of sermons he preached in the early morning service at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in 2001 (p. x). Phillips is a graduate of Westminster Seminary and the book reflects a Reformed perspective on faith and assurance.

Each chapter is an exposition of a portion of Hebrews 11, with the final chapter covering 12:1-3. It isn't a commentary per se since the author is preaching rather than teaching.

Phillips suggests that true faith works. Thus James and Paul are not in opposition. "There is no contradiction between Paul and James. Paul states that we are justified by faith alone. James merely qualifies that by insisting that such faith inevitably does good works, or else it is not true faith" (p. 50). He then quotes Calvin as saying "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." Phillips adds, "Faith is always accompanied by obedience."

In his discussion of Heb 10:35, Phillips implies that the men in question received eternal life because they persevered through persecution: "One of the brothers spat out to his tormentors, 'The King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, *because we have died for his laws*'" (p. 182, emphasis added). While this might seem to be justification by works, Phillips would see it as justification by faith that works.

Not only in 10:35, but in all the many places in Hebrews 11 where eternal rewards are in view, Phillips sees justification salvation. This is unfortunate. The net effect is that the reader cannot be sure he has eternal life since he cannot be sure he will persevere.

The tone of this book is quite irenic. I recommend this book to pastors who anticipate preaching through Hebrews.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

---

***The Rod: Will God Spare It?*** Second Edition. By J.D. Faust. Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 2003. 454 pp. Paper. \$22.00.

What happens when a Christian sins? Depending on the nature and extent of the sin, a Calvinist would say that the Christian is not a Christian at all—he was not saved to begin with as evidenced by the fact that he did not persevere in holiness until the end of his life. Similarly, an Arminian would say that the Christian lost his salvation because he did not persevere in holiness until the end of his life. Others would say that since Christ has forgiven our sins already that nothing happens—there is no future recompense. Still others would say that once a Christian obtains a certain level of spirituality or receives the second blessing or gets the anointing, etc. that he no longer actually sins. Most readers of this publication are premillennialists who would agree that even though a Christian is eternally secure, he should strive to live a holy life and avoid sin, that a Christian can suffer the consequences of sin and receive chastisement from God in this life, that all Christians will give an account of themselves at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and that at this judgment, a Christian can receive rewards or suffer loss. J. [Joey] D. Faust, the pastor of Kingdom (formerly Refuge) Baptist Church in Venus, Texas, and the publisher of a weekly e-mail newsletter (*The Kingdom Alert*) is a premillennialist who takes the Judgment Seat of Christ a step further—quite a bit further.

*The Rod: Will God Spare It?* is Faust's "exhaustive study of temporary punishment for unfaithful Christians at the Judgment Seat and during the Millennial Kingdom." This is actually the third edition of this book. The first was a "trial balloon" with the slightly different title of *Will God Spare the Rod?* The (true) second and third editions differ in many ways from this "pre-publication edition." The differences between the editions of *The Rod: Will God Spare It?* appear to be slight. Most noticeably, there is an additional entry in the glossary, the general index is a little different, and a Scripture index has been added.

The occasion of the book is the increasing number of complacent, worldly, carnal, rebellious, sinning Christians who, knowing that they are eternally secure, live their life in such a manner because they have no "accountability truth" that they must give an account of themselves to God and face the possibility of not only missing the millennial reign of Christ, but being slain by God at the Judgment Seat of Christ and banished to hell to suffer punishment for the duration of the millennium—only to be restored at its end. According to Faust, the disobedient and

unrepentant Christian is *ultimately* secure, but will not be “raised to everlasting life” until the Great White Throne Judgment (p. 153). It goes without saying that Faust considers most people to hold a defective view of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The book can basically be divided into three parts. Faust builds his case slowly in the first twenty-four short chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the “accountability truth.” This is followed by a digression of four chapters that examines antinomianism, Calvinism, Arminianism, future rewards, and the chastisement of Christians in this life. In chapter Six, the prospect of chastisement at the Judgment Seat of Christ is introduced. From there Faust introduces the concepts of “kingdom exclusion” (chap. 8), “the Christian’s temporary prison” (chap. 10), “death at the Judgment Seat” (chap. 13), “temporary soul death” (chap. 14), “hurt of the second death” (chap. 15), “passing through the fire of God’s judgment” (chap. 16), “banishment to the underworld” (chap. 17), “the prize of the first resurrection” (chap. 18), “millennial incarceration” (chap. 20), “the millennial book of life” (chap. 21), and “the reward of eternal life” (chap. 23). The missing chapters are digressions that do not introduce any new “accountability truth.”

The second part of the book is a lengthy chapter on “Objections and Questions Answered.” But in addition to answering what he perceives as potential objections, Faust introduces other details of his “accountability” system: Some Christians in 1 Thessalonians 4 will not always be with the Lord (pp. 249-56), some Christians in 1 Corinthians 15 are not raised to immortality (pp. 257-62), some Christians absent from the body will not be with the Lord (p. 274), and the teaching that God will perform a “preliminary judgment” on Christians *before* the Judgment Seat of Christ (pp. 275-76).

The third part of the book consists of three chapters (totaling almost 100 pages) containing quotes from men like George Peters, Robert Govett, J. R. Graves, G. H. Pember, Oswald J. Smith, Robert Ketcham, William H. Griffith Thomas, Philip Mauro, I. M. Haldeman, Hudson Taylor, J. A. Seiss, Watchman Nee, Robert Neighbor, D. M. Panton, and assorted Church Fathers on “accountability truth in history.” No evidence is presented that any of these men taught *exactly* what Faust believes, but there is no question that many of them did teach *some* of what Faust believes. Of course, many other premillennial writers could be cited to the contrary, and all amillennialists and postmillennialists could gather their own quotations in support of their position.

The most objectionable thing about Faust's "accountability truth" is that "every Christian must therefore come into contact with the fire that issues out from before the Lord's throne" (p. 155). He bases this on a misinterpretation of "the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is" (1 Cor 3:13). Instead of every Christian receiving "the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10), Faust has the fire trying the Christian himself "when he walks across it before the judgment throne of God" (p. 162). It is "the unfaithful Christian *man himself* that shall be literally burned" (p. 161). This being "cut asunder" (p. 128) by fire is being "hurt of the second death" (p. 171). The Christian is then punished further in "the fiery prison of the underworld" (p. 179). In reply to the charge that this teaching sounds like purgatory, Faust responds that the "Biblical truths of millennial exclusion and millennial chastisement were perverted into Rome's monstrous Purgatory" (p. 90). To disagree with how he applies certain Scriptures, is to be labeled a Bullingerite or hyper-dispensationalist (pp. 76, 266).

Just what does a Christian have to do in order to not be raised with a body sufficient to abide the fire of the Judgment Seat of Christ? Faust responds: practice "disobedience and sloth" (p. 143), "practice rebellion and unfaithfulness" (p. 215), "walk in the flesh" (p. 247), and perform "unfaithful deeds" (p. 161). And what does a Christian have to do in order to participate in the "selective resurrection" (p. 197)? Faust responds: "suffer with Christ" (p. 72), "abstain from practical iniquity" (p. 80), "abstain from sin in the first place" (p. 251), and "fear, hope, and strive *until* the end" (p. 243). But he also says that if a Christian sins "willfully" he will receive future judgment (p. 251). In fact, "*one* willful sin (worthy of exclusion) after salvation makes us worthy of temporary soul death" (p. 209). But alas, Faust never tells us what a sin of this nature consists of.

One thing he does tell us, however, is that if Christians "repent" (pp. 2, 23, 100, 143, 158, 171, 182, 183, 215, 218) or "confess their transgressions and seek mercy in fear" (p. 284) in time, then they will be safe; that is, every Christian will not "receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10).

In addition to these problems, *The Rod: Will God Spare It?* suffers from too many assumptions: Paul wrote Hebrews (pp. 136, 176, 251), the sea of glass (Rev 4:6) is the lake of fire (p. 146), the "much sorer punishment" (Heb 10:29) is the second death (p. 143), suffering for Christ is

suffering against sin (p. 260), overcoming is exercising “practical holiness” (p. 187), fighting the good fight (1 Tim 6:12) is “keeping the reward of the millennium in the forefront of our minds” (p. 226), the joy of the Lord (Matt 25:21) is the millennium (p. 80), Hades and Gehenna are the same place (p. 112), to walk in the flesh means to suffer for Christ (p. 73), the beasts (Rev 5:8) represent “some Christians who will be translated alive before the tribulation” (p. 37), the book of life (Rev 3:5) is the “book of practical righteousness and *millennial* life” (p. 214), and so on.

On a minor note, some of the footnotes and parts of the Bibliography are incomplete, the unnecessary spaces between paragraphs make the book appear longer than it is, and Scripture references in parentheses are spelled out instead of being abbreviated.

One other teaching of Faust that is strangely omitted from the book (except for a veiled reference in the glossary [p. 413]) is the doctrine of the selective rapture; that is, all Christians are not raptured together at one time—the most faithful ones go up first. Faust apparently believed that this teaching would unnecessarily turn people away from “accountability truth.”

Aside from calling attention to the serious nature of the Judgment Seat of Christ, the book is at best a curiosity. It is recycled Pember, Lang, Govett, and Panton with some additional twists that will further drive people away from real “accountability truth.” By inventing a Protestant purgatory, it is Faust who holds defective views on accountability truth. Believers are accountable, but secure now and forever.

**Laurence M. Vance**  
Vance Publications  
Pensacola, FL

---

***Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels.*** By Darrell L. Bock. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002. 704 pp. Cloth. \$39.99.

This book is essentially a commentary on the four Gospels. The Synoptic Gospels are handled together and John by itself. Bock precedes one passage at a time.

This is a very impressive work. Bock manages to comment on key verses and to point the reader to the comments of other key scholars.



On texts that are soteriologically crux passages, Bock advocates what might be described as a mild Lordship Salvation position. His views on the following passages illustrate the point.

*Matthew 16:24-28 and Parallels.* “The shift in verb tense is important: two Greek aorist imperatives followed by a present. Self-denial and taking up the cross are fundamental commitments, while following Christ is a continual activity” (p. 233). The author clearly views these things are required not for discipleship and eternal reward, but for justification and eternal life. “One’s real, eternal life is too high a price to pay for temporary earthly acceptance” (p. 233). “The allusion to the Son of Man and glory refer to the final judgment” (p. 234).

*John 15:6.* While Bock mentions the view that the nonabiding branches are unfaithful believers who are disciplined, he rejects it. He gives four reasons why he believes that “abiding [is] equal to having life and nonabiding [is] lacking it” (p. 507). In his view the nonabiding branches are unbelievers who face eternal condemnation.

*John 2:23-24; 8:30-32.* According to the author “this belief turns out to be superficial, short-lived belief that is not true faith” (p. 466; see note 98 as well). For Bock true faith perseveres and never ends (see also pp. 452, 626).

*John 20:30-31.* Bock argues that the purpose of John’s Gospel is not merely evangelistic. “First, the goal is not simply belief, but also the life that results from belief...Second, then, the nature of what is covered in the Gospel as a whole indicates that John is after a full experience of the life that Jesus gives, not merely the decision to believe” (p. 549).

*Repentance and Faith.* In one section Bock gives a theological portrait of Jesus. Within this section he indicates that Jesus called for two responses: repentance and faith.

“Those who would enter the kingdom of God must appreciate their need for his direction and rule in their lives” (p. 625). Repentance for Bock is recognizing and acknowledging one’s “need for God and for coming to him on his terms...To come to Jesus is to have a change of perspective and direction about God from the path that one previously was traveling” (p. 625).

Bock then says, “A second key term of response is faith” (p. 625). Clearly faith is not the sole condition of eternal life. It is “a second key term of response.” This is not to suggest that Bock views faith as of lesser importance than repentance. For him both are equally important.

There are extensive Scripture and Subject indexes in the back of the book that are very helpful. These make it a very handy reference tool.

While *JOTGES* readers will not agree with the Lordship Salvation theology that comes through in places, this is nonetheless a book that most would find quite helpful.

Admittedly the discussion of individual passages is quite brief. However, enough is given so that the reader clearly sees where Bock stands and in many cases what other major views are possible as well.

I recommend this book.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

---

***The Stranger on the Road to Emmaus: A Clear and Simple Explanation of the World's Best Seller.*** 3rd Edition. By John R. Cross. Canada: GoodSeed International, 2003. 304 pp. Paper. \$15.00.

Author John Cross is lecturer, author, photographer, and family man. Add to this list: Bible student. Cross has produced what may be the most clearly written and logically ordered beginner's summary of the Bible.

Cross appropriately begins the volume with a chapter that deals with the uniqueness of the Bible, as compared to all other books (pp. 5-13). He does a masterful job of describing God's character, the creation of the heavenly host, the creation of the universe and sin's consequences in this perfect creation. Chapter five specifically deals with the origin of sin in the universe and the tragic results it has on us (pp. 70-99).

Chapters six through nine deal with such key concepts, personalities and events as atonement, Moses, Babel, Abraham, grace, Lot, Isaac, Israel and Judah (the divided kingdom), Moses, Pharaoh, the Passover, the Ten Commandments, the Tabernacle, and the times of the Judges, Kings, and Prophets. Most of the concepts, personalities, and events are beautifully illustrated with pictures, charts, and timelines, which are worth the price of the book. Especially helpful for most Bible students is the timeline entitled, "A Family Tree: From Adam to Jesus" (pp. 162-63).

*JOTGES* readers should be aware that Cross is not always clear on the nature of faith. In his section on Abraham, he writes, "*belief* or *faith*

affects our actions. Abraham's belief went beyond agreement. He staked his life, his reputation, and his actions on it" (p. 105, author's emphasis). Later, he refers to "genuine faith" and writes, "True biblical belief does not stop with mental assent to the truth. It includes a *heart trust*, a confidence in the facts expressed by a voluntary act of the will" (p. 254, author's emphasis).

Although these statements may be of concern, it should be noted that Cross does acknowledge that salvation is a "gift." He writes, "Gifts are free. If you work for a gift, it is no longer free" (p. 271).

Many *JOTGES* readers will not agree with Cross on his understanding of repentance. He holds the "change of mind view" (pp. 180-81, 193). Most readers will also disagree with his use of Phil 1:6 as assurance of sanctification and perseverance (p. 283).

Overall, Cross demonstrates biblical precision in small and great details. His treatment of Jesus' "I am" statement (John 18:5) is thorough and insightful (pp. 219-20). He also takes care to note that the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is not a parable but a "true story" (p. 212). In his conclusion, he even differentiates between relationship and fellowship (1 John 1:9). Cross provides a helpful picture that explains: "Relationship: unbreakable. You have been born into God's family. You are eternally His child. Fellowship: breakable. Your sin breaks the pleasant harmony you have with your Heavenly Father" (pp. 281-82).

Cross is excellent at simplifying complex issues and making memorable points. For example, he makes an insightful observation in his discussion on the Law (pp. 124-41). He writes, "Most people will agree that they are *sinner*s. However, few will readily admit that they are *helpless sinner*s. There is a big difference" (p. 141, author's emphasis). Elsewhere, in distinguishing the Sadducees and Pharisees he explains that the Sadducees *took away* from God's Word and the Pharisees *added* to God's Word (p. 160, author's emphasis). He also does a good job tying the NT ideas together with the OT symbolism without bogging down in the minutia of details.

A workbook is also available which will make this tool even user-friendlier for individual study, small groups, and Sunday School classes. This book is an ideal tool to put into the hands of a new believer. While it may not be doctrinally "perfect," it is the best book of its kind that this reviewer has seen. Not only is it thoroughly biblical, it is also a very clear and interesting presentation of the key content of the Bible. For

those looking for a simple and concise overview to present the Bible as one unfolding story, order a copy of *The Stranger on the Road to Emmaus*. The subtitle delivers what it says, *A Clear and Simple Explanation of the World's Best Seller*.

**Keith R. Krell**

Senior Pastor

Emmanuel Baptist Church

Olympia, WA

---

*I Was Raised a Jehovah's Witness*. By Joe Hewitt. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997. 192 pp. Paper. \$9.95.

In this revised and updated version of the 1977 book of the same title, Hewitt gives a frank and compelling account of his life as a Jehovah's Witness and his subsequent persecution and excommunication after he decided to leave the cult. One does not have to be familiar with the workings of a cult in order to enjoy this book—Hewitt makes a point to explain what he has learned from both the history and theology behind the Jehovah's Witness movement.

Hewitt's writing style is quick and to-the-point. While never having dealt with a cult myself, because of the book's smooth flow, I was nonetheless compelled to finish this book practically in one sitting. Hewitt spends half of the book giving an account of his spiritual journey—from childhood in the backwoods of Arkansas to his wayward search for life's meaning throughout the country. He inevitably finds happiness as well as the true gospel and, once he believes, starts his own church in the family garage. Yet his dealings with the Witnesses never cease, as both he, his brother, and their sister deal with Hewitt's mother and the Kingdom Hall back in Arkansas. Hewitt explains that once a Jehovah's Witness leaves the cult, they're viewed *as one dead* (worse than an unbeliever) and are forever ignored even by family. Hewitt's own mother was pressured into ostracizing her children who inevitably left the cult, an event not without consequence as Hewitt saved his anger for the inevitable showdown with the cult's pastor at his mother's funeral.

The book is unusual as it is divided into two sections, the first dealing with Hewitt's autobiography as he leaves the cult at an early age. Various facts and history explaining the cult's movement are dispersed throughout Hewitt's story, giving his account a place in any pastor's

library. The second half is the theological meat of the book, as Hewitt gives point after point as to how the Jehovah's Witness cult is anything but Christian. Having never studied the cult in detail, I was encouraged to keep this book in my reference section simply because of how well it explains what the Witnesses *do* and *do not* believe. Specifically Hewitt shows that Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in the offer of God's free gift of eternal life. They believe that more than faith in Jesus is needed to make it into the coming Kingdom.

The Jehovah's Witness lives his life hoping to earn an entrance into heaven, and this book gives some real examples of how miserable one can get in trying to do just that. What is most compelling is the many examples of actual Christians Hewitt encounters in his travels who *do not* share the gospel with him. Hewitt is left with little guidance as he continually moves from one town to the next, and I for one felt convicted in thinking of all the people I've crossed paths with who, like Hewitt, perhaps never had heard a clear gospel presentation before.

If you want to understand the workings of this popular cult, especially the problems and inconsistencies in its belief system, then give this book a read. Hewitt spends much time debunking the Jehovah's Witness cult, and he even gives a reference section pointing you to even more insightful books.

While Hewitt is not consistent in his presentation of the gospel (sometimes he is clear and sometimes he is not), he does show a strong belief in the power of prayer as he credits his journey out of the cult to the consistent life-long prayers of a kind Christian, Mrs. Atchley.

One thing worth noting here is that a week after I had read this book, I spoke at a church where an older woman approached and asked me to pray for her. She explained that she had been free from the Jehovah's Witness cult for over a year now but that she, like the hero in our story, was being viewed by her family as one dead. Her testimony hit home—the fact that Joe Hewitt is clearly one among many who have left the cult and are now feeling the retribution.

**Shawn Leach**

Student

Dallas Theological Seminary

Dallas, Texas

---

***The Law of Rewards.*** By Randy Alcorn. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003. 135 pp. Cloth. \$11.99.

The Law of Rewards is a brief treatment of the doctrine of rewards with special emphasis on financial giving as an eternal investment. In a previous work, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Tyndale House, 1989; revised and updated, 2003), Alcorn included five chapters on eternal rewards. His material was excellent (and fairly revolutionary at the time). Tyndale House agreed to a thoroughly revised and updated version of the contents included in the above work.

Alcorn's thesis (i.e., "law") is "while our faith determines our eternal destination, our behavior determines our eternal rewards" (p. 7). He delineates eight principles that flow from this law. Reward Principle 1: Giving brings greater blessing than receiving (pp. 10-21). Reward Principle 2: When we invest money now in God's kingdom, we will receive greater rewards later in heaven (pp. 21-28). Reward Principle 3: God offers us rewards that are eternal, imperishable, and inexhaustible (pp. 28-47). Reward Principle 4: When we see our lives through the lens of eternity, our attitude toward wealth will change drastically (pp. 47-66). Reward Principle 5: Obeying God is not only right, it's smart. It will always pay off in the end (pp. 66-93). Reward Principle 6: We will have differing levels of reward in heaven, depending on our actions and choices on earth (pp. 93-103). Reward Principle 7: Desiring rewards is a proper motivation for serving Christ (pp. 103-13). Reward Principle 8: We are not to be motivated primarily by earthly power, possessions, and pleasures, yet we are offered all three in heaven if we invest now in God's kingdom (pp. 113-21). The book closes with "Questions and Answers about Rewards and Giving" (pp. 123-32) and a one-page summary entitled, "The Law of Rewards and its eight principles" (p. 135).

In his survey of pertinent passages, Alcorn answers questions such as: What good are works? (pp. 67-70); What does God reward? (pp. 88-93); Eternal differences in heaven? (pp. 93-95); and Can an appeal to our desires really be spiritual? (pp. 116-21).

Included in this work are several fine quotes from men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, John Wesley, Matthew Henry, C.S. Lewis, and A.W. Tozer. Such quotes begin each chapter and are interspersed throughout the book. These will prove helpful to those who preach and write on the topic of rewards.

Some *JOTGES* readers may question Alcorn's treatment of Rev 4:10 where he suggests that Christians will lay their crowns before Christ's feet (p. 92). Many believe that this is a reference to the angelic realm (see Robert N. Wilkin, *The Road to Reward*, 109-10). Nonetheless, Alcorn is quick to note, "There is no hint that, once given or withheld, rewards are anything other than eternal and irrevocable" (p. 93).

For a concise treatment on the doctrine of rewards, this book will prove helpful. However, one should recognize that it is only an overview designed to explain the concepts of rewards to those who have never considered this biblical teaching (see also *The Life God Rewards* by Bruce Wilkinson). Since most of this book is a topical overview (with the exception of an exposition of Luke 16:1-13 [pp. 77-85]), it will be helpful to combine this resource with the expositional approach taken by Robert N. Wilkin in *The Road to Reward*.

This reviewer knows Randy Alcorn personally and can vouch that he faithfully lives *The Law of Rewards*. As a result, this miniature book will have a massive impact on the body of Christ.

**Keith R. Krell**

Senior Pastor

Emmanuel Baptist Church

Olympia, WA

# PERIODICAL REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

---

**“Three Recent Bible Translations: An Old Testament Perspective,”** Michael A. Lyons and William A. Tooman; **“Three Recent Bible Translations: A New Testament Perspective,”** Peter H. Davids; **“Three Recent Bible Translations: A Literary and Stylistic Perspective,”** Daniel E. Ritchie, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (September 2003): 497-520, 521-32, 533-45.

These three articles review *The English Standard Version* (ESV), *The NET Bible* (NET), and *The Message*. While I feel it was a mistake to review a paraphrase like *The Message*, the discussion of the other two, and especially the NET, is outstanding.

These articles give the reader an understanding of what to look for in a Bible translation. For that reason they are must reading. In addition, Lyons and Tooman make an impassioned plea to shift our attention away from making more English translations to making first-time translations into the 6,400 languages that do not yet have even one adequate translation of the Bible. They suggest it is a shame that only 392 out of 6,800 languages have an adequate translation of the whole Bible.

I highly recommend all three articles.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

---

**“John 2:23-25: What Kind of Faith Is This?,”** Nicolas Farelly, *Presbyterian* (Spring 2004): 37-45.

The second chapter of John records Jesus’ first sign—transforming water into wine. And after seeing this miracle, “His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). Twelve verses later, “at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did” (John 2:23). Commentators and grammarians call into question the faith



of those in both of these verses (see Wallace, Morris, Bock etc.). Some believe that the aorist tense in Greek does not describe one who has saving faith. Additionally, others suppose that merely believing in Jesus' name and/or signs is not enough to justify an individual. Those that hold to the former demonstrate a fundamental unawareness of the contextual and lexical features involved. Furthermore, those that hold to the latter ignore passages that clearly state that those who believe in Jesus' name (John 1:18a; 3:18b; and 1 John 5:13) and in His signs (John 20:31) receive eternal life.

When I picked up Farelly's article and read his title, I regrettably assumed that this would be his reasoning as well. Yet, he fundamentally rejects them (pp. 37-41). Concerning this, I am in hearty agreement. However, he still calls into question the faith of those in John 2:23 because of the subsequent two verses which read: "But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all *men*, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man" (2:24-25). Farelly writes, "Jesus' reluctance to entrust himself to them is, in my opinion, a strong indication that the faith of the 'many' was inadequate" (p. 44). His reasoning is as follows: "The gospel shows from the very beginning that the relationship of Jesus toward believers is one of reciprocity (1:12-13; 3:16; 10:27-18 [sic]; 11:26; 20:31). Nowhere in John do we find examples of adequate faith resulting in something other than spiritual blessings. In fact, John presents two consequences of man's attitude toward Jesus: Man either believes in Christ and thus receives eternal life, or he remains in unbelief and receives divine wrath (3:18)" (p. 44). There are two false misconceptions here that I would like to comment on: 1) His belief that Jesus' response to believers is always one of reciprocity; and 2) His implicit assumption that wrath is synonymous with condemnation.

First, the passages that Farelly uses to back up his view of reciprocity cannot logically be compared with John 2:23. The five passages he references all have one thing in common, those that believe unconditionally receive eternal life. Yet, Jesus did not deny that those who had believed in 2:23 did indeed receive eternal life. He did, however, deny them the fellowship which comes through walking in harmony with God. Although they entrusted their eternal destiny to Jesus (2:23), He did not entrust His earthly ministry to them (2:24) "for He knew what was in man" (2:25b).

Second, wrath and eternal condemnation are not synonymous. It should be in fact taken as God's temporal anger which is evoked by sin. Thus, the wrath of God can be poured out on unbelievers as well as believers. In fact, Paul reminds the Corinthian believers in 1 Cor 10:1-10 that just as the anger of the Lord burned against the nation of Israel, the same could be said of them if they choose that same path, which is characterized by idolatry, immorality, and grumbling.

Excluding the two issues above, his ultimate conclusion, and some minor non sequitur reasoning, I highly recommend this article for the grounded believer. Farelly does a good job at dismantling the specious reasoning of his colleagues.

**Michael D. Makidon**

Director of Publications  
Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, TX

---

**“Moral Virtues Associated with Eldership,”** David Mappes, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 2003): 202-18.

Does it seem as though morality in the church is more reflective of the culture than the biblical standard? If so, there are many reasons offered to explain why. Some think it is the church's attempt to be accepted by our postmodern culture. Others believe it is because most churches are not being taught a straight forward interpretation of the biblical text. Still others blame the fact that many interpreters are not being honest with the text and are reinterpreting the imperatives regarding morality. Whatever the reason, it is an important issue in the church today.

The article under review relates to all these reasons. Its principal concern “is to examine the source and function of the list of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, while interacting with the various views espoused by some proponents of the sociological-historical-exegetical approach to this passage. A central issue focuses on the source from which the apostle Paul may have obtained this list” (p. 202).

It starts by presenting the leading proponents of the sociological-historical-exegetical approach. They argue that “the ethical admonitions regarding NT believers and church leaders are no different from the ethical expectations of the general populace” (p. 207). It is argued that

sociologically these virtues would make Christianity attractive to the culture because it is in agreement with its moral standard and this is the reason Paul included them. The implication is that these moral standards are cultural and not universal making the moral standard Paul prescribes not literally applicable for today. If this is true we must now look at our culture to determine what the relevant moral standard should be. Not only is this subjective but it also undermines Paul's authority in the church today.

This article refutes this method of interpretation by first dealing with the issue of Paul's *sources*. It shows that a close comparing of the supposed copied lists "reveals few verbal or conceptual similarities" (p. 208). It also points out that other lists claimed to be copied by Paul have been dated by scholars "after A.D. 110 or between 135 and 137. Both dates are well after the writing of 1 Timothy and thus could not have been consulted by Paul" (p. 208-209). He goes on to show that the many "dissimilarities discount the hypothesis...that the writer of the Pastorals used well-known lists of moral virtues and vices to call the church to a conciliatory position with society" (p. 210).

Second, it deals with the *function* of the qualifications. It shows they are given specifically for Timothy to be able to discern "between true and false teachers" (p. 212). It is the true doctrine from true teachers that brings about true conduct. The teachers not reflecting these moral virtues in Paul's list "held to a form of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5), but it did not result in good deeds (Titus 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:15). They taught strange doctrines. In contrast true teachers adhere to (and thus model) sound doctrine that conforms to godliness" (p. 213). To take Paul's specific instructions away is to remove one tool the church has in discerning between true and false teaching. As the article points out very well, this list (as all of Paul's lists) is given for a specific theological reason, and is tied directly to the overall argument he is making in the letter, not simply a copy of moral virtues already associated with the culture he is writing to.

Finally, the lists of virtues by Paul "provide a general description of the godly life, and they call church officers to be examples of the godly life" (p. 215). It is extremely important for the church to have a biblical moral standard that is exemplified in the life of the elders as they live out a straight forward literal reading of the text.

It is important for our churches and elders to be aware of the different ways Christian morality is being changed. This article is informative,

helpful, and encouraging to all those who desire to live as a reflection of the moral standard prescribed by Paul.

**G. Brian Stone**

Chaplain  
Union Gospel Mission  
Dallas, TX

---

**“Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?”** Gordon R. Lewis, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2003): 269-98.

The concept of spiritual formation has become quite popular as of late. And like never before, Christians and non-Christians alike long for deeper spirituality. This sounds great, right? Well, lest you think that this spiritual movement is leading many to faith in Christ, may I remind you that modern-day spirituality, in many of its manifestations, seeks to remove propositional truth from its development. One such proposition is that Jesus is the only way (John 14:6) and that all who believe in Him have eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27). True spirituality begins and ends with propositional truth. Sadly, spirituality in the past two decades has evolved into an experience of mystical enlightenment. Gordon Lewis, a senior professor of theology and philosophy at Denver Seminary, appropriately poses the question, “Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?”

He begins with his thesis: “that, in addition to God’s supreme revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, some propositional revelation is necessary, although not sufficient, as a guide for authentic evangelical spiritual experience” (p. 269). Instead of the Scriptures alone bringing about maturity and the equipping for good works (2 Tim 3:17), the Word of God merely guides one down the path of spirituality, which he defines as “[a] devotion, desire or longing for a loving relationship with the ultimate reality with which, or with whom, we have to do” (p. 269). In case some ambiguity remains, he seeks to clear up any confusion by offering “God originated biblical sentences with their true contents to direct our deepest devotion beyond anything in the space-time creation, to Holy Spirit-enabled communion with the ultimate reality, the triune Creator and Lord of all” (p. 272). Although Lewis later blasts spiritual mysticism, his language does not exclude it.

Next, he surveys spiritualities, from New Age pantheism to Buddhism, which he makes clear, are not based on propositional truth. Lewis rightly criticizes one such spirituality which is currently of particular interest to Evangelicals—postmodernism. He writes, “Grenz and Franke think they have advanced beyond the individual relativism of the modernists, mystics, and neo-orthodox by referring to the knowledge of a community. However, they set forth ideas that are relative, not to an individual, but to a community of persons. Grenz in his *Theology for the Community of God* presents Christian stories as useful for Christians. But the stories and meta-narratives of numerous other religious communities describe contradictory views with spiritualities which are true for them” (p. 280). He then describes where this thinking originates: “Grenz and Franke, like [Donald] Bloesch, do not equate the revelation of God with the Bible. Like Roman Catholics, they regard the Bible as the product of the community of faith that cradled it...God speaks, not the propositional content of biblical sentences, but via the resultant actions. Following the ‘speech-act’ theory of J.L. Austin, Grenz and Franke displace the original intention of an assertion with its pragmatic result in their community” (p. 281). Thus, community based relativism.

Lewis then seeks to show how propositional truth, which is revealed generally and specially, is foundational in evangelical spirituality. He writes, “Paul’s exemplary mission in Athens to passionate Epicurean naturalists, Stoic pantheists, and idol worshippers did not begin with the gospel of Christ. He first made clear who God is from general (universal) revelation” (p. 283). He leaves no confusions that “a theistic world view is foundational to evangelical spiritual formation” (p. 284). Noting the dangers of Barthian and postmodern theology, with their community based relativism: “They leave non-Christians with the excuse that they did not know God’s moral demands” (p. 285).

While Lewis, until this point, has been generally clear, from his section concerning special revelation onward he begins to divert from an otherwise lucid presentation. He writes, “We often hear that knowledge is not enough without faith. True. It is equally true that sincere spiritual zeal without knowledge of the gospel is insufficient. The most pious Jewish monotheists, like Paul, needed to hear and assent to the gospel’s truth (Rom 10:1-4)” (p. 286). Unfortunately, Kierkegaard’s “inward passion” from his work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* rears its ugly head once more—Lewis seems to equate

spiritual zeal with faith. Even more shocking is the implied equality between spiritual zeal and assent to the gospel.

While at times Lewis is unclear concerning the gospel, he clearly explains that “He [the apostle John] recorded Jesus’ claims that people of every culture ‘might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that believing [that proposition] you may have *life* through his name’ (John 20:31). It is assent to the truth of the gospel’s propositions expressed in the language of any culture that begins an eternal life of personal fellowship with the Father and the Son (1 John 1:3)” (p. 288). But, unfortunately, Lewis closes this section with a disturbing conclusion: “Evangelicals, of course, do not claim to know anything as completely as God does. They see things from their particular, limited perspectives and have different interpretations. Some interpretations, however, are in fact better informed than others. Some ideas are consistent with divinely revealed information; some are not. We know the truths of general and special revelations about spiritual realities only *in part*. But God’s image bearers *know* the central gospel message in part. The elements of gospel truth they receive are sufficient to direct one’s spiritual passion from the creation to the Creator and from their sinful selves to their sinless Savior” (pp. 289-90). Disappointingly, this over exaggerated postmodern perspective reduces all propositional truth to incertitude. In fact, if this corresponds to reality, how can one be sure of anything? For this reason, consistent postmodernists admit that certainty is merely a modern hallucination. This seems to be Lewis’s implied determination as well. Given this mindset, it is no wonder why Kierkegaard’s inward passion is so easily adopted by postmodernists.

Whether non-Christian or Evangelical, mystic overtones have invaded spiritual formation. Many have elevated Catholic and Buddhist mystics to spiritual experts. Jesus asserted, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6) True spirituality begins and ends with the truth—Jesus. May we never deviate from it [Him].

**Michael D. Makidon**  
Director of Publications  
Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, TX