The Dangers of
REFORMED THEOLOGY

The Scripture tells us to "prove all things [*test all things by the Word of God*]; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ it is our responsibility to test and examine what men teach in light of the inerrant Word of God. We will attempt to do this with respect to the teachings of Reformed Theology. May the Lord grant that this analysis would be fair and accurate, and most of all true to His Word.

A brief paper such as this can hardly do justice to the great Biblical and theological issues that are involved. Realizing this, we have referred the reader to other books and/or literature which deal with these issues in more detail. With the exception of books written by other authors, the literature mentioned in this paper may be ordered from:

The Middletown Bible Church
349 East St.
Middletown, CT 06457
Tel. (860) 346-0907

Most of these studies may also be found on our website:
www.middletownbiblechurch.org

Before exposing some of the doctrinal dangers of Reformed Theology, let us consider some of the positive aspects of this movement. Consider the following strong points:

1) The Bible (66 Books) is considered the only rule of faith and practice. Those in the Reformed tradition have a great reverence and respect for the Word of God and they generally hold to a high view of inspiration, insisting that the Bible is totally without error of any kind. May we all be counted among those who tremble before the Word of our God (Isa. 66:2)!

2) **JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH** is given its proper place as well as the other great Reformation doctrines such as the **UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD OF EVERY BELIEVER** and the **SOLE AUTHORITY AND SUPREME AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES**. We can only thank God that these great truths were re-discovered and brought to light by the early reformers.

3) The GRACE OF GOD is rightly exalted. Knowing the depravity of the human heart, Reformed men have expressed deep gratitude for the amazing and super abounding grace of God which can reach to the chief of sinners. Every believer needs to join with them in boasting in our merciful and gracious Savior and exulting in His sovereign grace.

4) Because of their emphasis on the depravity of man and the glory and sovereignty of God, those in the Reformed tradition tend to have a **GOD-CENTERED** emphasis rather than a man-centered, humanistic emphasis which is so common today, even in the evangelical world. Their theology tends to abase sinful man and exalt the God of all glory. It is fitting to do so "for of HIM, and through HIM, and to HIM, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

5) Those in the Reformed tradition usually have a healthy fear of God and a strong abhorrence for sin. They also have a reverential respect for God's absolute moral standards, especially as they are set forth in the Ten Commandments. "But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conduct; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

6) Reformed Theology has on its roles some noted men who ought to be recognized. They have been diligent in the study of the Word of God from which we all can benefit. Such men have sought to point to God and His Word in the outworking of this age of grace. To the measure that these men have imitated Christ, to that measure we can imitate them (1 Cor. 11:1).

7) Those in the Reformed tradition have been very successful in making their views known. They have done this not so much through local church outreach, but through literature. Reformed writers have permeated the Christian book market. A great majority of theology books and Bible commentaries are written from a Reformed perspective. Early dispensationalists such as Darby, Kelly and Ironside used the pen in a mighty way and produced volumes of Christ-exalting books, but later dispensationalists have failed to pass on the torch in quite the same way. For example, no present day dispensationalist has come even close to the quantity and quality of work done by Reformed writer William Hendriksen (now with the Lord) in his ***New Testament Commentaries*** [although dispensationalist D. Edmond Hiebert, a dear servant of Christ, has made significant contributions in this area]. R.C.Sproul seems to come out with a new book every month! Most people who are converted to Reformed Theology will admit that they were led to embrace this position as a result of reading certain books.[1] Though we do not agree with all that they write, we acknowledge that they have been diligent in making their positions known through the printed page.

Certainly there is much that is commendable in the Reformed movement. These seven points (and more could be added) are certainly to their credit. In general it has been a God-honoring movement which has preached Christ, detested sin, acknowledged that God rules on His sovereign throne and proclaimed the glorious doctrine of justification by grace through faith according to the Scriptures. May these very things be said of us!

With all due respect for this movement, the men of this movement and the fruits of this movement, it is our purpose to alert believers to the doctrinal problems and dangers of Reformed Theology.

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[1] It is interesting that many Reformed men were converted to Christ as a result of dispensationalists and later converted to Reformed Theology as a result of Reformed writers. For example, John Gerstner wrote a book attacking dispensationalism but he admits, "My conversion came about, I believe, through the witness of a dispensationalist" (*Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, page 1).

Keeping Truth in Balance

Believers are ever in danger of failing to keep God's truth in balance. Christians often err when they seek to confine God's truth by locking it in to man-made systems of theology. C. H. Mackintosh made the following observation:

> God...has not confined Himself within the narrow limits of any school of doctrine—high, low or moderate. He has revealed Himself. He has told out [made known] the deep and precious secrets of His heart. He has unfolded His eternal counsels, as to the Church, as to Israel, the Gentiles, and the wide creation. Men might as well attempt to confine the ocean in buckets of their own formation as to confine the vast range of divine revelation within the feeble enclosures of human systems of doctrine. It cannot be done, and it ought not to be attempted. Better far to set aside the systems of theology and schools of divinity, and come like a little child to the eternal fountain of Holy Scripture, and there drink in the living teachings of God's Spirit.[2]

In another place Mackintosh said this:

> Dear friend, your difficulty is occasioned by the influence of a one-sided theology [extreme Calvinism]—a system which we can only compare to a bird with one wing, or a boat with one oar. When we turn to the sacred page of God's Word, we find THE TRUTH, not one side of the truth, but the whole truth in all its bearings. We find, lying side by side, the truth of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Are we called to reconcile them? Nay, they are reconciled already because they are both set forth in the word. We are to believe and obey. It is a fatal mistake for men to frame systems of divinity. You can no more systematize the truth of God than you can systematize God Himself. Let us abandon, therefore, all systems of theology and schools of divinity, and take the truth.[3]

By God's grace may we wholly follow the Word of God, not the frail and faulty systems of men. In the following few points we will see some examples of how Reformed Theology has strayed from the simple and balanced teaching of the Bible, especially regarding the extent of the atonement and saving faith.

1. The Danger of Teaching that Christ Died Only for the Elect

This is commonly known as a belief in a "limited atonement" (some Reformed men prefer to call it "definite atonement"). It is the teaching that Christ died on the cross and paid the penalty only for the sins of the elect. He did not die for the ones who eventually will be in the lake of fire. Often it is worded as follows: "Christ died for all men WITHOUT DISTINCTION but He did not die for all men WITHOUT EXCEPTION." This is a subtle game of semantics which makes it possible for them to say that He died for all without really meaning that He died for all. What they really mean is that Christ

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[2] The Mackintosh Treasury, "One sided Theology," p. 605.

[3] C. H. Mackintosh, *Short Papers on Scripture Subjects*, Vol. 2, p. 267.

died for ***all kinds of people*** and ***all classes of people***, but He did not die for every single person. That is, He died for Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, etc., but it is understood that He died for only elect Jews and Gentiles, only elect rich and poor, etc.

Dr. Paul Reiter has clearly and simply summarized the Scriptural teaching on this issue.[4] FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE? **HE DIED…**

1. For all (1 Tim. 2:6; Isa. 53:6).
2. For every man (Heb. 2:9).
3. For the world (John 3:16).
4. For the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).
5. For the ungodly (Rom. 5:6).
6. For false teachers (2 Peter 2:1).
7. For many (Matt. 20:28).
8. For Israel (John 11:50-51).
9. For the Church (Eph. 5:25).
10. For "me" (Gal. 2:20).

It is evident that the extreme Calvinist must ignore the clear language and obvious sense of many passages and he must force the Scriptures and make them fit into his own theological mold. Limited atonement may seem logical and reasonable, but the real test is this: ***Is it Biblical***? "What saith the Scriptures?" (Rom. 4:3). In childlike faith we must simply allow the Bible to say what it says.

Those who promote this erroneous doctrine try to tell us that "world" does not really mean "world" and "all" does not really mean "all" and "every man" does not really mean "every man" and "the whole world" does not really mean "the whole world." We are told that simple verses such as John 3:16 and Isaiah 53:6 must be understood ***not as a child would understand them*** but as a theologian would understand them. That is, we must reinterpret such verses in light of our system of theology.

The true doctrine of the atonement could be stated as follows:

> The Scriptures teach that the sacrifice of the Lamb of God involved the sin of the world (John 1:29) and that the Savior's work of redemption (1 Tim. 2:6; 2 Pet. 2:1), reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19) and propitiation (1 John 2:2) was for all men (1 Tim. 4:10), but the cross-work of Christ is efficient, effectual and applicable only for those who believe (1 Tim. 4:10; John 3:16). The cross-work of Christ is not limited, but the ***application*** of that cross-work through the work of the Holy Spirit is limited to believers only.

The extreme Calvinist would say that the cross was designed only for the elect and had no purpose for the "non-elect" (persistent unbelievers). But the death of God's Son had a divine purpose and design for both groups. For the elect, God's design was salvation according to His purpose and grace in Christ Jesus before the world began (2 Tim. 1:9; 2 Thess. 2:13). For unbelievers, God's purpose and design is to render the unbeliever without excuse. Men are CONDEMNED because they have rejected the Person

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[4]From unpublished lecture notes, from Dr. Paul Reiter, former professor at Appalachian Bible College, Bradley, WV.

and WORK of Jesus Christ and refused God's only remedy for sin (John 3:18; 5:40). Unbelievers can never say that a provision for their salvation was not made and not offered. They can never stand before God and say, "The reason I am not saved is because Christ did not die for me." No, the reason they are not saved is because they rejected the One who died for them and who is the Savior of all men (1 Tim. 4:10). They are without excuse.

This issue is not merely academic. It is extremely practical. It affects the very heart of the gospel and its presentation. The gospel which Paul preached to the unsaved people of Corinth was this: "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). Do we really have a gospel of good news for ***all men*** (compare Luke 2:10-11)? In preaching the gospel, what can we say to an unsaved person? Can we say, "My friend, the Lord Jesus Christ died for you. He paid the penalty for your sins. He died as your Substitute"?

One Reformed writer said this:

> But counselors, as Christians, are obligated to present the claims of Christ. They must present the good news that Christ Jesus died on the cross ***in the place of His own***, that He bore the guilt and suffered the penalty for their sins. He died that all whom the Father had given to Him might come unto Him and have life everlasting. ***As a reformed Christian***, the writer believes that counselors ***must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, FOR THEY CANNOT SAY THAT***. No man knows except Christ Himself who are His elect for whom He died [emphasis mine].[5]

As C.H.Mackintosh has said, "A disciple of the high school of doctrine [extreme Calvinist] will not hear of a world-wide gospel—of God's love to the world—of glad tidings to every creature under heaven. He has only gotten a gospel for the elect."

How can we sincerely offer to men what has not been provided for them? How can we offer them a free gift if the gift has not been purchased for them? How can we urge them to drink from the fountain of life if no water has been provided for them? How can we tell them to be saved if the Lord Jesus Christ provided not for their salvation? How can we say to a person, "Take the medicine and be cured!" if there is no medicine to take and no cure provided? W. Lindsay Alexander explains: "On this supposition [that of a limited atonement] the general invitations and promises of the gospel are without an adequate basis, and seem like a mere mockery, an offer, in short, of what has not been provided."[6]

If the Reformed preacher were really honest about it, he would need to preach his "gospel" along these lines:

> "Perhaps Christ died for you."
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> "Maybe God so loved you."
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> "Christ shed His blood for you, perhaps."

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[5] Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, p. 70.

[6] W. Lindsay Alexander, *A System of Biblical Theology*, 2nd volume, page 111.

"Salvation has been provided for you, maybe."

"Possibly God commendeth His love toward you."

"Hopefully He's the propitiation for your sins."

"There is a possibility that Christ died as your Substitute."

"I bring you good news, maybe."

"It's possible that Christ died for you. If you get saved then we know that He did die for you, but if you continue to reject Him then He did not die for you."

"Christ died for you only if you believe that Christ died for you (thus proving you are elect), but if you do not believe this and if you continue in your unbelief until the day you die, then Christ did not die for you."

Those who hold to a definite or limited atonement do not present the gospel in this way, but would not such a presentation be consistent with their theology? Would it not be a correct and cautious and sincere way of sharing with the unsaved? An extreme Calvinist must be very careful how he presents the cross-work of Christ to an unsaved person because he never really can be sure if Christ has made provision for that person. As Robert Lightner has said, "Belief in limited atonement means that the good news of God's saving grace in Christ cannot be personalized. Those who hold to such a position cannot tell someone to whom they are witnessing that Christ died for him because that one may, in fact, not be one for whom Christ died."[7]

John Bunyan made this observation: "The offer of the Gospel cannot, with God's allowance, be offered any further than the death of Christ did go; because if it be taken away, there is indeed no Gospel, nor grace to be extended" (Bunyan's *Works*). In other words, how can you offer the gospel to a person if Christ did not die for that person? How can we offer the sinner what has not been provided? As Lightner has said, "No maxim appears more certain than that a salvation offered implies a salvation provided."[8]

Boettner says: "Universal redemption means universal salvation" (cited by Lightner, *The Death Christ Died,* p. 96). The extreme Calvinist argues that Christ must save everyone that He died for. They reason thus: "If Christ died for everyone, then everyone will be saved." Let's think about the logic of this statement. This would be like saying, "If medicine is available for everyone, then everyone must be healed." This is obviously false. The medicine, though available, will not do any good unless it is taken. "There is more than enough cool, refreshing water for every thirsty person in the village." Does this mean that every person in the village will have his thirst quenched? Only if every person drinks! We need to make a difference between redemption accomplished and redemption applied.

"Lord, I believe were sinners more

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[7] This quote is from an article by Robert Lightner in the book, *Walvoord: A Tribute*, p. 166.

[8] Robert Lightner, *The Death Christ Died,* p. 114.

Than sands upon the ocean shore,
Thou hast for all a ransom paid,
For all a full atonement made."
Nikolaus L. von Zinzendorf, 1739

For a more detailed study of these important issues you may order the following papers: *For Whom Did Christ Die? –A Defense of Unlimited Atonement* (50¢), *"Savior of all men"—The Meaning of 1 Timothy 4:10* (5¢), and *God's Willingness and Man's Unwillingness* (15¢).

Books recommended for further study: *The Death Christ Died, revised edition* by Robert Lightner (Kregel, 1998); *Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?* By Norman F. Douty (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR) and *Systematic Theology* by Lewis Sperry Chafer (Vol. III, pages 183-205).

2. The Danger of Teaching that Regeneration Precedes Faith

The doctrine of man's total depravity has been distorted by extreme Calvinists resulting in a wrong understanding of man's inability. The Philippian jailer once asked, "WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?" (Acts 16:30-31 and compare Acts 2:37-38). Some extreme Calvinists, if they had been in Paul's place, would have answered as follows: *What must you do to be saved? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! You are spiritually DEAD and totally unable to respond to God until you are regenerated!*

Extreme Calvinists teach that regeneration must precede faith, and that a person must be born again before he can believe. They would say that a person must have eternal life before he can believe because a person dead in sins is unable to believe. They teach that faith is impossible apart from regeneration. Such teaching seems logical and reasonable to them based on the theological system which they have adopted. But "WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURES?"

The Bible clearly teaches this: BELIEVE AND THOU SHALT LIVE! "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life" (John 6:47). "That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:15). The extreme Calvinist says, "LIVE AND THOU SHALT BELIEVE!" Please notice that John 1:12 does **not** say this: "But as many as have been regenerated, to them gave He the power to believe on His Name, even to those who have become the children of God." Notice also that John 20:31 says, "believing ye might have life." It does not say, "having life ye might believe." In his helpless and hopeless condition the sinner is told to LOOK to the Lord Jesus Christ AND LIVE (John 3:14-16)! [We sing the hymn "LOOK AND LIVE." The extreme Calvinist should change the words to "LIVE AND LOOK"].

For a moment, let's assume that what the extreme Calvinists are saying is true. If regeneration precedes faith, then what must a sinner do to be regenerated? The extreme Calvinists have never satisfactorily answered this. Shedd's answer is typical: Because the sinner cannot believe, he is instructed to perform the following duties: (1) Read and hear the divine Word. (2) Give serious

application of the mind to the truth. (3) Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration. [See W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 472, 512, 513.]

Roy Aldrich's response to this is penetrating: "A doctrine of total depravity that excludes the possibility of faith must also exclude the possibilities of 'hearing the word,' 'giving serious application to divine truth,' and 'praying for the Holy Spirit for conviction and regeneration.' ***The extreme Calvinist deals with a rather lively spiritual corpse after all***."[9]

The tragedy of this position is that it perverts the gospel. The sinner is told that the condition of salvation is prayer instead of faith. How contrary this is to Acts 16:31. The sinner is not told to pray for conviction and for regeneration. The sinner is told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some Reformed men, including R.C. Sproul, even teach that a person can be regenerated as an infant, and then not come to faith in Christ **until years later**. For documentation of this, as well as a much fuller discussion of this entire issue, see our paper *Does Regeneration Precede Faith?* (10 cents).

3. The Danger of Teaching that Faith is the Gift of God

This teaching is based on a wrong interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9 which says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: **it is the gift of God**: not of works, lest any man should boast." Many Reformed men wrongly conclude that the pronoun "it" refers to "faith." What Paul is really teaching is that SALVATION is the gift of God. The IFCA Doctrinal Statement is accurate and clear: *"We believe that salvation is the gift of God brought to man and received by personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."* Salvation is the gift; faith is the "hand of the heart" that reaches out and receives the gift which God offers. We need to be careful not to confuse ***the gift*** with ***the reception of the gift.***

The fact that SALVATION (eternal life, righteousness) is the gift of God is taught repeatedly throughout the New Testament (see John 4:10; Rom. 5:15,16,17; 6:23). In the New Testament the word "GIFT" never refers to saving faith, though we certainly recognize that apart from God's mercy and gracious enabling and enlightenment, saving faith could not be exercised (John 6:44,65; Matt. 11:27; 16:16-17; Acts 16:14; etc.).

For a detailed 16 page study on this question, you may order our paper entitled, *"What is the Gift of God in Ephesians 2:8-9?"* (30¢).

The teaching that faith is the gift of God has some very practical implications and it will affect the way a person understands the gospel and how a person presents the gospel. **If faith is the gift of God, then how do I get this gift?** What must I do? WHAT MUST I DO TO BELIEVE? How can I get this

[9] Roy L. Aldrich's article is highly recommended. It is found in the July, 1965 issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra* and is entitled, "The Gift of God" (pages 248-253).

gift from God? First option: Do I do nothing and hope that God will sovereignly bestow it upon me? Do I do nothing and hope that I am one of God's elect? Second Option: Do I cry out to God and pray that He will give me the gift of saving faith?

John MacArthur holds to this second option. He teaches that faith is the gift of God and he recommends that the sinner **pray** to God in order to obtain it:

> Faith is a gift from God…it is permanent…the faith that God gives begets obedience…God gave it to you and He sustains it…May God grant you a true saving faith, a permanent gift that begins in humility and brokenness over sin and ends up in obedience unto righteousness. That's true faith and it's a gift that only God can give, **and if you desire it, pray and ask that He would grant it to you**."[10]

Notice carefully what MacArthur is doing. He is not telling the sinner to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31) but rather to pray and ask God to grant the gift of faith. This perverts the gospel of Christ by making the condition of salvation prayer instead of faith. Sinners are commanded to believe on Christ. They are not commanded to pray for the gift of faith.[11]

4. The Danger of Adding Additional Requirements to Saving Faith

In recent years many Reformed men have been strongly promoting what has been called "Lordship Salvation." Essentially Lordship salvation teaches that simple faith in Jesus Christ is not enough for salvation. Something else is needed. A solid commitment to Christ is needed. A person needs to surrender to the Lordship of Christ. A willingness to obey Christ's commands is a necessary condition. Also the sinner must fulfill the demands of discipleship or at least be willing to fulfill them in order to have eternal life.

We must never forget that a person is saved because he throws himself upon the mercy of a loving Savior who died for him. It is not our COMMITMENT that saves us; it is our CHRIST who saves us! It is not our SURRENDER that saves us; it is our Savior who does! It is not ***what I do for God***; it is ***what God has done for me***.

We need to avoid the dangerous error of taking what should be the RESULT of salvation and making it the REQUIREMENT for salvation:

- It is **because I am saved** that I surrender to His Lordship.
- It is **because I am saved** that I follow Him in willing obedience.
- It is **because I am saved** that I agree to the terms of discipleship.
- It is **because I am saved** that I submit to His authority over every area of my life.

Behavior and fruit are the evidences of saving faith but they are not the essence of saving faith. Don't confuse the fruit with the root. Because we are justified freely by His grace we measure up to the

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[10] Transcribed from John MacArthur's tape GC 90-21 dealing with Lordship Salvation.

[11] We again recommend the excellent article by Roy L. Aldrich entitled "The Gift of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1965, pages 248-253.

full demands of God's righteousness in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21); because we are frail we often fail to measure up to the full demands of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33, etc.). The requirements of discipleship are many; the requirement for salvation is simple faith and trust in the Savior.

My commitment to Jesus Christ does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE. My surrender to His Lordship does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE. My obedience to His Word does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE. My love for the Savior does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE. My ability or lack of ability to fulfill all the demands of discipleship does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE. My behavior (conduct) does not save me. CHRIST SAVES ME BY HIS GRACE.

God's saving grace is to be found in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone can satisfy God's holiness and righteousness! Eternal life is not something that we earn or achieve by our faithful living throughout our Christian life. Instead, it is a free gift that we receive at the moment we first believe in Christ. This LIFE is the present possession of every believer: "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John 5:12; all verbs are in the present tense).

Have you been justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus? Is your hope built upon what you have done or is your hope based upon Jesus' blood and righteousness? "I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but WHOLLY LEAN ON JESUS' NAME!" May we be standing fully on Christ the solid Rock, not upon the sinking sand of our own fragile commitment.

Other papers which deal with this important issue: *Saved By Grace Alone–A Clarification of the Lordship Issue* (32 pages, 50¢); *Salvation and Discipleship* (5¢)

5. The Danger of Teaching that the Believer Does Not Possess an Old Nature

Not all Reformed men deny the old nature, but many do, including John MacArthur,[12] M. Lloyd-Jones, and David Needham. It was Needham who brought this "one nature" position to the forefront by publishing his book ***Birthright– Christian, Do You Know Who You Are?***

John MacArthur may be used as a spokesman for those who hold this position as seen in the following quotes:

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[12] John MacArthur is dispensational in some respects (especially in the area of prophecy) but reformed in many respects. In his two books on Lordship salvation he attacks dispensationalism while at the same time claiming to be a dispensationalist. Reformed theologian, John Gerstner, described him as being as far away from dispensationalism as anyone can be and still be called a dispensationalist (from a taped message given at Geneva College, Sept. 27, 1986). See our notes on *The Teaching of John MacArthur with respect to Dispensationalism.*

> Salvation is not a matter of improvement or perfection of what has previously existed. It is total transformation….At the new birth a person becomes "a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17). It is not simply that he receives something new but that he **becomes** someone new….The new nature is not added to the old nature but replaces it. The transformed person is a completely new "I." **Biblical terminology, then, does not say that a Christian has two different natures. He has but one nature, the new nature in Christ.** The old self dies and the new self lives; they do not coexist. It is not a remaining old nature but the remaining garment of sinful flesh that causes Christians to sin. **The Christian is a single new person, a totally new creation, not a spiritual schizophrenic**….The believer as a total person is transformed but not yet wholly perfect. He has residing sin but no longer reigning sin. He is no longer the old man corrupted but is now the new man created in righteousness and holiness, awaiting full salvation.[13]
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> The relation of the **old self** and the **new self** has been much disputed. Many hold that at salvation believers receive a new self but also keep the old self. Salvation thus becomes addition, not transformation….Such a view, however, is not precisely consistent with biblical teaching. At salvation the old self was done away with. [He then cites 2 Cor. 5:17 and Rom. 6:6.] Salvation is transformation—the old self is gone, replaced by the new self.[14]

Holding such a view has some very practical significance. If the believer only possesses a new nature in Christ, then we should expect the believer to be remarkably free from sin. We would expect the believer to exhibit a quality of life which is truly exceptional. John MacArthur, for example, teaches the following:

1) Christians will never be ashamed before the judgment seat of Christ.[15]
   But see 1 John 2:28.

2) Christians always have fellowship with God and nothing, not even sin, can break this fellowship.[16]
   But see John 13:8.

3) Christians are in the light and cannot walk in darkness.[17]
   But see Ephesians 5:8.

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[13] *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Ephesians*, p. 164.

[14] *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Colossians and Philemon*, p. 148.

[15] *Marks of a True Believer* (Moody Press), pp. 34,37. See also the comments in *The MacArthur Study Bible* under 1 John 2:28.

[16] *Confession of Sin*, Moody Press, pp. 12-14,55. See also the comments in *The MacArthur Study Bible* under 1 John 1:3.

[17] *Confession of Sin*, pp. 28,32,33,34 and *Faith Works*, p. 167. See also the comments in *The MacArthur Study Bible* under 1 John 1:7.

4) Christians do not need to confess their sins in order to be forgiven.[18]
But see 1 John 1:9 and Psalm 51.

5) Christians can no longer live in bondage to sin.[19]
But see Galatians 5:1.

Note: For full documentation and discussion of these five points, see *The MacArthur Study Bible–A Critique* (50¢) and also *The Teaching of John MacArthur on the Two Natures of the Believer,* Chapter 7 (20¢).

We have available a lengthy and detailed critique of this ONE NATURE position (31 pages), $2.00. A very helpful book dealing with these issues is *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles Stanford (Zondervan).

6. The Danger of Denying the Literal Thousand Year Kingdom.

The early reformers never totally freed themselves from the allegorical method of Origen and from the church/kingdom concept of Augustine. Most Reformed theologians are still entrapped and crippled by these approaches to the prophetic word. In contrast, the dispensational approach insists that Biblical prophecies be interpreted in their plain, obvious and normal sense.

Reformed theologians also teach a general resurrection at the end of the age and a general judgment. They understand that all men, saved and unsaved, are raised up at the last day and all are judged. In contrast to this the Bible teaches that there are several different judgments which take place at different times, and two resurrections (one for the unjust and one for the just) separated by a thousand years. See the following study: "Discerning Between the Two Comings of Christ, the Five Judgments and the Two Resurrections" (Chapter 13 in our notes entitled *Shedding Light on Dispensations*).

Harry Bultema (1884-1952) pastored Christian Reformed churches in Iowa and Michigan. He was a Reformed theologian but in his study of prophecy he came to realize that the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, did not teach one general resurrection. He published his findings in his book *Maranatha--A Study of Unfulfilled Prophecy*. This book was republished by Kregel Publications in 1985 (it was originally published in the Dutch language). His discussion on the first resurrection is very insightful and more detailed than most of the writings of dispensationalists who treat this subject. Bultema also has a fascinating chapter entitled "From the Reformation to the Present" where he identifies the men who were Chiliasts (or Premillennialists), including many of the Reformed persuasion.

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[18] *Confession of Sin*, pp. 48,52,55. MacArthur fails to distinguish between the two aspects of forgiveness that are taught in the Bible. There is that forgiveness which is needed for salvation (Acts 10:43) and there is that forgiveness that is needed for fellowship (1 John 1:9). See our paper (chart form) entitled "Two Aspects of Forgiveness" (5¢).

[19] *Faith Works*, p. 117.

See our paper entitled *Comparison Between the Present Age, the Millennium and the Eternal State* (10¢), *What the Bible Teaches Concerning the Rapture* (50¢) and our set of notes entitled, *Prophecy–Preview of Coming Events* ($1.50). Recommended books: *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Alva McClain), *The Theocratic Kingdom* (George Peters), *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Charles Ryrie), *Millennialism* (Charles Feinberg) and *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Paul Lee Tan).

7. The Danger of Not Understanding the Bible in its Literal, Normal Sense

The Bible must be interpreted literally, which is the way language is normally and naturally understood. We recognize that the Bible writers frequently used figurative language which is a normal and picturesque way of portraying literal truth. The Bible must be understood in the light of the normal use of language, the usage of words, the historical and cultural background, the context of the passage and the overall teaching of the Bible (2 Timothy 2:15). Most importantly, the believer must study the Bible in full dependence upon the SPIRIT OF TRUTH whose ministry is to reveal Christ and illumine the minds and hearts of believers (John 5:39; 16:13-15; 1 Cor. 2:9-16). The natural, unregenerate man cannot understand or interpret correctly the Word of God. The things of God are foolishness to him; he cannot know them (1 Cor. 2:14). His mind is blinded (Rom. 3:11; 2 Cor. 4:3-4).

God means what He says and says what He means. God has not given us His Word to deceive us or to trick us. He expects us to receive what He has said in simple childlike faith. We are simply to take Him at His Word.

Reformed Theology has abandoned literal interpretation in three key areas:

1) The Prophecies of the Kingdom

One cannot read the great prophecies of the Bible found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and in all the other prophets without coming face to face with amazing detailed descriptions of a future kingdom age when the Messiah will be ruling in Jerusalem. How can we ignore such prophecies? How can we proudly declare that these predictions will never be literally fulfilled? Were the prophets mistaken? Were their predictions somehow nullified? Why do Reformed men refuse to understand these kingdom prophecies in their normal, literal sense?

2) The Prophecies of the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming

Many Reformed men today have joined the preterist camp. They believe that most or all prophecy has already been fulfilled in the past, especially in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. They claim that these great prophecies about the great tribulation and the second coming of our Lord are not FUTURE, but are already FULFILLED. They claim these major prophetic events have already happened! What about the Great Tribulation? They say it has already taken place, in 70 A.D. What about the Lord's second coming? They say it has already taken place, in 70 A.D.

This approach is the result of a non-literal interpretation of prophecy. The Bible has many things to say about when our Lord will come in His kingdom. Consider the following and notice how they completely contradict the notion that Christ came in His kingdom in 70 A.D.:

1. When Christ comes in His kingdom, He will return to earth and be seen by every eye (Matthew 24:25-30 and Revelation 1:7).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. In 70 A.D. Christ was not seen by anyone.

2. When Christ comes in His kingdom, the Jewish people will be regathered from every country on earth and brought into their promised land (Matthew 24:31; Jeremiah 16:14-15; Isaiah 43:5-7; Jeremiah 23:7-8; Jeremiah 31:7-10; Ezekiel 11:14-18; Ezekiel 36:24).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. Instead of being regathered, the Jews were killed and scattered.

3. When Christ comes in His kingdom, there will be no wars on earth (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3; Psalm 46:9; Zech. 9:10).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. 70 A.D. was a time of fierce warfare carried out by the powerful Roman army.

4. When Christ comes in His kingdom, the kingdom will be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6) and the Messiah will sit on the throne of David which will be located in Jerusalem (Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 17:25; 23:5-6; 33:15; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-15; Luke 1:32-33).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. In 70 A.D. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple destroyed and no King from the line of David was reigning on the throne!

5. When Christ comes in His kingdom it will be a time of great deliverance and great blessing for the Jewish people (Jeremiah 30:7-9; Ezekiel 34:25-31).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. which was a time of great judgment upon the Jewish people who decades earlier had crucified their Messiah and rejected Him (although some Jews did believe on Him).

6. When Christ comes in His kingdom, God's sanctuary (His temple) will be in the midst of His people (Ezekiel 37:26-28; Ezekiel 40:5-43:27).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. because it was then that the Jewish temple was destroyed resulting in the Jews having no temple at all.

7. When Christ comes in His kingdom, there will be a priesthood operating in the temple and animal sacrifices will be offered (Ezekiel 44:1-46:24).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. because when the Romans destroyed the temple they put an end to a functioning priesthood and they put an end to animal sacrifices.

8. When Christ comes in His kingdom, "the Jews will possess and settle in all of the promised land, and it will again be subdivided into the twelve tribal divisions. But these tribal divisions will be different than those described in the book of Joshua" (Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footprints of the Messiah*, p. 328). The description of the location of all of the 12 tribes during the kingdom is described in Ezekiel 47:13-48:29. Seven tribes will be situated to the north of the temple (Ezekiel 48:1-7) and five tribes will be situated to the south of the temple (Ezekiel 48:23-29).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem the surviving Jews were scattered throughout the world until the 20th century when a small remnant returned to the land of Israel and a Jewish state was established.

9. When Christ comes in His kingdom, there will be a message of good news that will be declared to Jerusalem (Isaiah 52:7-10). This message will consist of the following elements: 1) The good news of peace; 2) The good news that Messiah will reign in Zion; 3) The good news that God has comforted His people; 4) The good news that God has redeemed Jerusalem.

This did not take place in 70 A.D. In 70 A.D. there was only bad news for the Jewish people. It was the bad news of judgment and destruction and ruin and death, not the good news of comfort and peace.

10. When Christ comes in His kingdom there will be joy and gladness (Isaiah chapter 35). This joy and gladness will result from the following conditions: 1) the desert will become fertile (verses1-2,6-7); 2) Messiah will come to deliver Israel (v.3-4); 3) Those who are lame or blind or deaf will be healed (v.5-6); 4) Wild vicious animals will no longer be a problem (v.9); 5) It will be a time of great rejoicing (v.10).

This did not take place in 70 A.D. In 70 A.D. the Jews who were fortunate enough to survive the Roman invasion did not have joy and gladness, but only sorrow and sighing (compare Isaiah 35:10).

3) The Passages Which Speak of the Extent of Our Lord's Atonement

Another example of Reformed men abandoning literal interpretation is their theological interpretation when it comes to the question, FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?

Reformed men would agree that universal terms are used to describe those for whom Christ died. How should these universal terms be understood? Those who hold to a limited atonement tell us that "world" (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19; John 6:51) does not really mean "world" and that "the whole world" (1 John 2:2) does not really mean "the whole world." Furthermore they insist that "all" (1 Tim. 2:6) does not really men "all," that "all men" (1 Tim. 2:4) does not really mean "all men," that "every man" (Heb. 2:9) does not really mean "every man," and that "us all" (Isa. 53:6) does not really mean "us all."

Sir Robert Anderson has written the following:

> In the early years of my Christian life I was greatly perplexed and distressed by the supposition that the plain and simple words of such Scriptures as John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:6 were not true, save in a cryptic sense understood only by the initiated. For, I was told, the over-shadowing truth of Divine sovereignty in election barred our taking them literally. But half

> a century ago a friend of those days—the late Dr. Horatius Bonar—delivered me from this strangely prevalent error. He taught me that truths may seem to us irreconcilable only because our finite minds cannot understand the Infinite; and we must never allow our faulty apprehension of the eternal counsels of God to hinder unquestioning faith in the words of Holy Scripture.[20]

Dispensationalists have endeavored to follow this rule of Biblical interpretation: When the plain sense makes good sense seek no other sense lest it result in nonsense! But others have abandoned a literal approach when it comes to certain areas of Scripture. Limited redemptionists, for example, seem to have followed another rule: When the plain sense contradicts our theological system seek some other sense lest we end up contradicting our particular brand of Calvinism.

Over three hundred years ago Richard Baxter wrote the following:

> When God telleth us as plain as can be spoken, that Christ died for and tasted death for every man, men will deny it, and to that end subvert the plain sense of the words, merely because they cannot see how this can stand with Christ's damning men, and with his special Love to his chosen. It is not hard to see the fair and harmonious consistency: But what if you cannot see how two plain Truths of the Gospel should agree? Will you therefore deny one of them when both are plain? Is not that in high pride to prefer your own understandings before the wisdom of the Spirit of God, who [inspired] the Scriptures? Should not a humble man rather say, doubtless both are true though I cannot reconcile them. So others will deny these plain truths, because they think that [All that Christ died for are certainly Justified and Saved: For whomsoever he died and satisfied Justice for, them he procured Faith to Believe in him: God cannot justly punish those whom Christ hath satisfied for, etc.] But doth the Scripture speak all these or any of these opinions of theirs, as plainly as it saith that Christ died for all and every man? Doth it say, as plainly any where that he died not for all? Doth it any where except any one man, and say Christ died not for him? Doth it say any where that he died only for his Sheep, or his Elect, and exclude the Non-Elect? There is no such word in all the Bible; Should not then the certain truths and the plain texts be the Standard to the uncertain points, and obscure texts?[21]

Richard Baxter then skillfully applied these principles to the case at hand:

> Now I would know of any man, would you believe that Christ died for all men if the Scripture plainly speak it? If you would, do but tell me, what words can you devise or would you wish more plain for it than are there used? Is it not enough that Christ is called the Saviour of the World? You'll say, but is it of the whole World? Yes, it saith, He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole World. Will you say, but it is not for All men in the World? Yes it saith he died for All men, as well as for all the World. But will you say, it saith not for every man? Yes it doth say, he tasted death for every man. But you may say, It means all the Elect, if it said so of any Non-Elect I would believe. Yes, it speaks of those that denied the Lord that bought them, and bring upon

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[20]From the preface of Anderson's book *Forgotten Truths*.

[21]Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind*, pages 282-283.

themselves swift destruction. And yet all this seems nothing to men prejudiced.[22]

I knew of a man who was not committed to the belief that Christ died for all men and yet he made this remarkable concession: "If Christ really did die for all men, then I don't know how the Bible could say it any clearer than it does." How true! This same man later embraced the doctrine of unlimited atonement because he could not deny the clear and plain statements of Scripture.

For a much fuller discussion of the importance of a literal interpretation, see the following documents: 1) *Do I Interpret the Bible Literally? Six Tests To See if I Truly Do* [50 cents]. 2) *Literal Interpretation–Showing the Inconsistencies of Non-Dispensationalists*. $1.00.

8. The Danger of Teaching that All or Most Prophecies Were Fulfilled in 70 A.D.

This danger was discussed in the previous section (#7), as we considered how Reformed men have abandoned the literal and normal understanding of God's Word, especially as it relates to the prophetic portions of the Bible.

Use your imagination, and suppose you were an Israelite living in the days of Esther during the time of the Persian empire (about 470 B.C.). One day you come across several Hebrew scrolls which happen to include the books of Isaiah and Micah (both written approximately 700 years before Christ's birth). As you read through these sacred books, you discover some amazing prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah:

> But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2).
>
> Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).
>
> For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given (Isaiah 9:6).

Now suppose a Jewish friend of yours comes along and you share with him your excitement: "Isn't it wonderful that God promised to someday send the Messiah into the world?" But to your amazement, your friend does not share your same expectation. He says this:

> My friend, I'm sad to say that you have misunderstood these prophecies. These prophesies are not predictions about what is going to happen in the FUTURE, but these are predictions that have already been FULFILLED in the past. You see, those of us who have great insight into the real message of the Bible understand that these predictions were fulfilled at the time of the destruction

[22]Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind*, pages 286-287. The verses that are alluded to in this quotation are John 4:42; 1 John 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:4-6; Heb. 2:9; 2 Pet. 2:1.

of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. It was at this time that the Messiah came in judgment. These prophecies are all about the Messiah's coming in judgment during the days of Nebuchadnezzar. Even though it's true that no one saw the Messiah at that time, yet nevertheless, that is when He came. You should not expect Him to come in the future because He has already come. In fact, Isaiah told us that His coming would soon take place: "Howl ye; for the day of the LORD is **at hand**; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty" (Isaiah 13:6). Obviously this was referring to the soon coming event of the Babylonian destruction, not to some far off future happening. Anyone living today who is living in the expectancy of a far off, future coming of the Messiah is sadly misguided and has totally failed to understand the Bible.

Hopefully everyone reading the above would recognize the folly of understanding prophecy in such a way. Yet, today there are many people in the Reformed camp who have embraced preterism and are telling us much the same thing as in our imaginary story. The great prophecies of our Lord's second coming, we are told, have already been fulfilled in the past, in 70 A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Even though no one saw Christ return at that time, yet this is when He returned in judgment!

The great truths of prophetic Scripture: the coming of the Lord for His saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18), the great tribulation (Revelation 4-19), the second coming of Christ, the kingdom reign of the Messiah (described in great detail by all the prophets)---all these are denied by those who relegate all prophecies to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Hundreds of prophecies are cancelled out by this method under the bewildering supposition that they have already been fulfilled.

9. The Danger of Covenant Theology

Those in the Reformed tradition generally embrace Covenant theology. This system of theology evolved after the Reformation. It explains all relationships between God and man from the beginning to the end of time under the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, and (sometimes) the Covenant of Redemption.[23] Reformed/Covenant theologians teach that Old Testament Israelites and New Testament believers are one people and that the Church is but a continuation and successor of Israel. The CHURCH is usually understood as including the saints of all the ages. They teach that the Church, as the successor of Israel, has now absorbed and appropriated Old Testament prophecies and promises. According to their thinking, the promises which God made to Israel are now being fulfilled by the Church or they have been forfeited because of Israel's unbelief (but see Jeremiah 31:31-**37**). This system of theology is directly opposed to dispensationalism which makes a clear and Biblical distinction between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church (Acts 15:13-18; Rom. 11:25-26).

The following accurate and helpful statement has been formulated by the men of the New England Bible Conference and is entitled ***"A Clarification Regarding Dispensationalism."***

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[23] In contrast to this, dispensationalists emphasize the covenants that are mentioned in the Bible, such as the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant.

When God's Word, the Bible, is taken in a consistent, literal manner it will result in dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is the result of a consistently literal, normal interpretation.

A dispensation is a unique stage in the outworking of God's program in time, whereby some or all of mankind are to have a believing response, being responsible to be good stewards of the particular revelation which God has given (Eph. 3:2,9; Col. 1:25; Exodus 34:27,28; Gal. 3:10-12; 1 Tim. 1:4; Eph. 1:10; etc.).

We believe that in order to be "rightly dividing the Word of truth" it is essential to distinguish things that differ and to recognize certain basic Biblical distinctions, such as the difference between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church (Acts 15:14-17; Rom. 11:25-27), the separation of 1000 years between the two resurrections (Rev. 20:4-6), the difference between the various judgments which occur at various times (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15), the difference between law and grace (John 1:17; Rom. 6:14-15; Rom. 7:1-6) and the difference between Christ's present session at the right hand of the Father as the Church's great high Priest and Christ's future session on the restored Davidic throne as Israel's millennial King (Heb. 1:3; 10:12-13; Acts 15:16; Luke 1:32).

We believe the Church is a distinct body of believers which was not present on earth during the Old Testament period and which was not the subject of Old Testament prophecy (Eph. 3:1-9; Col. 1:25-27). In accord with God's program and timetable, the Church is on earth between the two advents of Christ with the beginning of the Church taking place after Daniel's 69th week (on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2) and with the completion of the Church's ministry on earth taking place at the rapture before the commencement of Daniel's 70th week (Dan. 9:24-27). During this interval of time God is visiting the nations to call out a people for His Name (Acts 15:14-16; Eph. 3:1-11; Rom. 11:25). Indeed, the Church is God's called-out assembly.

We believe God will literally fulfill His covenant and kingdom promises to the nation of Israel just as the prophets foretold (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:18-21; Deut. 30:3-10; 2 Sam. 7:4-17; Jer. 31:31-37; 33:15-26). We believe that the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12,15, 17), the Palestinian Covenant (Deut. 30), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7) and the New Covenant (Jer. 31) were made unconditionally to national Israel and that the thousand-year kingdom will include the literal fulfillment of these covenant promises to ethnic Israel (Jer. 31:31-37; 33:14-26; Ezek. 36:25-28; 40-48; Rom. 11:23-32). The church is not the "new Israel" or the "spiritual Israel," but rather "one new man" created of two groups, saved Jews and saved Gentiles (Eph. 2:15; 1 Cor. 10:32). The terms "Israel," "Israelite," and "Jew," are used in the New Testament to refer to national ethnic Israel. The term "Israel" is used of the nation or the people as a whole or the believing remnant within. It is not used of the Church in general or of Gentile believers in particular. Saved Gentiles of this present age are spiritual sons of Abraham who is the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:12,16; Gal. 3:7,26,29), whether Jews or Gentiles; but believing Gentiles are not Israelites [that is, they are not the sons of Jacob]. The Israelites are carefully defined by Paul in Rom. 9:4-5.

We believe that in every dispensation God's distinctive programs are outworked for His great Name's sake and that in every dispensation persons have always been saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8; Gen. 15:6; Heb. 11:4-7; Rom. 4:1-8). We believe that the glory of God is the determining principle and overall purpose for God's dealings with men in every age and that in

every dispensation God is manifesting Himself to men and to angels so that all might redound to the praise of His glory (Eph. 1:6,12,14; 3:21; Rom. 11:33-36; 16:27; Isa. 43:7; 1 Tim. 1:17).

The prophecy found in Daniel 9:24-27 is a key to understanding the parenthetical nature of this present age. Israel's history from the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the second coming of Messiah is incorporated in the 70-Week prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. We know that Messiah was cut off (referring to His violent death) after the 69th week, and we know from the book of Revelation and other Scripture passages that the 70th week is yet future and represents the final seven years before the Messiah returns to the earth. Between the 69th and 70th weeks is a "gap" of nearly 2000 years, during which time God has been building His Church (Matthew 16:18) and "visiting the nations to take out of them a people for His Name" (Acts 15:14).

It is highly significant that this 70-Week prophecy of Daniel, while detailing the history of God's people—"seventy weeks are determined upon thy people" (Dan. 9:24)—has nothing to say about a period of history which is now known to consist of nearly two millennia. When this remarkable "gap" or "parenthesis" is integrated with Daniel's great chronological prophecy, the interpreter is forced to distinguish two histories: 1) the stated history of Israel (490 years); 2) the unstated, parenthetical history of the Church (already nearly 2000 years). God has a distinct history or program for Israel as well as a distinct history or program for His Church. The two programs harmonize perfectly but do not interfere one with the other, nor do they overlap in time. The Church age in its entirety falls in the period of time after the conclusion of the 69th week and before the beginning of the 70th week.

Vital Distinctions Between Israel and the Church

Dispensationalists are distinguished from non-Dispensationalists in that they recognize clear Biblical distinctions between Israel and the Church. The following distinctions, illustrated in chart form, are based on the clear teachings of the Scriptures when interpreted in their plain, normal, literal sense. For example, non-Dispensationalists are horrified at the thought that animal sacrifices will be observed in the future Messianic kingdom, but this is what the Old Testament prophets predicted. [For further study, see *The Millennial Temple of Ezekiel 40-48* by Dr. John Whitcomb, available from the Middletown Bible Church.] In the following chart the term "Church" refers to the true Church made up of born again believers, and does not include mere professing Christians who do not have the life of God (1 John 5:12).

A Comparison and Contrast Between Israel and the Church	
Israel	**The Church**
Israel is a nation chosen by God and sustained by covenant promises (Deut. 7:6-9). Not all individuals in this chosen nation are saved (Rom. 9:6; 11:28).	The Church is a called out assembly of believers who have been baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Every member of the body of Christ is saved, though there are multitudes of professing Christians who may not be saved (2 Tim. 2:19).
Israel traces its origin to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Jacob being the father of the twelve tribes).	The Church traces its origin to the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when believers were first placed into the body of Christ.
In God's program for Israel, His witnesses comprised a nation (Isaiah 43:10).	In God's program for the Church, His witnesses are among all nations (Acts 1:8).
God's program for Israel centered in Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37) and will again center in Jerusalem during the Tribulation (Matt. 24:15-20) and during the Millennium (Isa. 2:1-5).	God's program for His Church began in Jerusalem and extended to the uttermost parts of the earth (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The Church is identified with the risen Christ, not with any earthly city.
The hope and expectancy of Israel was earthly, centering in the establishment of the Kingdom of the Messiah foretold by the prophets (Jer. 23:5-8; Isa. 2:1-5; 11:1-16).	The hope and expectancy of the Church is heavenly, centering in the glorious appearing of Christ to take His people to heaven (John 14:1-3; Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).
God's purpose and program for Israel was revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures.	God's purpose and program for the Church was not revealed in the Old Testament, but was revealed by the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5).
Israel's history which is in view in Daniel 9:24 (the 70 weeks or 490 years) involved animal sacrifices. The last 7 of the 490 years involves the future Tribulation which will also involve animal sacrifices during the first three and a half years (Dan. 9:27). Israel's millennial worship will also involve animal sacrifices (Ezek. 43:27).	The Church's history does not involve animal sacrifices. Messiah's sacrifice is commemorated by means of the Lord's Table.

Israel's history which is in view in Daniel 9:24 (the 490 years including also the Tribulation) involves a temple in Jerusalem. The same will be true in the Millennium (Ezek. chapters 40-48).	During most of the Church age there is no Jewish temple in Jerusalem. In this age God manifests His glory in His believers, both individually and collectively, designating them as His temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20; Eph. 2:21-22). This is accomplished by the indwelling ministry of God the Holy Spirit.
Israel's history which is in view in Daniel 9:24 (the 490 years) involves a priesthood limited to the sons of Aaron, and excluding most Israelites. The same applies to the Millennium when Zadokian priests (also sons of Aaron) will serve in the temple (Ezek. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15).	During the Church age every true believer is a priest and able to offer spiritual sacrifices to the Lord (Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Whereas Israel had a priesthood, the Church ***is*** a priesthood.
Israel's history which is in view in Daniel 9:24 (the 490 years) will terminate with the coming of the Messiah to the earth to establish His Kingdom reign.	The Church's history will end at the Rapture of the Church when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Rom. 11:25).
During Israel's history (the 490 years of Daniel 9:24 which also includes the Tribulation) the ethnic makeup of the world is bipartite: Jews and Gentiles. This division of all people into Jews and Gentiles will also apply to those in the Millennial Kingdom in natural bodies.	During the Church age from Pentecost to the Rapture the ethnic makeup of the world is tripartite: Jews, Gentiles, and the Church of God (1 Cor. 10:32), the Church being composed of saved Jews and Gentiles united together in one Body (Eph. 2:15; 3:6).
During Israel's history, from Sinai to the Millennial Kingdom (excluding the Church age), Israel's role in the world will be characterized by PRIORITY [that is, they will have a leading role as God's chosen people]—see Deut. 4:6-8; Isa. 43:10; Matt. 10:5-6; Zech. 8:23.	During the Church age, Israel's role in the world will be characterized by EQUALITY—Jew and Gentiles united together in one body to bear testimony to a risen Christ (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28).
Male Jews were circumcised as a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. Believing Jews were circumcised in the heart (Jer. 4:4).	Believers of this age enjoy an internal circumcision not made with hands (Col. 2:11; Phil. 3:3). Physical circumcision is not required.
Israel was under the law of Moses as a rule of life.	The Church is under the "new creature" rule (Gal. 6:15-16). See our study: *What is the Believer's Rule of Life?*

Unbelieving Jews were physical children of Abraham and spiritual children of the devil (John 8:37-44).	Every believer in Christ (every true member of the Church, whether Jew or Gentile) is a child of Abraham and a child of God (Rom. 4:11-12; Gal. 3:26-29). This statement does not mean that Church age believers are Israelites.
Israel was to observe the Sabbath Day (Exodus 20:8). Sabbath observance will also take place in the Tribulation (Matt. 24:20) and in the Millennium (Ezek. 46:1,3).	The Church is to be diligent and make every effort to enter into God's rest (Heb. 4:9-11). This is a daily duty.
Membership into the Jewish nation was by birth or by becoming a proselyte (a convert to Judaism).	Membership into the Church is by the new birth accomplished by the baptizing ministry of God (1 Cor. 12:13).
Believing Jews who died prior to Pentecost, believing Jews during the tribulation, and believing Jews during the Kingdom reign of Christ are not members of the body of Christ.	Believing Jews and Gentiles from Pentecost to the Rapture are members of the body of Christ.
Israel's place of worship centered in Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; John 4:20) and this will also be true in the Tribulation (Dan. 9:27) and in the Millennium (Isa. 2:1-5).	The Church's place of worship is "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name" (Matt. 18:20; John 4:21-24). Christ is in the midst of His Churches (Rev. 1:13, 20).
Israel is likened to the wife of Jehovah, often an unfaithful wife (Hosea).	The Church is the beloved Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7-8), and although at times unfaithful, will one day be presented blameless and spotless (Eph. 5:27).

For further study pertaining to Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, see our set of notes entitled *Dispensations* (128 pages, $2.50). Recommended books: *It Really Makes a Difference* (Renald Showers) and *Dispensationalism* (Charles Ryrie).

10. The Danger of Putting Believers Under the Law

Reformed Theology attacks the very essence of the Christian life and the rule by which it should be lived. Reformed Theology errs in its teaching on sanctification by sending the believer back to Mount Sinai instead of sending him to Mount Calvary. Paul's focus was ever upon the cross: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (Gal. 3:1). "But God forbid that I should glory,

save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Reformed men would never say that a person is justified by the works of the law. They rightly insist that justification is by faith and not by works. "Justification by faith" was the faithful cry of the Reformation. The problem does not relate to justification but to sanctification (the Christian life and how it is to be lived). Reformed theologians consistently teach that believers are under the law ***as a rule of life***. Usually they say that the believer is not under the ceremonial law (the sacrificial system, etc.) but that he is under the moral law (the Ten Commandments, etc.). The overpowering characteristic of all Reformed theologians is their doctrine of the believer's relationship to the law. They would say that the believer is "under the law" as a rule of life.

Miles Stanford, author of ***The Complete Green Letters*** (in the Clarion Classics series published by Zondervan), has given the following list of pro-law Calvinist or Reformed authors whose theology permeates the thinking of vast numbers of believers:

Adams, J.	Fletcher, D.	Mauro, P.	Smeaton, G.
Allis, O.	Fuller, D.	Morris, L.	Steele, D.
Bass, C.	Gerstner, J.	Murray, G.	Stonehouse, N.
Baxter, R.	Gill, J.	Murray, J.	Stott, J.
Berkof, L.	Goodwin, T.	Nicole, R.	Thomas, C.
Berkouwer, G.	Haldane, R.	Owen, J.	Van Til, C.
Boettner, L.	Hamilton, F.	Packer, J.	Van Til, H.
Boice, J.	Hodge, A.	Payne, H.	Vos, G.
Bonar, A.	Hodge, C.	Pink, A.	Warfield, B.
Boston, T.	Kromminga, D.	Romaine, Wm.	Watson, R.
Brown, D.	Kuiper, H.	Ryle, J.	Watson, T.
Conn, H.	Kuyper, A.	Schaeffer, F.	Wyngaarden,M.
Cox, Wm.	Lloyd-Jones, M.	Shedd, Wm.	
Edwards, J.			

Many of these mentioned above could and should be considered as great and godly men. Their contribution to the cause of Christ ought not be minimized. However these men did err whenever they insisted that the believer is under the law as a rule of life. For sanctification the believer must be directed to Mt. Calvary, not to Mt. Sinai. It is at the cross that true freedom is found.

W. J. Berry, in his preface to William Huntington's classic work on ***The Believer's Rule of Life***, summed up the problem well:

> It is a divine fact that Christ has delivered absolutely, the "redeemed" from all bondage to, and consequences of, all coded law with penalty. This truth was at first denied by the Pharisees and by some believing Jews. This denial of the truth might have prevailed, had not the issue been immediately settled forever by the apostles. The essentials of this work is recorded of the conference in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35); in Paul's correction of Peter; of the apostle's rebuking the Galatian Judaizers (Galatians); his exposition in the Roman Epistle, and the final clarification in the letter to the Hebrews. But in spite of these clear declarations from heaven, certain men came into the churches and persisted in teaching the same coded law of Moses. At the Council of Nicea, called by the Roman Emperor Constantine, his bishops began the first "system" of Judao-Christian coded laws, to be expanded through the dark ages by Popes and their hierarchy of bishops; then

> modified and continued by the Protestant Reformers, –thence in all Christendom to the present day….The issue is not a question of right or wrong doing, but of the relationship under which we serve. All under every coded law serve sin to condemnation; all who are freed from the law now serve as free sons to righteousness and true holiness (Rom. 6:15-23).

The early dispensationalists also understood the issue well:

> I learn in the law that God abhorred stealing, but it is not because I am under the law that I do not steal. All the Word of God is mine, and written for my instruction; yet for all that I am not under law, but a Christian who has died with Christ on the Cross, and am not in the flesh, to which the law applied. I have died to the law by the body of Christ (Rom. 7:4). –John Darby[24]
>
> Some good men who in grievous error would impose the law as a rule of life for the Christian mean very well by it but the whole principle is false because the law, instead of being a rule of life, is necessarily a rule of death to one who has sin in his nature. Far from a delivering power, it can only condemn such; far from being a means of holiness, it is, in fact, the strength of sin (1 Cor. 15:56). –William Kelly[25]
>
> We are fully convinced that a superstructure of true, practical holiness can never be erected on a legal basis; and hence it is that we press 1 Cor. 1:30 upon the attention of our readers. It is to be feared that many who have, in some measure, abandoned the legal ground, in the matter of "righteousness," are yet lingering thereon for "sanctification." We believe this to be the mistake of thousands, and we are most anxious to see it corrected….It is evident that a sinner cannot be justified by the works of the law; and it is equally evident that the law is not the rule of the believer's life….As to the believer's rule of life, the apostle does not say, To me to live is the law; but, "To me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). Christ is our rule, our model, our touchstone, our all….We receive the Ten Commandments as part of the canon of inspiration; and moreover, we believe that the law remains in full force to rule and curse a man as long as he liveth. Let a sinner only try to get life by it, and see where it will put him; and let a believer only shape his way according to it, and see what it will make of him. We are fully convinced that if a man is walking according to the spirit of the gospel, he will not commit murder nor steal; but we are also convinced that a man, confining himself to the standard of the law of Moses would fall very short of the spirit of the gospel. –C. H. Mackintosh[26]
>
> Most of us have been reared and now live under the influence of Galatianism. Protestant theology is for the most part thoroughly Galatianized, in that neither the law or grace is given its distinct and separate place as in the counsels of God, but they are mingled

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[24]Cited by Miles Stanford (840 Vindicator Dr., #111, Colorado Springs, CO 80919), in the paper entitled, *"Arminius, To Calvin, To Paul– Man, Law, or Christ-Centered?"*

[25]Cited in *The Complete Green Letters* (Zondervan), by Miles Stanford (p. 265).

[26] *The Mackintosh Treasury–Miscellaneous Writings by CHM*, pages 628, 653-654.

together in one incoherent system. The law is no longer, as in the divine intent, a ministration of death (2 Cor. 3:7), of cursing (Gal. 3:10), or conviction (Rom. 3:19), because we are taught that we must try to keep it, and that by divine help we may. Nor does grace, on the other hand, bring us blessed deliverance from the dominion of sin, for we are kept under the law as a rule of life despite the plain declaration of Rom. 6:14.

–C. I. Scofield[27]

When the sinner is justified by faith, does he need the law to please God? Can obedience to the law produce in him the fruit of holiness unto God? What is the relation of the justified believer to the law? Is he still under the dominion of the law or is he also delivered from the law and its bondage? These questions are answered in this chapter [Romans 7]. "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God….But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:4,6). –Arno C. Gaebelein[28]

Believers today are not under law, either as a means of justification or as a rule of law, but are justified by grace and are called upon to walk in grace….Primarily here [in Rom. 7:14-25] we have a believing Jew struggling to obtain holiness by using the law as a rule of life and resolutely attempting to compel his old nature to be subject to it. In Christendom now the average Gentile believer goes through the same experience; for legality is commonly taught almost everywhere. Therefore when one is converted it is but natural to reason that now [that] one has been born of God it is only a matter of determination and persistent endeavor to subject oneself to the law, and one will achieve a life of holiness. And God Himself permits the test to be made in order that His people may learn experimentally that the flesh in the believer is no better than the flesh in an unbeliever. When he ceases from self-effort he finds deliverance through the Spirit by occupation with the risen Christ. –H. A. Ironside[29]

The Word of God condemns unsparingly all attempts to put the Christian believer "under the law." The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul gave to the church the book of Galatians for the very purpose of dealing with this heresy. Read this Epistle over and over, noting carefully the precise error with which the writer deals. It is not a total rejection of the gospel of God's grace and a turning back to total legalism. It is rather the error of saying that the Christian life, having begun by simple faith in Christ, must thereafter continue under the law or some part of it (Gal. 3:2-3). Alva McClain [30]

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[27] Cited in *The Complete Green Letters* (Zondervan) by Miles Stanford (p. 265).

[28] *Gaebelein's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 907.

[29] *The Continual Burnt Offering*, see under September 18; and *Romans*, p. 89.

[30] This last quote by Alva J. McClain is taken from his book *Law and Grace*, pp. 51-52. This book in its entirety is highly recommended. It is published by BMH Books, Winona Lake, IN 46590.

The key to living the Christian life is not found at Mt. Sinai. It is found at Mt. Calvary. It is there that I learn that "I died, and my life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). The law came forth from Sinai, but GRACE flowed forth and gushed forth from Calvary, and it is the grace of God that teaches us "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world [age]" (Titus 2:11-12). The foolish Galatians abandoned Mt. Calvary in favor of Mt. Sinai even though Jesus Christ had been evidently and openly set forth before their eyes crucified among them (Gal. 3:1). "But God forbid that I should glory, SAVE IN THE CROSS of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Reformed Theology is deficient in its teaching on sanctification. William Newell made the following observation:

> Neither in *doctrine* nor in *walk* did the Reformation go back to the early days of the Church. In doctrine they did teach (thank God!) *justification* by faith apart from works. Luther's "Commentary on Galatians" is in many respects the most vigorous utterance of faith since Paul. Yet the Reformers did not teach Paul's doctrine of *identification*,--that the believer's *history*, as connected with Adam, *ended* at Calvary: that he died to sin, federally, with Christ; and died to the law, which gave sin its power. All the Reformation creeds kept the believer under the law as a rule of life; and "the law made *nothing* perfect." Whereas, Scripture speaks of a *perfect* conscience, through a *perfect sacrifice*; of faith being *perfected*; of being made *perfect* in love; of *perfecting* holiness in the fear of God. [William Newell, *Revelation--A Complete Commentary*, p. 63 (see his comments under Rev. 3:2).]

Space does not allow us to consider these issues at length, but the reader is urged to consider our 32 page booklet, *What is the Believer's Rule of Life?* (50¢) for a full discussion of these vital matters.

For additional literature items that might be helpful see *New Testament Teaching on How to Live the Christian Life* (25¢) and our notes on *Romans* ($4.00).

Recommended Books: *Law and Grace* (Alva McClain), *The Complete Green Letters* (Miles Stanford), *Romans* (William Newell, especially his discussion of Romans 6-7) and *There Really Is A Difference* (Renald Showers).

11. The Danger of Teaching the Erroneous Doctrine of "Vicarious Law-Keeping"

"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

The contrast in this verse is between **Adam's one act** of disobedience which plunged the entire race into sin and **Christ's one act** of obedience which provided salvation for all.

Romans 5:19 is often misinterpreted by Reformed men who say that the obedience of Christ mentioned in this verse refers to His obedience throughout His life in keeping the law perfectly. And while the Lord Jesus Christ did keep every jot and tittle of the law perfectly, the obedience spoken of in Romans 5:19 is the same obedience referred to in Philippians 2:8, namely Christ's obedience to the Father's will by going to the cross. It refers to His one act of redemption.

Reformed theologians hold to a theory which is sometimes referred to as "vicarious law-keeping." This theory says that Christ not only died for us as our Substitute (a truth which we fully agree with), but that Christ also lived for us (during His pre-cross days) and kept God's commandments for us as our Substitute. They teach that the debt man owed to God was paid and fully satisfied not only by Christ's substitutionary death but also by the obedience of His life (which they call Christ's "active righteousness"). They teach that justification is grounded not only in Christ's death on the cross where He bore the penalty of God's judgment against us, but it also "is grounded in Christ's lifelong obedience in which He fulfilled the precepts of God's law for us" [*Reformation Study Bible*, see note under Romans 3:24]. Concerning this "obediential righteousness of Christ," they assert and maintain that Christ atoned by His life as well as by His death, and that this was absolutely necessary and essential in procuring our righteousness. They say that when we get saved, God imputes to us the law-keeping righteousness of Christ.

The 1999 document entitled, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration* (signed by many leading Evangelicals including Hybels, Hayford, MacArthur, Robertson, McCartney, Swindoll, Lucado, Stott, Ankerberg, Neff, Stowell, Stanley, etc.) expressly states:

> **God's justification of those who trust in him, according to the Gospel, is a decisive transition, here and now, from a state of condemnation and wrath because of their sins to one of acceptance and favor by virtue of Jesus' flawless obedience culminating in his voluntary sin-bearing death.**

It later adds:

> **We affirm that Christ's saving work included both his life and his death on our behalf (Gal. 3:13). We declare that faith in the perfect obedience of Christ by which he fulfilled all the demands of the Law of God on our behalf is essential to the Gospel. We deny that our salvation was achieved merely or exclusively by the death of Christ without reference to his life of perfect righteousness.**

Clearly, this statement perpetuates the erroneous idea that our justification is based upon Christ's legal obedience in life as well as His death and resurrection.

Note: Not all Reformed men have held this view. Mitchell, who wrote a history of the Westminster Assembly (the group of Bible scholars who created the Westminster Confession of Faith), states: "The main question on which the long debates on the Article of Justification turned was whether the merit of the obedience of Christ as well as the merit of his sufferings was imputed to the believer for his justification. Several of the most distinguished members of the Assembly, including Twisse the Prolocutor, Mr. Gataker, and Mr. Vines maintained...that it was the sufferings or passive obedience only of Christ which was imputed to the believer" [Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards,* 1992 reprint from the 1883 edition (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books), p. 149.]

In answering this theory, we must first strongly affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life and that He perfectly obeyed God's commandments, always doing those things that pleased the

Father. He was the spotless, sinless Lamb of God. No Bible believer could deny the flawless, sinless life of our Savior. These facts are indisputable. He kept the law perfectly.

However, the righteousness by which we are justified does not flow from the earthly Jesus, but it becomes ours because of the risen and glorified Son of God and our union with Him. Please notice that Romans 4:25 does **not** say this: "Who was delivered for our offenses, and **who obeyed the law for our justification**." Reformed theology, in this case, looks for righteousness on the wrong side of the cross. We do not find our righteousness in the law or even in Christ's keeping of the law, but we find our righteousness only **in Him**, the risen Christ (2 Cor. 5:21).

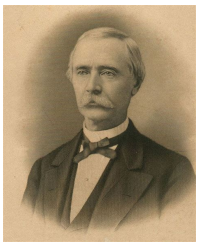
Our righteous standing in Christ is due to the fact that we have been **united** to the risen Christ, and He has become our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). The righteousness of God, which we receive by faith, is "without [apart from] the law" (Rom. 3:22), and has no legal basis whatsoever. In Romans 3:24 we learn that the basis of our justification is found at Calvary: "Being justified freely by his grace **through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**." The verse says nothing of His law-keeping as being the basis for our justification. Likewise, Romans 5:9 declares that we are justified by His blood, not by his pre-cross obedience. And having been justified by His blood, we are saved by His life (Rom. 5:10), even His resurrection life (Rom. 4:25).

Remember, if Christ had not been raised from the dead, we would still be in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17), in spite of Christ's perfect pre-cross obedience.

[For a very helpful discussion on the error of vicarious law-keeping, see William Newell in his commentary on *ROMANS VERSE BY VERSE* (see pages 190-193, his discussion under Romans 5:19).]

Christ Did Not Keep the Law As Our Substitute

(by William Kelly, Early Plymouth Brethren Scholar)



There prevails a notion (unknown to the Bible) that Christ was making out our righteousness when He was here below. Now the life of Christ was, I do not question, necessary to vindicate God and His holy law, as well as to manifest Himself and His love; but the righteousness that we are made in Christ is another thought altogether -- not the law fulfilled by Him, but the justifying righteousness of God founded on Christ's death, displayed in His resurrection, and crowned by His glory in heaven.

It is not Christ simply doing our duty for us, but God forgiving my trespasses, judging my sin, yea, finding such satisfaction in Christ's blood that now he cannot do too much for us; it becomes, if I may so say, a positive debt to Christ, because of what Christ has suffered....The law is the strength of sin, not of righteousness. Had Christ only kept the law, neither your soul nor mine could have been saved, much less blessed, as we are. Whoever kept the law, it would have been the righteousness of the law, and not God's

righteousness which has not the smallest connection with obeying the law. It is never so treated in the Word of God.

Because Christ obeyed unto death, God has brought in a new kind of righteousness -- not ours, but His own in our favour. Christ has been made a righteousness of God in Him. Were the common doctrine on this subject true, we might expect it to be said, He obeyed the law for us, that we might have legal righteousness imputed or transferred to us. Whereas the truth is in all points contrasted with such ideas. Surely Christ's obeying the law was not God's making Him sin. So, in the passage that is so often used, "by His obedience many are made righteous." How is His obedience here connected with the law? The apostle does introduce the law in the next verse, as a new and additional thing, coming in by the way. **[William Kelly, Lectures on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Ephesians, London: Race, p. 104, n.d.]**

The Righteousness of Christ

(by David Dunlap, used with his permission)

In the late 18th century a group of intrepid British Dispensational leaders began to raise their voices in uncompromising opposition to, what seemed to many, an established doctrine of the church. This doctrine was called the "Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ." This doctrine was so accepted at the time that few imagined that it could be challenged. It was a doctrine that grew out of the Reformation period and was first articulated in the writings of Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther. But when British Dispensationalists such as John N. Darby and William Kelly opposed this doctrine on Biblical grounds, they were bitterly denounced as unorthodox and even heretical. At that time, a book by William Reid called *Heresies of the Plymouth Brethren* was issued as an attack on these Dispensationalists; and Dr. Robert Dabney set forth a similar attack in a work called *Theology of the Plymouth Brethren* in 1891. However, in the years to follow and up to the present day, leading evangelicals have concluded that this Reformed doctrine of imputation was not based upon the bedrock of the Word of God, but rather on the shifting sand of human reason. Today, this doctrine is not generally accepted among evangelicals; in fact, there are few serious-minded Christians who would even be familiar with it. Reformed writer Dr. R. C. Sproul laments that among present-day evangelicalism this doctrine is largely unknown and overlooked **[R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 103]**. However, in recent years there has been a growing interest in this doctrine due to the popularity of Reformed theology.

What is Salvation by the "Obedience" of Christ?

Reformed theology, since the time of the Reformers, has taught that Christ provided a two-fold foundation for justification. It has been asserted that our Lord's sufferings from His birth until His death were His "active obedience" and His sufferings and death on the cross set forth Christ's "passive obedience." These two aspects combine to form the basis for the believer's justification. All evangelical Christians affirm that Christ's death on the cross is the Biblical foundation for justification. However, Reformed theology insists that the obedience and sufferings of Christ prior to the cross are essential for our salvation. Calvinism affirms that the death of Christ, His "passive obedience," dealt with our guilt, while the merits in the life of Christ, his "active obedience" provides for our justification. Reformer John Calvin, in his most important theological work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, sets forth this view,

> . . . when it is asked how Christ, by abolishing sin, removed the enmity between God and us, and purchased a righteousness which made him favourable and kind to us, it may be answered generally, that he accomplished this by *the whole course of his obedience*. This is proved by the testimony of the Paul, "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made

> righteous" (Rom. 5:19). And indeed he elsewhere extends the ground of pardon which exempts from the curse of the law to the *whole life of Christ*, "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his son, made of a woman, made unto the law, to redeem them that were under the law" (Gal. 4:4-5). Thus even at his baptism he declared that a part of righteousness was fulfilled by his yielding obedience to the command of the Father. In short, from the moment *when he assumed the form of a servant, he began, in order to redeem us, to pay the price of deliverance* . . . (Italics mine) **[John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes, vol.2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 437]**.

The implication of what Calvin is saying must not be lost on us. It is not the death of Christ alone that redeems and justifies; it is also the sufferings and obedience that Christ endured during His life prior to the cross. Every act of obedience, as a child, was redeeming, every drop of blood shed, in early manhood, was atoning, in every act of obedience from the time He assumed the form of a servant, from the time of His birth, he was "paying the price of deliverance." At times, so much weight is given to the redemptive work in the life of Christ by Reformed authors that one wonders why the death of Christ was necessary at all. Some Reformed writers press this issue so much so that they attribute a redemptive quality to specific events in the life of Christ. The hymnwriter and Reformed theologian Horatius Bonar details events in Christ's life which he considers to be redemptive sufferings prior to the cross. He writes,

> Christ's vicarious life began in the manger . . . there his sin-bearing had begun . . . when He was circumcised and baptised it was as a substitute . . . and He was always the sinless One bearing our sins... **[Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness*, (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1879), p. 26, 27, 29, 32]**.

As alarming as this may seem to many serious Bible students, this Reformed position of justification persists to our present day. The popular Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul has set forth this view in the most extreme terms. He asserts that the cross alone was insufficient, for the death and the life of Christ are on equal footing in the work of justification and redemption. Therefore, without the redemptive work in the life of Christ, the death of Christ could not justify the believer. He writes,

> The cross alone, however, does not justify us . . . We are justified not only by the *death* of Christ, but also by the *life* of Christ. Christ's mission of redemption was not limited to the cross. To save us He had to live a life of perfect righteousness. His perfect, active obedience was necessary for His and our salvation . . . We are constituted as righteous by the obedience of Christ which is imputed to us by faith **[R. C. Sproul, Faith Alone, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), p. 104]**.

Christ's holy and spotless life is of great interest to those who are spiritually minded. Contemplation of His perfections displayed prior to the cross evokes true worship, for worship does not arise from our appreciation of His death alone but also from consideration of all that He was in Himself and for the pleasure of God (Matthew 17:5). This is not to say that His life contributes directly to our redemption. Rather His Holy character was something essential to His own nature as well as qualifying Him to become the sacrificial Lamb. For God made it clear in the establishment of the Passover that "your lamb shall be without blemish and without spot" (Exodus 12:15) and Peter confirms that He fulfilled this divine requirement (1 Peter 1:19). His holiness was, as we have said, essential to Him personally but it is not vicarious or made over to us in some way. The Gospel is not that Christ lived His life for our benefit but that He "died for our sins.. .was buried and rose again" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4).

Reformed Arguments Examined

Reformed theologians struggle to find clear and unambiguous Biblical support for this view of justification. However, one verse that is consistently quoted by Reformed writers is Romans 5:18, "Therefore, as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." Reformed writers understand the phrase "by the righteousness of one" to mean the righteous, obedient, and law-keeping acts in the life of Christ prior to the cross. This righteousness, it is theorized, becomes imputed to us by faith. However, is this what Romans 5:18 teaches? Does the phrase "righteousness of one" refer to *His life* or to His once for all death on the cross? William MacDonald provides needed clarity on this point when he writes:

> The righteousness of Christ mentioned in Romans 5: 18 does not mean His righteousness as a Man on earth or His perfect keeping of the law. These are never said to be imputed to us. If they were, then it would not have been necessary for Christ to die. The New American Standard Bible is on target when it translates: "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men." The "one act of righteousness" was not the Savior's life or His keeping of the law, but rather His substitutionary death on Calvary's cross **[William MacDonald, *Justification by Faith* (Romans), (Kansas City, KS: Walterick Publishers, 1981), p. 62]**.

A careful reading and study of this verse shows that the word "righteousness" (Gr. "dikaioma") should be rightly rendered "act of righteousness." It refers to that which was accomplished at His death, and stands in contrast to righteousness as a quality. The discussion in verses 8-10 of the same chapter casts further light on the fact that it is a reference to the death of Christ. Moreover, the Word of God never teaches that we are justified by the righteous life of Christ, but rather by the righteous act of Christ on the cross, which permitted God to pour out His wrath against sin.

What are the Biblical Implications?

Every careful student of the Scriptures should be concerned about this teaching. At the very outset, this Reformed view of justification opposes the very tenor of New Testament teaching on justification. The New Testament repeatedly states that the basis of justification is found, not in the life of Christ, but in His death; and that justification was not through numerous events in the life of Christ, but by one event, namely, the death of Christ. The sheer weight of the Biblical record should make us pause. We read, "For Christ once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh . . ." (1 Peter 3:18); ". . . being justified by His blood we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom.5:9); "So Christ was once offered to bear the sin of many . . ."(Heb. 9:28). Moreover, the gospel writers make it very clear that up to the time of the suffering of Christ on the cross, our Lord did not "drink the cup" of God's wrath and become the sin-bearer. The righteous God did not forsake the Son prior to the cross. The Son, prior to the cross, never uttered the awful lament, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken Me . . ." (Mk. 15:34). The cross of Christ was the only place where the holy God poured out His unreserved and righteous judgment against sin. There the holy God poured out His unmitigated wrath without mercy, that we might receive the infinite mercy of God without wrath. In this regard our Lord states, "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father save Me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour "(John 12:27). Is not Scripture exceedingly clear that it was upon the cross that our Lord suffered for our sins and bore the wrath of God against sin?

There is yet another serious consequence of this Reformed doctrine of justification. This doctrinal perspective turns the salvation through the grace of God into a works-salvation through a focus on the keeping of the Mosaic law. The Scripture is very clear on this point; no one shall ever be saved by keeping the law. Paul unequivocally proclaims, " . . . to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5); "...no man is justified by the law in the sight of God" (Gal. 3:11); "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ..."(Gal. 2:16). Nevertheless, in the Reformed view of justification, we are instructed that we are reckoned righteous by the keeping of the law. However, there is an unusual twist; it is not our individual law-keeping that justifies, us but that of Christ who kept the law representatively for us, so His merits of keeping the law are imputed to us. Notice the words of respected author and Reformed theologian Dr. J. I. Packer:

> In classical (Reformed) Protestant theology the phrase "the imputation of Christ's righteousness," means, namely, that believers are righteous and have righteousness before God for no other reason than that Christ, their head, was righteous before God, and they are one with Him, sharers of His status and acceptance. God justifies them by passing on them, for Christ's sake, the verdict which Christ's obedience merited. God declares them to be righteous because He reckons them to be righteous; and He reckons righteousness to them, not because He accounts them to have *kept His law personally*, but because He accounts them to be united to the one who kept it representatively [J. I. Packer, *Justification, in Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology*, (Ed.) Harrison, Bromiley, Henry, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p.306.

Christian righteousness begins with the death and resurrection of Christ. The risen Christ Himself is our righteousness, not Christ fulfilling the law in our place. The Christian's connection to the law is broken through the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostle Paul in Romans chapter seven expands upon this important theme. The law's power is only in force as long as a person is alive, or in the words of the apostle, "Law has dominion over a man as long as he liveth" (Rom. 7:1). Paul then sets forth our complete deliverance from under the law when he says that those who were under the law were made dead to the law by the death of Christ, that they might be joined to another, to Him that was raised from the dead (Rom. 7:1-6). A dead man is not subject to civil or religious law; in like manner, the believer is not subject to the law of Moses because he is dead and risen in Christ. Therefore, to those who believe on Christ, the law has lost its authority to bring either condemnation or righteousness through the obedience of Christ. Paul finally concludes this argument in Romans by writing, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes" (Rom. 10:4). If the law is powerless to make righteous, what then is the true character of justification? Justification is the declaration by God unto us of a high and measureless righteousness, in that the whole value of the death of Christ was credited to the believer by faith, irrespective of the law, according to grace. Through the resurrection of Christ the believer now has a new standing in the risen Christ in glory (Rom. 4:25). Dispensational scholar William Kelly beautifully describes the basis and character of the righteousness of God through Christ when he writes:

> Had Christ only kept the law, neither your soul nor mine could have been saved much less be blessed as we are. Whoever kept the law, it would have been a righteousness of the law, and not God's righteousness, which has not the smallest connection with obeying the law. Because Christ obeyed unto death, God brought in a new kind of righteousness —not ours, but His own favor. Christ has been made a curse upon the tree; God has made Him sin for us that we might be the righteousness of God in Him **[William Kelly, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1979), pp. 104-105]**.

John Nelson Darby sets forth the important connection between the resurrection of Christ and our new standing in Him. He writes,

> What I deny is the doctrine that, while the death of Christ cleanses us from sin, His keeping the law is our positive righteousness; and that His keeping the law is imputed to us as ourselves under it, and that law-keeping is positive righteousness. I believe that Christ perfectly glorified God by obedience even unto death, and that it is to our profit, in that, while His death has canceled all our sins, we are accepted according to His present acceptance in God's sight,...being held to be risen with Him, our position before God is not legal righteousness, or measured by Christ's keeping the law, but His present acceptance, as risen..., and we accounted righteous according to the value of His resurrection **[J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings, vol.14*, (Kingston-on-Thames, GB: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, ND), p. 250]**.

The Importance of the Cross of Christ

Moreover, the death of Christ must never be trivialized. If Christ's keeping the law could justify, if it was truly vicarious, then why did Christ die? Understandably, the Reformed Christian would raise his vigorous objection. He would strongly argue that the death of Christ was truly needful and essential for our salvation. This sincere objection is noted and respected. However, the most serious question still remains unanswered. If, as the Reformed view suggests, justification comes through the law, since Christ was fully obedient to the law in every respect, and if the merits of Christ's righteous life were as truly redemptive as the death of Christ, then why did Christ die? Reformed theology strongly asserts that the obedience and righteous merits of the life of Christ are as truly redemptive as the death of Christ. The respected Reformed theologian Archibald Alexander Hodge explains:

> The Scriptures teach us plainly that Christ's obedience was as truly vicarious as was his suffering, and that he reconciled us to the Father by the one as well as by the other **[Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Atonement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1953), pp. 248, 249].**

If this is all true, why did Christ have to die? Why do Old Testament prophetic passages such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 speak of the necessity of the death of the Messiah? Reformed theology has never given a satisfying answer to this important question. Reformed writers, due to the influence of Covenant theology, do not see a distinction between righteousness through the law in the Old Testament and righteousness through Christ's death

alone in the New Testament. Covenant theology fails to see significant distinctions between earthly Israel under the law and the New Testament church. Therefore, it suggests a doctrine of righteousness through the co-mingling of both law and grace. This will never do. God has set aside righteousness according to the law and has brought in something altogether new. The law came by Moses, but grace and truth through our Lord Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ must stand at the forefront and alone in any theology of righteousness. Therefore, it must be stated with great earnestness that the death of Christ, without dispute, was necessary. Any attempt to minimize or lessen its importance and its efficacy must be vigorously resisted. Respected Bible commentator John Ritchie has well summarized the Reformed view of justification and the phrase "the righteousness of Christ." He writes:

> The theological phrase, "The righteousness of Christ," so much used, is not a scriptural term. The meaning usually read into it is, that the sinner having failed to keep the law, Christ has kept it for him, that His obedience is counted mans' righteousness, and put on all that believe as a "robe." But this would not be "righteousness apart from law" (Rom. 3:21). If God reckons the sinner to have kept the law because Christ kept the law for him, then righteousness surely comes by law, and the death of Christ was "in vain" (Gal. 2:21). In all this, justification by grace through redemption, has no place. The gospel is not that a sinner is made righteous by the imputation of Christ's legal obedience on earth, and saved by His death, but rather that "being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" **[John Ritchie, *Romans*, (Charlotte, NC : The Serious Christian, 1987), p. 161]**.

We must reject the conclusions of otherwise biblically sound believers that the law-keeping of Christ justifies, redeems, and reconciles. We must set aside the recent statements of Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul who states that "the cross alone, however, does not justify us . . ." **(*Faith Alone*, p. 103)** and that of Dr. D. James Kennedy who commented, "We are clothed in His righteousness alone . . . his perfect obedience provides our righteousness. This is all that is needed, and nothing less will suffice" **(*Is Jesus the Only Way to God?*, Coral Ridge Ministries, pp. 8-9 undated).** The Scriptures are clear and definitive on this point that no one is partially redeemed or justified in any degree by keeping the law.

However, this is not to say that the New Testament is silent concerning the glories and perfections of the life of Christ. Without question, our beloved Lord fully and completely satisfied the demands of God's holy law during His earthy life. His obedient life was necessary to manifest the glories of God in Christ to the world and to His disciples. The Lord Jesus Christ lived a life of obedience as none other had ever lived, or will ever live. He always did that which pleased His Father (Rom. 15:3). No word that He ever spoke ever needed to be withdrawn, for He never spoke rashly or in exaggeration. No action of our Lord ever required apology, for our Lord never wronged another man. No thought or deed of our Lord's ever needed confession, for He never sinned or transgressed the law of God. Our Lord never asked advice of another during His earthly ministry, for He was ever the all-wise and omniscient God. However, none of these perfections and glories of our Lord ever justified or redeemed man from a single sin. For it was only the matchless and infinite work of our Lord upon the cross of Christ that can redeem. New Testament scholar W. E. Vine summarizes the relationship of the earthly life of our Lord and His death upon the cross when he writes:

> Neither the incarnation of the Son of God, nor His keeping of the law in the days of His flesh availed, in whole or in part, for the redemption of men.... His redemptive work proper began and ended on the cross; ...Hence it is nowhere said in the New Testament that Christ kept the law for us. Only His death is vicarious, or substitutionary. He is not said to have borne sin during any part of His life; it was at the cross that He became the sin-bearer **[C. F. Hogg , W. E. Vine , *The Epistle of the Galatians*, (London; GB: Pickering and Inglis, LTD.), 1959, p.186]**.

The Active Obedience of Christ

(by Myron Houghton, used with his permission)

Many Bible-believing Baptists today are influenced by groups which identify themselves as centered on the gospel but in reality are teaching a Reformed view that the imputed righteousness of Christ is the result of His

active obedience to the law. This article considers two important questions: What is meant by "the active obedience of Christ" and is it Scriptural?

What Is Meant by "Active Obedience"?

Some people hold that the term "active obedience" refers to the fact that Christ kept the law in order to demonstrate His sinlessness, a Lamb without spot or blemish. This position is expressed in Article VIII, "Salvation," in the GARBC Articles of Faith.

> We believe that the salvation of sinners is divinely initiated and wholly of grace through the mediatorial offices of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who, by the appointment of the Father, voluntarily took upon Himself our nature, yet without sin, and honored the divine law by His personal obedience, **thus qualifying Himself to be our Savior** [emphasis added]; that by the shedding of His blood in His death He fully satisfied the just demands of a holy and righteous God regarding sin; that His sacrifice consisted not in setting us an example by His death as a martyr, but was a voluntary substitution of Himself in the sinner's place, the Just dying for the unjust, Christ the Lord bearing our sins in His own body on the tree; that having risen from the dead He is now enthroned in Heaven, and uniting in His wonderful person the tenderest sympathies with divine perfection, He is in every way qualified to be a suitable, a compassionate and an all-sufficient Savior. [http://www.garbc.org/?page_id=31 (accessed June 29, 2012).]

Many Reformed writers, however, hold to a different meaning of the "active obedience of Christ." Their definition views the atoning work of Christ as a substitute for the elect not only by His suffering and death (His passive obedience) but also by His keeping of the law (His active obedience). These Reformed writers believe both Christ's active and passive obedience were part of the atonement. The Bible teaches that justification is a two-fold change in God s records wherein all of our sins are blotted out (Rom. 4:8) and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us (Rom. 4:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). These Reformed writers believe our sins are blotted out because of Christ's suffering and death, but the righteousness of Christ that is credited to us was His keeping of the law as our substitute.

Is It Scriptural?

I do not believe the view that Christ s obedience to the law is part of His substitutionary atoning work for the following reasons:

1. The gospel does not focus on our Lord's sinless life but upon His death and resurrection. Paul stated, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

2. We are justified by Christ's death rather than His sinless life. In Romans 5:6-10 Paul wrote, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." In Romans 4:23-25 Paul made it clear that Christ's "life" refers to His resurrection, not His obedience to the law. "Now it was not written for his [Abraham s] sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed

to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification."

3. Justification comes through Christ's righteous act—a singular act rather than plural acts of righteousness. In Romans 5:18 and 19 Paul said, "Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."

4. Christ's sinless life qualified Him to be our sacrifice, but His death is the basis of our justification. "By that will [i.e., God s will] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10).

5. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper relate to His death, not His sinless acts. Water baptism points to a believer s union with Christ in His death and resurrection as the basis of salvation (Rom. 6:1-5), and the Lord's Supper focuses on a believer's communion with Christ based on His wounded body and shed blood (1 Cor. 11:23-26). We "proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

6. Justification is a change in God's records whereby our sins are blotted out (Rom.4:8) and the righteousness of Christ is credited to us. In Romans 4:6 we read, "just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works." In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul stated, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Note carefully that what is imputed to us is not the obedience of Christ but the righteousness of God! Our Lord Jesus Christ possessed this righteousness by virtue of His deity. His obedience to the will of God is the result of that righteousness, not the basis of it!

7. In Philippians 2:6-8 the focus of Christ's obedience was not His honoring the law but His willingness to die. "Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation [lit. "emptied Himself"], taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

8. Not all Reformed theologians affirm the active obedience of Christ as part of His atoning work. Alexander F. Mitchell, in his history of the Westminster Assembly, which created the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms, wrote:

The main question on which the long debates on the Article of Justification turned was whether the merit of the obedience of Christ as well as the merit of his sufferings was imputed to the believer for his justification. Several of the most distinguished members of the Assembly, including Twisse the Prolocutor, Mr. Gataker, and Mr. Vines maintained...that it was the sufferings or passive obedience only of Christ which was imputed to the believer. [Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (1883; repr., Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992). 149.]

The Importance of This Issue

Two well-known organizations today hold the view that the active obedience of Christ was part of His substitutionary atonement. The Gospel Coalition, in its Confessional Statement #8, "The Justification of Sinners," declares, "By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own,

freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners."
[http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/confessional (accessed June 28,2012).]

Together for the Gospel, another organization that focuses on the gospel, has a section on its website titled, "Today in Christian History." The January 1, 2009, edition had the following entry:

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) Died on January 1, 1937, J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, and formidable defender of biblical Christianity, died in the hospital, having developed pneumonia while preaching in the cold of December in North Dakota. His famous last telegram to his dear friend and colleague John Murray: "Thank God for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."
[http://14g.org/2009/01/today-in-christian-history (accessed June 29, 2012).]

We grant that this organization does not specifically teach this idea in its doctrinal affirmations and denials. It is, nevertheless, found on their website, which is supposed to focus on the gospel.

From my perspective, this view of the active obedience of Christ is not consistent with Scripture and even distorts the truth of justification. Pastors and church leaders today need to understand this matter clearly and communicate the gospel accurately in their speaking and writing. [This ends the article from Myron Houghton]

12. The Danger of Teaching that the Savior Bore Our Sins Prior to Calvary's Cross

> "Who His own self bore our sins in His own body **ON THE TREE**" (1 Peter 2:24)

A common teaching of Reformed men is that the Lord's death on the cross was not the only place where sin's penalty was paid. They connect the payment of this penalty with our Lord's sufferings apart from and prior to Calvary's cross. They often point to the Lord's sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane as being a time when the Lord Jesus was suffering as the Divine Substitute for man's sins.

In light of the Reformed doctrine of "vicarious law-keeping," such a view is not surprising. If Christ's righteous acts were substitutionary, and if His law-keeping righteousness was imputed to the believer's account, then it would follow that our Lord's non-cross sufferings should also be substitutionary and expiatory. They teach that His sufferings throughout life were expiatory, but the Bible teaches no such thing. [See the precious section, #11].

Here are some quotes by Reformed men who share this view:

> **John R. W. Stott**, Rector of All Soul Church, London, (British Evangelical) explains that the sufferings of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane were of such magnitude that they were equivalent to hell: "We may even dare to say that our sins sent Christ to 'hell,' not to the 'hell' (hades, the abode of the dead) to which the Creed says he 'descended' after death, but to the 'hell' (Gehenna, the place of punishment) to which our sins condemned him before his body died...God in Christ endured it in our place" (The Cross of Christ, p. 79, 161).

> **C. H. Spurgeon** - "I do not know whether what Adam Smith supposes is correct, that in the garden of Gethsemane Christ did pay more of a price (for our sins) than he did even on the cross; but I am quite convinced that they are very foolish who get to such refinement that they think the atonement was made on the cross and nowhere else at all" (*A Treasury of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of our Lord*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979, p.119).
>
> **C. H. Spurgeon** - "I feel myself only fit to be cast into the lowest hell; but I go to Gethsemane, and I peer under those gnarled olive trees, and I see my Saviour. Yes, I see him wallowing on the ground in anguish, and I hear such groans come from him as never came from human breast before. I look upon the earth and I see it red with his blood and, while his face is smeared with gory sweat, and I say to myself, 'My God, my Saviour what aileth thee?' I hear him reply, 'I am suffering for thy sin' " (*A Treasury of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of our Lord*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979, p.131).
>
> **Matthew Henry** - (speaking of His sufferings in the Garden) "He was now bearing the iniquities which the Father laid upon him, and, by his sorrow and amazement, he accommodated himself to his undertaking. The sufferings he was entering upon were for our sins, and they were all to meet upon him and he knew it." (*Commentary on the Whole Bible, Matthew to John,* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 320).
>
> **F. W. Krummacher** is one of the worst offenders in this regard. His chapters in *The Suffering Saviour* pertaining to the Garden of Gethsemane are too long to be included here.

Another example would be from the writings of Horatius Bonar. In his book, *The Everlasting Righteousness*, in chapter 3 ("The Completeness of Substitution") he argues that Christ's substitutionary work began all the way back to the manger. He points to our Lord's circumcision as an example of substitutionary shedding of blood. Even in his banishment to Egypt as an infant He was bearing our sins, according to Bonar. He believes the Lord's entire life involved sin-bearing.

There are at least two key reasons why we know that our Lord was not bearing our sins in His own body in the Garden of Gethsemane or anywhere else prior to the cross. 1) In His prayers in the Garden, the Lord always addressed God as "Father" (see Matthew 26:39,42,44; etc.). It is unthinkable that the Lord Jesus would have addressed God as "Father" at a time when God was acting as the HOLY JUDGE, pouring out His terrible wrath upon the Substitute of sinners. There could be no enjoyment of the Father/Son relationship at such a time (compare Matthew 27:46). If He were forsaken by God in the Garden, then how could He address Him as "Father"? 2) Immediately following His time in the Garden, the Lord Jesus said, "The cup which my Father hath given me, **shall I not drink it**?" (John 18:11). Notice that the drinking of the cup of God's wrath was yet FUTURE. He had not yet partaken of that cup. He would drink of that cup on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24).

The Lord's anguish in the Garden was **anticipatory** of Calvary's cross. It did not involve His suffering for our sins, but it anticipated this awesome event. C.H.Mackintosh's explanation is helpful:

> It is evident there was something in prospect which the blessed Lord had never encountered before,--there was a "cup" being filled out for Him of which He had not yet drunk. If He had been a sin-bearer all His life, then why this intense "agony" at the thought of coming in contact with sin and enduring the wrath of God on account of sin? What was the difference between Christ in Gethsemane and Christ at Calvary if He were a sin-bearer all His life? There was a material difference; but it is because He was not a sin-bearer all His life. What is the

> difference? In Gethsemane, He was *anticipating* the cross; at Calvary, He was actually *enduring* it. In Gethsemane, "there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him"; at Calvary, He was forsaken of all. There was no angelic ministry there. In Gethsemane, He addresses God as "*Father,*" thus enjoying the full communion of that ineffable relationship; but at Calvary, He cries, "My *God*, my *God*, why hast thou forsaken me?" Here the Sin-bearer looks up and beholds the throne of Eternal Justice enveloped in dark clouds, and the countenance of inflexible Holiness averted from Him, because He was being "made sin for us" [Cited by Chafer, Volume III of the Eight Volume set of *Systematic Theology*, p. 40].

For a fuller discussion of these important points, see L.S.Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume III of the Eight Volume set of *Systematic Theology*, pages 36 and following (the section is entitled "Sufferings in Life").

William Kelly, in his notes on 1 Peter 2:24 [*Two Nineteenth Century Versions of the N.T.*, Present Truth Publishers, NJ, pages 647-648], answers the unbiblical theory and utterly false doctrine that Christ bore our sins throughout His earthly life:

> The hypothesis is incompatible, not merely with the word used by the Holy Spirit here and everywhere else, but with the broadest and most solemn facts which the most unlettered of believers, taught of God, receive with awe and adoring gratitude. What meant that supernatural darkness which in the hours of broad daylight wrapt up the cross from a certain point? What the cry of Him who had ever, in the fullest enjoyment of love, said "Father," but now "My God, my God, why didst thou forsake me?"....If He had been all His life bearing our sins, He must all His life have been abandoned by God who cannot look on sin with the least allowance. But no: Isa. 53:6 attests that Jehovah laid our iniquity on His Anointed when He hung on the tree....How unfounded is the idea that our Lord was bearing sins all His life!

The following is a listing of passages which teach that our Lord's expiatory work of bearing our sins in His own body took place in connection with His death on the cross, and did not include the many sufferings of His life on earth prior to the cross.

> "And, having made peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20).
>
> "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3).
>
> "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Please notice that this passage is quoted in 1 Peter 2:24-25 where it is made clear that Christ's work of bearing the iniquity of us all took place "on the tree."
>
> As the animals sacrifices took place on the altar [**the type**], so the Lord's sacrifice took place on the altar of Calvary's cross [**the antitype**].
>
> The strong implication from Matthew 27:45-46 is that the three hours of darkness were the hours when Jesus was forsaken by His Father because it was then that our sins were laid upon Him. Consider the words of the hymn: "So might the sun in darkness hide, and shut His glories in, when Christ the mighty Maker died, for man the creature's sin."
>
> "Who was delivered for our offenses" (Rom. 4:24). Compare Romans 8:32.
>
> "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10, and see verse 9, "by His blood").
>
> "For He (the Father) hath made Him (Christ) to be sin for us, Who (Christ) knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Though Christ was not a sinner,

He was treated as a sinner when He was made a curse for us. Though we are not righteous, we are treated as righteous because God sees the believing sinner IN HIS RIGHTEOUS SON.

Paul begins Galatians with this statement: "Who gave Himself for our sins" (Gal. 1:4) and near the end of the book makes this statement: "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). The two statements are intimately and vitally connected.

Christ became a curse for us when God poured out His wrath on our Substitute. When did He become a curse for us? "**ON A TREE**" (see Gal. 3:13).

Because of our SIN-BEARER we are made NIGH (near) and we have been reconciled to God. How and where did this take place? "**By the blood of Christ**....by the cross" (see Eph. 2:13,16).

We were redeemed **with the precious blood of Christ** (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

"Who His own self bore our sins in His own body **on the tree**" (1 Pet. 2:24).

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18). Two points to notice about this passage: 1) The phrase "once suffered for sins" clearly limits His bearing of sins to a specific time. It was a one time act of redeeming love. The phrase is not at all consistent with a lifetime of suffering for our sins; 2) Christ once suffered for our sins, and this is equated with His being "put to death." Thus, it is His death sufferings that are involved, not His sufferings throughout His incarnate life.

"Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins **in His own blood**" (Rev. 1:5).

Paul did not glory in Gethsemane; He gloried in the cross (Gal. 6:14). He did not preach the Garden; He preached the cross (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:2). Peter did not teach that Christ bore our sins in His own body in the Garden, but on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24).

Healed By His Stripes

Isaiah 53:5 is often thought to be a reference to the scourging Jesus received at the hands of the Romans. It says: "by His stripes we are healed." Is this really referring to suffering that Christ endured from Roman scourging prior to His going to the cross? It is better to understand Isaiah 53:5 as referring to the terrible punishment Christ received at the hands of God the Father when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree of Calvary's cross.

The great emphasis of Isaiah 53 involves not what the Romans did to Jesus but what God the Father did to Jesus. He was stricken and smitten by God (v.4), even though we know that at His trials He was smitten by the Romans. It is true that Christ was bruised by the Romans during His trials as they struck Him with their hands and their fists and abused Him in other ways, yet Isaiah 53 emphasizes that He was bruised by the LORD (v.10). The emphasis in Isaiah 53 is upon what GOD did to Him--see verse 6 ("The LORD hath laid on Him the iniquities of us all"). Isaiah 53:5 says that the Messiah "was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities."

The clear teaching of the Bible is that Christ paid the penalty for our sins when He died on the cross, not prior to the cross. See 1 Peter 2:24 which says that He "bore our sins in His own body **on the tree**." When Isaiah 53:5 says "by His stripes we are healed" it is referring to the punishment inflicted upon

Him by the Father when He was punished as our Substitute. This is further confirmed by 1 Peter 2:24 where Isaiah's phrase, "by whose stripes ye were healed," is quoted by Peter. This same verse makes it clear that it was on the tree (cross) that He bore our sins in His own body. Thus we conclude that the stripes mentioned in Isaiah 53:5 were blows received from God the Father when He died for our sins and not blows received from scourging at the hands of the Romans prior to the cross.

William Kelly's comments are helpful:

> When it is said, "By His stripes we are healed," is it credible that a saint could believe they refer to His being scourged by the soldiers? These figures so multiplied in Isaiah 53 express not merely of what man did to Jesus, but what He suffered from Jehovah, when He [placed] the iniquity of His own on the rejected Messiah -- figures taken from what is common among men, but above all to express that which He Himself inflicted. It pleased Jehovah to bruise Him, it was He that put Him to grief; and it was for the transgression of His people that He was stricken. He bare the sin of many. [William Kelly's "The Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16," as found in R.A. Huebner's publication, *Thy Precepts,* Vol. 14, #4, July/Aug 1999, page 123.]

For further study, see *The Savior's Sufferings in Life* by Robert P. Lightner [Bib. Sac. Vol. 127, January 1970] and by the same author, *Sin, the Saviour and Salvation*, Chapter 11, "Obedience and Suffering in Life."

13. The Danger of Neglecting the Heavenly Ministry

Some in the Reformed tradition tend to overemphasize the earthly life and ministry of Christ and to de-emphasize His heavenly life and ministry. For example, they often teach that the Sermon on the Mount is the ***"Magna Carta"*** of Christian living. John MacArthur's teaching is typical of this approach when he insists that the Sermon on the Mount's "primary message is for Christians" and must be considered "truth for today."[31] See our 12-page booklet, *The Sermon on the Mount—Is it For the Church Today?* –15¢.

We fully recognize the value of "all Scripture" (2 Tim. 3:16). Certainly the Gospels are profitable to us and of immense value to the believing heart. The Sermon on the Mount is rich with truth and applications and lessons for the child of God. But to find God's revelation which was directly given to the CHURCH, we must go to the Epistles, not to the Gospels. May we not neglect the very books which were given to the churches. It is there that we find our heavenly Lord, ascended and glorified and seated, and we find ourselves seated with Him there.

Carefully consider the words of Paul: "Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now **henceforth know we Him no more**" (2 Cor. 5:16). The Epistles were given, not so that we would know Christ after the flesh, but so we would know our Great High Priest who having finished His perfect work on the cross is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

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[31] *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 27 footnote. MacArthur is critical of those who want to consign this Sermon to another age (see p. 214). It is important to understand that this Sermon was given at a time when the kingdom was announced as being "at hand."

If you read through the New Testament beginning with Acts, continuing through all the Epistles and ending with Revelation, you will find the following:

183 verses speak of Christ's death.

97 verses speak of Christ's resurrection.

162 verses speak of Christ's heavenly life and ministry.

203 verses speak of Christ's return (as King, as Judge, etc.).

ONLY 10 PASSAGES SPEAK OF HIS EARTHLY LIFE AND MINISTRY!

These ten passages are as follows:

1) Acts 2:22, which speaks of our Lord's earthly ministry and miracles.
2) Acts 10:38, which summarizes His earthly ministry.
3) Acts 20:35, where Paul mentions one of the sayings of Christ.
4) 1 Timothy 3:16, where the life and witness of the Lord Jesus forms a pattern for the life and witness of the church.[32]
5) 1 Timothy 6:13, which speaks of Christ before Pilate prior to His death.
6) 2 Peter 1:15-18, which speaks of the transfiguration (which was really a preview of the kingdom and could be listed under the category of the second coming).
7) 1 Peter 2:21-23, the example of Christ's life, especially in suffering.
8) Hebrews 4:15, which speaks of Christ having been tempted (see also 2:18), yet without sin. However, the emphasis of the passage is upon His High Priestly ministry.
9) 1 John 2:6, the manner in which Christ walked as an example for believers.
10) Hebrews 5:7, which speaks of His agony in the garden prior to His death.[33]

Thus, in the New Testament Epistles the great emphasis is upon the heavenly life and ministry of our exalted Lord, the Head of the church, the Life of the body, the Vine of the branches. Indeed God has given us an entire book, one of the longest Epistles (Hebrews), which has as its main theme our Lord's present ministry in heaven on our behalf.

May we never forget that our Lord Jesus is on the resurrection side of the cross. He is risen, ascended and glorified and exalted. A careful and prayerful reading of John chapter 17 shows that the great emphasis of this prayer is upon our Lord in heaven ("I have finished the work"; "I am no more in the world"; "I come to Thee").

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[32] See our paper on *The Mystery of Godliness* (20¢) and also our book ($2.50).

[33] Other possible references might be Hebrews 12:3 and 1 Peter 4:1, both of which refer primarily to Christ's sufferings relating to His passion and death. 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Philippians 2:5-8 both refers to the poverty and humiliation of His incarnate life. If the reader is aware of any other passage in Acts or the epistles which speaks of His earthly life and ministry, please contact us so that we can be aware of this omission.

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:1-2).

14. The Danger of Neglecting the Heavenly Position

The early pioneer dispensationalists (Darby, Kelly, Mackintosh, etc.) were thrilled because of their position in Christ. Though walking on earth, they saw themselves as seated in heaven. They understood their high, heavenly, upward calling. They understood their IDENTIFICATION with Christ, not only in His death and resurrection, but also in His ascension and present session. While most Reformed men encourage us to "keep looking up," the dispensationalist who is aware of His exalted position has a better word: "KEEP LOOKING DOWN" Why? "For ye died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). May we not lose perspective!

"And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). "For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). "Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus" (Heb. 3:1).

We find no such statements ever made in the Gospels. We find no such statements in the Sermon on the Mount. We find no such statements ever made to the Israelites in Old Testament times. God is doing a marvelous and unique thing in this present age!

David Dunlap sums up the issue:

> Is it more appropriate to consider believers as saints or as sinners? We explored whether miserable-sinner Christianity is the proper message for New Testament Christians, and we discussed what the Bible emphasizes in that regard. Yes, the belie ver does sin; there is no doubt about that fact. But believers are saints—children of God and co-heirs with Christ—and as saints, they ought to live up to Christ's high calling. Scripture stresses that our identity in Christ is more important than what we make of ourselves through performance, actions, and failures. Indeed, when we are firmly grounded in our proper identity in Christ, we will live up to the full potential that Christ has marked out for us.[34]

J. Sidlow Baxter has issued a similar plea:

> The more I reflect upon it, the surer I become that we cannot have a true disposition toward the New Testament teaching on holiness unless we have a discerning appreciation of our standing and privilege in Christ. Nobody thanks God more than I for the Protestant Reformation. Nobody glories more than I in its triumphal arch of the "doctrines of grace," with its shining keystone, "justification by faith." Nobody marches more positively than I under the aegis of Luther and Calvin.
>
> Yet just because I march beneath the same banner, I claim the same right to differ...the "miserable sinner" emphasis of the Reformers may be overdone to the point where it actually incapacitates our response. All the New Testament epistles were written to Christian recipients, and they all alike assume that the new Christian standing has

[34]David Dunlap, *The Battle is the Lord's,* pages 135-136.

fundamentally changed all the relationships of those who are "in Christ." The standpoint is not that we are seeking forgiveness but that we are already forgiven. We are not just seeking peace with God but we "have peace with God." May we never forget the New Testament emphasis, that the Christian belongs to the new, in Christ, rather than the old, in Adam. It says that we already are saints, positionally, in Christ, and that we are to become saints of His in our character.[35]

[35]J. Sidlow Baxter, *A New Call to Holiness*, pages 35-36.

Conclusion

In spite of its many strong points, Reformed Theology errs in some very crucial areas. Its extreme Calvinism forces it to have a gospel only for the elect. Its deadly legalism permeates its entire teaching on the Christian life and sanctification. Its teaching on regeneration and saving faith takes away from the sinner's personal, God-given responsibility to believe the gospel. Its emphasis on Lordship salvation complicates and corrupts the gospel message by requiring the sinner to perform additional acts of surrender and obedience in order to be saved. This detracts from the simple gospel of the grace of God which Paul preached and defended with his life.

The Reformed theory of "vicarious law-keeping" is a distortion of the doctrine of justification, and the teaching that Christ bore our sins prior to the cross is a serious misunderstanding of what took place on Calvary's tree. Putting believers under the law of Moses as a rule of life puts the focus upon Mt. Sinai rather than Mt. Calvary, and incalculable harm is caused whenever the cross is not central in the Christian life.

In addition to these problems, Reformed Theology has abandoned the literal, normal interpretation of the Scriptures when it comes to prophecy in general and the millennial reign of Christ in particular. Many Reformed men have embraced preterism, a system of prophetic interpretation which has destroyed the prophetic significance of hundreds of passages in the Word of God, thus robbing the Church of its "blessed hope" and robbing Israel of its promised kingdom. When the Church loses its evangelistic zeal due to extreme Calvinism and when the Church ceases to look for the Lord's coming due to preterist influences, then a sad spiritual condition will inevitably result.

With an open Bible and with a poor and contrite heart and with an attitude of trembling before the written Word of God, may we continue in those things which are fitting for sound doctrine!

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