

FOUNDERS JOURNAL

FROM FOUNDERS MINISTRIES | SPRING 2018 | ISSUE 112

FAITH, REPENTANCE AND WORKS





Founders Ministries is committed to encouraging the recovery of the gospel and the biblical reformation of local churches. We believe that the biblical faith is inherently doctrinal, and are therefore confessional in our approach. We recognize the time-tested *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) as a faithful summary of important biblical teachings.

The *Founders Journal* is published quarterly (winter, spring, summer and fall). The journal and other resources are made available by the generous investment of our supporters.

You can support the work of Founders Ministries by giving online at:

founders.org/give/

Or by sending a donation by check to:

Founders Ministries
PO Box 150931
Cape Coral, FL 33915

All donations to Founders Ministries are tax-deductible.

Please send all inquiries and correspondence for the *Founders Journal* to:

editor@founders.org

Or contact us by phone at 239-772-1400.

[Visit our web site](#) for an online archive of past issues of the *Founders Journal*.

Contents

Introduction: Faith, Repentance and Works

Chapters XIV–XVI of the *Second London Confession*:

Tom Nettles

Page 4

Of Saving Faith

Chapter XIV of the *Second London Confession*

Regan Marsh

Page 6

Repentance unto Life

Chapter XV of the *Second London Confession*

Eric Smith

Page 17

Of Good Works

Paragraphs 1–3 of
Chapter XVI of the *Second London Confession*

Tom Nettles

Page 25

Good Works

Paragraphs 4–7 of
Chapter XVI of the *Second London Confession*

Bill Ascol

Page 32



Tom Nettles

Introduction

Faith, Repentance and Works

This issue of the *Founders Journal* focuses on three aspects of salvation closely intertwined as evidences in the human affections of a saving operation of the Holy Spirit. The three subjects are “Saving Faith,” “Repentance unto Life and Salvation,” and “Good Works.” These three subjects show that grace has transformed the human soul—mind, understanding, affections, will—and put it in operation for the knowledge of God, love for God, and a consuming desire for the glory of God. The organization of the 1689 London Baptist Confession gives insight into the relation of these manifestations of grace to others that have preceded them in the confession’s ordering of doctrines. After Chapter Eight’s description of the Person and work of the Redeemer, chapter nine showed the necessity of a divine intervention in the human will to bring him to trust in this all-sufficient Redeemer. Chapter Ten then describes this intervention in the discussion of “Effectual Calling.”

After that, three chapters follow that concentrate on the objective results of effectual calling. “Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies ... by imputing Christ’s active obedience to the whole law, and passive obedience in his death,” are the words that begin the chapter on “Justification.” The chapter on “Adoption” follows describing God’s act of taking justified sinners into the number and the privileges of sons of God. The chapter on “Sanctification” begins the inter-relation between God’s unilateral operations and the co-operation of the human will. “They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ’s death, and resurrection; are also farther sanctified, really, and personally, through

the same virtue by his word and Spirit dwelling in them.” The article goes on to describe how those so set apart by the Spirit and the Word also are “pressing after a heavenly life, in evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ as Head and King, in his word has prescribed to them.”

This leads to an exposition of the subjective and internal impact effectual calling has on the sinner who is the object of this grace. Chapter Fourteen, “Saving Faith,” describes how sinners bound by their resistance to the holy character and claims of God as revealed both in His law and in the gospel reverse their entire orientation so that they accept receive, and rest on Christ alone for all the blessings of salvation. Reagan Marsh, pastor of Rocky Face Baptist Church, did this exposition. In the quotes that follow his name on his emails, Reagan includes this from Augustine: “The grace of God does not find men fit for salvation, but makes them so.” Eric Coleman Smith wrote the exposition of “Repentance unto Life.” He serves as pastor of Sharon Baptist Church in Savannah, Tennessee. One of his sons is named Coleman, showing his respect for a family name, and one is named Crockett, showing his respect for a Tennessee hero. The editor wrote on paragraphs 1–3 of the chapter on “Good Works.” Bill Ascol, Pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, Oklahoma, completed that chapter in his exposition of paragraphs 4–7. His rich experience as an associate-pastor and then pastor of three churches, investing his life in the spiritual well-being of hundreds of congregants, shines through in his sensitive handling of this rich, and in many ways difficult, aspect of human response to the saving work of God.

—Tom J. Nettles



Reagan Marsh

Of Saving Faith

Chapter XIV of the *Second London Confession*

They've sat across from me repeatedly over the last 20 years in my study, a counseling room, or the coffee shop. Though the locations and names change, the conversation doesn't. Tears rolling, bodies taut, they're troubled over their soul's state: "Pastor, I've prayed the prayer, walked the aisle, tried to change, but I'm not sure I'm really saved. Other preachers said I have to 'know that I know that I know.' But what am I supposed to know? How do I know when I know, or if I know? What does it mean to believe in Jesus?"

Saving faith is a perennial question in a biblical ministry, and Scripture answers the question masterfully by revealing four kinds of faith—three of which send their adherents to hell. Historical faith (James 2:19) means believing the Bible like a demon does. Since an archaeological record can't be denied, or historical fact can't be disputed, a begrudging credence is given on that specific basis, though often limited to those particular points. It's a form of faith, to a degree; but its believer isn't exactly thrilled about it. Temporary faith (Matthew 13:20–22) assents to the Bible's propositions and demands, affirms God's goodness, usefulness, and claims regarding himself and humanity, and in general looks fairly authentic; but it doesn't last. Assent and affirmation have a pregnancy scare, but don't conceive—proving it wasn't the genuine article after all (Hebrews 6:4–8; 1 John 2:19). Miraculous faith (Matthew 7:22; John 6:25–29; Acts 8:18–23; 1 Corinthians 13:2) embraces a particular promise or possibility, often in times of need or concern. It's excited about God's track record in the category, impressed with God's power, interested in God's

people (mostly because they've tapped into it), and hopeful for God's help. But it pursues other interests when that one fades.¹

Where false faith fails, saving faith is altogether different. It's refreshingly, joyfully Scripture-driven: enabled by hearing God's Word (Acts 16:14), effecting biblical repentance and growth (Nehemiah 8:1–12; 2 Corinthians 7:8ff), and possessing a distinctive experience which is governed by and aligned with God's Word (Isaiah 55:10f; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). The 2LC, drawing heavily from the viewpoint and verbiage of 1LC (1644),² summarizes the Bible's reply with faithfulness and clarity.

The Essence of Saving Faith (2LC 14.1)

What does saving faith entail?³

Saving faith is a grace-gift of God to His people.⁴ At the heart of Scripture's description, Ephesians 2:8f delineates the total sum of our salvation, both grace and faith, as "the *gift* of God."⁵ Philippians 1:29 makes this gift even more explicit: "it has been *granted* to you that for the sake of Christ you should... believe in him." "All the Powers of Man's Soul move as they are first moved by *God*,"⁶ Ussher remarked. Matthew Henry added that "Both that faith and that salvation are the gift of God... [who] has ordered all so that the whole shall appear to be by grace."⁷ In kingly mercy, Christ gifts the grace of faith to His beloved elect (Romans 12:3; Ephesians 4:7). Saving faith is non-native, neither merited nor earned (1 Corinthians 4:6–7): imported like kudzu, imparted like a Christmas present, it distinguishes God's people from the world, because "not all have faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:2). As a friend once quipped, "Following Jesus was the best decision God ever made for me."

Turretin emphasized that "As Christ alone is the cause of salvation, so faith alone is the means and way to Christ." Any sinner who is saved finds himself enjoying a state of grace by faith alone. Scripture describes saving faith in various ways: it's the bond of our union with Christ (Ephesians 3:17), the fruit of election (Titus 1:1), the instrument of justification (Romans 5:1), the principle of sanctification (Acts 15:9), and the infallible means of salvation (John 3:16).⁸ Sinful men aren't saved by works (Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:9), never have been (John 14:6; Hebrews 10:4), and never could be (John 6:29; Hebrews 11:6).⁹

As a grace-gift, such faith endures by "clinging to the faithfulness of God... lean[ing] upon him, so that we may obtain what he gives to us, Jn 3:33, Jn 1:12."¹⁰ The parable of the Sower demonstrates plainly that only one soil "produced" and "yields" (Mark 4:8)—a heart changed by grace. "Faith is a fruit of Christ's purchase," observed Keach.¹¹ Sometimes

that fruit will be greater, sometimes lesser, but there will be yield. Those who don't persevere, whether by withering (Mark 4:6, 16f) or walking away (Mark 4:7, 18f), never had this grace to begin with (1 John 2:19); but those who produce fruit do (Mark 4:20).

In producing saving faith, God's method of grace is the ordinary means of grace; He does not typically work apart from them. Someone once described his conversion experience to me. It totted up to him witnessing an inspiring cloud and feeling inwardly warmed. While general revelation is indeed a gift of God's common grace (Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 1:18ff), it is the law of the Lord which converts the soul (Psalm 19:7–10). Even in the extraordinary case of Saul's conversion, he was overwhelmed with a blinding "light from heaven" (Acts 9:3) on the Damascus road; but it required special revelation for his salvation (Acts 9:4). He later wrote, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17; cf. 2 Timothy 3:15; James 1:18). It pleases the Spirit to use preaching the gospel to create true faith, "enabl[ing them] to believe to the saving of their souls." Thus the Catechism succinctly states, "The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us."¹²

The Spirit also uses the ordinary means of grace to confirm, strengthen, and grow this faith in God's people. Christians realize the need to grow in faith when Scripture confronts them with the righteousness God requires (Luke 17:3–10), and God delights to use that experience to drive them right back to Scripture to build them up in Christ (1 Peter 2:2). The NT shows the proper focus of saving faith is God Himself, in and by "the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32)—the Scriptures, particularly as they bear witness to His redeeming purposes in Jesus. Acts 20:32 further records God's power to save ("give you an inheritance"), strengthen ("build you up"), and sanctify His flock, and Hebrew 12:2 exhorts Christians to respond in "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." God accomplishes this sanctifying work through prayer, preaching, and the ordinances—the "Means appointed of God," which accompany and assist believers in the walk of faith.¹³ Saving faith, then, appropriates the promises of God in Jesus Christ through regenerating grace applied to the soul: "... it is as a hand to take hold of, or receive, or apply Christ and his Righteousness...the hand of the Receiver is the Grace of justifying Faith."¹⁴

The Effects of Saving Faith (2LC 14.2)

What does this faith look like practically?

Saving faith is directly, distinctively grounded upon Scripture; in His grace, the Holy Spirit enables believers to see God's truth and savor God's glory in the Bible (Psalm 119:72).

Because God doesn't change, saving faith affirms sacred Writ wholly and wholeheartedly,¹⁵ throughout the world (Psalm 119:18,33,86). The NT's apostolic pattern mirrors the OT prophetic pattern (Ephesians 2:20) and reflects God's *modus operandi*: "... believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God" (Acts 24:14f). Thus for the Christian, what the Bible says, God says; there is a vast distinction between having questions and questioning what we have.

Saving faith recognizes that Scripture is altogether unique. It's in the Bible alone that Christians learn who God is: His nature and character, ways and will—in short, what God wants man to know concerning Himself is contained and preserved upon its pages. It displays God's Trinitarian being in all its economic mystery and majesty; unfolds the varied perfections of His attributes; details the past, present, and future supremacy of Jesus in his Person and work as Lord and Christ; and showcases the sovereign beauty of the Spirit "in his Workings, and Operations." In short, it possesses "an excellency therein, above all other *Writings*."

It's one thing to affirm something as true *in itself*, but another to believe such truth applies in your own case—truly *intended for me*. There is an objective content to Christian faith: one believes God's promises made to sinners in Jesus, as Scripture bears them witness in the gospel (Galatians 1:23; 1 Timothy 1:14). At the same time, true faith subjectively experiences the Spirit applying Christ's work to the soul: humbling, drawing, regenerating, justifying, sealing, indwelling, sanctifying, and preserving the believer until the Day of Christ and final glorification. Saving faith therefore continually applies to itself the promises¹⁶ that this God makes in the Bible (Psalm 119:30f). "[T]o believe God is to believe that God is; to believe in God is to have faith in God speaking; and to believe in God is to place confidence in him."¹⁷ Bare intellectual apprehension or mere cognitive agreement about the propositions concerning God in Scripture, while important, falls short of true faith: as Watson acknowledged, "There may be an assent to divine truth, and yet no work of grace on the heart."¹⁸

Scripture instead describes the Christian as one possessing personal knowledge of Christ: "I know whom I have believed," and trusting in His Person and promises: "and am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me" (2 Timothy 1:12; cf. Titus 1:2). God gives conception (Ruth 4:13f) to apprehension and agreement, producing the heir of joyful abiding in Christ. Ussher described this as "such a firm Assent of the mind to the Truth of the Word, as flows into the Heart, and causeth the Soul to embrace it as Good, and to build its Eternal Happiness upon it."¹⁹ Here again is the

gracious work of the Spirit (Zechariah 12:10) through the purchase of the Cross, to “inable [men] to cast the weight of their soules upon this truth thus beleaved.”²⁰

The hidden change of heart produces an open change of life. Where self-love, self-esteem, and self-interest previously ruled the unsaved heart, dominating its affections, now this new love to Christ does. Having affirmed Scripture’s testimony and apprehended Scripture’s Christ, regenerate souls now seek to act in ways that please (2 Corinthians 5:9) and honor (1 Corinthians 10:31) Scripture’s God. saving faith prizes Christ (1 Peter 2:7), refines saints (Acts 15:9), strengthens obedience (Hebrews 11:8), grows and increases (Romans 1:17), and changes its possessors to be more like Jesus.²¹ In other words, true Christians increasingly aim to live biblically. Saving faith walks with both eternity and every day in view (Isaiah 1:19; 1 Timothy 4:8); its estimation of God effects practical change toward godliness (Hebrews 12:14).

Growth in personal holiness is the second-greatest evidence of the change of heart wrought by the Spirit of God; as Turretin explained, faith “either formally includes, or consequently and necessarily draws after it all the duties of the believer.” William Collins, Nehemiah Coxe, and Benjamin Keach—likely the framers and editors of 2LC²³ —faced a difficult spiritual context remarkably similar to ours today. They battled strong antinomianism on one hand and legalism on the other, while shameless hypocrisy, burgeoning theological liberalism, rapidly multiplying numbers of sects, and outright apostasy all vied for their attention. Further complicating matters, they struggled against all these while undergoing selective religious persecution—sometimes for their Protestant/Reformed views, and other times for practicing credobaptism.²⁴

To respond to these theological assaults, they searched the Scriptures. Careful biblical exegesis birthed their doctrine of Christ’s Lordship in the souls of all his elect, and framed 2LC’s conscientious adoption of the Westminster (1646) and Savoy (1658) language. Neither our biblical fathers nor our Baptist forebears could conceive of a professing Christian who lived licentiously, yet considered himself reconciled to God. True grace is often its own best apologetic. Keach wrote, “If a man Hates not Sin, be not out of Love with Sin, How should he be in Love with God and Holiness?...Sanctification is not necessary, as antecedent to Justification, but it is the Fruit or Product of Union with Christ...the Habits (of Holiness) are infused at that same Instant that Faith is Wrought in the Soul.”²⁵ Alongside their Presbyterian and Congregational brethren, they emphasized that saving faith is marked by carefully obeying Scripture’s commands (John 14:15; John 15:14), trembling at its warnings and threats (Isaiah 66:2), and embracing its promises (Hebrews 11:13). Their faithfulness exposes modern fruitlessness.

Progressive sanctification proves itself. But it can also be counterfeited (Matthew 24:24f), or the heart may chill through sin or neglect. Thus Flavel noted, “Observed duties maintain our credit; but secret duties maintain our life.”²⁶ No wonder that the Protestant consensus on saving faith ultimately and unswervingly affixes itself to Jesus Christ: “the principal acts of Saving Faith, have immediate relation to *Christ*, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone.”²⁷ Through saving faith, sinners receive Christ (Jn 1:12), believe on Christ (Acts 16:31), Christ lives in them (Galatians 2:20), and they are justified (Romans 5:1f).

Such justifying faith is effectual in nature: God will have a holy people for Himself (1 Peter 1:14–19), and Christ is made unto us sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30f) and eternal life (John 5:21,26).²⁸ Christians therefore must always deal with Him as both Savior and Lord—indeed, as our very life (Colossians 3:4). Here 2LC’s language of “accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone” comes into sharper focus:²⁹ employing the classical categories of *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (faith), saving faith means here that we know who He is, believe what He says, and embrace what He gives, by faith alone (John 1:12; Acts 16:31; Galatians 2:20; Romans 5:1f). Keach wrote, “‘Tis by Faith only, that we come to have actual Enjoyment and Possession of Christ himself, and of Remission of Sin; and not only so, but of Eternal Life, and so of Holiness also, and no other Ways.”³⁰ The Christian’s standing before God, spiritual growth, and eternal security are all thus rooted in Christ, who alone is the Surety (Isaiah 49:8; Revelation 13:8) of the Covenant of Grace (John 6:37; Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 13:20).³¹

The Experience of Saving Faith (2LC 14.3)

What is the practice of this faith like?

Saving faith differs in its strength and sense within each Christian’s soul, according to what Romans 12:3 terms “the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Gk. *metron pisteos*) to each saint. Contextually, Paul is addressing personal humility while serving in various roles within the church, but he also calls believers to a holy self-awareness—to realize how God has “put them together.” Discussing interpersonal dealings within the church (Romans 14:1), he introduces the category of the Christian “who is weak in faith” (Gk. *de asthenounta te pistei*), building on Jesus’ designation in Matthew 6:30 of some of the disciples as “little-faiths” (Gk. *oligopistoi*). Scripture presents something of a dual sense, then, with saving faith: it can describe the spiritual constitution of believers—some to whom God has given a greater or lesser measure of faith, i.e., Romans 12:3—or speak of their experience of struggles with belief (i.e., Romans 14:1; Matthew 6:30; Romans 4:19f).

The truth of Scripture's categories has been demonstrated throughout church history in the saint's experience. From Abraham's doubt (Genesis 16:2) to Moses' fearful reluctance (Exodus 3–4), from Job's anger (Job 3) to David's depression (Psalm 35), from Naomi's hopelessness (Ruth 1) to Esther's casting herself upon divine providence (Ester 4:16), from Augustine's sexual struggles to John Owen burying 10 of his 11 children, from Calvin's exile to Adoniram Judson's baptismal crisis *en route* to Burma, God has always tested the faith of His people. Some believers are deeply conscious of the saving power of Christ, rarely face doubts concerning God or their own eternal state, and are even marked by almost effervescent joy. Meanwhile others are often tormented or embattled, undergo many dark nights of the soul, and struggle (whether by doubt, depression, difficulty, or disobedience) to believe that God's love for sinners actually applies to *them*.³²

But both are regenerate. Beddome explains that justification is an act by which the Father forgives His people's sins, accepts our persons, receives our worship, looks upon us with complacency, speaks of us with approbation, and treats us with intimacy and endearment.³³ Christ "is *offered to Sinners as Sinners*, not as righteous persons, but as ungodly ones, without any previous Qualifications required of them...they are all as poor, lost, undone, weary, and heavy laden Sinners...These are they, Christ came to call."³⁴ That one lacks the sense or consciousness of God's sovereign grace and tender disposition toward Him doesn't nullify its reality; as Ussher wrote, "he was safe before he was sure."³⁵

This is a categorically different matter from what 2LC calls "the common grace of temporary believers," or "almost-Christians," as Matthew Meade termed them.³⁶ Spiritual infidelity, doubt, error, heresy, and apostasy ultimately characterize them;³⁷ they have no lasting concern for their souls, no consequential regard for God, and ultimately no saving interest in Christ. But the saints do, because they've passed from death to life. This is where the beauty of regeneration preceding faith serves struggling saints so well: Christians are born of God (John 1:13) by His will (James 1:18), and made willing in the day of God's power (Psalm 110:3). God has begun this good work in them, and will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6). Thus they're marked by newness of life (Romans 6:4), a new spiritual disposition and desire (Jeremiah 31:33f; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 36:24–27) and a life redirected by the purposes for which God saved them (Ephesians 2:10). They think of God's glory (2 Corinthians 5:9), wish to be more holy (Romans 7:24), imitate those who are faithful (Hebrews 6:11f), grieve over sin—theirs and others (Matthew 5:4), and long to be with Christ. These are precious evidences of God's grace toward them. Assurance may be—and often is—the blessing of God in the Christian's life (Colossians 2:2), but the very fact that there's a struggle shows that there's life! God does that in them.

Over time, the patterns and practices of the new life will grow stronger, and one's grasp of God's promises and the depths of His grace will grow more full and deep. Watson summarized it well: real faith grows, "bearing cross[es] with more patience" and "doing duties in a more spiritual manner, with more fervency."³⁸ Such evidences are encouragements from God; and the very presence of new habits, struggles, or dispositions are often powerful proofs of true grace. But the most certain evidence of possessing saving faith is that one looks to Christ, prizes Christ, and leans on Christ, "who is both the Author and finisher of our Faith." As Calvin wrote, Christians "embrace Christ clad in his own promises."³⁹ Christians look to Christ, again and again—it is the pattern of their lives. To look to Christ is to believe on Him alone for salvation, as your only hope in life and in death (John 3:14f).

This runs utterly against the grain of most of today's views. The Christian does not trust in cobbling together a spirituality of his own construction; he entrusts himself to "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). The Christian doesn't worship a god of his understanding, but the One who says in His Word, "I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:5; Isaiah 46:9). The Christian does not believe in himself (Proverbs 28:26; Isaiah 5:21), trust his own heart (Jeremiah 17:9), or have faith in faith—but only in Christ alone. "'Tis not faith, but the Object and Righteousness Faith apprehends or takes hold of, that *justifies the ungodly*."⁴⁰ Anything beyond this is a false belief.

So how do I answer that person sitting across from me, asking me what it is to believe in Jesus? I tell them who Jesus is, and what He's done for sinners like them.⁴¹ I tell them that Jesus will receive them, and forgive them, and welcome them into His Father's presence with great joy (Jude 1:24), because He has died and risen again for sinners. I tell them that Jesus will keep those whom He saves (John 10:29), because salvation belongs to Him (Psalm 3:8). I tell them that if they see their need of a Redeemer, to call to Him; and on the days they struggle, to say with that nameless father, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)—because that's the kind of prayer Jesus loves to answer. I teach them, when appropriate, what Scripture says about killing sin, walking in righteousness, looking for the way of escape God promises, and self-examination.⁴² But mostly, I point them to Jesus.

Weak faith is yet true faith, for it takes hold of a strong Savior.⁴³ As Keach concluded, may the Lord "help you to a right Understanding of these things, and make you all a holy People, to the Praise of his Glory, and Honour of your Sacred Profession."⁴⁴

NOTES:

¹ Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.559f; Watson (c.1620–1686), *A Body of Divinity*, 215; and Ussher (1581–1656), *A Body of Divinity*, 175f, all outlined these 4 types of faith. Turretin added, “In innumerable believers, there is justifying faith without the faith of miracles” (II.560.V). Flavel (1627–1691) agreed and elaborated: “There are several sorts of faith besides saving faith, and in saving faith there are several acts besides the justifying or saving act.” (*Works*, II.104).

² The relevant portions of 1LC are found primarily in paragraphs XXII–XXIX.

³ As contained in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 259f. Original emphasis/spelling is retained throughout this essay with some modernization of orthography.

⁴ Keach’s Catechism, Q. 93 (identical in Collins, Q. 91): “What is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” So also 1LC: “continually whatever a Christian is, he is by grace” (XXVI) and “whatsoever the Saints, any of them doe possesse or enjoy of God in this life, is onely by faith” (XXXI). Matthew Poole (1624–1679) commented that faith is not a work, but “an instrument or means of applying the grace and salvation tendered to us.” *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Vol. 3, 667.

⁵ All Scripture ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁶ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 177.

⁷ Matthew Henry (1662–1714), *Zondervan NIV Matthew Henry Commentary in One Volume*, 663. Cp. Hendriksen, *Baker NT Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians*, 120–125; Wood, *Ephesians*, vol. 11 in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 36.

⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.559.II.

⁹ Nehemiah Coxe (d. 1689) noted, “... in the business of Justification, Faith is opposed to all good works, as exclusive of them from any influence into the obtaining of our pardon and acceptance with God, Romans 3:20–22,28; Romans 4:4f; Galatians 2:1–6; Galatians 3:11f.” *Vindiciae Veritatis* (1677), 105.

¹⁰ William Ames(1576–1633), *The Marrow of Theology*, 241.

¹¹ Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), *The Marrow of True Justification*, 94.

¹² Keach’s Catechism, Q. 34; cf. 1LC XXIV, and Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 244.29.

¹³ Cf. Collins’ Baptist Catechism, Q. 93–96; Keach’s Catechism, Q. 96.

¹⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification*, 27; he again personifies faith as “only a hand to apply the Remedy,” 94. Archbishop Ussher, heavily influential for both Westminsterian and 2LC Puritanism, employed the same metaphor: “Faith [is]...not considered as a Virtue inherent in us...but only as an Instrument or Hand of the Soul stretched forth, to lay hold on the Lord our Righteousness...Faith being only

the Instrument to convey so great a Benefit unto the Soul, as the hand of the Beggar receives the Alms.” *A Body of Divinity*, 175. Cf. Coxe: “True and lively Faith whereby we receive Christ and his benefits freely given of God to us, and rest on him and his Righteousness, is the instrument of our Justification, John 1:12, Romans 5:17.” *Vindiciae Veritatis*, 105.

¹⁵ Ames notes that “the material object...is whatever is revealed and set forth by God to be believed” (*Marrow of Theology*, 242.21), while “the formal object...is the truthfulness or faithfulness of God...[which] depends on the authority of the one who gives the testimony” (243.25) Thus, “He who believes that he Scripture is true in every way believes implicitly all things which are contained in the Scripture” (244.34).

¹⁶ Ames, *ibid.*, 242.19: “But faith is rooted in the promises, because in them is set forth a good to be embraced.”

¹⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.559.III.

¹⁸ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 215.

¹⁹ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 176.

²⁰ 1LC (1644), XXII, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 151. Cf. Keach’s Catechism, Q. 34, above.

²¹ Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 218f.

²² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.559.

²³ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 217–222. Cf. Coxe and Owen, *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ* (RBAP, 2005), 20.

²⁴ Cf. Daniel Neal (1678–1743), *The History of the Puritans*, III.329–416 (Tentmaker, 2009); J. Newton Brown, *Memorials of Baptist Martyrs*. Gospel truth has always carried the price of blood. Thus 1LC XXXII: “That the onely strength by which the Saints are inabled to incounter with all opposition, and to overcome all afflictions, temptations, persecutions, and tryalls, is onely by Jesus Christ, who is the Captain of their salvation, being made perfect through sufferings, who hath ingaged his strength to assist them in all their afflictions, and to uphold them under all their temptations, and to preserve them by his power to his everlasting Kingdome” (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 153).

²⁵ Keach, Benjamin. *The Marrow of True Justification*, 9 (cf. p. 82).

²⁶ John Flavel, *Works*, V.520.

²⁷ Major Reformation and Post-Reformation symbolics were also overwhelmingly Christocentric on this subject. See 1LC (1644/46) #22; Belgic Confession (1561) #22; Heidelberg Catechism (1563) Q. 20–23, 53; Second Helvetic Confession (1566) XVI; Canons of Dort (1619) #1.2–6.

²⁸ 99 years later, David Jones’ 1788 Circular Letter gave lockstep exposition of Philadelphia Baptist Confession’s Chapter 14: “This faith is not dead and fruitless, it will not allow men to live in sinful ways... the work of God in the soul, cannot produce such effects.” Gillete, A.D. *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707–1807*, 241.

²⁹ See R. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*; and especially Flavel's deeply insightful sermons on this theme from John 1:12 in *The Method of Grace* (*Works*, II.102–140).

³⁰ Keach, Benjamin. *The Marrow of True Justification*, 9.

³¹ Thus Watson summarized, “Faith is the condition of the covenant of grace; without faith, without covenant; without covenant, without hope.” *A Body of Divinity*, 218.

³² Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification*, 20: “... divers weak Saints are ready to judge of their justification according to the degree and measure of their Sanctification.”

³³ Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795), *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism*, 69f.

³⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification*, 82.

³⁵ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 178.

³⁶ Cf. Matthew Meade (1630–1699), *The Almost Christian Discovered*.

³⁷ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 245.

³⁸ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 220.

³⁹ John Calvin (1509–1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.426 [II.ix.3].

⁴⁰ Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of Justification*, 27.

⁴¹ Luther said once, “When Satan tells me I am a sinner he comforts me immeasurably, for Christ died for sinners.”

⁴² See, for example, Ryle's tract on 1 John's tests of life: <http://www.chapellibrary.org/files/2413/7643/2882/ayba.pdf>

⁴³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 220.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of Justification*, 9.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Reagan Marsh serves as Pastor-Teacher of [Rocky Face Baptist Church](#) in Rocky Face, GA. He is a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and has served in gospel ministry since 1998.



Eric Smith

Repentance Unto Life

Chapter XV of the *Second London Confession*

Twenty year-old Edmund Botsford lingered uncertainly at the gate of the Charleston Baptist meetinghouse one Sunday in 1765. As the church's members streamed past him to their seats, a conflict raged within: should he stay or should he go?

Born in Woodburn, Bedfordshire, England, in 1745, and orphaned by age seven, Botsford had bounced between boardinghouses, the military, and a variety of odd jobs before sailing for the New World with a friend at age nineteen. Now, a year after arriving in Charleston, he was alone, directionless, and racked with guilt over his sinful past. On the voyage to Charleston, he had read John Bunyan's *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, and considered himself at that time "a converted man" and "the best person on board the ship." Now, he realized that "never was a poor creature more deceived." He began attending churches in Charleston, hoping to hear "a gospel sermon" and find peace for his soul, but was always disappointed. Eventually, he received advice from a neighbor: "There is but one minister in this place, who can be of service to you," the man told Botsford, "but he, I am told, is a Baptist; all the rest of the ministers deserve not the name." Botsford's hopes arose; he believed that "if I could hear the gospel, there would be a possibility of my being saved." This conversation had led him to the threshold of Oliver Hart's Baptist meetinghouse.¹

Botsford talked himself out of going in that morning, and retreated instead to the old fortifications at the Charleston Harbor. But as he strolled along the waterfront, conviction

fell on him like a bolt from the sky. “I had heard of the gospel, and had rejected it; I considered myself a monster, a reprobate; my distress was so great that I cried out, ‘I am damned, justly damned!’” he recalled. As Botsford’s eyes fell on a cannon, he wished he could be “blown to hell” and “be done with his misery.” He passed the next week in agony.

The following Sunday, Botsford returned to the Baptist church. When he hesitated at the gate again, he recognized his misgivings as “the temptation of Satan,” and hurried inside. Moments later, Hart appeared in the pulpit. Hart wore a black gown and bands, and Botsford “did not like his dress.” But he could not deny that “there was something in his countenance which pleased me.” Hart’s earnest praying further intrigued him. Finally, Hart preached from Acts 13:26, “Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God; to you is the word of this salvation sent.” Hart’s message spoke directly to Botsford’s troubled soul. “To describe these exercises of my mind under this sermon would be impossible,” he remembered, “However, upon the whole, I concluded it was possible that there might be salvation for me, even for me.” He resolved to return: “Indeed, I would not have omitted one sermon for all the riches in the world. Before this, I wished to return to England; but now I was perfectly satisfied to remain, if I lived on bread and water only.”

Finally, on his twenty-first birthday, Botsford experienced “a day of light, a day of joy and peace.” As he described it:

That day I had clearer views than formerly, of sin, holiness, God and Christ, and different views from all I had ever before experienced. I think I was enabled to devote my whole self to God as a reconciled God. I think I then so believed in Christ, as to trust in him, and commit my all into his hands. At that time, and from that time, I considered myself as not my own, but his, *his*, and not the world’s, but *his*, and no longer Satan’s, *his* for time and *his* for eternity...²

Botsford had experienced what older Baptists referred to as “Repentance unto Life and Salvation,” the doctrine unpacked in Chapter 15 of the Second London Confession.³ In this article, we will consider the subjects, the signs, and the source of repentance unto life.

The Subjects of Repentance

Repentance, turning to God by faith in Christ, is the entry point to the Christian life. Jesus announced simply, “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15).⁴ Paul declared the same message whenever he entered a new city, preaching “both to Jews and Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our

Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). As any Vacation Bible School attendee knows, repentance belongs to the ABC’s of becoming a Christian; thus the author of Hebrews begins his list of “elementary doctrines” with “repentance from dead works” and “faith toward God” (Hebrews 6:1). This was the repentance Edmund Botsford discovered: he turned from his overt sinning and proud attempts to establish his own righteousness, and “commit[ted] my all into his hands.” The 2LC describes this conversion-repentance in 15.1: “Such of the elect as are converted at riper years, having sometime lived in the state of nature, and therein served divers lusts and pleasures, God in their effectual calling giveth them repentance unto life.”⁵

But while repentance is essential to conversion, it is also more than a onetime event. As 2LC 15.2 clarifies:

Whereas there is none that doth good and sinneth not, and the best of men may, through the power and deceitfulness of their corruption dwelling in them, with the prevalency of temptation, fall into great sins and provocations; God hath, in the covenant of grace, mercifully provided that believers so sinning and falling be renewed through repentance unto salvation.⁶

Repentance is as important for Christians as for non-Christians. Alluding to the examples of David (2 Samuel 11–12) and Peter (Luke 22:31–32), the 2LC authors emphasized that God’s choicest saints can still fall into scandalous sins. Yes, even for those who love the Lord, indwelling sin remains powerful, the way of the world seductive, and our enemy the devil relentless all the days of our lives. Under these conditions, none of us is beyond falling into even the most shameful patterns of sin (1 Corinthians 10:12). When this occurs, the devil who tempted us now accuses and condemns us, and we instinctively despair that there could ever be a place in the Father’s heart for us again. To these, God announces the good news that He has provided for us a way of total renewal. It follows the same path we travelled when we first came to Christ: the life-giving low road of repentance.

This qualification is reassuring. Yet it still leaves the impression that repentance ought to be a relatively rare event in the life of the healthy believer. By invoking David’s disgrace and Peter’s denial, repentance sounds like it exists behind a glass case, to be smashed only in emergencies, after we have ignited our lives into a total conflagration. This is not the biblical picture. Praise God, renewal-through-repentance exists for the most dramatic, crash-and-burn moments of our discipleship. Yet it is also needed for all those mundane acts of unfaithfulness we commit every single day: the “respectable sins” of anger, lust, pride, greed, flattery, slander and envy.⁷

The truth is, when we first repented, we had no idea how much we needed to repent of! We simply put our lives in the hands of Jesus, who takes us as we are. But like His first disciples, He says to us, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” (John 16:12) He will spend the rest of our lives patiently showing us all he intends to change in us. It’s why 2LC 15.5 calls “the constant preaching of repentance” “necessary:” we never stop needing to hear that we must repent. This “ordinary repentance,” all the millions of little course corrections prompted in us by God’s Word and God’s Spirit, are not signs of spiritual sickness, but of health. As 2LC 15.4 puts it,

As repentance is to be continued through the whole course of our lives, upon the account of the body of death, and the motions thereof, so it is every man’s duty to repent of his particular known sins particularly.⁸

So repentance, as it turns out, is for everybody. It is why there is no room for pride in the church, a family of continually-repenting sinners. The only One among us with no need to repent is the one who so patiently is loving and changing the rest of us. What a comforting thought! Now I can relax, love, and enjoy the imperfect people around me, as Jesus does his work in us all.

The Signs of Repentance

What does repentance look like? The external details will differ from case to case. For Edmund Botsford, repentance came as a dramatic crisis in his adult years. Such crisis-repentance may involve a season of intense emotional distress, followed by euphoria over the forgiveness of sin, and radical change to one’s manner of life. Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9), Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1–3), and King Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:10–16) experienced crisis-repentance. For others, like Timothy, growing up in a believing home, repentance may appear quiet and subtle (2 Timothy 1:5, 3:14–16). The prophet Joel cautioned us that the rending of the heart, rather than the garments, is what is essential to repentance, so we should not put our trust in externals (Joel 2:13). Still, certain elements will be present in all true repentance, which the 2LC attempts to capture in 15.3:

This saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, doth, by faith in Christ, humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrency, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavour, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things.⁹

By specifying this repentance as “evangelical” or saving,” the early Baptists drew attention to a vital biblical distinction. The Bible speaks of a sorrow for sin that looks and feels like true repentance, but is in fact a counterfeit: instead of leading to life, it leads to death. Paul called this “worldly grief” over sin (2 Corinthians 7:10); the Puritans spoke of it as “legal repentance.” This is not the insincere apology of a politician doing damage control after a scandal, or the coerced apology of a child to his sibling with his mother standing behind him. This counterfeit repentance is often utterly sincere. But it is “legal repentance” because it trembles only at the legal penalties of breaking God’s Law, not at the horror of losing God’s fellowship. It is “worldly sorrow” because it grieves over what sin has cost us in this world: a reputation, a position, a relationship. Counterfeit repentance is tricky to pin down: it can involve an orthodox confession of sin like Pharaoh,¹⁰ intense regret and tears like Esau,¹¹ or complete self-loathing like Judas.¹² Yet the Bible is clear that we can have all this, and still lack repentance unto life. It is a sobering thought. Clearly, there is a great need to grasp the signs of true, saving, repentance.

According to the 2LC, true repentance begins when we move past sin’s uncomfortable consequences, and are “made sensible” to the evil of sin *itself*. This only happens when we view our sin in light of the love and holiness of the God we have sinned against. Jesus described this in the parable Prodigal Son. After a long season of madness in the far country, the young man finally “came to himself” (Luke 15:8). In the pigsty of a Gentile taskmaster, the boy realized how wrong he had been about the father he left behind. The prodigal had imagined his father as a sweatshop-running miser; now he realized the truth. His father was a good and gracious man, who loved his sons and treated even his hired workers with dignity and care. His father was in fact so tender, he had handed over the inheritance to the ungrateful son, allowing the prodigal to disgrace and impoverish him in the process. As he came to view his sin in light of the father’s character, the boy saw for the first time what the Puritans called “the sinfulness of sin.” It is, Paul says, “God’s *kindness*” that is “meant to lead you to repentance.” (Rom 2:4). Our hearts quake with terror when we see we have broken the Judge’s Law; they break open in repentance when we see how we have grieved the loving Father.

Seeing the evil of our sin toward God produces, as the 2LC notes, a newfound humility. In the past, we have justified our words and actions, for “every way of a man is right in his own eyes” (Proverbs 21:2). We have flattered ourselves as shrewd managers of our lives. When challenged by God’s Word or by our consciences, we have stubbornly defended our choices, finding comfort in the fact that we were far more righteous than many others we could name. But with the dawn of true repentance comes a painful new self-awareness, and the poverty of spirit we find in David’s confession in Psalm 51. We now know are

neither wise nor righteous; we are fools, who have deceived ourselves at every turn. We now stand guilty before God, with no excuses left to make, no further protests to voice, none to blame but ourselves.

Yet, as we have seen, repentance must move beyond personal shame if it is to lead to life. Even when under the heaviest conviction of sin, it is still possible for sinners to try to deal with our guilt ourselves; to make atonement for our sins while still maintaining control of our lives. We may weep, we may apologize, we may resolve to do better. We may even perform heroic religious duties to soothe our turbulent consciences. But all my contrition, regret, and “turning over a new leaf” cannot save me; only Jesus can do that.

True repentance means more than turning from my sin; it means “turning to the Lord” (Acts 9:35, 11:21). This is why the 2LC specifies that only “by faith in Christ” can we truly repent. I must cease resisting the Lordship of Jesus Christ and surrender myself completely to Him. It is the one thing I fear most in this world; it is the one thing that can rescue me. This was the difference between the repentance of Judas and of Simon Peter. Like Judas, Peter also betrayed the Lord, and wept bitter tears over his sin (Luke 22:62). But while Judas turned inward in despair, Peter turned himself over to the Lord. It must have been excruciating to allow Jesus to examine him so thoroughly on the shore (John 21:15–19), yet Peter came out on the other side with a full pardon for his sin, and a restored fellowship with the Lord, purchased for him by the finished work of Jesus on the cross. He found that he could say with David after he turned again to the Lord, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered ... you are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.” (Psalm 32:1, 7) It is a song that all of us who have turned to the Lord can sing.

Turning to the Lord also means asking Him for what the 2LC calls, “strength of grace...to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things.” Certainly the Lord does not forgive us on the basis of our commitment to “never do that again;” if anything, repentance teaches us how much weaker we are than we ever realized, and how likely we are to find ourselves imploring the Lord for forgiveness again very soon. But if our resolve to walk in obedience is imperfect and an unreliable source of assurance, it is nevertheless genuine, and pleasing to Christ. He will see to it that we “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). It will mean different things for each of us: Zacchaeus paid his debts (Luke 19:8), the Corinthians mended their broken relationship with Paul (2 Corinthians 7:2–13), Peter embraced Gentile outsiders (Acts 10:34–48). The Lord will call us to exhibit our repentance in any number of other ways specific to our discipleship, and sometimes it will be uncomfortable and intimidating. But turning to the Lord means He is in charge of our

repentance; Paul said it was the Corinthians' willingness to do whatever was necessary to deal with their sin that demonstrated they had the real thing. (2 Corinthians 7:5–13) No matter what it may cost to turn to the Lord, we will have Him. This will be enough.

The Source of Repentance

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” Jesus says. (Luke 13:5) Indeed, we are commanded to repent throughout the Bible. Unfortunately, it is a command none of us is able to obey! Like Adam in the Garden, our sinful hearts are simply too entrenched in self-justifying, blame-shifting, rationalizing pride ever to turn to God. In fact, Jesus' parable of the rich man in hell shows him complaining, giving orders, and demanding favors, but never repenting. This is how far our self-deception extends. Left to ourselves, we simply cannot see ourselves as we truly are before God. The best we might muster up is a legal repentance, scrambling to escape sin's consequences with our apologies and religious activity and moral reformations. Yet all the while, we are still loving only ourselves, not God. Like Botsford, we are always lingering at the gate, hesitating to go inside and find life in Christ.

No, if we are to experience life-giving repentance, it must come from outside ourselves. God must give *to* us what he demands *from* us. And according to Peter, this is precisely what God raised Jesus from the dead to do: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 5:31) Paul also describes repentance in terms of a divine gift: “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of their truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:25–26) This is why the early Baptists referred to repentance as “an evangelical *grace*.” The biblical record is clear, and our own experience confirms it: we can rend our garments, but only Jesus Christ can rend our hearts.

The 2LC pushes us deeper into the grace of repentance. They specify that God secured this gift of repentance for His people “in the covenant of grace,” that mysterious agreement within the Trinity to save sinners before the world began. It is an idea worthy of our reflection. As the members of the Godhead committed to do everything necessary to secure the eternal joy of their needy people, they agreed even to supply the ability to repent, knowing we would be unwilling and unable to do so on our own. Truly, our loving God has thought of everything we will ever need to live before Him! With all His heart, He says to us in the gospel, “Come, for everything is now ready!” (Luke 14:17) How did we ever land in such a story of grace?

Jesus tells us that heaven rings with laughter and praise “over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7). So should our churches and our homes. When the eighty year-old man to share that he has finally trusted Christ; when the wayward teenage daughter calls to say she is coming home; when the mountain of bitterness crumbles and a spouse extends forgiveness; whenever under the preached Word I stop thinking about how it applies to everyone else and feel my own hard heart cracking open—then let the celebration begin! God is visiting us in grace; by His mercy, we are turning to the Lord. Come, and welcome to Jesus Christ.

NOTES:

¹ Charles D. Mallery, *Memoirs of Elder Edmund Botsford* (Charleston: 1832), 27–28.

² Mallery, *Edmund Botsford*, 28–34.

³ Hereafter 2LC

⁴ All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version.

⁵ 2LC 15.1, citing Titus 3:2–5.

⁶ 2LC 15.2, citing Ecclesiastes 7:20 and Luke 22:31–32.

⁷ See, for example, the admonitions in Ephesians 4:25–32 or Colossians 3:1–17.

⁸ 2LC 15.4, citing Luke 19:8 and 1 Timothy 1:13–15.

⁹ 2LC 15.3, citing Zechariah 12:10, Acts 11:18, Ezekiel 36:31, 2 Corinthians 7:11, and Psalms 119:6, 128.

¹⁰ “This time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong” (Exodus 9:27).

¹¹ “...Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Hebrews 12:16–17).

¹² Judas confessed, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,” and then, “throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:4–5).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eric C. Smith serves as pastor of Sharon Baptist Church in Savannah, Tennessee.



Tom Nettles

Of Good Works

Paragraphs 1–3 of Chapter XVI of *the Second London Confession*

Both saving faith and repentance unto life imply a heart that is alarmed at the evil of sin and attached to the beauty of righteousness. Faith sees the beauty as well as the absolute necessity of the perfect righteousness of Christ and goes to Christ for life, righteousness, sanctification, eternal life. Repentance arises from heart-repulsion at the ugliness and evil of sin and expresses itself in continual turning from every evidence of sin that dwells deeply in the flesh. Both of these aspects of saving union with Christ flow from a sight of the goodness of the law of God, peculiarly as expressed in the death and righteousness of Christ, and press the believer toward embracing that same goodness—“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12). The desire to have our thoughts and actions conformed to the principles of true righteousness undergirding the revealed law, the commandments of Jesus Christ, drive believers in their lives. Good works—we put no trust in them but nevertheless pursue them.

The first three paragraphs of this chapter point to the Bible as our source and authority for knowledge of good works, synthesize passages describing spiritual advantages of doing good works, and argue for the necessity of human exertion in full dependence on the Spirit for the performance of good works.

Good Works Conform to Biblical Revelation

As a doctrinal statement birthed in the Reformation one would expect the kind of distinction drawn in the first paragraph of this chapter. “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his Holy word; and not such as without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intentions.”

This statement embodies two of the most compelling and revolutionary ideas of the Reformation. The first principle is that of *sola scriptura* and the second is *sola fide*.

In *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin wrote, “Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert his full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what he wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with his command.” Calvin found this to be particularly true in efforts to reform the worship of the church. “I know,” he wrote with the confidence of present experience, “how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word.” He along with other advocates of reform sought to remove from corporate worship all things that had been added to the simple, clear propositions of the Word of God.

He found the same thing true in dealing with concepts of “good works.” Calvin observed that the state of religion in the sixteenth century included “laws and regulations made binding on conscience which obliged the faithful to things not commanded by God” [Geneva Confession, art. 17]. Instead they established “another service of God than which he demands.” Such invented acts of obedience Calvin condemned as “perverse doctrines of Satan,” specifically violating “our Lord’s declaration that He is honored in vain by doctrines that are the commandments of men.” So Zwingli agreed, that “no Christian is bound to do those things which God has not decreed” [67 Articles” 24].

As a result, many of those actions required by the church as indicative of a pious and meritorious life, including work of supererogation, were condemned as needless, insulting inventions imposed on Scripture, derogatory of the true goodness of the law, and contradictory to the gospel. Such practices as pilgrimages, the wearing of certain types of clothes, fastings, canonical alms, showing reverence to images of the saints, were not good works at all (for God never required them). These, in fact, fall into the category works “without the warrant” of Scripture, but “devised by men, out of blind zeal.” Such blind zeal served to hide from people both their desperate condition of sinfulness before the law of God and the perfect merits of Christ.

This effect was prominently displayed in the writings of the Reformers. Zwingli wrote, “That Christ is our justice, from which it follows that our works insofar as they are good, so far

they are of Christ, but insofar as they are ours, they are neither right nor good” [67 Articles, 22]. The Augsburg Confession stated, “We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father. Whoever imagines that he can accomplish this by works, or that he can merit grace, despises Christ and seeks his own way to God, contrary to the Gospel” [Augsburg Confession, XX.] In pointing out the error of Rome on this issue, Calvin lamented, “On no account will they allow us to give Christ the honour of being called our righteousness, unless their works come in at the same time for a share of the merit.” He did not want to be understood as minimizing the moral absolute of the law or of the necessity of Christians, yea, all persons, seeing that perfect obedience is certainly required. “The dispute is not,” he explained, “whether good works ought to be performed by the pious, and whether they are accepted by God and rewarded by him, but whether by their own worth they reconcile us to God.” Can we, he inquired, “acquire eternal life as their price,” and do they serve as “compensations which are made to the justice of God, so as to take away guilt.” Can they, indeed, “be confided in as the ground of salvation?” [*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*] No one can plume himself on the merit of works “as if they laid God under obligations by them.”

The Confession, as an expression of Reformation doctrine, rejects any invention of men as binding either as a mark of spirituality, morality, righteousness, a sin to be repented of, or a doctrine to be believed. When the Pharisees exalted their unwarranted standard above the law of God, Jesus upbraided them as people like those the Lord reprimanded in Isaiah 29 who honored Him with their lips while their hearts were far away. They worshipped God emptily, for they taught as “doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:8, 9). They wanted Jesus to repent for he had offended them (Matthew 15:12) by ignoring their invented standard of holiness. Jesus wanted them to repent because they had ignored the true requirements of the law.

Though Not Saving, Good Works Bear Fruitful Witness

In Scripture, good works all flow from a proper understanding of the law of God and those clear implications within the law that emerge from the power of the gospel. The Confession in paragraph 2 gives several vital advantages to the performance of good works. As Paul wrote in Galatians 5:22, 23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Certainly, there is no law against them for they are immediate implications

of the law. All of these beautiful traits of character and conscience arise from love for God, trust in the perfect purpose of God, satisfaction with his providence, and love of neighbor as ourselves. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul pointed to the law as good when used in the right way. It is the true standard of righteousness, and therefore does not correct a truly righteous person, if there were such. But for all others, each of the commandments condemns actions that are prominently practiced in all cultures. The actions Paul mentions are all violations of the Ten Commandments in some way and thus are “contrary to sound teaching.” In addition, this “sound teaching” is in accord with “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:8–11).

The teaching of “Good works,” therefore, helps inculcate a proper understanding of the relationship between law and gospel and serves to highlight the true power of the gospel in the life of a sinner. “These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits, and evidences of a true, and lively faith.” This accords with the teaching of James that a true believer shows his faith by his works and gives evidence of an active and maturing faith (James 2:18, 22).

In addition, works according to the true spiritual strength of the law manifest gratitude to God for His salvation. “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift,” Paul exclaimed as he pointed to the leading motivation for giving a generous gift to the Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 9:15). God gave His Son in order to honor His law for both vengeance and righteousness; in gratitude for such a gift we honor the law by joyous, sacrificial love for our neighbors, particularly those of the household of faith.

Good works done out of love for the law strengthen the heart’s assurance of salvation. Peter saw an advancement in conformity to the holy spirituality of the law as vital for discerning that efficacy of one’s call and thus for assuring one of his or her election (2 Peter 1:8–11). The Psalmist in effusive celebration of the goodness of the law and of his love for it, comfort in it, and its driving him to trust in God alone for forgiveness and righteousness, wrote “I hope for your salvation, O Lord, and I do your commandments. My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly” (Psalm 119:166, 167 ESV).

Good works edify our brothers by prompting them to glorify God for producing such fruit in the hearts of sinful, selfish people. “In the same way,” so Jesus instructed, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). A profession of the gospel and the lifestyle that follows, Paul found as a motive for giving instruction to slaves; “Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the

teaching may not be reviled.” Paul did not allow deviation from this instruction for it was consistent with the “sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness” (1 Timothy 6: 1, 3).

The doing of good works also gives opponents of the gospel nothing condemning to say: “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:15). Not only will cantankerous criticisms be put to silence, but the pursuit of the excellence that arises from attention to the works and spirit required by both the Law and the gospel, will result in extended praise to God. This will happen to some degree in increasing measures in this life, but will explode into praise when Christ comes. Those who give sincere attention to approving what is excellent will be found “pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1: 9–11; cf 4:8).

Good works are a manifestation of saving grace, not that they save in the sense of justification, but that they arise from the steady removal of the corruption of the heart that also is involved in the comprehensive purpose of God in cleansing His people from sin. “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of yourselves, but the free gift of God; this salvation does not arise from works, so that no one will ever boast. For you are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the purpose of good works which God made ready beforehand purposing that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8–10). As we are elect in Christ Jesus to be “holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4), these prepared good works constitute one aspect of that blamelessness. A. T. Robertson wrote in his comments on this passage, “Good works by us were included in the foreordination by God.”

That good works are not merely optional, but constituent in the very marrow of saving grace, is emphasized in the confessional phrase, “that having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end eternal life.” The proof text is Romans 6:22: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.” The slaves of sin receive the wages of death, but God’s intended outcome for his slaves is a life fit for eternity in his presence. Not only are we God’s slaves, but His sons. As such, He disciplines us to produce His intended outcome the “peaceful fruit of righteousness,” and, at the same time, admonishes us to “strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:11, 14). Though good works do not justify, God will save no one that he does not sanctify.

Good Works are the Proper Fruit of the Indwelling Spirit

The production of these good works arises from the personal operation of the Holy Spirit in us. So the confession reads, “Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves; but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.” The confession points to John 15:5, 6 summarizing this doctrinal assertion. There Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in Him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Those who do not abide in Him do not bear fruit, but wither, and are gathered up to be cast away. This comes after Jesus has given a lengthy explanation about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit produces obedience to Christ as a fruit of engendering love for Christ (John 14:18–24), and by revealing the truth about Christ and His work of obedience to the Father (John 14:25–31).

Not only has the Spirit changed our disposition from one of hatred toward God and holiness and given us love for Christ in the fullness of his obedience to the Father—not only has the Spirit revealed the true standard of righteousness and given us motivation to drive toward it—but he also operates within us moment by moment secretly enlightening, clarifying, strengthening, guiding us toward more purity in thought and life, more zeal for the glory of God, more knowledge of conformity to the truth, and more hope in the prospect of finally being like Christ. The confession points to Philippians 2:12, 13: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Salvation’s richness should produce holy fear and mental trembling—a nervous fixation on eternal things that will let us rest with nothing less than an increasing sense of the divine glory in all the things that have conspired to grant to sinners eternal life. We reach down into the very depths of all our mental perceptions, our manner of establishing values, our intense distrust of ourselves, along with a growing awareness of the subtle and destructive power of the flesh and exhaust our energies to live with consistency what we have professed in the gospel. We cannot relax, we cannot let go, we must be ever watchful. We must maintain a sober suspicion, not of others, but of our own souls. A. T. Robertson comments:

Paul has no sympathy with a cold and dead orthodoxy or formalism that knows nothing of struggle and growth. He exhorts as if he were an Arminian in addressing men. He prays as if he were a Calvinist in addressing God and feels no inconsistency in the two attitudes. Paul makes no attempt to reconcile divine sovereignty and human free agency, but boldly proclaims both.

Of course, I disagree that one of these is more “Arminian” in its emphasis, but the admonition still is plain and perfectly consistent with Paul’s concern. Human agency and responsibility, human motivation and exertion of energy, human perception and determination all operate in perfect harmony with divine power and divine decree. God superintends all things at each successive moment by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself. This superintendence moves forth according to His eternal decree so that not one motion of the wind or drop of mist in the raging waters falls accidentally but obeys His power and prior determination while at the same time each follows a pattern of cause and effect intrinsic to the relations of all the elements of the universe. Even so, we exert all of our energies to achieve the highest of all callings—actually to conduct ourselves according to the originally implanted law of God in the heart, to love God supremely with no rival and to love our neighbors as ourselves—while we know that apart from His effectual operations by His Spirit, we truly can do nothing.

The confluence of these realities, divine effectuality and human agency, means that we do not wait for some inner promptings before we do what we know, by divine revelation, is right. Even when we recognize utter dependence on present operations of grace, Christians are “not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.”

The Augsburg Confession of Faith contains this simple plain statement on the relation between faith and good works.

It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God’s will and glorify him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works... Consequently this teaching concerning faith is not to be accused of forbidding good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done [Augsburg, chapter XX].

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom Nettles is retired but presently teaches as a Senior Professor at SBTS in Louisville. He is an active member at LaGrange Baptist Church in LaGrange, KY.



Bill Ascol

Good Works

Paragraphs 4–7 of Chapter XV of *the Second London Confession*

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was summoned to a meeting by a disgruntled deacon. His concern? Habitual tardiness by various members who held leadership roles in the church. I listened sympathetically because I shared his concern. Then the conversation took a turn I was not expecting. It became apparent that his frustration was not due to the fact that habitual tardiness on the part of leaders set a bad example or hindered the effectiveness of various ministries on the Lord's day and beyond. He began pounding his fist on my desk and said, "This is not fair. My family gets here at least fifteen minutes early every Sunday. We meet all the expectations. We keep all the rules. And we are treated just like all those families who come in late every Sunday!" I realized that I was face to face with a Baptist deacon who was a Pharisee. What made this particularly troubling is that in order for a person to serve in leadership in this particular church he had to express publicly (among other things) that he was in "wholehearted, non-divisive agreement with The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith." It was fairly obvious that this man's thinking on the matter of good works in the life of a Christian was not being informed by Chapter 16 of this Confession, much less the teaching of Scripture.

The value of a good confession of faith cannot be overstated. In his commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, B.H. Carroll asserted,

"A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of

faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness. The modern cry, 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jelly fish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy."¹

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith affords the serious Christian the tool which Carroll thought to be so valuable for the health and vitality of a church. Charles H. Spurgeon led the congregation he pastored in London to adopt this confession in 1855 and said of it,

"This little volume is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby ye are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. Here the younger members of our church will have a body of divinity in small compass, and by means of the scriptural proofs, will be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them."²

I am so very grateful to Dr. Stan Reeves for his careful labor in taking this venerable Confession and presenting it in language better suited for the 21st century reader.³ Before I undertake an explanation of paragraphs four through seven in the Confession's statement on "Good Works", I will briefly comment on the first three paragraphs. Paragraph One makes it clear that the idea of good works is defined by Holy Scripture. We are not at liberty to make up our own list of good works. I am reminded of a "Deeper Life" teacher who decades ago was explaining to an audience his understanding of what the Scripture meant in teaching that Christians are declared righteous in Jesus Christ. He said that his first righteous act that day was to brush his teeth. Aside from the silliness of this claim, God's Word alone is the arbiter regarding what constitutes "good" works. Paragraph Two makes the case that good works are the fruit, not the root of the gracious salvation by grace through faith that God offers to sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paragraph Three applies the doctrine of sanctification to the expression of good works. While it is the responsibility of every believer to engage in and manifest good works, the capacity to do this comes from the Holy Spirit dwelling in the life of the believer. This fact does not let the Christian "off the hook," however, since he or she is responsible for manifesting good works as the inevitable expression of having been saved. Sam Waldron, in his excellent book, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, makes the keen observation that it is only in "the gospel economy"⁴ that good works have any spiritual value and then only for the Christian.

Paragraph Four of the Confession states:

16:4 Those who attain the greatest heights of obedience possible in this life are far from being able to merit reward by going beyond duty^a or to do more than

God requires. Instead, they fall short of much that is their duty to do.¹³

^a*supererogate*. ¹³Job 9:2, 3; Galatians 5:17; Luke 17:10.

This paragraph asserts that the highest obedience one has ever achieved, or the greatest demonstration of obedience one has ever observed, are woefully inadequate to “merit reward” from God for one’s efforts. Even though we have been delivered from the condemnation of sin (and its attending dominion) in our justification by faith, we have not been altogether delivered from the condition of sin. To say it another way, we have been delivered from reigning sin, but we still fight a war with remaining sin. For this reason, our very best efforts as Christians are mixed with sin.

This paragraph serves to remind us that progressive sanctification is an inseparable grace with its twin, justification. It also challenges and brings a corrective to the harmful teaching of sinless perfection. Roman Catholics teach that if a Catholic endeavors to add practices such as celibacy, a vow of poverty, and/or a commitment to monasticism then he or she can exceed God’s righteous requirements. The word used for this is “supererogation.” This means going above and beyond what is required. This, however, is not possible. Jesus taught in Luke 17 that such an idea was irresponsible.

⁷ “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? ⁸ Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:7–10, ESV).

When a servant has done “all” that he or she was “commanded,” that obedience has not added one thing to his or her standing before God, because of the great gulf that exists between God’s holiness and the Christian’s remaining sinfulness.

Other groups teach a similar possibility of achieving sinless perfection, only with different wrinkles. Our Baptist forefathers were keenly aware of their religious surroundings and, like their Presbyterian (the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1637) and Independent (the Savoy Declaration of 1658) brethren, they wanted to set themselves apart from those who espoused such a pernicious error.

Paragraph Five states:

16:5 We cannot, even by our best works, merit pardon of sin or eternal life from

God's hand, due to the huge disproportion between our works and the glory to come, and the infinite distance between us and God. By these works we can neither benefit God nor satisfy Him for the debt of our former sins.¹⁴ When we have done all we can, we have only done our duty and are unprofitable servants. Since our good works are good, they must proceed from His Spirit;¹⁵ and since they are performed by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they cannot withstand the severity of God's punishment.¹⁶

¹⁴Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 4:6. ¹⁵Galatians 5:22, 23. ¹⁶Isaiah 64:6; Psalm 143:2.

The first reality stated in this paragraph is that our very "best works" cannot and will not give us any ground or gain us any advantage in attaining to eternal life from God's good hand. The reason given for this is that there is an unfathomable gap between the nature and expression of our works now and the glorious arena in Heaven where all those who have been declared righteous in Jesus Christ will dwell on day. As the prophet Isaiah declares in Isaiah 64:6, "...all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." Our very best endeavors do not add anything of value to the being or character of God, because He is "wholly other" and does not depend upon us for anything. Again, the prophet Isaiah is very clear in helping us come to grips with the fact that God's thoughts are not like our thoughts and His ways (i.e., His works) are not like our ways.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8–9, ESV).

Horatius Bonar begins his work, *How Shall I Go To God?* with the answer to that question. "It is with our sins that we go to God, for we have nothing else to go with that we can call our own."⁵ The conclusion from Luke 17:10 (see previously) is that the best we can call ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ when we have engaged in the sincere undertaking of what has been taught us and exemplified for us in God's Word is "unworthy servants." This is as it should be. For God declares, "I am the LORD (Yahweh); that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols" (Isaiah 42:8, ESV). For mere mortal man, whose best stature on this earth can be described as a sinner saved by grace, to expect to get credit for "only doing our duty" is a subtle, but nonetheless real, attempt to take from (or at best share in) God's glory. We do not, by anything good accomplished by us, increase God's satisfaction with us or diminish our debt owed to God. God's satisfaction with us and His willingness to cancel the inestimable debt we owed to Him is based solely in the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ to the law of God and His substitutionary, sin-

bearing, wrath-appeasing, sacrificial death on the cross at Calvary, whereby He (without our help) satisfied divine justice, by His suffering and death in the place of every sinner who would repent of sin and trust in Him. This is the understanding set forth in various catechisms. We read in C H. Spurgeon's A Catechism with Proofs:

24. Q. How does Christ execute the office of a priest?

A. Christ executes the office of a priest, in his once offering up himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice (Heb. 9:28), and to reconcile us to God (Heb. 2:17), and in making continual intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

The second point made in this paragraph is that the follower of Jesus Christ must recognize that anything that can be called "good" that we practice or accomplish while we live has its origin in the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is what Paul refers to as "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 2:22–23, ESV). This is, in fact, what makes our works "good." This wonderful truth is tempered, however, with the reality that as followers of Jesus Christ, born again by the Holy Spirit, living by the Holy Spirit, walking in the Holy Spirit, being continually filled with the Holy Spirit, we still struggle with remaining sin. Therefore, in our very best expressions of good works, sin is nevertheless mixed in all that we do. The seventh chapter of Romans shows this in bold strokes. Paul could rejoice that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23, ESV) and declare "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, ESV). These hope-filled truths did not negate the reality for Paul that "...I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Romans 7:18a, ESV). This is the Christian's "dilemma." Even though we have been delivered from the punishment of sin (Justification), and are presently being delivered from the power of sin (Sanctification), we have not yet delivered from the presence of sin (Glorification) and will not be until we are with the Lord in glory. Were it not for the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in us, our very best works would not withstand the fiery blast of God's wrath at the judgment.

Paragraph Six of the Confession sets forth good news for the follower of Jesus Christ and the value of engaging in good works.

16:6 Nevertheless, believers are accepted through Christ, and thus their good works are also accepted in Him.¹⁷ This acceptance does not mean our good works are completely blameless and irreproachable in God's sight. Instead, God views them in His Son, and so He is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, even though it is accompanied by many weaknesses and imperfections.¹⁸

¹⁷Ephesians 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5. ¹⁸Matthew 25:21, 23; Hebrews 6:10.

In spite of the fact that every Christian is plagued with the reality of remaining sin which stains everything he or she thinks, says, or does, there is good news. Because of God's marvelous grace, believers are "accepted through Christ" (Ephesians 1:6) and enabled "to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). This is what some call "evangelical obedience" as distinct from and contrary to "legal obedience." Because salvation by grace alone through faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone transforms the mind, emotions and will of the individual, the motivation of the Christian undergoes a transformation as well. Before salvation, a person looks at the precepts and examples set forth by Jesus Christ and His followers from one of two faulty perspectives. The first is a very superficial perspective that concludes these are easy to do. Usually there is a serious watering down of Christ's teachings that results in a legalistic list of "dos" and "don'ts" and results in a functional form of antinomianism. The other approach to the precepts and examples of Jesus Christ and His followers is that they are unreasonable and place an unnecessary burden on people who "just want to be saved." The gospel response to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and His followers is best expressed by the Psalmist, the Apostle Paul, and the Apostle John.

While the entire 119th Psalm is a tribute to the value and of God's precepts, verse 11 gives a sense of an evangelical attitude toward that which the Lord requires of those who have been declared righteous by the merits of Jesus Christ: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11, ESV).

Paul declared that even in the midst of the battle with remaining sin he nevertheless found himself delighting in God's law: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being" (Romans 7:22, ESV).

John taught that the new birth involves a change of the whole person so that the reality of it is manifested by a love for God, a love for those who by God's grace have also been born again, and a love for the commands of God. In the aftermath of the salvation experience the believer finds that the commandments of God are not a burden.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:1-3, ESV).

For those in Christ, God looks upon the good works and acts of obedience and accepts

them with all of their imperfections because we are in Christ. This is glorious good news for the sincere Christian.

Paragraph Seven of the Confession makes a sober observation and gives an attending warning to those who are not yet Christians as pertains to their engaging in or failing to engage good works.

16:7 Works done by unregenerate people may in themselves be commanded by God and useful to themselves and others.¹⁹ Yet they do not come from a heart purified by faith²⁰ and are not done in a right manner according to the Word²¹ nor with a right goal—the glory of God.²² Therefore, they are sinful and cannot please God. They cannot qualify anyone to receive grace from God,²³ and yet their neglect is even more sinful and displeasing to God.²⁴

¹⁹2 Kings 10:30; 1 Kings 21:27, 29. ²⁰Genesis 4:5; Hebrews 11:4, 6.

²¹1 Corinthians 13:1. ²²Matthew 6:2, 5. ²³Amos 5:21, 22; Romans 9:16; Titus 3:5. ²⁴Job 21:14, 15; Matthew 25:41–43.

Because good works are defined by God and flow from His goodness and mercy, anyone who engages in such activity may well receive temporal value from participating in them. However, because the unrighteous person always falls “short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), no matter how beneficent or philanthropic his or her deeds may be, such conduct is not accepted by God. Rather it is viewed as sin. Martin Luther referred to this as committing “splendid sins.”⁶ Thomas Brooks called it the act of engaging in “glorious sins.”⁷ Even though the most noble work an unconverted person can do cannot in any way curry the gracious favor of God, the failure to do good is an even greater sin in the sight of God will be met with His greater displeasure.

One would think that Ephesians 2:8–10 makes it abundantly clear that we are saved completely and exclusively by the marvelous grace of God, so much so that any notion of our contribution by way of works is utterly excluded and thus removes any ground of boasting on our part. In addition to that, this same Ephesians passage makes it equally clear that while we are not saved by works, the nature of salvation is such that good works are the inevitable outcome of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Sadly, this is not a matter generally understood and embraced in the current Christian milieu. Thankfully, The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, in a marvelous demonstration that the Scripture is its own best interpreter, can assist the sincere follower of Jesus Christ to walk the evangelical path of living in the glorious delight that salvation is by grace through faith apart from works, while at the same time recognizing the sobering truth that the same God Who ordained our salvation, also ordained that we should practice good works.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8–10, ESV).

NOTES:

¹ B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, Volume 6 (Baker Book House, 1973), 140.

² *The Baptist Confession of Faith with Scripture Proofs* (Gospel Mission, n.d.), Foreword.

³ Stan Reeves, *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith in Modern English* (Founders Press, 2017).

⁴ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Press, 1989), 209.

⁵ Horatius Bonar, *How Shall I Go To God?* (Religious Tract Society, 1881), 1.

⁶ Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, 212.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *Smooth Stones Taken from Ancient Brooks: Being a Collection of Sentences, Illustrations, and Quaint Sayings, from the Works of That Renowned Puritan, Thomas Brooks* (Sheldon and Company, 1860), 235.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bill Ascol serves as Senior Pastor at Bethel Baptist Church, Owasso, Oklahoma.