

Appendix:

Storming the Strong Towers of Faith Alone

In the main body of this book I have not dealt with central passages that have been advanced in support of the “justification by faith alone” doctrine. My intent in writing this book has been to demonstrate the uniform way in which the covenant has functioned from Adam through the New Covenant in Christ, the second Adam. I have tried to avoid the significant detours that would be required to address important passages marshaled in defense of the faith alone teaching. This appendix has been dedicated to that crucial task. I have selected three Pauline texts that are broadly considered to be the strong towers of faith alone teaching by its own adherents.

First, it must be acknowledged that taking a biblical position on any biblical doctrine results in the need to explain passages that appear to contradict the position taken if the position being put forward is to be shown to be biblically coherent. Faith alone adherents have to explain how James doesn’t mean what he says when he asserts that “a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” The need to explain what James really meant is to say that James, on the surface, seems to assert works as a necessary means of acceptance before God. Faith alone teachers don’t believe he really means this, and the responsibility lies with them to present a biblical rationale of why this is so. They must not be rejected out of hand. They deserve a fair hearing, because it is true that in our communication with each other, through normal use of language, we don’t always mean what we seem to say on the surface. For example, Paul can write in Romans 5:13, “before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.” Does Paul mean what he seems to be saying? Is Paul teaching a type of universalism in which men who never hear the word of God are not responsible for their sin? On the surface, this appears to be the case. But a closer look at the immediate context and other passages concerning the accountability of man, before the giving of the

law, reveals otherwise. A closer look reveals Paul to be speaking about being accountable for “transgression” of specific commands within a covenant verses a general guilt shared by all and penalized by death (Rom.5:14). To explain Paul here is not equivocating the truth, but rather its opposite. It is a pursuit of a right understanding of a particular text from Scripture as a whole. We understand what Paul meant in light of contextual considerations and other passages which address the same issue under consideration. Faith alone teachers must explain James 2:20-24, Romans 2:5-16 and Matthew 6:14,15 which would appear, on the surface, to teach justification by works and not by faith alone. I must explain passages like Galatians 3:10-12, Romans 4:1-6 and Romans 10:1-13 which would appear, on the surface, to teach justification by faith alone. If the view of the covenant that I espouse is to be accepted, then these passages must be explained. And they must be explained because they appear to teach that faith alone saves a person. My intention is to demonstrate that they don’t mean what they appear to say.

I hope to have shown by this brief discussion that explanations should not be dismissed out of hand, but only rejected when shown to be a biblically incoherent explanation. For as I have said before, we all have some explaining to do.

Strong Tower # 1

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” (Galatians 3:10-13)

It is easy to see why this passage has been a strong tower of faith alone teaching. Here Paul appears to make a sharp distinction between faith and the keeping of the law. He appears to hold up faith as the only way to be justified in contrast to keeping the law which requires the doing of

it. He seems to uphold Habakkuk's "The righteous will live by faith" as the faith-way of justification and rejects Moses' "The man who does these things will live by them" as a futile law-way to be justified. This seems to be supported by Paul's further claim that "the law is not based on faith." Or, in other words, the law-way of being justified is not based on faith but rather on doing the works of it. Martin Luther states,

Paul therefore reasoneth here, out of plain testimony of the prophet, that there is none which obtaineth justification and life before God, but the believing man, who obtaineth righteousness and everlasting life without the law, and without charity, by faith alone. The reason is, because the law is not of faith, or anything belonging to faith, for it believeth not: neither are works of the law faith, nor yet of faith: therefore faith is a thing much differing from the law. For the promise is not apprehended by working, but by believing. Yea, there is a great difference between the promise and the law, and consequently between faith and works, as there is between heaven and earth. It is impossible therefore that faith should be of the law. For faith only resteth in the promise, it only apprehended and knoweth God, and standeth only in receiving good things from God. Contrariwise the law and works consist in exacting, in doing, and giving unto God.

Clearly for Luther Galatians 3:10-13 is Paul's objective and systematic teaching on how faith and obedience relate covenantally. They stand "contrariwise" or at odds with each other. Moreover, the reason a person who tries to be justified by the law is under a curse is that it cannot be kept in the way the law itself requires it to be kept. John Calvin writes,

Let us now see if there is any man living who satisfies the law. It is certain that none has been or ever can be found. Every individual is here condemned...Whoever has come short in any part of the law is cursed. All are held chargeable of this guilt. Therefore all are cursed.⁴²

However, a closer look at faith and the law raises some important questions concerning the Calvin's interpretation of Paul's intent in this

⁴² Calvin, Galatians Commentary p.53

passage. First, James claims that Abraham obtained the promise not from faith alone but from working. “Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar” (Jas.2:21)? This is consistent with what is stated in Genesis 22:17,18, “Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” Abraham’s obedience to the command of God was the basis or ground of his apprehending the promise. James is simply restating what was reported in Genesis 22. This seems to contradict Paul’s assertion that “the promise is not apprehended by working, but by believing.” This was Martin Luther’s own view of James, that James contradicted Paul.

Secondly, the law itself, according to Jesus Christ, commanded faith as of first importance. We read this in Matthew 23:23, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices— mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faith. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former.” Here Jesus places faith as one of the more important matters of the law. And this is precisely what we see there. The law itself contained remembrances of God’s power in order to inspire faith in the Lord. Israel was to remember in order that they might believe or have faith. This is what Israel was so roundly criticized for. They were seen as rebels because of their failure to believe God.

“Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not *believe* his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord.” (Psalm 106:24, 25)

“The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them survived. Then they believed his promises and sang his praise. But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel.” (Psalm 106:12, 13)

Here we see the connection between remembering and believing. To forget, for the Psalmist, is to no longer believe. The law commands festivals like the Passover in order that the people would remember and believe. It was believing that the ancients were commended for in Hebrews 11. Moses, the giver of the law, was a man of faith. In Hebrews 11 we learn that Moses kept the law by faith in order to receive the promise of God’s salvation from Egyptian slavery. “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered

because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel” (Heb.11:28).

Once again, we can understand how Jesus can say that a more important matter of the law is faith, because it is by faith that the law is kept. “By faith Moses kept the Passover.” From this it follows that every Passover, Sabbath, New Moon festival and whatever else was commanded was to be kept by faith. So it seems quite clear that the basis of keeping the law is, in fact, faith. This then raises an important question. If this is true, what can Paul mean when he says, “The law is not based on faith, on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them’”(Gal.3:12)?

If we understand that faith was commanded in the law and indeed was kept by faith, we are now prepared to understand what Paul meant when he said that “the law is not based on faith.” First, we need to recognize that Paul was not making an abstract theological statement. We need to take stock of the fact that Paul was engaging in verbal warfare against opponents of the message he preached. In polemical rhetoric it is characteristic to speak in narrow and pointed ways in order to make a particular point emphatic. For example, Ronald Reagan spoke rhetorically when he called the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” By making this statement he was not making a scientific and objective moral evaluation of every citizen of the former Soviet Union. He did not mean to say that every individual within the Soviet empire was morally evil. What he meant was that the communistic world-view and political agenda that this world-view spawned had evil effects for mankind. This was powerfully communicated by the phrase “evil empire.” The many critics of Reagan jumped on this phrase as being simple-minded and backward. They argued that there were many well-intentioned people in Russia and that this kind of language painted a whole nation unfairly with a broad brush. However, the critics, either intentionally or not, failed to recognize the purpose behind Reagan’s use of such language. A husband or wife may employ verbal rhetoric in an argument at home. A wife who is frustrated may exclaim, “You never help me around the house!” Once again, this is not meant to be a scientific evaluation of his behavior. He may respond by saying, “What do you mean? I washed the dishes twice last month!” She would respond, “That is not what I mean. I know you help sometimes, but we are both busy with our jobs and I am the one who is expected to get things done around here.” So she used a powerful statement in order to make a point. The word “never” does not mean literally and

objectively, never. It means there is a severe problem with the current arrangement. This is how language is customarily used.

Paul's wrestling with the law-keeping Judaizers led him to employ this kind of polemical rhetoric repeatedly. We read this in 1 Timothy 1:9,10, "We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers..."

According to Paul here, the law is instituted for "perverts" and not for the righteous. How do we square this with the fact that David and many others rejoiced that the law was wisdom from God for them, and that these men and women were considered by God to be righteous according to that law? Is Paul saying that David, Hezekiah, Josiah and Elizabeth were in reality "perverts" and parent killers? Of course not. Paul is making a powerful rhetorical statement. The context reveals that he is saying that those who proclaim the need for law-keeping are in reality acting "contrary to sound doctrine," which is the gospel of Christ (1 Tim.1:10,11). This is a powerful way of saying that these people are in reality morally bankrupt in the eyes of God. The law is now for morally bankrupt people, because it is the immoral who turn away from the gospel in order to embrace the law. This graphically proclaims how reprehensible it is to desire to live "under the law" now that Christ has come.

Paul uses polemical rhetoric in Colossians 2:8, where he describes teachings that promote law-keeping as "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world..." Similarly, in Galatians 4:8,9, he describes the law as "weak and miserable principles" that enslaved them as if they were gods to them. This is incredible! God's revealed word is a "principle of this world" that even promotes idolatry? Wasn't it the law that condemned idolatry over and over again? How could the law given from God Himself, and everywhere recognized as righteous, holy and good be "miserable principles"? These were precisely the questions that he was provoking others to ask. What Paul is condemning here is not the law objectively considered. The law, Paul reports in Romans 7:12 is "holy, righteous and good." This is his objective evaluation of the law. The law consists of righteous and holy decrees, which are not from this sinful world, but from a holy and good God. But how could he call them "weak and miserable principles"? We read what Paul wrote, but we must know what Paul meant when he wrote these words. We know

from Romans 8:3 what Paul meant. He did not mean that they were, in themselves, weak. He meant that “the law was powerless...in that it was weakened by the sinful nature” (Rom.8:3). What is miserable and weak are human beings under the law, because they are enslaved by the sinful nature. Moreover, it is not through the law that God ultimately has ordained to set men free from the guilt and power of sin, but in Christ. The law was a mere pointer or shadow of the reality (Col.2:17). God’s power through the Holy Spirit is not manifested now through the law but through Christ. The law is now a weak and miserable principle because God’s power is no longer to be found there. This is how Paul can consider these people to be enslaved by “gods” of the law. Works of the law have themselves become as gods to them, enslaving them, because they have to turn away from the one true God who is Jesus Christ in order to embrace them. Furthermore, this is how Paul can refer to the law as “hollow philosophies” and the “teachings based on human tradition.” Christ was always the true substance of the law, so when you turn from Jesus Christ in order to embrace the law, you are turning the law into a “human teaching,” a “hollow philosophy.” It has been emptied of its God-centered substance and a shell of a weak and miserable man-made religion is left behind.

In all of this powerful rhetoric Paul is not making objective, scientific, timeless statements about the law as a phenomenon of God’s revelation. The words inscribed by God’s finger on Moses’ stone tablets were not “miserable principles.” Rather, they were to be the very opposite for God’s people—their great delight and joy as expressions of God’s will for His people (see Psalm 119). Neither were they ever considered to be “hollow philosophies.” Such a sentiment would get you justly stoned for blasphemy under the direction of that same law. When Paul wrote Galatians, he was addressing an historical situation of false teachers who were misusing the law in specific ways. Paul’s expressions reflect, not the law itself objectively considered, but a particular strand of the law’s misuse. The tragedy here is that Luther did not seem to appreciate this. For him, the law was, as God’s revelation through Moses, a “miserable principle.” For Luther it was not the misuse of it that made it so, but its proper use as the condemner of sin.

Not surprisingly, we read the same kind of rhetorical language used in 1 Timothy and Colossians in the passage under consideration in Galatians 3, because Paul is dealing with the same opponents in all three letters. “The law is not based on faith” means the law as it is being promoted by the false teachers he is addressing. Paul’s point, is

not that the law had nothing to do with faith to uphold it, but that faith has a transcendent life of its own which is based on the promise and not based on the law of Moses. Faith believes the promise, this is the indispensable core of God's interaction with men, which (and this is the important point for Paul) transcends the law. God speaks and we must believe. On the occasion of hearing the promise, faith is the obedience required (Gen.15:1-6). The first and overarching necessity, in order for obedience to be possible, was faith in the promise. The law requires "the doing of it," this is from Moses and true enough, but the promise requires faith. The false teachers are failing to believe this word of promise by continuing to embrace works of the law. The promise of the gospel is that all the promises of the Old Covenant "find their 'yes' in Jesus Christ" and only in Jesus Christ. Since it is found exclusively by faith in Jesus, then it is not in keeping the law (2 Cor.1:20). The false teachers are not believing that promise, by embracing "works of the law" as necessary for justification. This teaching requires Paul to make this antithetical statement, "not doing, but believing." To live by the law is to do it, but to live by the promise is to believe it. The promise believed was how Abraham's relationship with the Lord was initiated. Abraham was justified from the moment he believed the promise. Abraham was justified years prior and without the giving of the Mosaic law. In this sense, Abraham was justified apart from the doing of the law and by faith. What Paul meant is that the law is not permanently binding, and Abraham is an ideal example in retrospect, because Abraham was the esteemed father of the Jews—who was justified apart from law—just as the Gentiles and Jews are now. But the promise continues and is permanently offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ and faith in that promise remains the saving response to that promise.

Third, when Paul says those "of the works of the law" can't be justified because, "cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law," he is not making a statement about the impossibility of doing all of it. He can't mean this because the Scriptures reveal that the law was able to be kept. This reality contradicts Calvin and Luther's belief that Galatians 3:10 contains a suppressed premise that the law could not be kept—that it was and is impossible to keep all of it. So, they would understand it this way:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse, *(suppressed premise: for no one can keep the law)* and it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do

everything written in the Book of the Law.”

The understanding above cannot be true because of the simple fact that in many places the laws, regulations and decrees were reported to be have been done successfully. The following three examples make this clear:

“As for you, if you walk before me as your father David did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne” (2 Chronicles 7:17).

“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25).

“Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly” (Luke 1:6).

These clear statements of Scripture establish Calvin’s suppressed premise that the law could not be kept as biblically untenable. So we must revisit Paul’s statement and inquire again as to why Paul would insist on a curse for those who “rely on works of the law?” I believe that a more biblical and historically sensitive understanding of this statement understands Paul to be rejecting “those who rely on works of the law” or more literally, those who are “of the works of the law” as people who were asserting specific statements about what people must do in order to be saved. This historical group of people is no mystery to us, and neither is what they were teaching. From Acts 15, Galatians and Romans 4, it is abundantly clear that Paul is rejecting teachers who were saying, not only must you believe in Jesus, but you also must believe in Moses. But these teachers were not in the first order asserting all of Moses, they were emphasizing what they considered certain non-negotiables of the Mosaic law. This why they were called “the circumcision group” (Gal.2:12; Tit 1:10). Circumcision was the primary push of these teachers as Acts 15 and Paul’s statements make clear. This is not to say that Paul did not discern the slippery slope of this teaching, and indeed, there were those sliding down it, and now observing special days, dietary restrictions, etc. (Gal.4:9). But the central thrust of these teachers consisted in the continuing necessity of non-negotiable Mosaic commands. The tip of this Mosaic law iceberg was the teaching of the necessity of

circumcision. This makes good Old Covenant sense, because circumcision was the entry rite into the Old Covenant people of God. For them, this was the first and primary step of becoming truly saved and accepted by God. Paul is throwing the law's own teachings back at these men who teach certain non-negotiables of the law as needing to be done. If you are under the law, according to its own witness, you are under all of it and not just self-chosen portions. These men who asserted the law, were not speaking according to the law's own expectations and requirements for covenantal fidelity. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:3, "Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." Paul has to say this because this is something the false teachers were not saying, even though once sold on circumcision, many were coming to this logical conclusion. The law, by definition, was something to be swallowed whole. The law of Moses begins and ends with this assertion, and this is spoken over and over again throughout the law.

"Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you." (Deut. 4:1, 2)

"'Cursed is the man who does not uphold *the words of this law by carrying them out.*' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deut. 27:26)

These men were teaching certain "works of the law" as necessary, so Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 in order to show how their teaching leads to being under the law's curse. They teach people to do certain things in the law, while the law itself commands you to do all things or be cursed, therefore to follow the "works of the law" teachers is to be cursed according the law's own expectation. Paul states, "Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh" (Gal.6:13). This makes much better sense of this passage, because it is a biblical fact, as we have seen, that the law could be and was kept by faithful Israelites.

Secondly, to be "under the law" was to be under the law as a curse in two possible senses. First, the law was given as a national charter. The law of Moses was a law for the nation of Israel by

definition. Therefore it was to be kept by the nation. It was the nation as a whole that would stand or fall by the law of Moses. By the time Paul wrote this letter it was an established fact that the nation as a whole had broken God's covenant and were under his curse, as we see clearly from the prophets. Once the covenant had been broken, the promised curses of Deuteronomy were poured out on the nation. What was in effect at the time of the writing of Galatians was the promised curses under the covenant of the Mosaic law. To be under the law was to be under a national curse of famine, plague, and foreign oppression.

However, this is not to say that the Lord had no regard for righteous individuals within the nation of Israel. There was always a faithful remnant within the nation, maintaining covenant loyalty to the one true God. This finds classic expression in Elijah who bemoaned the corporate infidelity of Israel under Ahab's ungodly and idolatrous leadership. Elijah thought he was the only individual to remain faithful, but the Lord informed him that there were seven thousand other individuals within unfaithful Israel who has remained faithful to the covenant and had not bowed the knee to Baal (Romans 11:3,4; 1 Kings 19:10). Also, we see God turning his back on the nation with Manasseh's infidelity, yet after His back was turned, it could be said about Josiah, a king to come later, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with the law of Moses" (2 Kings 23:25). Josiah, as an individual, was faithful in the midst of a continuously unfaithful nation. So we can say that even though the nation was under a curse, there were covenant-keeping individuals who nevertheless had God's favor. It is not as though these faithful ones were kept from the suffering produced by the curse over the nation. They as well would be killed by invading armies, enslaved in Babylon, and experience the hunger and oppression this national curse produced. God knew them as faithful ones in the midst of an unfaithful nation and their hope would transcend their present suffering. Nehemiah, a faithful man who worked tirelessly for the holiness of unfaithful Israel reflects this hope, "Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love" (Neh.13:22).

So it is biblically possible to speak of two senses in which a person could experience the curse of the law. To be an Israelite was to be under the national curse. But it is also true a person could be under God's mercy, or have his favor, like Elijah, Nehemiah, Josiah, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Jesus Himself, who was born "under law,"

while at the same time living under a national curse. From this we can see that the worst of all situations was to be under God's curse in total and to have no national or personal hope of God's favor. To be an unfaithful individual was to not only experience the national curse, but also God's curse on you as an individual without a hope that transcends the present circumstances. It is to not only have God as your national enemy, but to have God as your personal enemy as well. Keeping part of the law, as the Judaizers had been teaching, places you not just under the national curse of Israel, but also under God's personal curse, because, as we have already seen, the law as a whole must be kept. Here, it is important to note, that Paul seeks to undermine the false teachers according to their own false premise of the necessity of law-keeping post-Christ. He is not to be understood as endorsing the proper keeping of the law. He is demonstrating that these men are tragically wrong-headed even according to law-keeping standards, which they claim to uphold.

Paul also asserts that no one is justified by the law but by Christ. Once again, it is crucial to understand this as a polemical statement. He is responding to those who assert law-keeping after Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the law of Moses, has come. Paul would have had no problem asserting law-keeping as God's requirement pre-Christ. However, the law finds its true meaning and substance in Christ. Therefore, to be justified under the law, as many were, is in reality to be justified by Christ, since He is the true meaning of the law. So what Paul meant is that ultimately no one is justified by the law. Once Christ comes, the law loses its significance, since its significance was as a reflection of Christ. He is not saying that the law was never kept, or could not be kept, or that the doing of it was somehow wrongheaded (see Luke 1:6). Still less is he saying that faith had nothing to do with law-keeping (see Hebrews 11:28). Neither is he saying that there was nothing Abraham had to do in order to be justified (see James 2:20-24). His point in Galatians is polemically specific and has to do with "works of the law" post-Christ and not obedience generally considered. To those who assert law keeping post-Christ, no one is justified that way now, because in reality, no one ultimately and in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ, was ever justified in that way. This is how he can talk about law-keeping as doing and not believing (Galatians 3:11,12). This is how Paul can pit Moses against Habakkuk.

As an objective reality, Habakkuk, the prophet of faith, was not opposed to Moses, the teacher of the law. If Habakkuk had been asked if law-keeping was required in order to be accepted by the Lord, he would

have responded with a resounding “Yes!” In fact, it is the lack of law-keeping in Israel that caused him such personal grief (Hab.1:4). If Moses had been asked if the Israelites needed to have faith in order to be accepted by their covenant Lord, he would have said unequivocally “Yes!” Moses, was a model of Old Covenant faith (Heb.11:28). Paul can and does pit Moses’ required “doing” against Habakkuk’s required “faith,” because of the teachings of the post-Christ law-keepers. To have Moses now that Christ has come, is by necessity, to dispense with faith in the promise. Paul is responding to the error of asserting Moses, because to assert Moses is to deny faith in the promise. They claim Moses as still binding, but to do so is to reject Habakkuk. This is why Paul asserts Habakkuk over Moses. What Habakkuk proclaimed remains binding and true in Christ, while what Moses proclaimed by way of commandments has been fulfilled in Christ (Matt.5:17). The righteous still live by faith, but the law has become obsolete (Heb.8:13).

This I believe pulls it all together. Paul’s anti-law and pro-faith-in-the-promise statements are specifically designed to reject the false teaching confronting the church. These men want to retain certain cherished practices of the law as necessary for acceptance. Paul rejects the doing of the law and upholds faith in the promise in the face of this threat. To retain the law is to reject faith-in-the promise, since Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law and object of the promise. He is not making expansive objective statements about how faith and obedience relate to one another covenantally. He is not giving an objective theological treatise on the nature of the law as God’s revelation to mankind. To understand him in this way is to miss the point of Galatians as a response to an historical error. Reformed theology has missed his point so its proponents speak as if God saves, at least theoretically, in two ways, either by law or by faith. Paul’s radical antithesis, which was designed to reject a specific historical teaching, has become Reformed theology’s objective and timeless way of looking at commands and faith in general. They have understood Galatians 3:10-12 to be Paul’s understanding of how the “diverse” covenants work. According to them, there is a covenant of works (required doings) and covenant of grace (faith in the promise). It is easy to see how they come to this conclusion if Paul’s polemic against a specific historical error is not understood.

Paul’s follow-up example from 3:15-18 confirms our interpretation. This is meant to explain what preceded in 3:10-14. Paul in this section describes the temporary nature of the law. He does this

by describing how God's covenant with Abraham was not annulled by the covenant of the Mosaic law, which comes later. The promise continues as well as the necessity of faith in that promise. The law, which is in the fore of the false teacher's thinking, does not supersede the covenant made with Abraham, in fact, he describes the law as being added as a temporary measure. He states, "What then was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come." So the law was "added" after Abraham and was to be binding "until" Christ. He concludes in 3:25, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." His overall thrust is two things, the temporary and the overall negative role of the law. The law was temporary, and its purpose was to restrain and demonstrate Israel as sinners (along with the world). But what does Paul mean by "now that faith has come?" Does he mean the response of faith to the promise of God, which had not previously existed? He can't mean that, because as Hebrews 11 demonstrates, a whole host of people in the Old Covenant had faith in the promise. The faith that has come is the same faith as "this faith" in Galatians 3:23: "Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed." The faith that has come, or this specific faith, is faith in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the law and the promise. "The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith"(Gal.3:24). It is crucial to continue to understand that the people of God have always been justified by faith, even under the law. The law's role here is to lead us "to Christ in order that we might be justified by faith" in Christ. The revelation of Jesus Christ is what is truly new! However, we cannot take our eyes off the ball and miss Paul's main point. Notice how this serves Paul's polemic against the law-keeper teaching: The law served its purpose "until faith should be revealed" (3:23) or in other words, "the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (3:25).

The temporary nature of the law in God's redemptive and covenantal history is Paul's main point. The purpose of his argument is to reject the false teaching currently confronting the church which seeks to maintain the validity of the Mosaic law. To use these statements as a general teaching on how faith and obedience work covenantally without regard for Paul's narrow and historical purpose is to be ripe for misuse and misunderstanding. Paul was not pitting faith against obedience, or promise against command, he was pitting New Covenant against Old Covenant, allegiance to Jesus Christ against a

misguided residual allegiance to Moses.

One thing to note in addition. Paul is not interested in arguing for the validity of Christ's claims to be the Savior of Israel and the world. Paul argues from the standpoint of those who at least acknowledge Christ as Lord. This is not a matter of debate with Paul's opponents. His concern is to show how Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise effects our view of law-keeping. The false teachers believed that law-keeping along with faith in Jesus Christ was necessary to inherit the promise. Paul's strong polemic is to show how law-keeping is not only no longer necessary, but opposed to faith in Christ. So he says, not by law, or by doing the law, but by faith in Jesus. "If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it (the inheritance) to Abraham through a promise." Paul is quick to note that the law objectively considered as God's revelation is not against the promise (3:21). This is easy to see, because the promise of inheritance is contained in the law itself. The promise to Abraham is repeated to his descendants, the people of Israel, through the law (Deut. 28:1-14). But once "this faith" in Christ has come, then Old Covenant law-keeping for acceptance by God has ended.

Strong Tower #2

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." (Romans 4:1-9)

From my experience, this is the most popular text in defense of faith

alone. While faith alone for justification is never spoken of favorably in the Scriptures, it is believed that this passage teaches the substance of the matter. Indeed, this would appear to be the case when Paul says in verse 5, “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” First, Paul sets working against believing when he writes, “to the man who does not work but trusts God.” He appears to be saying that working and believing for justification are antithetical to each other. This understanding is further strengthened by Paul’s teaching that the man of faith is the “wicked” who stands justified by his faith. This establishes the non-worker to be the one who stands justified by his faith, because he is a wicked man who has no works to credit him before God. It is understood that David is depicted by Paul as another example to illustrate the point. David speaks of the “transgressor” who has his sins covered by faith and “apart from works” (vv. 6-8). David’s own life as a forgiven sinner is understood to reflect this faith alone perspective. At first glance, this seems to be a formidable text for faith alone.

However, we have to keep in mind that Paul wrote Romans 4 as an historical illustration for his teaching from Romans 2. We see this from Paul’s opening verse in Romans 4, “What then (or therefore) shall we say Abraham, our forefather discovered in this matter?” Paul is now bringing in Abraham and David as historical examples to give flesh and bones to his prior teaching. He wisely calls Abraham and David, since they were two Jewish heroes, into his argument as key witnesses. So it follows that we need to know what Paul was arguing for in Romans 2-3, in order to know how Abraham and David function as illustrations. In other words, we must understand Romans 4 in the context of Paul’s overall argument. The question is: What is Paul’s concern that makes Abraham and David ideal witnesses?

Paul’s concern for his fellow Jews is front and center in Romans 2:17, 18, 21, 23: “Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and *brag* about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?...You who *brag* about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?”

Here we read of Paul’s strong concern about Jewish boasting. They are in the very bad habit of boasting “about their relationship to God” and “about the law.” What makes this particularly offensive to Paul is that while they boast about their possession of the law and their relationship to God through it, they at the same time are in the habit of breaking it. It is important to see that their boasting does not derive

from obedience to the law, but rather, their boasting derives from the mere possession of it. Paul then further critiques his fellow Jews by bringing up circumcision. It is clear that this has a disproportionate value to the Jew because Paul finds it necessary to argue against its value. “Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you were not circumcised” (Rom. 2:25). Clearly they are finding their confidence before God by circumcision even while they steal and commit adultery. Paul goes on, “If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.” This makes Paul’s concern very clear. He is arguing against a Jewish confidence in mere possession of the law. They are deceived into thinking that having the law and bearing the physical sign of circumcision is enough. Paul argues his point in even stronger terms, “A man is not a Jew if he is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God” (Rom. 2:28,29). Notice, Paul equates the keeping of the law with circumcision of the heart by the Spirit. In other words, the man who obeys the law is the man who has the Spirit, and the man who relies on circumcision of his flesh is the one devoid of the Spirit and a lawbreaker. The man who, by the Spirit’s power, keeps the law, will at the day of judgment condemn the man who has the law and fails to keep it.

Paul’s point here, is not that keeping the law (i.e. good works) is what produces the boasting. Of course, this can happen. Sinful human beings can find almost anything as fodder for boasting, even faith. But here, Paul does not fault the law keeper as the boaster, because the boaster he is writing against is the law breaker. Paul’s concern is not works per se, but confidence from mere possession of the law, in which the work of circumcision is the chief sign of its possession.

Paul then anticipates an objection from his Jewish audience, and this objection Paul presents as a rhetorical question to begin chapter 3. “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” Notice he equates “being a Jew” and circumcision specifically. He goes on to deny that there is no advantage at all—indeed, “they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” But the remainder of chapter 3 is written not to uphold the Jew as being in a

special place, but to demonstrate that life under the law has served to show that Jews are sinners in need of a Savior, just like the Gentiles. “What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (Rom.3:9). Paul’s argument then presents the universal solution to the universal problem of sin, which is Jesus Christ and the righteousness from God that comes to all through faith in him. Jew and Gentile alike are under sin, so Jew and Gentile alike need Jesus’ sacrifice of atonement to be received by faith (Rom.3:21-26).

Now Paul returns again to his original concern. “Where then is boasting? It is excluded.” The law as taught by the Jews who Paul criticizes, does not provide the basis for excluding boasting, but the knowledge of sin and the one solution for all people does exclude boasting in having the law. The Jews cannot put confidence in having the law, or in other words, “being a Jew” (Rom.3:1). “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles, too? Yes, of the Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” Notice, equal access to the one God of all is what Paul understands as excluding boasting. The Jew can place no confidence in their natural heritage, their physical connection seen through the physical and outward rite of circumcision.

Only now can we begin to understand Paul’s use of Abraham and David in Romans 4:1-9. Now Paul introduces both Abraham and David as witnesses to men of their own bloodline, who put no confidence in that bloodline, and therefore in their circumcision, but who rather lived by faith in the promise and mercy of God. Literally, Paul poses the question this way, “What, therefore, shall we say Abraham, our forefather, discovered according to the flesh?” The NIV interprets the Greek word *sarka* as “this matter.” It stands alone in translating this word in this way, the more popular and literal rendering is “flesh.”⁴³ Once again, boasting comes into view with verse 2. “If, in

43 It is debated whether the prepositional phrase “according to the flesh” modifies “our forefather” or modifies the verb “found.” The first option would read “our forefather according to the flesh,” the second option would read “what Abraham, our forefather found according to the flesh.” I have preferred the second option for contextual reasons. Grammatically, both options are possible. Paul’s prior concern was to argue for the lack of value for circumcision of the “flesh” as a justifying work before God. So it seems to make the most sense to read it this way. However, it is possible Paul would be emphasizing Abraham as a bloodline descendant, and being that, what did he, “our forefather according to the flesh” discover? The

fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.” Context must rule our understanding of what Paul means by boasting here. His concern right up to this verse has been a concern for Jewish boasting in having the law by virtue of being a Jew and not a Gentile, with circumcision as the “work” serving as a sign of the possession of the law. Paul grants, that if Abraham was justified on this basis, he indeed has a boast—“but not before God.” Abraham could have considered himself as special by virtue of his “flesh” before men. But Paul now shows his boasting brothers that Abraham himself did not have this understanding. “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’”(v.3). Abraham believed God’s promise to him, and it was his faith and not his flesh that commended him before God.

Next Paul uses a wage earner illustration. “Now when a man works, his wages are not considered for him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, for the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is considered as righteousness.” We must keep our contextual controls in place. The boasting that has been Paul’s concern has been of a specific kind, that is, boasting in having the law by virtue of bloodline, or “of the flesh.” This mindset has created a situation in which Paul’s fellow Jews believe they have a claim against God, that God owes them, or is obligated to them as His special people. His wage earner point is very specific. The worker has a claim against his employer for wages in which he can boast. Paul’s point here is that this totally misunderstands the real situation between God and Abraham and David. “However, to the man who does not work...” in context means, to the man who does not think his flesh by circumcision obligates God, “but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness.” History is on Paul’s side since Abraham was called from idolatry in Mesopotamia. Abraham had no confidence in his flesh, and had no possible reason for confidence in his flesh because of that fact. Abraham believed God’s promise and was reckoned righteous by virtue of his faith, not his bloodline. Next comes David. “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” Once again, we must keep our understanding of “apart from works” in tune to Paul’s concern. David put no confidence in his circumcision to justify him before God. Bloodline meant nothing to him when

upshot of all this, is that either reading serves to establish my interpretation of Paul’s meaning in this text.

confronted with his sin. David was the “ungodly” murderer and adulterer who needed his sins wiped away. His confidence was in the mercy of his God to be received by faith “apart from circumcision.” We must remember that Paul is contending with Jews who are thieves, murderers and adulterers, yet have confidence before God because of their “flesh” (Rom.2:22-24). David was not like them.

Paul’s argument from verse 9 through 11 serves to confirm this interpretation. “Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before” (vv. 9,10)! Now Paul is driving his argument home. Abraham was credited before God as righteous apart from circumcision. There was a period of time in which circumcision was not necessary for their forefather Abraham, and neither is it necessary now. However, it is true, as a faithful Israelite under the law, you needed to be circumcised in order to be justified as belonging to God. This was a command that had to be obeyed. But Paul’s point here is simple and straight-forward. There was a time when justification took place before circumcision was mandated, and now is the time when justification takes place after the law, or the time of mandated circumcision. In fact, Abraham, as a man justified “apart from works of the law”(i.e. circumcision) stood as a forerunner of all those who would in the future would be justified “apart from works of the law.” Paul explains, “So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be reckoned to them”(v.11). So Abraham is not just the forefather of the Jew, but also the forefather of the Gentile, not through the flesh and circumcision, but through faith in the promise of God. However, the Jews have not been pushed aside. “And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our forefather Abraham had before he was circumcised”(v.12). God reckons the Jew as righteous as well, but on the same ground as the Gentile, by faith in Jesus Christ, therefore there is no possible ground for boasting. Both Jew and Gentile stand on equal footing, both claim Abraham as their forefather, but both can only do this through faith in Jesus Christ.

It should be clear now why this text cannot be seen as endorsing faith alone for justification. When Paul rejects works in this context, he is rejecting a particular kind of working that establishes a Jewish boast against other men and sees God as obligated to them by virtue of their

flesh which indicates natural descent not moral effort. The extent of Paul's purpose in Romans 4 is to present historical examples that demonstrate the fallacy of this belief. He is not arguing against works in total.⁴⁴ He is not even arguing against the necessity of circumcision under the Old Covenant. He would readily acknowledge that both David and Abraham had to be circumcised in order to be justified before God. David could not confess his sin against God on the one hand and refuse God when He commands circumcision on the other and expect to be justified.

To understand Paul as rejecting "works" (i.e. obedience) in total because works by necessity result in boasting before God is to say that when God commands obedience for justification, He commands men to enter into a situation in which they will, by necessity, boast against God and sin.⁴⁵ So from this view, God commands men to sin, when He commands them to obey! It may be objected that God's commands only result in this hopeless situation when He commands obedience for justification, but not for sanctification. This objection is really no objection at all. It is a shallow attempt to avoid the obvious. If boasting

44 Tom Schreiner, in order to defend the traditional understanding which maintains that Paul means "works fundamentally" must deny these contextual indicators. He states, "This view founders (in the present context) because Paul does not even use the word *nomos* (law) in verses 1-8. The use of *erga* ("works") alone (v.v.2,6) and the verbal form *ergazomeno* ("to the one working," vv.4,5) demonstrate that his attack is against works fundamentally." Here Schreiner rejects that Paul means "works of the law," because the word "law" is never used in verses 1-8, even though "works" clearly means "works of the law" in the argument leading up to and following verses 1-8! He goes on, "To appeal to the discussion of circumcision in verses 9-12 in support of the notion of boundary markers are the central issue fails, because the "therefore" in verse 9 reveals a new stage in the argument." What Schreiner casually passes over is the fact the "therefore" connects what follows to what precedes by way of logical progression. The "therefore" points to a conclusion which is reached on the basis of what precedes. What precedes, namely verses 1-8, leads to the conclusion stated in verses 9-12. The fact that Schreiner has to dismiss this as a "new stage" and denies the obvious logical connection reveals the weakness of his position. See Schreiner, *Romans: An Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Baker, 1998, 218.

45 John Murray demonstrates this logic in his commentary. He writes, "It (Paul's argument) is to the effect of the following syllogism. (1) If a man is justified by works he has a ground for glorying. (2) Abraham was justified by works. (3) Therefore Abraham had ground for glorying. Paul emphatically challenges and denies the conclusion...by showing the minor premise to not be true. He proves that Abraham was not justified by works and, by proving this, he refutes the conclusion."(p.130) See Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans 1959, 130.

against God is a sin, and boasting by necessity results from doing good works, then it really makes no difference. If good works by necessity result in boasting and boasting is sin, then God commands us to sin when He commands our obedience for sanctification, for we will, by necessity boast in being made more holy (i.e. sanctified)! If we understand Paul to be rejecting good works in total because in doing them, they, by necessity, result in boasting and sin, then we cannot conclude otherwise. In other words, the faith alone view leads us straight into biblical incoherence, because everywhere in the Scriptures God commands our obedience, and never to we get a hint that this will by necessity lead us to sin, in fact just the opposite- His commands lead us away from sin. Paul's meaning comes into focus and maintains biblical coherence by understanding the limited and contextually defined purpose of Paul's argument.

Paul is arguing for faith in Jesus Christ for both Jew and Gentile, and against "works of the Mosaic law" which have been understood by Jews to be a legitimate cause of boasting before men and a claim against God by virtue of their flesh. The danger facing the church is not that false teachers are commanding men to obey God for justification, but that men are commanding circumcision which places confidence and boasting in the "flesh." This danger is articulated by Paul, "Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh" (Gal.6:13). We must understand that Paul is not arguing against "works" as obedience to God through the commands of Jesus and the Apostles. To insist on this is to insist on much more than Paul ever meant to say in Romans 4:1-8.

Strong Tower #3

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. [For] Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by law: "The man who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that is by faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend to heaven?' (That is to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the deep?' (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in

your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: that if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:4-9)

Once again, it is easy to understand the apparent value this passage would have for the faith alone teaching. Here Paul appears to place doing against believing as two antithetical ways of being justified before God. This antithesis is very similar to the one Paul sets up in our Galatians passage, since Paul again quotes Leviticus 18:5 and rejects doing the law and upholds faith as the way to be justified. The advocates of faith alone point out that Paul rejects the doing-way as “the righteousness that is by law” and upholds the faith-way as “the righteousness that is by faith.” In what follows, Paul seems to emphasize the difference between faith and law by promoting “the word of faith we proclaim.” This “word of faith” is interpreted to mean that if you simply confess your faith that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead then the promise is yours. These teachers see this text as showing that a man is justified by faith alone, not by obedience as in the days of Moses.

First, all agree that Paul once again establishes an antithesis. But is he setting up a faith-way of relating to God over and against an obedience-way of relating to God? The passage itself argues against this kind of understanding. First, Paul asserts that the coming of Christ marks the “end of the law.” He does not assert the end of obedience or of good works simply considered. Paul is arguing for the end of doing something *specific*, namely, “the law.” Paul then gives reasons for the termination of the law. “For Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The man who does these things will live by them’”(v.5). “The law” is forefront in Paul’s mind, and it was by doing “the things” of the law that a person would be justified under the Old Covenant. He goes on, “But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart who will ascend into heaven? (That is to bring Christ down.)’” What is remarkable here is that Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12 to assert faith, which is from the law of Moses! Paul is using Moses’ command to assert the necessity of faith, which is to say that Moses commanded the same thing in the law. What is Paul’s point? His point is the same as Moses’ in Deuteronomy 30. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses was proclaiming that Israel need not go

elsewhere to discover the will of God. They need not “go to heaven” or “descend into the deep.” The will of God was not some deep mystery that needed to be discovered. “No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it” (30:14). The word at that time was the word of Moses. They need not go elsewhere, but rest content with God’s provision in the law. Paul is now saying that the Word has come to us in human flesh. The will of God now is revealed not through the law, but through Jesus Christ. The antithesis Paul is setting up is not doing vs. believing, but the law vs. Jesus Christ who is “the end of the law.” Notice the parallel:

“No, the word is very near you; It is in your *mouth* and in your *heart*, so you may obey it' [Deut.30:14],

that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming:

That if you confess with your *mouth*, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your *heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

The heart and mouth are to be involved in both covenants, but the focus is different. For Moses it was the word of the law, but for Paul and the New Covenant the focus is Christ who Himself is the living Word. The Word Himself has come down from heaven. We need not look past Him in order to discover God’s will, and in this case, we need not look past Jesus and back to the law. Christ alone is all we need. This is the new word of faith.

The faith alone adherents will point out that Moses emphasized obeying while Paul was all about faith and believing. On the surface, this would appear to be the case. But we must look closer. The “word of faith” that Paul and the apostles are proclaiming, in contrast to Moses, is that “Jesus is Lord.” Tightly connected to this confession is the belief that “God raised him from the dead.” You must believe in Christ’s resurrection from the dead in order to acknowledge Christ’s present and very real lordship. This is where faith alone teachers run into trouble. What does it mean to “confess that Jesus is Lord?” Some hold that to confess that Jesus is Lord is to do just that, faith alone teaching renders a proper confession of Christ’s lordship with our mouths as sufficient for justification. This is celebrated as a demonstration of the free grace of the gospel, that to merely confess Jesus is sufficient for salvation. But is this what Paul meant? It cannot

be. How can Paul mean this when Jesus himself teaches the insufficiency of saying Jesus is Lord with our mouths yet not doing what he has said we are to do? “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”(Mt.7:21).

For other faith alone teachers, it means that the fruit of faith is the confession that Jesus is Lord and that Paul places the fruit of faith (i.e. sanctification) prior to faith itself which alone justifies. So, according to them, in this verse Paul has justification and sanctification alongside one another. So to confess with your mouth is the sanctified fruit of faith, but to believe in your heart is all you have to do to be justified. However, how is it possible Paul can mean that confessing Jesus as our Lord has nothing to do with our justification when Paul himself holds out salvation as the promise for those who do? Salvation is made conditional not on just believing, but also upon confessing Christ’s lordship (Rom.10:9,10). So if salvation is dependent upon confessing Christ as Lord, as Paul clearly asserts, and confessing Jesus as Lord entails more than saying Jesus is Lord with our mouths, as Jesus Himself asserts, then it follows quite reasonably that salvation is dependent upon doing what Jesus and His apostles have commanded us to do. To confess Jesus is Lord is to have Jesus Christ as our Lord, the Lord of our lives.

This makes good sense of our passage. In this passage Paul pits Moses in Leviticus 18:5 against Moses in Deuteronomy 30 in order to show that the faith Moses commanded for his people under the Old Covenant, that is, to believe the Word that he had given them in the law was sufficient for life, was the same kind of faith Paul and the apostles were requiring in response to Jesus. “The word of faith we are proclaiming” is different than the word of faith Moses proclaimed, but it is still a “word of faith.” To live under Moses was to do the things Moses commanded to be done, things like circumcision and Sabbath-keeping. But the “word of faith” being proclaimed now is that “Jesus is Lord” as His resurrection from the dead has clearly demonstrated. With Jesus as Lord is a New Covenant, and with a New Covenant are things to be done just as Jesus has already said quite clearly, and nothing less than salvation is at stake in not only saying Jesus is Lord, but acknowledging Him as Lord in the biblical sense of the word.

At this point it is important that I acknowledge the possibility of the second faith alone understanding of Romans 10:9,10. It is possible that when Paul says, “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” that

Paul is talking about two aspects of our salvation. It is possible that Paul switches from justification, a momentary forensic declaration in the first clause, to the process of sanctification in the second clause and that Paul intends confessing Jesus and being saved as not referring to justification but to being made more holy through a sanctifying confession of Jesus. As a seminary professor of mine used to say, “All things are possible, but not all things are probable.” I believe, while it is possible to see it this way, it is not at all likely this is how Paul intended to be understood. Let’s look closer. The outline below shows Paul’s logic in this text.

*“If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord'
and
believe in your heart that Jesus rose from the dead,
you will be saved”(v.9).*

As the above outline shows, the promise of being saved is dependent on meeting the twin conditions of confessing and believing. Confessing Jesus as Lord in the first clause and believing Jesus rose from the dead both lead to being saved. Then Paul makes an explanatory statement with the next verse:

*“For a man believes with his heart for justification
and
confesses with his mouth for salvation” (v.10).*

With this second phrase Paul is repeating himself. In verse 9, both confessing and believing lead to being saved. In verse 10, confessing leads to salvation and believing leads to justification. Either we believe Paul to mean, as he did in verse 9, that confessing and believing lead to the same thing—salvation, now in verse 10 described in two different ways, as justification and salvation, or we believe that Paul is speaking about two different movements in the process of salvation, namely, justification and sanctification. The first observation that makes the two movements view unlikely is the first phrase. If this were Paul’s intention, it is odd that he would lump both confessing and believing as necessary for salvation and then in the next phrase make only confessing necessary for salvation and believing necessary for something different (justification). The second observation is that the proponents of faith alone make justification the first move in the process of salvation, with sanctification following in its wake. Why is

it, then, that Paul mentions a sanctifying confession first and justifying belief second in verse 10, which is his explanatory clause? If this “process of salvation” were informing Paul’s discourse then this is certainly odd. Calvin himself thinks so as he comments,

The Word of the Lord ought to bring forth fruit wherever it exists, and our confession of the Word is the fruit of the mouth. To put confession before faith is an inversion of the order quite common in Scripture. The order would have been better if the faith of the heart had been put first, and the confession of the mouth, which arises from it, had followed.”⁴⁶

Notice, Calvin himself considers Paul to have “inverted the order” of salvation, and even finds it necessary to correct Paul in saying it “would have been better if the faith of the heart had been put first.” If Calvin is right, then he is quite correct to conclude that Paul could have done a better job with it. But since Paul was not only a highly capable theologian in his own right, but as an apostle a teacher of theologians, and as a writer of Scripture, inspired by the Spirit of God, it is better to conclude that Paul did a fine job of explaining himself. It would be better to question our expectations of what Paul should have said. In conclusion, it is far more likely that Paul did not have this “order of salvation” in mind at all and that in this text justification and salvation are two different ways of describing the same reality, which is to be obtained by “confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.”

That Paul intends Christ to be the focus, and faith in him—not faith as a unique New Covenant response is confirmed by what follows verse 10. See below:

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. For the Scripture says, “*Anyone* who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” For there is *no difference between Jew and Gentile* - the same Lord is *Lord of all* and richly blesses *all* who call on him, for, “*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

We can discern a tight logical progression in Paul’s thought. Verses 11-13 establish the basis for verse 10. To paraphrase; “If you confess Jesus

⁴⁶ Calvin’s commentary, 227.

is Lord you will be saved, for ‘anyone who trusts in the Lord will be saved.’” The tight logical progression makes Paul’s focus very clear. Now in the New Covenant, “anyone,” “everyone,” “all” being saved is a new aspect of the New Covenant. Now “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile” even though there clearly was under the Old Covenant. Paul quotes Old Covenant prophets, Joel and Isaiah, who were prophesying a future time when God’s message would be universal in its scope, when not just Israel will be summoned to “call upon the Lord,” but every nation will hear the summons. Again, what is new about the New Covenant, is not trusting as a saving response, but the call for all to trust—Jew and Gentile alike. The stone that would cause men to stumble would not be the call to believe rather than obey, but it would be the call to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of all mankind. This now pulls together this passage from where Paul began: “Christ is the end of the law so that there might be righteousness for everyone who believes....for there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him”(vv. 4, 12).

Conclusion

I have attempted in this appendix to explain three so-called strong tower passages of the faith alone view of our acceptance before God. I believe that I have demonstrated that these towers are not at all strong for faith alone, but rather, they point quite clearly to God’s acceptance being based upon our allegiance to the Lord. To hold to the faith alone view leads to either explaining Paul incoherently and to accuse him of “inverting the order of salvation” or of the need to ignore the wider biblical context of Paul’s thought. We cannot isolate particular sayings of any biblical writer in order to back our favorite doctrine. This is dishonest, and reveals a desire to not really hear Paul, but to hear our cherished traditions from his mouth. This must be combated with the utmost energy and forthrightness. May the Lord lead His church and the clear light of His truth.

