

Where Do We Go From Here?

This work has been an attempt to raise awareness of the theological challenge in which we find ourselves, and the challenge is a great one. We evangelicals live in the midst of a stream of thought and faith that is held most dearly. Faith alone is held more or less self-consciously by evangelicals as the very cornerstone of evangelical orthodoxy. To be faithful to Jesus, in the main, is understood to mean holding to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. What makes matters worse, is the commonly held assumption that the only option to the doctrine of faith alone is a pursuit of “works righteousness” of the type that Paul rejects and Roman Catholicism endorses. This leads to irrational fears that to abandon faith alone will lead to a life of futile attempts to earn our way to heaven. These are seen to be the only two choices, hence we are subject of a logical fallacy, the fallacy of the excluded middle.

For evangelicals we are either justified by faith alone *or* by works. For Catholics we are justified by works the church directs us to do, as they are added to the things the church tells us to believe. These are the belief-ditches that lie on either side of “the way of righteousness” that Isaiah prophesied so powerfully about (Is. 26:7, 8; 35:8-10). The way of righteousness leading to the Kingdom of God is the path of God’s commands in Scripture which are kept by faith. The excluded middle is not a mediating position between evangelicals and Catholics; it is the only way, and the only truth, and the only life, and Jesus guarantees that only a few will find it. Of course evangelicals and Catholics alike both strongly believe they are on this narrow way. These convictions are emotionally held and makes careful biblical reasoning very difficult, but careful biblical reasoning is the only way to know the truth about this way of righteousness.

This makes our position a difficult one indeed. But the truth must be told. We can’t imagine the difficulty of a first century Jew

proclaiming that someone who had been publicly crucified in a shameful way, is now sitting at the right hand of the Father ruling the world! God's glory shines through even more brightly in very dark times, and we have entered our own modern dark age. The dark age in religion was characterized by biblical ignorance and superstition, which work hand in hand. Not to understand the Scriptures is to be ripe for all kinds of aberrant beliefs and practices. Many of Roman Catholicism's current and cherished beliefs have grown out of such ignorance of the Scriptures.

We live in a day, however, in which a new darkness has fallen over Christendom. It is a darkness that has been born from ignorance just as the old darkness was. The old darkness was produced by an ignorance due to the lack of understanding of biblical revelation, by priest as well as by lay person. The fundamental reason was that the Sacraments were seen as *the* way in which we relate to God. Therefore, it follows that according to this view, knowing the Scriptures was at worst, not necessary, and at best, of a secondary concern. This, of course, was and is, theologically misguided. This error resulted in spiritual death and deprivation of a magnitude that is hard to even comprehend.

But the truth is, we live in a new darkness, a new dark age within evangelicalism, in which we are experiencing a spiritual death and deprivation of our own.²⁸ The new darkness is also born from ignorance of God's revealed will, and this ignorance is due to being theologically misguided. We, as evangelicals, are not misguided in the same way, for sure; we have liberated ourselves from the "Babylonian captivity" of Sacramental slavery. However, in the process, we have run into the arms of another slave master.

The very discovery of Luther and Calvin that led to their liberation from Rome resulted in an unholy alliance with the one who Paul most sternly warned us about in his second letter to the Thessalonians. Luther, while casting off the chains of Roman Catholic works righteousness, having to do with a whole host of unbiblical remedies for sin, bravely announced that not only was the Pope his enemy, but so was Moses. Moses, according to the reformer, is the "hangman," the "minister of death." Luther, in his loathing of Roman Catholic demands, now loathed all demands whatsoever where justification is concerned. Demands, in the form of biblical commands,

28 Dr. David Wells writes compellingly about this present reality in his three volume series entitled, *No Place for Truth*, *God in the Wasteland*, and *Losing Our Virtue*.

were seen as condemning words, and therefore Luther's enemy, to be renounced in the name of freedom. He would say in his *Table Talk*, "I will have none of Moses with his law, for he is an enemy to my Lord and Saviour Christ. If Moses will go to law with me, I will give him his dispatch, and say: Here stands Christ."²⁹ On another occasion he said,

Moses with his law is most terrible; there never was any equal to him in perplexing, affrighting, tyrannizing, threatening, preaching, and thundering; for he lays sharp hold on the conscience, and fearfully works it, but all by God's express command. When we are affrighted, feeling our sins, God's wrath and judgments, most certainly, in the law is no justification; therein is nothing celestial and divine, but 'tis altogether of the world, which world is the kingdom of the devil.³⁰

Conversely, Jesus is depicted as one who does not threaten but gently cajoles His already justified people. "By this we see that he forces not, but teaches amicably, saying: 'Blessed are the poor,' etc., 'Come to me all ye that are weary and heavy laden,' etc. And the apostles use the words: 'I admonish,' 'I exhort,' 'I pray,' etc.; so that we see in every place that the gospel is not a lawbook, but a mild preaching of Christ's merits..."³¹ Luther seems to have forgotten that the Law of Moses exhorted faith in the God who is a "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex. 34:6). He seems to have forgotten that Jesus threatened his believing disciples with the torments of hell when he promised them, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt. 12:35).

Luther divided law from gospel, Moses from Jesus and command from promise. Luther's great discovery that set him free from Rome, had the tragic effect of setting us free from Jesus and His New Covenant. We evangelicals proudly assert that we are free to eat meat on Friday, and divorce at the same rate as the rest of the world. We crawled out of the muddy ditch on one side, and in our wild joy of new-found freedom, have blindly stumbled into the ditch on the other. It is a different ditch to be sure, but it is still a ditch. It is not the firm footing

29 William Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, Bell, 1875, 221.

30 *Table Talk*, 220.

31 *Table Talk*, 227.

of the road which is the Way. The problem for us now is that we like our ditch. We even call our ditch old paths of orthodoxy just as they do in the ditch on the other side of the road.

We have escaped from papal captivity, for that we must be grateful. But we must not be so grateful that we fail to hear Jesus above the din of evangelical faith alone orthodoxy. The freedom of the faith alone evangelical is no freedom at all, but an invitation to slavery to sin, and that with an appeased conscience. Assurance of salvation is a prime selling point of the faith alone doctrine. We are frightened by the assertion that if we abandon faith alone we will have no assurance of God's acceptance. The clear conscience and assurance of the "faith alone" evangelical type hardens us to the sin we all know is wrong, but have no power to resist. We have no power to resist sin because, according to the faith alone doctrine, we have no real need to. This results in having a "form of godliness, but denying it's power" (2 Tim. 3:5).

The problem is that the kingdom of God is not about mere talk, but it is about power. Paul warned us of one who would come. He would be the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:3). He would be one who would come as an angel of light and in the name of the Lord, proclaiming salvation and freedom from God's law. The man of lawlessness is indeed free from God's law and wants you to be free too, and like him, become a slave to sin, heading for death. He will preach fierce sermons of old path orthodoxy against false teachers who dare to obscure his counsel with heretical notions of obedience, repentance and covenant faithfulness. He will give a shoulder to cry on and sooth fears with sweet imaginary notions of God's unconditional love. He will say, Jesus has done it all, there is nothing more to do. He will assure you that this is a good thing, because in reality all your faithfulness is disgusting to God, like a menstrual cloth. He will tell you that the very best you can do is actually very disgusting to God. All we have to do is believe that Jesus died for our sins, we are told. We are told by the "lawless one" to memorize John 3:16, and verses like it. We are told that this is what it means to "know Jesus," to believe that he died for my sins. He teaches that the rest is gravy, and that you can live without gravy. The darkness settles in. We already have all we need. We are saved. Roman Catholics put Jesus in their hearts by eating the host, and we put Jesus in our hearts by going forward, and praying a prayer.

We have believed a host of lies and it is time to hear Jesus again. It is time to not rest content with old path orthodoxy. Jesus Christ and His apostles can and must be understood. The Bible is a covenantal

document that is not to be ripped into preferential pieces. It is meant to be eaten whole. We need all of it because all of it has been given to us to save us. We “live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4). The covenant that God has made with His people incorporates the commands and the promises into one unified saving Word. Luther and Calvin were tragically wrong to lead us in another direction. But, they recognized their own fallibility. Our Lord will be their judge.

In the meantime, I personally believe (and hope!) that, though wrong about the covenant and how it functions, these were men who lived the truth. They loved Jesus Christ and suffered much for Him. They lived and worshiped better than their doctrine. Jonathan Edwards recognized this possibility when he considered “how a wonderful and mysterious agency of God’s Spirit may so influence some men’s hearts, that their practice in this regard may be contrary to their own principles.”³² The best testimony to this from Luther was the expression of his distress at the end of his life:

Luther thought the preaching of the gospel would bring about all the necessary changes, but had to complain bitterly, at the end of his life, of the dissolute manners of the students and citizens at Wittenberg, and seriously thought of leaving the city in disgust.³³

This brings to mind Peter writing about Lot as a “righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men, for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard” (2 Pet. 2:7,8). In his case, Luther was bemoaning a city who had cut its teeth on faith alone teaching. He was a man who bemoaned the practice of a people that had followed consistently from the principles taught. To Luther’s credit, his practice was different, as he had not lived according to his own principles.

We must do better. We must teach and preach true principles. We must teach and preach the covenant of our Lord, and in doing so, be reformers according to God’s Word. The light of the Lord’s Word must shine on and in the church. It will expose much sin and complacency, but we will gain life and have it abundantly. The darkness will recede

32 Edwards, *Works*, Vol. 1, 654.

33 Philip Schaff, *History of The Christian Church*, Vol. 8, Hendricksen, 1996, 484-5.

where the light of God's truth is proclaimed in all its covenantal pungency. In the words of Dr. C. van der Waal, "If things go wrong in the churches, ask whether the covenant is preached and understood. If the missionary work is superficial, ask whether the covenant is taken into account. If sects and movements multiply, undoubtedly they speak of the covenant in a strange way, or ignore it deliberately."³⁴ We must recall the words of Isaiah for our day of great darkness,

*"To the law and to the testimony!
If they do not speak according to this word,
they have no light of dawn."*

³⁴ C van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, 175.