

12.

The Great Divorce Revisited

I have great regard for both Martin Luther and John Calvin as men of courage and faith, in the face of great opposition, to a move “back to the Scriptures.” They broke with centuries of tradition, and traditional unquestioning allegiance to church authorities. What they accomplished in their great zeal for the Lord should never be minimized. However, these men and the traditions they spawned should never be enshrined with unquestioned magisterial authority. This was something that John Calvin humbly recognized as he wrote in his *Institutes*, “Above all, I must urge him (the reader) to have recourse to Scripture in order to weigh the testimonies that I adduce from it.”¹⁴ Here Calvin gives us a charge to go “back to the Scriptures” in order to weigh his own teachings. So if Calvin is wrong, and we follow his opinions, we are at fault for not weighing carefully enough his teaching with Holy Scripture.

Where Calvin, and Luther before him, were tragically wrong, was in rending the covenant into separate and unrelated compartments. The tight unity of the covenant that hold faith and obedience together for justification was pried apart. Faith was seen by Calvin as the part that relates to justification. Obedience comes next, as a necessary consequence of justifying faith, but has no causal relationship to it. This leads to a confession, or creed, which amounts to the opposite of what Scripture reveals. The Reformation heritage says in so many words, “You see we are justified by faith alone and not by works.” Scripture says, “You see we are justified by works and not by faith alone.”

For Calvin, the commands of Jesus and the Law of God become useful guides to holiness for the person who has already been “justified by faith alone.” This understanding has had the effect of turning Scripture on its head. Let me illustrate: Jesus’ covenantal logic is reflected in Matthew 5:44,45 when He says “love your enemies that

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 1. Westminster, 1960, 8.

you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” This is rendered very different, according to Calvin’s faith alone teaching. For Calvin, those who have been justified by faith alone, and are established as God’s sons, will love their enemies as a *necessary consequence* of being justified by faith alone. But for Jesus, being justified as “God’s son” lies at the end of obedience, and the future promise of sonship is the motivating factor for that obedience. For Calvin, the declaration of sonship comes by “faith alone,” and then the obedience of loving our enemies becomes a necessary consequence of being God’s sons already. The problems here are obvious.

First, Jesus’ future promise of sonship is depicted as to no longer be a future promise. Second, the promise of sonship is no longer dependent upon the command to love our enemies. The promise is torn away from the command. For Calvin, sonship is now attained without reference to the command at all, and can be had by faith in the promise alone. This, I contend, is a blatant mis-representation of the teaching of Scripture. This mis-representation strikes at the covenant God has made with mankind through Jesus Christ. Therefore, the consequences are nothing less than disastrous.

James represents faith and works as working together in the sense of being complimentary. But take note, he intends for us to understand that faith and works work together *for justification*. This is why he concludes by saying, “You see, a man is *justified by works* and not by faith alone” (Jas. 2:24). We cannot rip one away from the other *for justification*. James asserts this necessity by insisting to those who hold to faith alone for justification that faith alone is dead. “Faith by itself is dead,” therefore it cannot justify anyone (Jas. 2:17). In separating faith from works for justification we kill faith.

In order to explain this, let’s continue with Jesus’ covenantal logic in Matthew 5:43-45. Jesus promises sonship for those who obey his command to “love your enemies.” It is this promise that we are to embrace by faith. The object of faith is the future promise of being declared as God’s son, and we obtain that promise by a life of faithfulness in loving our enemies. But Calvin’s understanding that sonship is *not* a future promise but *only* present possession to be had by faith alone causes us to take our eyes off of the goal that Jesus Himself commands us to fix them on, which is our *future* declaration of sonship! Faith loses its proper Jesus-given focus.

We may say we have faith and believe in Jesus, but if we don’t believe what Jesus told us to believe, then these words about faith and believing are empty. They have lost their biblical-covenantal content.

Jesus has given us what to believe, but if we refuse what He has given us to believe, then faith, biblically considered, is dead. And when faith dies, then obedience cannot be sustained because it no longer has the will to live. When faith is dead, loving our enemies is a command that we have no power to obey, because the God -ordained motivation for obedience, which is faith in the promise of our future declaration of sonship, has just been torn away. John Calvin, in his commentary on Matthew, reflects this down-grade of what Jesus taught. Here is Calvin's explanation of Jesus' teaching:

No-one wins this distinction for himself (sonship), no-one begins to be a son of God from the time he loves his enemies - but this is Scripture's normal way of speaking, to present the free gifts of God as a reward, by way of encouraging us to do the right thing.¹⁵

Notice Calvin acknowledges that Scripture's "normal way of speaking" is to present the gifts of God "as a reward." In other words, Calvin acknowledges that Scripture, in many places, presents what he considers to be by faith alone, *as if* it were obtained as a reward for good works. But of course this begs the question; why would God speak *as if* something is true when it isn't? Why would the Lord present the promise (sonship) *as* a reward for obedience when it is not? It seems far more likely to be true that Calvin's insists on faith alone *as if* this is the teaching of Scripture, when it is not. It is more likely that Calvin is at odds with Scripture, than Scripture is at odds with itself. But that is not all! We see the effect this has on Jesus' command for us to love our enemies. Calvin downgrades this from a command of necessity *for sonship*, as Jesus presents it, to a mere "encouragement for the sons of God to do the right thing." This teaching represents Jesus as playing motivational gamesmanship by speaking non-truths for a desired effect. May it never be! It is all too clear why Calvin must reason like this. He must uphold his faith alone teaching, even if it conflicts with the clear teaching of Scripture. It is beyond the scope of this writing to delve into all the possible motivations that led John Calvin to reason in this way. But whatever the motivation, it is clear that the teachings of Calvin contrast with Jesus at this point. He not only clashed with Jesus, he also clashed with the apostle Paul.

Paul, in 1 Timothy 6, commands certain things of Timothy and

15 Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew*, Baker, 1974,199.

of wealthy people in the church. Beginning in verse 17, Paul instructs Timothy to “command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” Note that this is not to be just an encouragement, or a friendly suggestion, but a command. He then goes on to describe what is at stake in keeping this command, “In this way they will lay up a treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, *that they may take hold of the life that is truly life*” (6:19). But what does that mean? Does Paul mean a particular quality of life in heaven? Paul used the same phrase in earlier verses while exhorting Timothy toward faithfulness. He told him to “flee sin” and “take hold of the *eternal* life to which you were called” (6:11-12).

So we can understand from the prior context to “take hold of life” means to “take hold of eternal life” itself. Eternal life remains the future promise of “the coming age.” How is it the rich in this age are to take hold of the promise of eternal life in “the coming age”? They are to take hold of eternal life *by* being generous and willing to share in this life! In other words, they are to “love their neighbor” who is in need. They are not to be like the wealthy man in Jesus’ parable who hoarded his wealth to his own destruction, but was not “rich toward God” by loving others (Lk. 12:16-21). Once again, the covenantal structure is in view. The great promise and privilege is eternal life in “the coming age.” The obligation is to love those in need in this age. It is by obeying “the command” to be generous that we will enjoy the privilege of the future promise.

The covenantal logic is crystal clear in Paul’s commands for Timothy and the wealthy in the church. But, when we pick up Calvin’s commentary on this section of Scripture, the covenantal clarity becomes unclear. Calvin’s commitment to the faith alone doctrine muddies the waters of Paul’s clear teaching. Calvin describes Paul as not laying the promise of eternal life before the wealthy. He represents Paul as meaning “they will obtain for themselves treasure in heaven” as a reward. So rather than Paul’s assertion that heaven itself is taken hold of by being generous, Calvin changes this to treasures in heaven. However, this explanation fails to consider Paul’s thoughts. Paul explicitly says that by being generous “they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, *so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life*.” Clearly, for Paul, life in the age to come is the treasure, and eternal life is the end result of being generous.

What is the motivation for Calvin to explain “taking hold of

life” as being generous in order to get treasures in heaven, but not heaven itself? For Calvin, “heaven itself is attained through “the righteousness of faith” (faith alone) and the good works that Paul commands is to “be viewed as an appendix to it.”¹⁶ Calvin’s prior commitment to faith alone leads him, by necessity, to change Paul’s clear meaning. For Paul, being generous to those in need leads to “taking hold of eternal life.” For Calvin, being generous to those in need becomes “an appendix” to saving faith, that alone justifies. For Calvin, if faith alone is true, then Paul simply can’t mean that we take hold of eternal life *by* being willing to share with those in need.

The tragedy here is that God’s saving and gracious covenant now becomes misrepresented at its most crucial point. The covenant is misrepresented at the point it is understood that “we take hold of eternal life.” Nothing is more important than that! The reason that I spend so much time discussing Calvin’s views on justification and its relation to obedience, is that evangelicalism as a whole swims in the stream of this theological perspective.

16 Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, Baker, 1974, 83, “But after God has reconciled us to Himself by free grace, He accepts our services such as they are, and bestows on them a reward they do not deserve. Thus our reward does not depend upon considerations of merit, but on God’s gracious acceptance, and is so far from being opposed to the righteousness of faith that it may be viewed as an appendix to it.”

