**Book Review: `The Whole Christ' by Sinclair B. Ferguson**

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**The author's purpose for writing**

Ferguson writes `The Whole Christ' to bring to light, and to address, a subtly distorted view of God which places conditions on his grace and ultimately suggests He is a restrictive, self-absorbed and selfish `Father' whose word cannot be trusted. Ferguson suggests this is the lie the Serpent used to deceive Eve in the garden, which leads to *both* legalism *and* antinomianism in individuals, and which underlies many of the controversies, struggles, and challenges which the church and individual believers have faced throughout history. This has been expressed as questions of how we preach the gospel, the role of God's law and our obedience in the Christian life, and what it means to have assurance of salvation. Ferguson writes this book with the purpose of demonstrating how these each relate to a distorted view of the true God, and to treat this underlying issue by redirecting his readers to the truth of Grace in the Gospel.

In the 18th century Church of Scotland this distorted view of God was expressed in the belief held by many in the Church that the legal conditions of faith and repentance must be met before salvation can be offered to a believer. The work of Thomas Boston and the other `Marrow Men', inspired by `the Marrow of Modern Divinity' by Edward fisher, is what brought to light this legalistic spirit; directing the church back to a right view of God and His grace. The supporters of the Marrow were accused of defending antinomianism, while their critics were, in turn, suspected of legalism. Ferguson retells the story of the controversy, in order to reveal the distortions of the Gospel which arise imperceptibly in each age, and demonstrating the `tincture' needed to draw the church back to Christ – grace.

**Summary of the message of the book**

Even when we have clear and precise confessions of faith which do well to express the core message of the gospel, we can often divorce these from Christ in his fullness. In so doing the truths lose their glory and we are left with a distorted view of God. When this is the case the human condition is to construct a legalistic view of God and either try to earn God's grace through works, or react to the legalism with an antinomianism that says `if God really loved me, he would not demand obedience'. Reuniting the `benefits' of Christ with Christ himself, and coming back the truth that we are in fact *in* Christ, acts as both a `litmus test', revealing the legalism, and as a catalyst, leading us to a deeper appreciation of the nature of the gospel.

**Challenges from the book**

In his book, Ferguson pinpoints the separation of the `benefits' of the gospel, from Christ himself, as leading to both a skewed view of God and of the benefits themselves. As we lose focus on Christ himself, we misunderstand the justification which is in Christ, and the sanctification which comes from the right understanding of our relationship with God. Reading the book revealed this condition within me, and provided the right treatment - not an order to `believe in your justification' (though he does not diminish the need to meditate on justification), but by presenting the glory of Christ in the gospel. This reuniting of Christ himself with the benefits of the gospel (which without Christ were no benefits at all) righted the misconceptions of my heart, and led me to worship where I would not previously.

A second challenge of the book, somewhat linked to the first, is an exposing of how little I appreciated the power of the grace in Christ to change hearts. Ferguson points out that the language of grace was surely present for the Pharisees, the mediaeval church, and for the 17th century Church of Scotland, yet each of these had no grasp of the fullness of grace in Christ Jesus, and so each constructed a legalistic system which had no need for grace. It was the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles, and a return to that by the 16th century reformers and the Marrow Men, which powerfully confronted the errant groups of their legalism. And what did they teach? Grace in God. Being confronted with grace in Christ, demonstrated the need for it. Preaching Christ in his fullness is powerful in itself to work in the hearts of the lost. This challenged a view in me which saw it as my role to convict individuals of their sin, and point them to belief and repentance - I did not appreciate the power of proclaiming Christ himself in his fullness, and allowing grace to work.

**Questions or disagreements**

In Chapter 7, Ferguson considers the different `faces' of antinomianism, however I did not understand his discussion of `Exegetical' antinomianism (pg 143-145). He introduces the division of the law into civil, ceremonial, and moral, only to say this division is held neither by faithful believers nor antinomians (even if the labels are useful for talking about specific laws). However, in his rebuttal to the antinomian (who argues “it is clear the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law are obsolete, and we maintain that the law must be treated as a whole, therefore the entire law must be obsolete''), Ferguson returns to a division of the law, suggesting the moral law continues, written on our hearts, while the others do not! Does he reject this division? Why then, does he bring it up in his rebuttal? In fact, is this not `treating antinomianism with a dose of legalism' - the very thing he argues against! Surely the treatment is a right understanding of the gracious gift of the (entire) law!

**Elements that have led to an enlarged vision of/love for God and helped to worship**

In his chapter titled `The Order of Grace', Ferguson discusses the covenant at Sinai as a covenant of grace, in which God generously and graciously gives the law, prompting the people to respond with a desire to please, obey and never grieve him. *The law itself is the gift which prompts the desire in the recipients to give the glory to the gracious and generous God, and itself describes how to give God the glory!* This new view of the law is so much more wonderful than the view which sees the law simply as revealing our sins, directing us to the atonement, and in this way leading us to thank God for the law. Instead when we remember the character of the God who gave the law, we can say with the psalmist “The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing my soul'', for the law both prompts and directs our worship.

This pattern of God demonstrating grace, prompting praise, and directing the worship, is the same as the covenant of Eden, in which God richly provided all the good things of the garden, and commands of how to glorify him - ``enjoy all he has created, and do not eat from the central tree in the garden''. In fact in Psalm 19 the psalmist begins with this covenant - first acknowledging God's characteristics as revealed in his gift of creation - an elements of the Adamic covenant - before moving on to worship in the Mosaic covenant.

When discussing challenges from the book, I mentioned an expanded view of the power of grace, and the limitations I placed in my mind on the power of grace. Something which contributed to that was the discussion of grace as *a priori* making us unable to boast in ourselves. I would certainly have said I was unable to boast since I am unable to save myself, but a view of grace as eliminating the possibility of boasting even before I myself have failed to keep up to God’s standards.