

Calvinistic modification of justification by faith alone

Does God save all who believe the good news of Christ crucified?

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Introduction

Ongoing controversy between even some of the most conservative followers of John Calvin surrounding what has become known as “the new perspective on Paul” dispels the illusion that professing evangelicals, though disagreeing on minor points of doctrine, at least agree on justification by faith alone. Among the more influential denominations involved, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church recently commended for study a report that explains many of the points of contention, some concerning seemingly harmless definitions of terms.* Noting that words in the phrase “justification by faith alone” mean different things to different people, the report criticizes what it calls “the Federal Vision” for redefining *faith* to include faithfulness, obedience, or other good works. On the other hand, the same document condemns baptismal regeneration as contrary to the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession of Faith. That regeneration by baptism as God’s visible word as well as by his spoken word was integral to Martin Luther’s understanding of justification by faith suggests that those who formulated the confession’s underlying system of doctrine may have, ironically, redefined justification by faith centuries before the Federal Vision.

This essay’s examination of that thesis has brought me great sadness along with inexpressible joy. For inasmuch as the gospel consists of truly glad tidings of great joy, deep sorrow is felt for those who not only subtract from the good news of what Christ has done for them, but also add to it uncertain human elements. Indeed, the very comfort found in believing his pure promise contributes to disappointment in the extent to which even some of the most highly respected Protestant theologians have departed from it.

The first Protestant confession of faith offers a simple summary of the good news proclaimed by the apostles: “Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3-4).”¹ Augsburg Confession: 2, IV, 1-3 Within 15 months of the public confession of that faith in the gospel, the defense (“Apology”) of that confession was formulated and finalized by the Protestant theologians. It clarified the various teachings disputed by the status quo, especially the article of justification by faith

* *Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification, 73rd General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (2006); available from <http://www.theparchment.org/documents/justification1.pdf>.

alone. The early Protestants followed Paul in teaching justification by nothing more than believing God's promise, as Abraham did (Romans 4):

Paul clearly shows that faith does not simply mean historical knowledge but is a firm acceptance of the promise (Rom. 4:16): "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may be guaranteed." For he says that only faith can accept the promise. He therefore correlates and connects promise and faith. ^{1, Apology of the Augsburg Confession: I, II, 50}

Isaiah 53:11, "By his knowledge he shall justify many." But what is the knowledge of Christ except to know Christ's blessings, the promises which by the Gospel he has spread throughout the world? And to know these blessings is rightly and truly to believe in Christ, to believe that God will certainly accomplish what he has promised for Christ's sake. ^{1, Apology of the Augsburg Confession: I, II, 101}

As anyone who sincerely makes a promise desires to keep it, receiving God's promise includes believing he wants to accomplish what he promised:

Now we shall show that faith justifies. In the first place, we would remind our readers that if we must hold to the proposition, "Christ is the mediator," then we must defend the proposition, "Faith justifies." For how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use him as mediator in our justification and believe that for his sake we are accounted righteous? But to believe means to trust in Christ's merits, that because of him God wants to be reconciled to us. In the same way, if we must defend the proposition, "The promise of Christ is necessary over and above the law," then we must defend the proposition, "Faith justifies." For the law does not teach the free forgiveness of sins. Again, we cannot keep the law unless we first receive the Holy Spirit. Therefore we must maintain that the promise of Christ is necessary. But this can be accepted only by faith. ^{1, Apology of the Augsburg Confession: I, II, 50}

The second edition of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which was influenced by Luther even more than the first edition, ^{2, pp. 108-109} adds that we must believe that God desires to forgive us since the good news is that he sent his Son to save the world:

For the gospel itself is the mandate that commands us to believe that God wants to forgive and to save on account of Christ, according to the passage, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned" [John 3:17-18]... For eternal life is promised to the justified. However, faith justifies whenever and at whatever time human beings apprehend it. Throughout life we ought to strive to obtain and strengthen this faith. ^{2, p. 167†}

† Five decades after the reading of the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord achieved doctrinal unity by refuting two opposite extremes of Lutheran deviations from the first Lutheran doctrine of justification:

Accordingly we believe and maintain that if anybody teaches the doctrine of the gracious election of God to eternal life in such a way that disconsolate Christians can find no comfort in this doctrine but are driven to doubt and despair, or in such a way that the impenitent are strengthened in their self-will, he is not teaching the doctrine according to the Word and will of God, but in accord with his reason and under the direction of the devil, since everything in Scripture, as St. Paul testifies, was written for our instruction that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Therefore we reject the following errors:

1. The doctrine that God does not want all men to come to repentance and to believe the Gospel.

2. Furthermore, the doctrine that God is not serious about wanting all men to come to him when he calls us to him.

3. Furthermore, that God does not want everybody to be saved, but that merely by an arbitrary counsel, purpose, and will, without regard for their sin, God has predestined certain people to damnation so that they cannot be saved.

4. Likewise that it is not only the mercy of God and the most holy merit of Christ, but that there is also within us a cause of God's election, on account of which he has elected us to eternal life. ^{1, The Formula of Concord: I, XI, 16-20}

The Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and the Formula of Concord are still confessed by the more conservative Lutheran churches.

The command to believe, implicit in any promise, is not yet another inflexible ordinance of God, but rather is a kind invitation to take a gift offered, as explained by a pastor known for his defense of the Apology's distinction between regulations and good news:

When demanding faith, we do not lay down a demand of the Law, but issue the sweetest invitation, practically saying to our hearers: "Come; for all things are now ready." Luke 14, 17. When I invite a half-starved person to sit down to a well-furnished board and to help himself to anything he likes, I do not expect him to tell me that he will take no orders from me. Even so the demand to believe is to be understood not as an order of the Law, but as an invitation of the Gospel.

The error against which this thesis is directed is this, that man can produce faith in himself. Such a demand would be an order of the Law and turn faith into a work of man...

Here is where Luther reveals his true greatness. He rarely appeals to his hearers to believe, but he preaches concerning the work of Christ, salvation by grace, and the riches of God's mercy in Jesus Christ in such a manner that the hearers get the impression that all they have to do is to take what is being offered them and find a resting-place in the lap of divine grace.^{3, p. 260}

After reviewing another distinction important to Luther, that between the secret and revealed will of God, some significant Protestant modifications of his teaching on justification will be cited and briefly evaluated.

God's will hidden and God's will revealed in law and gospel

Saving faith looks to God's will revealed in the incarnation, not to his hidden will

In *The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther responded to the arguments of Erasmus that Scripture passages on election had to be interpreted metaphorically to make them square with reason:

You see, therefore, that the controversy here is not about the text itself, nor is it any longer about inferences and similes, but about tropes[‡] and interpretations. When, then, are we ever going to have a text pure and simple, without tropes and inferences, for free choice and against free choice? Has Scripture nowhere any such texts? And is the issue of free choice to be forever in doubt, because it is not settled by any certain text, but is argued back and forth with inferences and tropes put forward by men at cross purposes with one another, like a reed shaken by the wind?

Let us rather take the view that neither an inference nor a trope is admissible in any passage of Scripture, unless it is forced on us by the evident nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith. Instead, we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man. For if everybody is allowed to discover inferences and tropes in the Scriptures just as he pleases, what will Scripture as a whole be but a reed shaken by the wind or a sort of Vertumnus?⁷ Then indeed there will be nothing certain either asserted or proved in connection with any article of faith which you will not be able to quibble away with some trope or other. We ought rather to shun as the deadliest poison every trope that Scripture itself does not force upon us.

Look what happened to that master of tropes, Origen, in his exposition of the Scriptures! What fitting objects of attack he provides for the calumnies of Porphyry, so that even Jerome thinks that the defenders of Origen have an impossible task. What happened to the Arians in that trope by which they made Christ into a merely nominal God? What has happened in our own time to these new prophets regarding the words of Christ, "This is my body," where one finds a trope in the pronoun "this," another in the verb "is," another in the noun "body"?

What I have observed is this, that all heresies and errors in Connection with the Scriptures have arisen, not from the simplicity of the words, as is almost universally stated, but from neglect of the simplicity of the words, and from tropes or inferences hatched out of men's own heads.^{4, pp.}

[‡] In Luther's usage, a *tropum* is a figure of speech as opposed to plain, straightforward, everyday language that requires no explanation.

As Luther noticed, teachers of false doctrine have always used figures of speech to evade the straightforward meaning of clear passages of Scripture, so Erasmus was doing nothing new in that regard.

Luther also perceived that the faulty, synergistic conclusions of the reasoning of Erasmus resulted from his attempt to pry into the secret will of God. Consequently, Luther warned his readers to turn their eyes from their speculations concerning the secret will of God to his will revealed in the gospel:

When now [Erasmus] pertly asks, “Does the good Lord deplore the death of his people, which he himself works in them?”—for this really does seem absurd—we reply, as we have already said, that we have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, “Things above us are no business of ours.”^{4, p. 139}

God’s secret will is not relevant to us, but we are to be concerned with his desire to save, with his will revealed in preaching:

God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word, through which he offers himself to us and which is the beauty and glory with which the psalmist celebrates him as being clothed. In this regard we say, the good God does not deplore the death of his people which he works in them, but he deplores the death which he finds in his people and desires to remove from them. For it is this that God as he is preached is concerned with, namely, that sin and death should be taken away and we should be saved. For “he sent his word and healed them” [Ps. 107:20]. But God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all.^{4, pp. 139-140}

In fact, since knowing God’s secret will is impossible, we have no choice but to believe what he has seen fit to reveal in the preaching of his word:

God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will. After all, who can direct himself by a will completely inscrutable and unknowable? It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why, and how far it wills, that is something we have no right whatever to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore.

It is therefore right to say, “If God does not desire our death, the fact that we perish must be imputed to our own will.” It is right, I mean, if you speak of God as preached; for he wills all men to be saved [I Tim. 2:4], seeing he comes with the word of salvation to all, and the fault is in the will that does not admit him, as he says in Matthew 23[:37]: “How often would I have gathered your children, and you would not!”^{4, pp. 140}

We must learn about God by contemplating him, not as the one hidden in majesty, but as the incarnate and crucified Son, who with bitter tears longs to save even those who will never accept his sincere invitation (Luke 19:41-44):

We say, as we have said before, that the secret will of the Divine Majesty is not a matter for debate, and the human temerity which with continual perversity is always neglecting necessary things in its eagerness to probe this one, must be called off and restrained from busying itself with the investigation of these secrets of God’s majesty, which it is impossible to penetrate because he dwells in light inaccessible, as Paul testifies [I Tim. 6:16]. Let it occupy itself instead with God incarnate, or as Paul puts it, with Jesus crucified, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, though in a hidden manner [Col. 2:3]; for through him it is furnished abundantly with what it ought to know and ought not to know. It is God incarnate, moreover, who is speaking here:

“I would ... you would not”—God incarnate, I say, who has been sent into the world for the very purpose of willing, speaking, doing, suffering, and offering to all men everything necessary for salvation. Yet he offends very many, who being either abandoned or hardened by that secret will of the Divine Majesty do not receive him as he wills, speaks, does, suffers, and offers, as John says: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it” [John 1:5]; and again: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” [John 1:11]. It is likewise the part of this incarnate God to weep, wail, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, when the will of the Divine Majesty purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish. And it is not for us to ask why he does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things.

No one, I think, will wish to deny that this will concerning which it is said: “How often would I ...” was disclosed to the Jews before God became incarnate, inasmuch as they are accused of having killed the prophets before Christ, and so of having resisted his will. For it is well known among Christians that everything done by the prophets was done in the name of the Christ who was to come, concerning whom it had been promised that he should be God incarnate. Hence whatever has been offered to men from the beginning of the world through the ministers of the word is rightly called the will of Christ. ^{4, pp. 145-146}

Luther also noted that God has expressly forbidden man to probe into his secret will:

Thus Paul says in Romans 11[9:19 ff.]: “Why, then, does God find fault? Who can resist his will? O man, who are you to contend with God? Has the potter no right ...?” and the rest; and before him, Isaiah 58[:2]: “Yet they seek me daily, and desire to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness ...; they ask of me righteous judgments, they desire to draw near to God.” I think it is sufficiently shown by these words that it is not permissible for men to pry into the will of the Divine Majesty.

Our present subject, however, is of a kind which most of all tempts perverse human beings to pry into that awful will, so that it is most of all in place here to exhort them to silence and reverence. In other cases we do not do this, where matters are under discussion for which a reason can be given, and for which we have been commanded to give a reason. ^{4, pp. 146-147}

Indeed, what must be known of God is revealed in his word, but the secret things belong to him alone. Whereas God in his sovereign Majesty is inscrutable (Romans 11:33-36), he has manifested himself through the incarnation of his Son (John 1:14-18).

What has God revealed about his desire to save all people?

Rather than straightforwardly interpreting passages that, in their context, seem to reveal that Christ died to save all people, Calvinistic theologians tend to force Scripture to line up with their reasoning about God’s purposes in election, as seen in the following examples from John Owen’s classic on the subject. ⁵

Owen faced the unenviable task of demonstrating that this passage does not teach that Christ gave himself as a ransom for all people, which Owen found hard to believe since not everyone will be saved:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2:1-6)

Recognizing that, in the text, the *all* Christians are to pray for is the same *all* Jesus desires to save and the same *all* he died for, Owen concluded that the passage only commands believers to pray for the elect among all kinds of people (pp. 343-347). Even most Calvinistic churches here follow Paul rather than Owen, praying for government leaders in general, not just for those chosen by God.

To interpret the apostle John's statement in his first epistle that Christ "is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2), Owen argued that John was writing to the Jews, and thus that he meant to say that Christ was the propitiation not only for the sins of Jews, but also for the sins of Gentiles all over the world (pp. 331-332). If it could be demonstrated that John wrote primarily to Jews, this interpretation would be much more compelling than Owen's interpretation of 1 Timothy 2. The most convincing evidence Owen offered for a Jewish audience was Paul's statement that whereas he ministered to the Gentiles, John ministered to the Jews (Galatians 2:9). However, the death of Paul and the rapid growth of the church among the Gentiles could easily have necessitated John's ministering primarily to them later in his life, and early church tradition has John in Ephesus. Further, John's letters were written largely to refute and condemn an early form of docetism, a Gentile heresy based on Greek philosophy. Even less convincing is Owen's alternate explanation, that Jesus died not only for all believers then living, but also for those in all future times and in more remote places who would believe in the future (p. 338). The Puritans' arbitrary use of the word "world" is also evident in their changing it from meaning the non-elect in the beginning of Jesus' high-priestly prayer to meaning "the elect of God in an unconverted state" in the end of the prayer (John 17:9, 21, 23).^{6, pp. 100-101}

Why do Calvinists feel that they must go to such lengths to find the true meaning of passages that say that God desires all to be saved, that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, including those who perish, and that the Lord even bought apostates who deny him in the end (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8:11; 2 Peter 2:1, 18-21)? Why not simply accept their plain meaning? The main Calvinistic argument for limited atonement[§] may be presented as logical steps:

1. God sovereignly accomplishes all of his purposes.
2. Few will be saved, so it was not God's purpose in sending his Son to save all people.
3. Therefore, God never loved all people enough to send his Son to die for them.

Thankfully, many Calvinists are inconsistent, believing that God does sincerely offer salvation to all who hear the gospel in the sense that he, out of love for them, genuinely wants them to accept his invitation. Consistent Calvinists such as John Owen, however, teach that God's general call of the gospel is not for the purpose of saving any who are not elect, a conclusion reached by following the same logic:

1. God sovereignly accomplishes all of his purposes.
2. Not all who hear the gospel will be saved, so it is not God's purpose in sending his word to save all who hear it.
3. Therefore, God does not really graciously invite any who are not elect to receive eternal life, in order that they will do so.

[§] Attempts to find passages that teach limited atonement are less persuasive than the logical arguments. For example, Jesus' statement that he would give his life as a ransom for many is thought to imply that he did not give his life as a ransom for all (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 14:24).^{6, pp. 98-99} It could as validly be argued that since Romans 5:15 says many died through Adam's sin, not all do so. Since Jesus spoke the ransom statement either in Hebrew or in Aramaic, neither of which has the word "all," there is no reason to assume he meant *many as opposed to all* rather than *many as opposed to few*; comparisons with both Old Testament and New Testament passages lend overwhelming support to the latter.^{7, pp. 179-182} The many for whom the ransom was paid certainly includes more people than just the few who are elect: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).

In other words, Calvinistic theologians reason that just as God cannot fail to achieve his purpose in the atonement, he cannot fail to achieve his purpose in the preaching of the gospel. The denial of a genuine offer even to the non-elect contradicts a straightforward reading of clear scriptural passages, but no less so than the doctrine of limited atonement itself. All speculation based on the secret will of God, whose ways are passed finding out, must quickly and humbly yield to what he has chosen to reveal in the Scriptures about his will. Unlike human philosophy and complex systems of thought, God's clear word is a safe resting place since it will never deceive.

God saves everyone who believes the good news

The gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”

Paul wanted to proclaim the good news to those in Rome because that message was the means God used to save everyone who believes it (Romans 1:15-16). The resulting letter to the Romans played a key role in the Lutheran Reformation since it so clearly explained the gospel and answered objections to it. The good news was sufficient; no works had to be added to complete it.

Likewise, no information need be added to the apostolic gospel to form the message that one must believe to have justification. A sinner need not supplement the good news with any evidence of his conversion, any extra-biblical revelation, or anything else that must be believed to exercise saving faith. According to Paul, anyone who believes the good news announced by the apostles has salvation by the power of God. Consequently, the first Protestants held that anyone who doubts whether his sins are forgiven does so only because he doubts the objective reconciliation already accomplished by Christ's death:

Faith alone, looking to the promise and believing with full assurance that God forgives because Christ did not die in vain, conquers the terrors of sin and death. If somebody doubts that his sins are forgiven, he insults Christ because he thinks that his sin is greater and stronger than the death and promise of Christ, though Paul says that grace abounded more than sin (Rom. 5:20), that mercy is more powerful than sin. ¹ Apology of the Augsburg Confession: 1, III, 27-28

In other words, anyone who really believes the apostolic message that the death of Christ brought about the forgiveness of sins necessarily has the assurance of forgiveness. This is also seen in Luther's catechisms, which explains to its students that the second article of the Apostles' Creed teaches that their sins have already been forgiven through Christ's death. The earliest Protestants echoed Paul's teaching that God saves all who believe the good news handed down by the apostles, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; cf. John 20:31; Romans 10:9-10, 14-17). By contrast, both Arminianism and Calvinism, when consistent, teach that something in addition to the gospel must also be believed in the exercise of saving faith. Although this can be more readily demonstrated in the case of Arminianism, it can also be seen that Calvinism has the same problem, albeit for different reasons.

Arminianism is not good news

The gospel according to Arminianism is that Jesus died for everyone, and that his death justifies those who choose to believe by their own free will, understood such that the choice is not a gift of God. Since in this system the ultimate decision regarding one's

salvation is man's, not God's, to make, a consistent Arminian cannot trust Christ alone for eternal life. For assurance of salvation, Arminians are forced to look to their own decisions or to subjective signs of salvation. Having added to the gospel, they, along with Lutherans who reject the monergism of their confessions, can no longer really see the good news as God's power to salvation for everyone who believes it.

Limited atonement versus justification through faith in the gospel alone

The gospel according to Calvinism is that Jesus died not for everyone, but only for the elect, all of whom will trust Christ alone for eternal life. An unsettling question of limited atonement is how anyone can rely on Christ's death, given that the gospel does not in itself reveal who is and who is not elect.** Any answer consistent with Calvinism must direct the sinner to look inside himself for assurance of justification, either to God's subjective work of faith or sanctification in the sinner's life, or to God's special, internal revelation not included in the general, external call of the gospel. Examples will be given from John Owen and Charles Hodge, two widely influential Calvinists who faced the problem with unusual honesty and clarity.

Owen, perceiving the absurdity of asking someone to believe Christ died for him only on the basis that Christ died for the elect, proposed a staircase of five "acts of faith."^{5, pp. 314-316} In climbing the first three steps, the sinner believes that he cannot save himself, that the promised Messiah alone saves, and that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Then, and not before, the sinner is to rest upon Christ by believing that he, by the sufficiency of his sacrificial death, saves everyone who comes to him. In the fifth step, which can only be taken after the fourth step, the sinner is to reason that since he took the first four steps, God's grace must be at work in him, and thus Jesus must have died for him. This complex procedure is thought to unpack what it means to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Owen's explanation of the fourth step is a bit misleading since the sinner cannot really rest upon Christ before believing Christ died for his sins. The most significant deviation from Luther's doctrine of justification comes with the fifth step, which requires that the completion of saving faith depend not only on the gospel message, but also on the sinner's faith, exercised in the first four steps, as proof that God is at work in his heart. To summarize Owen's explanation, because the sinner does not hear that Christ died for him in the preaching of God's word, the sinner must rely not only on the message preached, but also on what he perceives as the beginning of saving faith in his heart. Convinced of the good news plus the evidence of his own incipient faith, he concludes that Christ died for him, thereby completing the act of coming to Christ in faith.

Hodge's solution does not as overtly have the sinner put faith in something inside himself.^{8: 3, pp. 99-104} In fact, Hodge went on to criticize excessive introspection and Jonathan Edwards' reliance on evidence of sanctification for assurance of salvation (pp. 106-107). (Revealingly, in the "Religious Affections," Edwards had already spoken

** A letter to the editor of the main publication of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is symptomatic of the widespread anguish accompanying failed attempts to answer the question: "... I am not sure of my calling and election (2 Pet. 1:10). It seems to me that believing and knowing on the basis of God's Word that Jesus died to save *his people* from their sins (Matt. 1:21; John 6:44, 65) is not the same as believing and knowing on the basis of some subjective decision, feeling, or act that he died to save *me*" (*New Horizons*, October 2005, emphasis original). The letter was a response to the July letter of a pastor expressing similar concerns. An elaboration of the other response of the October issue is available at <http://tinyurl.com/b6hzd>.

against excessive introspection. His case for basing assurance on perceived sanctification does not adequately use the clearer passages of Scripture to interpret those that are less clear in themselves, e.g., 1 John 2:3-6 and 2 Peter 1:5-11. Far from attaining the assurance of hope only after diligently pursuing a program of sanctification and introspection, the first converts to Christianity immediately received the good news of the kingdom with great joy.) Arguing from the facts that saving faith includes a sinner's belief that Christ loved him and gave himself up for him, and that "Faith must rest on the testimony of God,"^{††} Hodge concluded that God testifies not only through the external call of the gospel, but also through "the inward witness of the Spirit... the Holy Ghost convinces us that we are the objects of God's love... This manifestation is not outward through the word. It is inward... The Spirit calls forth our love to God, and reveals his love to us" (p. 103). In other words, since, in the Calvinistic scheme, the gospel does not tell the sinner that Christ loved him and died for him, saving faith must believe not only the gospel, but also an inner voice only heard by the elect. This is very different from Luther's doctrine that the Spirit creates saving faith in no revelation other than the Scripture.

In summary, a consistent Calvinist can only believe Christ died for his sins if he perceives in himself evidence that God has created saving faith, worked supernatural sanctification, or spoken an extra-biblical revelation. Thus, the gap left in the gospel by taking away the universality of the atonement must be filled in one way or another by something in man. In each case, relying on God's work within for assurance subtly approaches the Roman Catholic confusion of justification and sanctification: Roman Catholic Augustinians as well as Calvinists attribute God's work of inner grace to Christ alone.

Strictly distinguishing justification from sanctification, Martin Luther announced the good news that the death of Jesus reconciled everyone to God, leaving nothing undone, nothing for man to contribute to his own justification. Everyone who believes that good news receives justification (Romans 1:16-17), the subjective application of the already accomplished objective reconciliation (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:19-20).^{9: 2, pp. 347-351, 552; 3, Lectures 16-18} Salvation is entirely God's work since fallen people cannot even believe the good news unless he supernaturally creates faith in them. Since Jesus died for everyone, there is no need for the sinner to look within himself for evidence that Jesus died for him; as Luther often emphasized, faith does not rest in faith itself or in any work of God inside man, but only in the external, general call of the gospel. Knowing that Jesus long ago did everything needed for everyone's salvation, and that he genuinely desires that everyone simply believe what he has already done for them, Lutherans do not ask with Calvinists, *if Jesus only died for the elect, how do I know he died for me?* This is not to say that the gospel leaves no unanswered questions, such as *if Jesus fully satisfied God's wrath against everyone's sins, and if the creation of faith does not depend on man's free will, then why isn't everyone justified?* Rather, Lutherans, when consistent

^{††} The consistent Calvinist argues that no one is condemned for failing to believe Christ died for him since God does not reveal that to unbelievers. ^{6, p. 102} Some Calvinists are so consistent as to deny that God ever makes anyone an offer of salvation: "It is certain, that for those who shall not be saved, salvation was not purchased, nor should it be offered to them, *nor indeed to any*. Such for whom salvation is purchased, are the church whom Christ has purchased with his own blood; and to these, this salvation is not offered, but applied." ^{6, p. 103, emphasis added} Contrast Matthew 11:28-30; John 6:27; 7:37.

with their confessions, consider such mysteries as the secret things that belong to the Lord alone, not concerning themselves with human speculations about them, but instead taking comfort from his will revealed in his death for the whole world, that he does not desire the death of any sinner. They simply trust God's promise in the gospel, knowing that he does not lie or deceive.

Since Calvin's version of the gospel is not good news for a sinner without the additional information that he is among the elect, that message cannot bring apostolic assurance of justification. Consequently, the completely consistent Calvinist, looking to what is thought to be his own subjective faith, his own subjective sanctification, or an inward call of the Spirit, can never trust the gospel alone for justification. Nonetheless, due to the Spirit's supernatural creation of faith by means of the external word of God, many who profess limited atonement with the mouth nonetheless believe in their heart the truly good news they learned from the apostles, that Jesus died for them in order that they might have life.^{‡‡}

Conclusion: Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone

For different reasons, both the Arminian and Calvinistic ends of the spectrum of the historically Reformed churches have added something in man to the original Protestant gospel. This is one of their most serious deviations from the faith confessed by Luther:

In another place *Luther* writes (St. L. Ed. XI, 453 f.): "What I have said is this: God will not permit us to rely on anything or to cling with our hearts to anything that is not Christ as revealed in his Word, no matter how holy and full of the Spirit it may seem. Faith has no other ground on which to take its stand..."

Here you hear a verdict condemning all [Reformed] sects. No matter what other false doctrines they may teach, they all have this grievous error in common, that they do not rely solely on Christ and His Word, but chiefly on something that takes place in themselves. As a rule, they imagine that all is well with them because they have turned from their former ways. As if that were a guarantee of reaching heaven! No; we are not to look back to our conversion for assurance, we must go to our Savior again and again, every day, as though we never had been converted. My former conversion will be of no benefit me if I become secure.^{§§} I must return to the mercy-seat every day, otherwise I shall make my former conversion my savior, by relying on it. That would be awful; for in the last analysis it would mean that I make myself my savior.^{3, p. 207, emphasis of Walther}

^{‡‡} "A synergist can be saved, just like the Calvinist, only if he becomes inconsistent." ^{9:1, p. 276} "Wherever the doctrine is taught that the grace of God does not exist for the greater part of mankind, every hearer, particularly the sinner convicted by the Law, must remain in doubt whether there is grace for him. But such doubt absolutely destroys faith. The reason why many in Calvinistic communions still come to faith lies in the fact that preachers as well as hearers forget the [doctrine of limited, particular grace]. There are Calvinistic teachers who insist that especially when one is harassed by doubt, recourse must be had to the Scripture statements which speak of universal grace." ^{9:2, p. 50}

^{§§} Being "secure" here means being self-satisfied or self-righteous, as opposed to being assured by the good news for penitent sinners.

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