

## Dishonoring the Spirit?

It is not dishonoring to the Holy Spirit to exalt the centrality of Christ's person and work in your daily life as a Christian. Should you be profoundly thankful for evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Yes! Should you find assurance from the Spirit-wrought fruit in your life (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 86; WCF 16.2)? Yes!

But as J.I. Packer writes, "The essence of the Holy Spirit's ministry, at this or any time in the Christian era, is to mediate the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . Jesus, the Lord Christ, would be the focal point of the Spirit's ministry, first to last. The Holy Spirit's distinctive new covenant role, then, is to fulfill what we may call a floodlight ministry in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 55, 65).

Paul demonstrates the height of Christian maturity in Romans 7:24-25. He looks inward (v. 24) and laments his failure, because of remaining sin, to keep the law as he desires as one who is now in union with Christ (Rom. 6). He then immediately looks outward in faith (v. 25) to Christ alone for full, complete and unwavering assurance. He sets his faith squarely on Christ (outward focused), gives thanks and proclaims good news for Christians who sin, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The Judge's end-time verdict is rendered in the present for all who are in Christ!

Jerry Bridges writes, "If you want to judge how well a person understands the gospel, ask him what he makes of the death of Christ, and what the message of the cross is. The real Christian answers that while the message of the cross is foolishness to some and a stumbling block to others, to Christians it is the saving wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 1:18-24). The confession of the real Christian is, 'Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal. 6:14)" (*The Great Exchange*, 12).

According to Article 29 in the Belgic Confession, the marks of true Christians are:

They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. THEY APPEAL CONSTANTLY TO THE BLOOD, SUFFERING, DEATH AND OBEDIENCE OF JESUS CHRIST, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.

According to WLC Q. 155, the Holy Spirit "makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; OF DRIVING THEM OUT OF THEMSELVES, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; or building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation."

Contrary to the moralist who contends that living an outward focused life of faith in Christ alone is antinomian drivel, the Spirit's main work is to continually drive us out of ourselves so that we can actually begin to produce good works and give thanks for the gracious, Spirit-wrought works produced in us through our union with Christ (John 15:5-11).

### **The Necessity of Good Works**

Since we have been delivered from our guilt and condemnation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and thus have not earned one aspect of our salvation, are good works necessary? Yes, but to say that good works are necessary is not to make good works instrumental or antecedent conditions for the total "package" of salvation. It isn't antinomian to say that our good works cannot be the whole of or even a part of our righteousness before God. The Reformed confessions, rightly summarizing the teaching of Scripture, are clear on these points. WCF 16.5 states:

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.

In addition, it isn't antinomian to guard against confusing or conflating faith with obedience and repentance. Q. 62-64 in the Heidelberg Catechism provides the proper framework for understanding the consequent necessity of good works in salvation.

62. But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?

Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment-seat of God must be perfect throughout and wholly conformable to the Law of God;<sup>1</sup> whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.<sup>2</sup>

1 Deut 27:26; Gal 3:10; 2 Isa 64:6

63. How is it that our good works merit nothing, while yet it is God's will to reward them in this life and in that which is to come?

The reward comes not of merit,<sup>1</sup> but of grace.<sup>2</sup>

1 Mt 5:12; Heb 11:6; 2 Lk 17:10; 2 Tim 4:7-8

64. But does not this doctrine make men careless and wicked?

No, for it is impossible that those who are grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.<sup>1</sup>

1 Mt 7:18; Lk 6:43-45; Jn 15:5

### **The Emphasis on Justification**

Does placing primary emphasis upon justification for assurance understate the importance and necessity of good works (i.e., sanctification)? Does this emphasis dishonor the Holy Spirit's indwelling work? Absolutely not!

First, John Calvin clearly taught that when a believer grasps justification he also grasps sanctification:

Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies, (3.16.1).

It is not antinomian to teach that the substance of the covenant of grace is the double benefit of Christ, namely justification and sanctification. The Heidelberg Catechism makes this very clear:

Concerning justification:

60. How are you righteous before God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ;<sup>1</sup> that is, although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, have never kept any of them,<sup>2</sup> and that I am still inclined always to all evil,<sup>3</sup> yet God, without any merit of my own,<sup>4</sup> out of mere grace,<sup>5</sup> imputes to me the perfect satisfaction,

righteousness and holiness of Christ,<sup>6</sup> as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me,<sup>7</sup> if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom 3:21-28; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; Php 3:8-11; <sup>2</sup> Rom 3:9-10; <sup>3</sup> Rom 7:23; <sup>4</sup> Deut 9:6; Ezek 36:22; Tit 3:4-5; <sup>5</sup> Rom 3:24; Eph 2:8; <sup>6</sup> Rom 4:3-5; 2 Cor 5:17-19; 1 Jn 2:1-2; <sup>7</sup> Rom 4:24-25; 2 Cor 5:21; <sup>8</sup> Jn 3:18; Acts 16:30-31; Rom 3:22

Concerning sanctification:

88. In how many things does true repentance or conversion consist? In two things: the dying away of the old nature, and the coming to life of the new.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom 6:1-11; 1 Cor 5:7; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; Co 3:5-10

89. What is the dying away of the old nature?

It is heartfelt sorrow for sin; causing us to hate and turn from it always more and more.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps 51:3-4, 17; Joel 2:12-13; Rom 8:12-13; 2 Cor 7:10

90. What is the coming to life the new nature?

It is heartfelt joy in God;<sup>1</sup> causing us to take delight in living according to the will of God in all good works.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps 51:8, 12; Isa 57:15; Rom 5:1, 14:17; <sup>2</sup> Rom 6:10-11; Gal 2:20

Both benefits honor the Holy Spirit and are rooted in the believer's union with Christ, which the Holy Spirit brings about through the gospel and faith alone. Through the gospel and the gift of faith alone, believers are enabled to live in union with Christ as His Holy Spirit works in them. Thus, to be sure, Christ is not divided! As the English preacher, Walter Marshall writes,

True gospel faith makes you come to Christ with a great thirst, that you might 'drink of living water'- by which Christ means his sanctifying Spirit (John 7:37-38). True gospel faith makes you cry out earnestly for God to save you- not only from hell but from sin as well. 'Create in me a clean heart, Oh, God, and renew a right spirit within me' (Psalm 51:10). When you seek salvation by faith in Christ, holiness is a major part of the salvation that Christ freely gives you. You cannot divide salvation. You cannot have the forgiveness of Christ without the holiness of Christ (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 116)!

Since sanctification is indispensable to true saving faith, what role does sanctification play in regards to the believer's assurance?

## **Good Works as *A Posteriori***

Calvin writes that the sight of good works may play a role in strengthening the believer's assurance but only when taken *a posteriori* (3.14.19). That is to say the evidence of good works in a believer's life may serve as a secondary role in the support of assurance (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 86).

According to Calvin, good works are "*testimonies of God dwelling and ruling*" in believers inasmuch as they first cast their full confidence upon God's mercy not upon their obedience. Calvin argues,

...under God's judgment we must not put any trust in works, or glory in any esteem of them. The agreement lies in this: that the saints, when it is a question of the founding and establishing of their own salvation, without regard for works turn their eyes solely to God's goodness. Not only do they betake themselves to it before all things as to the beginning of blessedness but they repose in it as in the fulfillment of this. A conscience so founded, erected, and established is established also in the consideration of works, so far, that is, as these are testimonies of God dwelling and ruling in us. *Inasmuch, therefore, as this reliance upon works has no place unless you first cast the whole confidence of your mind upon God's mercy, it ought not to seem contrary to that upon which it depends, (3.14.18).*

According to Calvin, good works serve as "*signs of the divine benevolence*" toward believers. In this regard, good works may serve to undergird and strengthen one's faith provided these gracious "*testimonies*" direct the believer outside of himself to contemplate the source (i.e., God) of those good works. Calvin explains,

Therefore, when we rule out reliance upon works, we mean only this: that the Christian mind may not be turned back to the merit of works as to a help toward salvation but should rely wholly on the free promise of righteousness. But we do not forbid him from undergirding and strengthening this faith by signs of the divine benevolence toward him. For it, when all the gifts of God has bestowed upon us are called to mind, they are like rays of the divine countenance by which we are illumined to contemplate that supreme light of goodness; much more is this true of the grace of good works, which shows that the Spirit of adoption has been given to us [cf., Rom. 8:15], (3.14.18).

## **The Gift Giver and His Gifts**

Calvin gives place to good works in strengthening a believer's faith. But, just like the rays of the sun, which always lead us back to their source, so good works are intended to take us back to their source, the triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Ralph Erskine, in discussing characteristics of a legalistic disposition in believers, echoes Calvin when he writes,

It is a sign of a legal temper when a person is more taken up with the gifts of Christ than with Christ Himself; more taken up with any little thing they get from him than with himself. When they get any sensible grace, and sensible good affections, melting of heart, and melting of spirit; any inclination to what is good, any gifts or graces, whether more common or special, they admire these, and are not so much taken up with Christ Himself. But the person that is evangelical (*i.e., gospel-driven- J.F.*) in his actings, by what he gets, he is led to the giver; if this be sweet, O! He is infinitely sweeter that sent it: I embrace the token, and it draws out my heart the more after him, from whom it came (*The Works of Ralph Erskine, vol. 2, p. 83*).

When understood in this way, believers are reminded that good works are God's gifts (*i.e., fruits of faith*) and they are intended to lead the believer back to the Gift Giver and not remain solely fixed on His gifts.

## **Sanctification Unstable Ground for Full Assurance**

Good works cannot become the foundation for boasting, self-confidence or assurance because the believer's ability to do good works is not at all of himself/herself, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ (WCF 16.3). Thus, when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are only unworthy servants (Luke 17:10; WCF 16.5). Our good works merit nothing. Yet it is God's will to reward them in this life and in that which is to come and this reward comes not of merit but of grace (Mt 5:12; Heb 11:6; Lk 17:10; 2 Tim 4:7-8; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 63). The only good believers possess is that which is given to them by grace alone. Quoting Augustine, Calvin writes,

I do not say to the Lord, "Despise not the works of my hand." [Ps. 138:8; cf., Ps. 137:8, Vg.] "I have sought the Lord with my hands and am not deceived." [Ps. 77:2; cf., Ps. 76:3, Vg.] But, I do not commend the works of my hands, for I fear lest, when Thou lookest upon them, thou mayest find more sins than merits. This only I say,

this I ask, this I desire: despise not the works of thy hands; see in me thy work, not mine. For if thou seest mine, thou wilt condemn it. If thou seest thine own, thou wilt crown it. For whatever good works are mine are from thee," (3.14.20).

In addition, the believer's Spirit-wrought sanctity cannot serve as the primary foundation for assurance because, as has already been noted, sanctification is incomplete in this life. The very best we offer is imperfect and stained with sin (WCF 16.5). Even those who are converted to God cannot keep these commandments perfectly. Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience (Ecc 7:20; Rom 7:14-15; 1 Cor 13:9; 1 Jn 1:8). Nevertheless, with earnest purpose believers do begin to live, not only according to some, but according to all the commandments of God (Ps 1:1-2; Rom 7:22-25; Philip 3:12-16; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 114). Calvin writes,

He (Augustine-J.F.) gives two reasons why he dared not vaunt his works before God: because if he has anything of good works, he sees in them nothing of his own; and secondly, because these are also overwhelmed by a multitude of sins. From this it comes about that his conscience feels more fear and consternation than assurance. Therefore, he would like God to look upon his good deeds only that, recognizing the grace of his own call in them, he may finish the work he has begun (3.14.20).

A legal disposition constantly looks inward for assurance. Yet, believers bent in on themselves are continually faced with their failings, faults, flaws and weaknesses rather than perfect holiness, obedience, love for God and neighbor (good works they desire to have but fall short of). The justified and sanctified believer loves God's moral will and wants to follow it. The problem is that, due to remaining sin, the believer finds it exceedingly difficult to live in obedience to God's moral will (Rom. 7:15-24). This is the normal Christian life this side of the resurrection.

Thus, the result of the believer who continually focuses inward (fruit inspection) is that their assurance is destroyed. Why? Because they do not look upward and outward to Christ, their advocate and High Priest, where His perfect blood and righteousness, intercedes for them.

Again, Ralph Erskine, writes,

...when a man's peace and comfort rests only and always upon his sanctification, as if there were no other ground of joy, but a righteousness inherent: surely, when the joy of sanctification is

greater than the joy of justification, it is an evidence of a legal temper; *for the joy of justification is founded upon a law-bidding righteousness, the perfect obedience of the glorious Head, which is always the same unchangeable ground of joy to believers; whereas his sanctification is imperfect here, and cannot afford such peace and joy, as faith in a perfect obedience will give.* The true circumcision rejoice in Christ, and in what they have in him, more than in what they have from him. But behold, even the believer is ready to be taken up with his sanctification, which is inherent, and so to be lifted up, when he attains to a good gale, a great measure of sanctification; corruption may abuse the privilege, and then he is proud and lifted up (*The Works of Ralph Erskine, 2:80*).

Erskine concludes,

It is true, communion with God, is of a humbling nature, and natively makes a man humble, and lively, and watchful; but when the good frame is wearing off, and corruption beginning to work again, if this nick of time be not noticed, and the believer on his guard, a proud thought may enter in, were it even upon a Paul wrapt up to the third heavens; 'Lest I should be exalted above measure, a messenger of satan was sent; a thorn in the flesh. *O how does a legal temper run through every frame!* When a man is dead and dull, then he is in danger of murmuring: and when he is active and lively, then he is in danger of swelling (*Ibid, 80*).

## **Conclusion**

Christ's gifts are inseparable from his person. Thus, giving thanks to God for the changes in our affections and actions that we can see over time in our own lives is right (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 32, 43, 64, 116). Yet, believers must not put confidence in the "righteousness" of their works as the primary foundation for assurance of their right standing before God. As Calvin writes, when confidence is banished, all ascription of glory to works must also depart (3.14.16; WCF 16.5). Rejoicing and giving thanks for our inherent, Spirit-wrought righteousness (sanctification) is not problematic if we are rejoicing ultimately in Christ, who alone makes it acceptable (1 Peter 2:5; WCF 16.6).

Thus, Christ's *imputed righteousness* alone provides a sure foundation for assurance. For, even though our consciences accuse us that we have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, have never kept any of them, and are still inclined always to all evil, yet God, without any merit of our own, out of mere grace, imputes to us the perfect satisfaction,



righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if we had never had nor committed any sin, and as if we had ourselves accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for us (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 60).