

THE NEW PURITANISM PART 1: CARSON ON CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE¹

ZANE C. HODGES

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Over the last year or so a growing number of books and articles has appeared targeting the Free Grace movement for critique and rebuttal. These publications mention the Grace Evangelical Society and its literature. This is a positive development. GES definitely wishes to have its views seriously discussed in the marketplace of ideas.

It might be possible to describe these writings as presenting what is known as “Lordship Salvation.” But this designation, though widely used, does not indicate the true historical antecedents of the movement in its present form. The term could be used with equal ease to describe many who are Arminian in theology. Yet the major “Lordship” writers of today are not Arminian, however much they tend toward conclusions similar to those of Arminians (e.g., on assurance). Instead, these writers describe themselves as Calvinists. But John Calvin himself, were he alive today, would probably disown them because they more closely resemble the scholastic theology that *resisted* the Reformation than Calvin’s own theology.²

In deference, therefore, to the many Calvinists who hold a biblical theology of grace (e.g., R. T. Kendall, M. Charles Bell, Charles C. Ryrie), we refuse to describe the writers we are talking about as Calvinists. Instead, it would be better to identify them with the theology that became predominant in Puritan thought and which was, in significant respects, a rejection of certain basic concepts of Reformation theology. Hence my series title is “The New (i.e., contemporary) Puritanism.”

¹ This article appeared in the Spring 1993 issue of *JOTGES*.

² For just one of the points on which this seems true, see Paul Holloway, “A Return to Rome: Lordship Salvation’s Doctrine of Faith,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 4 (Autumn 1991): 13-21.

In this series we will consider some of the more significant recent literature produced from this particular theological perspective. In the process we will seek to determine how fairly, and how effectively, these writers have confronted the Free Grace movement.

In a recent issue of the *Westminster Theological Journal*, D. A. Carson, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, has written an article entitled, “Reflections on Christian Assurance.” Carson is a well-known scholar and a prolific writer. Since his presentation is reasonably well-balanced, it seems logical to begin this series with him.

I. PEJORATIVE LANGUAGE IN CARSON

Although a scholarly “distancing” generally prevails in Carson’s article, there are a few places where emotive and pejorative language break through. I will mention three such places.

A. Virulent Emphasis

In one place Carson speaks of the Reformation’s “virulent emphasis on *sola fide*.”³ The term “virulent” is anything but a compliment, since it can suggest such ideas as “extremely poisonous,” “pathogenic,” “hateful,” “obnoxious,” or “harsh” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). According to Carson this “virulent emphasis on *sola fide* led Luther to see assurance as an element of saving faith!” Moreover, he admits, “The same connection can be found in Calvin.”

It turns out, then, that “virulence” is in the eye of the beholder—in this case, Carson. He goes on to point out that, “By contrast, the English Puritans...placed more of an emphasis on the role of a transformed life in lending assurance to the Christian mind and conscience.”⁴ Precisely! And this is the fundamental issue in the debate today. Do we follow the Puritans in making a transformed life the lynch-pin of the doctrine of

³D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 54 (1992), 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

assurance, or do we concur with the great Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Melancthon) that assurance is “of the essence of” (an indispensable part of) saving faith? For Carson, the latter view is the product of a “virulent emphasis” on *sola fide*!

Let it be frankly admitted that the Free Grace movement today shares the reformers’ emphasis and conviction at this point. Carson’s use of the word *virulent* in connection with this issue suggests an underlying displeasure with, and rejection of, the Reformers’ doctrine of assurance. This is precisely the contemporary mentality of the New Puritanism.⁵

B. Wretched “Easy Believism”

Not surprisingly, Carson also writes about “the wretched ‘easy believism’ of many in the Western world who, having professed faith, feel no pull toward holiness and no shame when they take the elements.”⁶ Of course, along with phrases like “cheap grace” and “mental assent,” “easy believism” is one of the jargon terms of the New Puritanism. Hardly ever are these expressions clearly defined and they become little more than religious “cuss words” to hurl at one’s opponents and thus they serve as a substitute for calm and reasoned debate. As the quoted words of Carson show, “easy believism” (whatever it is) is so obviously bad that it can be described as “wretched” without further ado.

But does the rest of Carson’s quote actually define this term? No, not at all. Carson speaks of people who have “professed faith” but are without a holy conscience. Are such persons saved? Not for Carson. But also not necessarily for anyone whom I know of in the Free Grace movement, either! As I have made clear in print, I emphatically do *not* believe that all professions of faith are real. I know of no Free Grace writer who would disagree with me about that.

⁵ This mentality is by no means a new one. It is reflected clearly in the 19th century by Presbyterian theologian Robert L. Dabney. Dabney frankly states that Calvin and Luther were in error when they made assurance to be of the essence of saving faith. His immediate target was the Plymouth Brethren, who concurred with this view of the Reformers. See the two treatises, “Theology of the Plymouth Brethren,” in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*, vol. 1: *Theological and Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughn (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 169-213 and 214-28.

⁶ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 5.

Why is this? First, to profess faith is not the same as believing, since the profession may be a lie. After all, Paul speaks of “false brethren” down in Jerusalem who apparently only pretended to be Christians (Gal 2:4). But second, the content or object of a man’s faith may be false. If the true biblical gospel is not what is believed, then of course the professed believer has believed something that will not save him. Regrettably, many people believe a “gospel” that is unbiblical. If that is all they have ever believed about the way of salvation, believing it will not save them. We are saved by believing *truth*, not error. That is to say, only the *true* gospel saves.

But the statement Carson makes about professed believers is equally fraught with difficulties. Such persons, says Carson, “feel no pull toward holiness and no shame when they take the elements.”⁷ Pardon me, but I thought only God could know if a person feels “no pull toward holiness” or “no shame when taking the elements”! Does Carson really mean that they *seem* to have no such “pull” and that they *seem* to have no “shame”? But that’s different. It is often true that men hide their innermost feelings and may only *appear* to lack these things. Is Carson talking about cases where, *as far as we can tell*, these things are absent? If not, does Carson know for a fact that such cases as he describes actually exist?

The imprecision here is almost hopeless. The reader cannot tell exactly what the writer means. Does the writer himself know? If so, he’ll have to tell us.

Meanwhile, the phrase “easy believism” (whatever it is!) consists of little more than imprecise code words for who knows what?

C. Happy to Speak of...

According to Carson, “Zane Hodges is happy [!] to speak of Christians ceasing to name the name of Christ and denying the faith completely...”⁸ This comment by Carson is close to being an unethical canard. How could I be “happy” to speak of such things?

Carson might claim that he only meant to say that these matters did not move me to change my theology. But Carson is too

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

sophisticated a writer not to know better than that. The choice of the word *happy* will suggest to some that I maintain a kind of moral indifference to these things. But no one who has ever read any book of mine carefully, can fairly draw such a conclusion. I *do* believe that the Bible teaches that such awful sins can be committed by a Christian. But with biblical writers like Paul (2 Tim 2:16-21) and the author of Hebrews (chaps. 6 and 10), I am grieved that this is so. I am *not* happy about it!

Since the writers from the New Puritan school of thought stress the importance of holiness, perhaps they could set us all an example of chaste language which is fair rather than demeaning, relevant rather than *ad hominem*.

II. CONCESSIONS BY CARSON

One positive feature of Carson's article was his apparent willingness to concede some points that heretofore had been in debate. Of course, it is possible that, from Carson's viewpoint, none of the matters I list represent concessions *by him*. But at least, in the items cited, he appears to go against some of the widely-held positions of others in his school of thought.

A. The Debate over Kendall's Work

In his impressive historical study entitled *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University Press, 1979), R. T. Kendall has argued that, starting with Beza in Geneva and Perkins in England, post-Calvin Calvinism departed from Calvin's own doctrine of faith and assurance. The result was the denial of a fundamental feature of Calvin's doctrine of saving faith: namely, a denial that assurance was of the essence of saving faith.

Carson does not side with those who categorically reject Kendall's position. Indeed, in a carefully nuanced paragraph on this debate, Carson begins by saying: "Certainly both sides of this essentially historical debate have full arsenals by which to take on the others' positions."⁹

But he goes on to add that "both sides recognize that the debate is not merely a historical one...but a doctrinal one with

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

substantial theological and pastoral implications.”¹⁰ Although this sounds like a very modest concession, it is considerably more than that in reality. Considering that many in the New Puritan camp have firmly rejected Kendall’s conclusions, Carson’s unwillingness to come down clearly on that side of the issue speaks volumes.¹¹

Kendall’s thesis about the lack of assurance in Puritanism is relevant at another place in the article. There Carson has a lengthy quotation from I. Howard Marshall which ends with the words:

Whoever said, “The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it,” had it summed up nicely...The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds to Christ. It seems to me the practical effect is the same.¹²

Carson’s concession here is grudging: “At a merely *mechanistic* level, I think this analysis is largely correct” (italics added).¹³ Why “mechanistic”? Surely Marshall’s analysis is right on target. Carson’s discussion (following the quoted statement on p. 21), is simply an effort to salvage some superiority for the Puritan view over the Arminian one. But doubt, discouragement, and despair are the frequent fruits of a lack of assurance in *both* of these branches of professing Christendom.

B. The Problem of 1 John 3:9

While not citing this verse explicitly, Carson nevertheless has it in mind when he discusses the Apostle John’s “insistence that believers do sin” in relation to the fact that, “At the same time, he repeatedly insists that sinning is *not* done amongst Christians.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kendall’s thesis was defended against his critics by M. Charles Bell in his doctoral dissertation done for the University of Aberdeen (1982) and published as *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), 13-18. Also helpful in this whole discussion is A. N. S. Lane, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance,” *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979): 32-54.

¹² Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 20-21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

This observation refers especially to the well-known tension between 1 John 1:8 and verses like 3:9 and 5:18.

What is Carson's view of the solution? It is actually a variation of the old "ideal" view. This view antedates the more widely known "tense solution" that appeals to the use of the present tense in the (alleged) sense of "does not keep on sinning." Instead of the tense view, Carson writes:

Various explanations have been advanced, but the *most obvious* is still the best: although both our experience and our location between the "already" and the "not yet" teach us that we do and will sin, yet every single instance of sin is shocking, inexcusable, forbidden, appalling, out of line with what we are as Christians.¹⁵

Thus does Carson silently reject the "tense solution" which has been by far the most popular one among those holding to the New Puritanism. The present author challenged this view as far back as 1981 and again in the new edition of *The Gospel Under Siege* (1992). I have called this widely-held view an idea whose time has come *and gone!*¹⁶ It has been abandoned by the most recent major commentators on 1 John: Marshall, Brown, and Smalley.¹⁷

I am not so sanguine as to believe that we will never hear the tense view again from the other side, but with Carson quietly turning his back on it I am tempted to declare victory here for the Free Grace position. After all, we can live with the "ideal" view as easily as Carson does!

Maybe more so.

C. The Greek Verb *Pisteuō* and Its Constructions

In two footnotes, Carson explodes the reliance some New Puritan writers have placed on the different constructions used with the Greek verb for *believe* (i.e., *pisteuō* used with *eis* plus an accusative and *pisteuō* used with the simple dative). Correctly Carson writes: "In reality, the small variation in form is typical

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, italics added.

¹⁶ *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992), 63-67.

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Greek New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982); Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984).

of the Fourth Evangelist, who is well-known for his slight variations without clear-cut semantic distinction.”¹⁸

So much for another illicit argument that has sometimes been deployed against the Free Grace movement. Sophisticated linguists are not impressed by argumentation from grammatical over-refinements. The current discussion of soteriology will be greatly enhanced if we dispense with such over-refinements altogether.

III. “IN-HOUSE” INTERPRETATIONS BY CARSON

While the “concessions” mentioned above are to be valued, Carson nevertheless exhibits many “in-house” interpretations. By “in-house” I mean that they are quite common in the New Puritanism and are sometimes put forward as if they were self-evident. Space does not permit us to do more than mention a couple of these. In any case most of them are dealt with in my books, especially, *The Gospel Under Siege* (2nd ed., 1992).

A. Second Peter 1:10 and Assurance

Carson apparently takes this verse as most others in his school do, namely, as a call to perform good works so as to have reason to be sure of one’s election, but his reference to this text is too brief to bear discussion here (p. 2). Of course, Calvin did not take 2 Pet 1:10 in this way,¹⁹ nor is there any real reason to regard the text as relevant to one’s own inward assurance. Peter no doubt has demonstration to men, not to oneself, in view. In this sense, before the world, we *verify* our call and election by our lifestyle.

B. First Corinthians 3:1-4 and the Carnal Christian

As expected, Carson does not much like the distinction between “spiritual” and “carnal” Christians, though Paul plainly makes *some kind* of distinction in these verses, as Carson recognizes.

¹⁸ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 17.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Comm. 2 Peter 1:10*. M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, writes: “Even with regard to 2 Peter 1:10 (which was later used by Calvinists to justify the use of the practical syllogism [=testing one’s faith by one’s works]), Calvin refuses to refer this to man’s conscience as a means of discerning the certainty of our salvation” (p. 29).

What Carson appears to object to is “an absolute, qualitative distinction” between these categories.²⁰ But who in the Free Grace movement carries the distinction *that far*?

Since Paul compares carnality with babyhood (3:1), might we not ask whether to make a distinction between “babies” and “mature” people would also be making an “absolute, qualitative distinction” in the natural realm? If not (or even if so!), can we not also distinguish spiritual infants from the spiritually mature?

But Carson seems also to be worried about the term *carnal* being applied to “someone who made a profession of faith, followed the way of Christ for a few months, and then lived in a manner indistinguishable from that of any pagan for the next fifteen years, despite conscientious pastoral interest.”²¹ Yet here again we encounter the same confusion we met in Carson’s treatment of “easy believism.” Since Carson does not tell us what exactly the so-called profession of faith rested on, we have no way of knowing whether such a case is one over which we might disagree.

And why fifteen years? Would the case have the same meaning for Carson if the time covered were only ten years? Five years? Two? One? New Puritanism shows an understandable reluctance to address particulars of this sort, since addressing them will show how arbitrary examples like Carson’s are. Almost always the so-called examples are painted in such lurid and extreme colors that one never hears of the shades of gray that pastors on the field actually encounter.

And once more we meet the “fudge factor” of appearance versus reality. The case Carson hypothesizes is of a professed believer living “in a manner indistinguishable from any pagan.” Indistinguishable to whom? To God? Or to the New Puritans? Those are *not* the same thing!

Here it is easy to detect the “eagerness” with which New Puritan theology is ready to pronounce on cases of profession which are not followed by the fruits thought appropriate by New Puritanism. The proponents of this theology are anxious to rule on cases that they consider obvious, even though God may well know facts about real-life cases which can never be known by

²⁰ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*

finite man and which would significantly alter man's assessment if they *could* be known.

Carson's comments on false professions are all to be regarded as constructing arbitrary straw men which serve only to avoid the tougher questions at issue.

Finally, in his treatment of carnality, Carson errs in what apparently is supposed to be the Free Grace position. He states:

It [1 Corinthians 3] does not encourage us to think that it is possible to accept Jesus as Savior, and thus be promoted from the "natural" to the "carnal" level, in transit, as it were, to the "spiritual" stage, at which point one has accepted Jesus as Lord.²²

Carson offers us no documentation for such a view. I for one do not know where he can find any. This looks to me like a mere caricature which has been created in Carson's thinking by a flawed idea of what his opponents teach.

Carnality, in my view, is spiritual babyhood (1 Cor 3:1). It has nothing to do with the acceptance of Jesus as Lord any more than a child's infancy has anything to do with his "acceptance" of the authority of his father. The carnal Christian may well recognize (as the Corinthians obviously did) the Lordship of Christ. They were simply too immature to behave in a spiritual way and the Apostle Paul is asking them to face the true character of their conduct.

In the quoted statement, I see no resemblance between Carson's statements and the Free Grace position. Without the proper documentation, Carson's comments look like another straw man.

IV. CARSON AND GES

Carson is well aware of the existence of the Grace Evangelical Society and introduces us to his readers under a heading referring to "*a small but vociferous segment of evangelicalism.*"²³ I suppose a warm welcome to the evangelical scene was more than we could have expected from this writer. Why we are regarded as any more "vociferous" than the New Puritans themselves (if indeed we are so regarded) is a point that escapes me. No doubt

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 5, italics original.

the liberal media and elite regard politically active conservatives as “vociferous” too. But such pejorative terms are not likely to silence either them or us.

Carson incorrectly lumps all GES adherents together when he describes “our” view on repentance. He writes:

In the view of Hodges and his colleagues, trusting Jesus as Savior is all that is required for salvation. “Repentance,” in their view, must be understood in a narrowly etymological sense: it is a mental “change of mind” that accepts Jesus as Savior, but entails no necessary sorrow over sin or turning away from it.²⁴

Actually this is not my view at all, though it *is* the view of many of my fellow GES colleagues. My own view is carefully explained in my book, *Absolutely Free!*, in the longest chapter (chap 12, pp. 143-63), entitled “Repentance.”²⁵ Carson has not done his homework here.

Interestingly, Carson later claims that “it would take too much space...to demonstrate the methodological flaws inherent in Hodges’ treatment of repentance.”²⁶ Perhaps so. But in any case he should first *read* those views with enough care to get them right!

In discussing the Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1-20), Carson (evidently) adopts the standard view within the New Puritanism that the first three soils represent the non-elect (see pp. 18-19). But he goes on to say that “several popular interpreters with the Grace Evangelical Society find this so uncomfortable that they reinterpret the parable.”²⁷ I suppose we *are* uncomfortable with the New Puritan approach to this parable, but only because it does not appear to square with the text.

In fact, Carson’s treatment of the parable is so imprecise in its terminology that others from his camp may be uncomfortable, too, when they read it. He notes, for example, that in the parable “two of the three fruitless soils sprout life.” A few lines further down he states (of the seed on rocky ground) that “this spiritual life proves transitory.”²⁸

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989).

²⁶ Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

What can this possibly mean? Does “spiritual life” here equal eternal life? If so, how can it prove transitory unless, after all, the Arminians are right! (A conclusion we do not really entertain!) But if it is not *eternal* life, what is it? Is there *another* kind of spiritual life? Carson does not tell us.

But our understanding is further darkened when Carson goes on to write that to hold the GES view of the parable would mean “introducing a category for spiritual life that is nevertheless fruitless” and that to do so “is simply alien to the concerns of the chapter, and contrary to one of the driving motifs of all three Synoptic Gospels.”²⁹

But if *we* introduce a category of life that is fruitless (actually we do not), has not Carson himself introduced a category of spiritual life that is transitory and not eternal? Is this not a case of the pot calling the kettle black?

Actually, in the parable, the sprouts and the stunted grain of the middle two soils ought not to be called “spiritual life” at all. Instead, they are the *manifestations* of spiritual life. But *the life* is inherent in *the seed* which symbolizes the Word of God (Mark 4:14; see 1 Pet 1:22-25). As long as the seed remains in the soil (in the last three soils it *does* remain) *life is there*. Only its manifestations are lost in the rocky soil.

This is a perfectly straightforward view of the parable which should make no one uncomfortable unless (as is true in Carson’s case) it contradicts his theology!

I am happy that Carson has discovered GES. Perhaps the next time he writes about us he could aim for a higher level of scholarly precision.

V. CARSON AND “COMPATIBILISM”

In an extended section (pp. 21-26), Carson has appealed to what he calls “compatibilism.” Compatibilism, he claims, deals with the vexed question of the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.³⁰ “Modern compatibilists,”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The famous (alleged) tension between the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility has been called by others an irresolvable paradox, or an antinomy. “Compatibilism” is Carson’s term for this, by which he means that these doctrines “are mutually compatible” even though they cannot be totally harmonized. See his discussion on p. 22.

he claims, "...do not try to show how the two propositions hold together,"³¹ and "compatibilism touches many subjects: election, the problem of suffering, the nature of prayer, and much else. What is not often recognized is that it bears directly on the nature of Christian assurance."³²

There follows a crucial statement by Carson:

For, on the one hand, we are dealing with a plethora of texts that promise God's sovereign commitment to preserve His own elect; on the other, believers are enjoined to persevere in faithfulness to the new covenant and the Lord of the covenant, to the calling by which they were called. This is nothing other than God's sovereignty and human responsibility dressed up in another form.

So we will, I think, always have some mystery.³³

The fallacy of this approach, however, is that it is dictated by Carson's own view of faith and assurance as being somehow related to perseverance in holiness. Since Carson shows no serious inclination to re-examine this premise of his own theology, he is left with the very tensions he claims must be handled by compatibilism. But even after these tensions are waved aside by Carson, what is left is *not* assurance at all.

What is left, in fact, is the *idée fixe* of the New Puritanism: namely, that the passages which command "faithfulness to the new covenant and to the Lord of the covenant" must be tied in with soteriological concerns. As long as this flawed premise is held to, adherents of Puritan thought can still not have genuine assurance.

If "assurance" were indeed a mystery, then it would be a deeply disquieting mystery to those who need assurance the most. Does Dr. Carson know beyond question that he himself is regenerate? If so, let him tell us *how* he knows.

The compatibilist cannot have a mystery and a confident answer too!

³¹ Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," 23-24.

³² *Ibid.*, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

VI. CONCLUSION

There is certainly much more that can be said about the specific matters which appear in Carson's article, but space does not permit this. To respond to everything in Carson's discussion would almost require that our book, *The Gospel Under Siege* (2nd ed.) be reprinted here. The reader who wishes more discussion of the specific passages brought forward by Carson will find most of them addressed in that book or in *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*.

Let us here simply examine one of Carson's final, concluding observations. On the final page of his article he writes:

I have not argued that perseverance is the basis for assurance; rather, I have argued that failure to persevere undermines assurance. The *basis* of assurance is Christ and His work and its entailments.³⁴

This comes close to double-speak. *Of course*, New Puritan thought makes Christ and His work the *basis* of assurance even as they make it the *basis* of salvation. The trouble is that in New Puritanism one cannot *find* real assurance in Christ and His work (as Calvin so clearly taught that we could!), for any such supposed assurance is invalidated by the possibility that one may fail to persevere.

Thus the "failure to persevere" does more than to "undermine assurance" *after* the failure appears. It also undermines it *up front* as well, so that someone who believes in Puritan theology cannot be truly sure of salvation even at the supposed moment of conversion. And, indeed, he can never be sure before death, because only death forecloses the possibility of his "falling away."

I want to remind Carson that for Calvin such a person was not saved at all. In treating 2 Cor 13:5 (a favorite New Puritan text) Calvin writes:

Second, *this passage serves to prove the assurance of faith* [italics added], a doctrine which the sophists of the Sorbonne have so corrupted for us that it is now almost uprooted from the minds of men. They hold that it is rash temerity to be persuaded that we are members of Christ and have Him dwelling in us, and they bid us rest content with a moral conjecture, which is a mere opinion, so that our consciences remain

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, italics original.

perpetually undecided and perplexed. But what does Paul say here? *He declares that those who doubt their possession of Christ are reprobates* [italics added]. Let us therefore understand that the only true faith is that which allows us to rest in God's grace, not with a dubious opinion but *with firm and steadfast assurance* [italics added].³⁵

Even if we demur, as I do, from Calvin's precise exposition of this Pauline text, Calvin's firm insistence that assurance is of the essence of true saving faith is quite plain here. He makes the same point in many other places as well.

The Grace Evangelical Society agrees with Calvin's conviction that saving faith, whenever it is exercised, carries with it a firm assurance. Apparently the New Puritans agree with "the sophists of the Sorbonne"!

³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Public Domain), s.v. 2 Cor 13:5.

THE NEW PURITANISM PART 2: MICHAEL S. HORTON: HOLY WAR WITH UNHOLY WEAPONS¹

ZANE C. HODGES

I. INTRODUCTION

Michael S. Horton is the president of an organization known as Christians United for Reformation (CURE), with headquarters in Anaheim, California. As its journalistic arm, CURE publishes a magazine called *modernReformation* [sic], which promotes CURE's point of view. On the masthead of this magazine CURE is identified as "a non-profit educational foundation committed to communicating the insights of the 16th century Reformation to the 20th century Church."

The book under review here is a symposium volume entitled, *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; 240 pp.) and is edited by Horton. He also contributed a preface, an introduction, and two out of the eight articles the book contains. Four other contributors (W. Robert Godfrey, Rick Ritchie, Kim Riddlebarger, and Rod Rosenblatt) are listed as "Writers" on the masthead of *modernReformation*. The two remaining contributors are Paul Schaefer, a freelance writer, and Robert Strimple, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California (as also is Godfrey, mentioned above).

Clearly there is no reason to quarrel with the designation "A CURE Book" which appears on the title page.

Michael S. Horton's name has achieved considerable visibility in recent years through a number of books, including *The Agony of Deceit* (which he edited) and *Made in America* (which he wrote). But it is probable that many to whom his name is known could not pinpoint his theology beyond saying that it was evangelical. However, as one reviewer of *Made in America* has noted:

¹ This article appeared in the Autumn 1993 issue of *JOTGES*.

Horton's major concern is not with the country in general, but how quickly American evangelicals in particular abandoned the *Puritan ideal*, particularly its *Calvinistic theology* and world view, and accommodated themselves to whatever the culture dictated.²

Later, the same reviewer notes that "those who *do not share Horton's love* for the five Points of Calvinism may find his constant harping on Arminianism excessive."³ An awareness of the theology behind *Christ the Lord* is essential if we are to correctly evaluate this book.

II. LET THE READER BEWARE

In the last analysis, *Christ the Lord* is a vigorous attack on Free Grace theology from a slightly disguised Dortian (five-point Calvinist) perspective.

The reader should understand that five-point Calvinism generally denies the validity of all free will in human beings and embraces a harsh doctrine of reprobation along with a rigid view of divine election. To put it plainly, those who are lost were unconditionally assigned to hell by divine decree in eternity past. Since they have no free will, there is nothing they can possibly do about their eternal reprobation.

But equally, the elect can do nothing either, not even believe. This leads to the doctrine that our faith does not appropriate God's gift of life, but rather faith *results from* God's sovereign regeneration of the elect person. To the five-point Calvinist, regeneration logically precedes faith, despite all of the Scriptures that condition eternal life and/or justification on faith.

It follows, as well, that Christ did not pay the penalty for the sins of the non-elect, but only for those of the elect. This too flies in the face of Scripture (2 Cor 5:19; 1 Tim 2:3-6; 1 John 2:2).

None of these ideas has any right to be called normative Protestant theology. None has ever been held by a wide cross-section of Christendom. Most importantly, none of them is

² Robert W. Patterson, "Did the Reformation Take a Wrong Turn in America?" *Christianity Today* 35 (14, November 25, 1991): 30-32, italics added.

³ *Ibid.*, 32, italics added.

biblical. In the opinion of this reviewer, *all* of them lie outside the proper parameters of Christian orthodoxy.

Yet the contributors to this book do not lay explicit claim to this set of doctrines. To do so would have “turned off” a large majority of Christian readers. Instead, they feel more comfortable hurling at their opponents such epithets as “Arminian” and “antinomian.” But by concealing the full scope of their own theology—and by laying claim to orthodoxy—they actually construct a fantasy world. They create the deceptive illusion that the Free Grace movement is an enemy to historic orthodoxy.⁴

But in fact, the Free Grace movement is *not* an enemy to orthodoxy. On the other hand, most (but not all) Free Grace people are indeed opposed to the “Christian fatalism” of 5-point Calvinism.

The writers of this volume are sometimes so intense that one feels they regard their assault on Free Grace theology as a kind of “holy war.” But if this is their view of it, their weapons are decidedly *unholy*. Let us examine some of these “weapons,” which the writers freely deploy. Limits of space require our focus to be mainly on Horton, the leading offender here.

III. UNHOLY WEAPONS

Very few books that I have read deal so heavily in caricature and misrepresentation. It was hard for me even to *recognize* myself after encountering so many false strokes on this volume’s portrait of me. We will look at some of these “false strokes” as we survey the “unholy weapons” deployed in this volume.

A. False Statements

1. *The Issue of Saving Faith*

Under his discussion of “Is Faith a Gift?” (Introduction, p. 16), Horton refers to my approving citation of Dr. Robert Preus in *Absolutely Free!* (Note 5, pp. 227-28).⁵ Horton describes Preus as “perhaps the leading conservative Lutheran scholar in our

⁴One can obtain an instructive exposure to five-point Calvinism in the volume by John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

⁵Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, and Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989).

generation,”⁶ and quotes the section (which I also quoted) where Preus states:

The Arminians too opposed the Lutheran doctrine by making faith (which they granted was trust) a work (*actus*) of man. Like the Romanists they had a synergistic notion of how man came to faith...Their deviations from the evangelical model are in force today, although in somewhat less gross form. We have all encountered them.⁷

What follows in Horton is an astounding and reckless charge. He writes:

Indeed, we have all encountered them, not least in Zane Hodges’s *Absolutely Free!* That Hodges can approvingly cite these remarks while *laboring throughout the book* [italics added] to establish that very Roman Catholic and Arminian view of saving faith as a human act and the product of a synergistic (i.e., cooperative) response of free will to divine grace demonstrates the author’s confusion either as to what the Reformers taught or as to his own position.⁸

This is totally “off the wall,” to use a colloquial expression. We should note that, in saying that I labor “*throughout the book*” to prove what he charges me with, Horton does not cite so much as one single page-reference! Since I do *not* hold or teach what Horton says I do, Horton’s statement is flatly false.

What is equally bad is the question of whether or not Horton has even read with care the very footnote in my book from which he himself was quoting! In that note I speak approvingly of Preus’s insistence on the traditional Lutheran understanding of faith as “pure receptivity.” I also refer to Preus’s citation of Luther’s own great statement: “Faith holds out the hand and the sack and just lets the good be done to it. For God is the giver... , we are the receivers who receive the gift through faith that does nothing.”⁹ This is my view of faith, too.

⁶ *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 16.

⁷ Robert D. Preus, “Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45, (July 1981): 172.

⁸ *Christ the Lord*, 16.

⁹ Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 227.

I do not contradict this position anywhere in *Absolutely Free!* Horton's claim that I do is without foundation. Faith is *not* an "*actus*" in either the Roman Catholic or Arminian sense. It is "pure receptivity" to the offer of the Gospel. Faith is a *persuasion* of the heart, not an "*act*" of the human will.¹⁰

2. *The Second or Third Point of Calvinism?*

After the discussion above, we are hardly surprised to read another accusation by Horton:

Denying the doctrine of unconditional election ("this tragic error," Hodges calls it) and the effectiveness of God's grace in granting faith, the author adds...¹¹

This is also an untrue statement. I say nothing in *Absolutely Free!* about the doctrine of unconditional election (the so-called second point of Calvinism). As a matter of fact, I hold to that doctrine, though probably not in a form to which Horton would give his approval.

In my text the words "this tragic error" refer to the *third* point of Calvinism, namely, to the doctrine of *limited atonement*. This doctrine is often denied by those Calvinists who hold to the other four points of Calvinism (including unconditional election). With apologies to the reader, I must quote myself here in order to make my point. I wrote:

Frequently (though not always) lordship salvation is combined with a harsh system of thought that *denies the reality of God's love for every single human being*. According to this kind of theology, God dooms most men to eternal damnation long before they are born and *really gives His Son to die only for the elect*.

For such thinkers, the declaration that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16) must be tortured into meaning something less than His universal love for mankind. It

¹⁰ One might note here Kendall's crisp summation of Calvin's view of saving faith: What stands out in these descriptions is the given, intellectual, passive, and assuring nature of faith. What is absent is a need for gathering faith, voluntarism, faith as man's act, and faith that must await experimental knowledge to verify its presence." R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 19, italics added. I, of course, concur with such a view of saving faith.

¹¹ *Christ the Lord*, 17, italics added.

does not lie within the scope of this book to deal with this tragic error.”¹²

No doubt this section of my book greatly displeased Horton, who evidently holds to “limited atonement.” But why could he not accurately designate the doctrine I was criticizing? Is this carelessness? Or is it an unwillingness to allow his belief in “limited atonement” to be plainly declared. After all, most Christians throughout church history have rejected this doctrine. Furthermore, a powerful case has been made that *Calvin himself did not hold it*.¹³ Is Horton afraid that “open confession” will undermine his case to the general Christian public?

3. Revelation 3:20

Or, we might take the following unwarranted statement by Horton:

Hodges also returns to the faulty, if popular, exegesis of Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” It is clear from the context that Jesus is addressing “the church of the Laodiceans,” not the unbelieving world, as Hodges and others interpret it.¹⁴

How could Horton possibly have come up with this? Certainly not by a careful reading of my book! In fact I say clearly of Rev 3:20 that:

It would be wrong to take this famous statement as a simple gospel invitation, though that has often been done. Here our Lord is addressing a Christian church and, clearly, anyone in the church is invited to respond.¹⁵

Moreover, on p. 150 of my book, I refer to Rev 3:20 in connection with Christian repentance! Horton’s statement about my view is *totally* false.

¹² Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 85-86, italics added.

¹³ For effective discussions of this issue, leading to the conclusion that Calvin held to unlimited atonement, the reader should refer to Kendall’s *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*; to M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1985); and to A. N. S. Lane, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance,” *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979): 32-54.

¹⁴ *Christ the Lord*, 17-18.

¹⁵ Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 129.

4. Conclusion

The observant reader will have noticed that the three false statements I have cited occur on pp. 16, 17 and 17-18. This is falsification at a very rapid clip! Obviously I would soon use up all the space in this article if I tried to enumerate each and every false assertion this volume makes about my views.

Suffice it to say, Horton and his fellow authors are so unreliable in stating these views, that none of their statements about me should be taken at face value unless carefully verified by the reader from my actual writings!

B. Distortions

As we have said, the writers in *Christ the Lord* frequently just misstate my views; on the other hand, they often distort them. Once again we will focus on Horton.

1. The Charge of Denying God's Sovereignty

On p. 21 (still in his Introduction!), Horton rejects my view about the statement in Eph 2:10 that Christians are “created... for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” In *Absolutely Free!* I stated that one cannot find in this text “any kind of guarantee that the stated purpose will be fulfilled.”¹⁶

Horton replies: “So, once again, the author follows his logic to its sad conclusion: God is not sovereign; he does not achieve his gracious purposes...”¹⁷

Has Horton never heard the formulation to which even many Calvinists hold, namely that, “What God desires, He does not always decree”? God may deeply desire certain goals which, in His wisdom, He has not chosen to attain. Horton’s charge that my theology results in the conclusion that God is not sovereign, is logically absurd.

Horton’s position is also linguistically untenable. The Greek word *hina* (= “that”) in Eph 2:10 tells us nothing about the final results and only describes the intended *purpose* God has for us as people “created in Christ Jesus.” Whether or not this purpose will be fulfilled in each and every case is a conclusion that cannot be supported from this text.

¹⁶ Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 73.

¹⁷ *Christ the Lord*, 21.

But in Horton's theology one is required to hold to its fulfillment by *all* the elect. From Horton's perspective, the reason for this is indicated by the words that immediately follow the quotation cited above: [The result of Hodges's view is that] "the effectiveness of the grace he [God] offers depends entirely on what we decide by an act of the will."¹⁸

This, too, is a distortion. I do not state, nor do I believe, that obedience to God's will "depends *entirely*" on what *we* decide. God works on the human will to move us (not coerce us!) to a decision to obey, and His enablement is necessary as we seek to carry out this decision (see Phil 2:13). At the same time, the Christian *may* resist God's work in his heart.

But leaving this point aside, the real key to Horton's comments is his complete refusal to allow any role to man's will either in salvation or in sanctification. Horton appears to think that any allowance for the activity of the human will deprives God of His sovereignty. But this is false.

The relationship between divine control and human freedom has long been a controversial theological issue. The reader may be interested in a recent and highly competent treatment of this difficult subject. He will find it in an article by David Basinger entitled, "Divine Control and Human Freedom: Is Middle Knowledge the Answer?" in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1, March 1993): 55-64. The complexity of the issue can easily be seen from Basinger's discussion. Horton's perspective evidently requires what Basinger calls "theological determinism." In my view, the approach designated "middle knowledge" is superior to other views. In "middle knowledge" full account is taken of God's omniscience so that room is left for the biblical concept of human responsibility as well as of divine sovereignty. A discussion of the whole question cannot be taken up here.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It must be said that Basinger does not hold himself to the "middle knowledge" position. His critique of this position, however, does not seem to me to do full justice to the tremendous scope of God's foreknowledge, which includes knowing all things that could be conceived of occurring, in all of their conceivable permutations—and knowing all this with full immediacy. Such a God can instantaneously take account of an infinite number of possible scenarios and could ordain precisely that scenario in which His will is completely worked out within a cosmos containing actual free will. For Basinger's evaluation, see the article cited in the text above, 61-64.

Suffice it to say, Horton apparently charges me with theological indeterminism of an Arminian type, which is not at all a fair or correct assessment of my position.

2. *The Charge of Antinomianism*

Naturally, Horton also charges me (and others) with antinomianism. This is pretty standard fare for my critics in the New Puritan camp. I was certainly not surprised to find it in this book too.

What did surprise me was Horton's apparent lack of accuracy in discussing the so-called "antinomian controversy" in seventeenth-century New England. In a section entitled "The Antinomian Controversy" (found on pp. 142-47 of Horton's chapter called "Christ Crucified between Two Thieves"), Horton depicts that controversy in a way that is, historically, almost unrecognizable.

The best resource for students of this controversy is the volume edited by David Hall and entitled, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*.²⁰ Here all the essential original documents have been collected and printed in full. The first edition was published in 1968 (Horton apparently errs in citing it as 1989 on p. 228), while a second edition appeared in 1990. I have read the documents in their entirety. But has Horton? I seriously doubt it, even though he cites the book four times. On inspection, his citations from the first edition are from p. 15 (twice), p. 19, and p. 53. But this is a book of well over 400 pages!²¹

Strikingly, Horton critiques the New England Puritans who *opposed*(!) antinomianism because they "appeared to be following a system more akin to the medieval penitential system, with assurance of God's favor being granted through successive stages of contrition, purgation, illumination, and finally union" (pp. 144-45). And who is Horton's "hero" in this controversy? Astoundingly, it is John Cotton, the leading clergyman on the *antinomian* side! Of Cotton he writes:

For whatever reasons, John Cotton had become more aligned with the thinking of the Reformers (and, I think, the New Testament) after his move to Boston.

²⁰ David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990).

²¹ In the second edition, to be exact, xxi + 453 pages.

Cotton argued, quite traditionally, that we do not attain union through a series of stages; rather we are united to Christ immediately by the Holy Spirit through faith. His opponents, however, like many of their English contemporaries, followed a line closer to the medieval scheme.²²

All of this is to be taken *cum grano salis* because it throws a false slant on the controversy. As Hall has reaffirmed in the preface to his new edition, “I argued in 1968, and would argue again, that assurance of salvation was the central issue in the controversy.”²³ The argument among the Puritans revolved around whether assurance of salvation could be immediately given by the Spirit at conversion, or whether assurance must wait on one’s sanctification—i.e., on a manifestation of *obedience to the law*. Those who *opposed* making obedience to the law a necessary condition of assurance were the “antinomians” (= those against law). As I have noted, Cotton was the leader of the “antinomians.”²⁴

But if Cotton, the “antinomian,” is Horton’s hero in the controversy who is his villain? This dubious distinction falls on Anne Hutchinson, whom Horton acknowledges to have been “one of his [Cotton’s] devoted parishioners.”²⁵ Of Hutchinson Horton writes:

Now it must be said that Anne Hutchinson, in addition to being a strange person, was certainly an antinomian. Very often, charges of antinomianism are not seaworthy, but Anne clearly denied the necessary connection between faith and repentance, justification and sanctification, and relegated the latter to “works-righteousness.” Every command, every requirement in Scripture, was viewed as a form of legalism.²⁶

Where is the documentation for these claims? Horton offers none. Apparently he wishes to distance Hutchinson from Cotton, but in so doing he distorts history. Much more accurate, it seems to me, are the publisher’s comments on the back cover of the paperback edition of Hall’s *The Antinomian Controversy*:

²² *Christ the Lord*, 144-45.

²³ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, xiv,

²⁴ Cotton was charged with antinomianism, for example, by Robert Baillie, who was a minister in the church of Scotland as well as a delegate to the Westminster Assembly (which drew up the Westminster Confession).

²⁵ *Christ the Lord*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

This new edition of the 1968 volume, published for the first time in paper, includes an expanded bibliography and a new preface, treating in more detail the primary figures of Anne Hutchinson and her chief clerical supporter, John Cotton. Among the documents gathered here are transcripts of Anne Hutchinson's trial, several of Cotton's writings defending the Antinomian position, and John Winthrop's account of the controversy. Hall's increased focus on Hutchinson reveals the harshness and the excesses with which the New England ministry tried to discredit her and reaffirms her place of prime importance in the history of American women.

This does not sound at all like Horton's description of things!

What is crucial here is the account, or transcript, of Mrs. Hutchinson's examination by the General Court at Newtown in November of 1637.²⁷ This account was first found in an appendix to an historical work published in Boston in 1767.²⁸ It sheds significant light on Mrs. Hutchinson and is included in Hall's volume on pages 312-48.

It is plain from the transcript that Mrs. Hutchinson was routing her accusers with her responses until she admitted that she had received divine revelations. As Hall has noted,

Her trial by the Court was nearly a disaster, for Mrs. Hutchinson made the various charges brought against her seem ridiculous. Not until she spoke of receiving revelations from God did the Court find an issue on which she could be banished. With her proscription the Controversy drew to a close.²⁹

So, in reality, Mrs. Hutchinson was not banished for her antinomian views, but for what amounted to her "charismatic" tendencies!

The reader may be interested in a brief extract from the exchange between Anne Hutchinson and her accusers at this hearing. In segment, the Deputy Governor charges her with disparaging all ministers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by

²⁷ Given in Hall's chapter, "The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton," 311-48.

²⁸ Specifically, according to Hall, p. 311, "the second volume of Thomas Hutchinson's *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston, 1767)." Hall calls Hutchinson "a notable historian and political figure in pre-revolutionary Massachusetts."

²⁹ Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 10.

saying “that they have preached a covenant of works, and only Mr. Cotton a covenant of grace.”³⁰

The transcript proceeds as follows:

Mrs. H. I pray Sir prove it that I said they preached nothing but a covenant of works.

Dep. Gov. Nothing but a covenant of works, why a Jesuit may preach truth sometimes.

Mrs. H. Did I ever say they preached a covenant of works, then?

Dep. Gov. If they do not preach a covenant of grace clearly, then they preach a covenant of works.

Mrs. H. No Sir, one may preach a covenant of grace more clearly than another, so I said.

D. Gov. We are not upon that now but upon position.

Mrs. H. Prove this then Sir that you say I said.

D. Gov. When they do preach a covenant of works do they preach truth?

Mrs. H. Yes Sir, but when they preach a covenant of works for salvation, this is not truth.

D. Gov. I do but ask you this, when the ministers do preach a covenant of works do they preach a way of salvation?

Mrs. H. I did not come hither to answer questions of that sort.

D. Gov. Because you will deny the thing.

Mrs. H. Ey, but that is to be proved first.

D. Gov. I will make it plain that you did say that the ministers did preach a covenant of works.

Mrs. H. I deny that.

D. Gov. And that you said they were not able ministers of the new testament, but Mr. Cotton only.

Mrs. H. If I ever said that I proved it by God’s word.

Court. Very well, very well.

Mrs. H. If one shall come to me in private, and desire me seriously to tell them what I thought of such an one. [sic] I must either speak false or true in my answer.³¹

Here it is plain, as it is throughout the entire transcript of the proceedings, that the court was having considerable difficulty in

³⁰ Ibid., 318.

³¹ Ibid., 318-19.

nailing down any significant charge against Mrs. Hutchinson. Moreover, John Cotton stood with Mrs. Hutchinson in her defense virtually to the end of the hearing. A segment near the end of the examination is illuminating:

Mr. Peters. I was much grieved that she should say our ministry was legal. Upon which we had a meeting as you know and this was the same she told us that there was a broad difference between Mr. Cotton and us. Now if Mr. Cotton do hold forth things more clearly than we, it was our grief we did not hold it so clearly as he did, and upon those grounds that you have heard.

Mr. Coddington. What was wrong was that to say that you were not able ministers of the new testament or that you were like the apostles—methinks the comparison is very good.

Gov. Well, you remember that she said but now that she should be delivered from this calamity.

Mr. Cotton. I remember she said that she should be delivered by God's providence, whether now or at another time she knew not.

Mr. Peters. I profess I thought Mr. Cotton would never have took her part.³²

It should be clear enough from these segments of Hutchinson's trial before the General Court that something quite different was taking place than what Horton describes. The issues were fundamentally her charges of legalism against the Puritan ministers and her claims to direct revelation. Mrs. Hutchinson was not banished from the colony for antinomianism in any widely accepted sense of that word, such as "lawlessness" or "libertinism." As much as anything she was banished (as we said earlier) for her "charismatic" tendencies. Pastor Cotton did not desert her.

Ironically, Hutchinson was later tried by Cotton's own church in Boston, with Cotton participating.³³ But this was on an array of new charges, many of which were unrelated to the original controversy. Although she was convicted and excommunicated by Cotton's church, Hutchinson professed to have held none of

³² *Ibid.*, 372.

³³ For the account of this trial, see Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 349-95.

the censured convictions prior to her imprisonment, which followed her trial at Newtown. Cotton acknowledged his own previous unawareness that she held these views.³⁴ But at this point the larger antinomian controversy was over.

In conclusion, it must be said that Horton's discussion of this historic controversy is so distorted and flawed, that one wonders how he could manage to be so far off target. It is therefore almost grotesque for Horton to write:

Like Anne Hutchinson, the Dallas position is clearly what its critics insist it is: nothing short of the antinomian heresy. The gospel is distorted in bizarre ways by Hodges, Ryrie, Cocoris and the like.³⁵

With words like these, Michael Horton descends to new depths of irresponsibility.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 372.

³⁵ *Christ the Lord*, 146.

THE NEW PURITANISM PART 3: MICHAEL S. HORTON: HOLY WAR WITH UNHOLY WEAPONS¹

ZANE C. HODGES

INTRODUCTION

In the previous issue we began our review of the book, *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, edited by Michael Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). This is a symposium book with articles by seven writers, including Horton, who contributes two articles and an introduction.² Horton is the president of CURE (Christians United for Reformation) which is based in Anaheim, California.

The theological perspective of the writers appears to be that of Dortian (or, five-point) Calvinism. The volume displays considerable hostility toward the Free Grace position. A sense of “holy war” against the theology of grace is not hard to detect in many places in the book. But the weapons employed might be described as *unholy* weapons.

In the last issue we saw that the book is permeated by false statements (point A) and/or distortions of its opponent’s views (point B). To these unholy weapons we may now add another: the subjugation of biblical soteriology to theological determinism.

C. Soteriology Subjugated to Determinism

If there is one thing five-point Calvinists hold with vigorous tenacity, it is the belief that there can be no human *free will* at all. With surprising illogic, they usually argue that God cannot be sovereign if man is granted any degree of free will. But this view of God actually *diminishes* the greatness of His sovereign power. For if God cannot control a universe in which there is

¹ This article appeared in the Spring 1994 issue of *JOTGES*.

² Besides Horton, the other writers are Robert B. Strimple, Rick Ritchie, Kim Riddlebarger, W. Robert Godfrey, Paul Schaefer, and Red Rosenblatt.

genuine free will, and is reduced to the creation of “robots,” then such a God is of truly limited power indeed.

We would argue quite differently. The God of the Bible is in fact great enough to create creatures with genuine powers of choice. Yet so perfect is His omniscience of all choices, possible and actual, that He can devise an almost infinitely complex scenario for mankind in which His sovereign purposes are all worked out perfectly through—and even in spite of—the free choices made by His creatures. This view of things is sometimes called “Middle Knowledge,” which was briefly referred to in our last article.

The theological determinism found in *Christ the Lord* is in no way necessitated by the Bible. But since the writers *impose* it on Scripture, the results are necessarily bad. When the Bible is not allowed to speak beyond the grid of its interpreters, we are not surprised if its voice is seriously distorted.

1. There Is No Place for Human Responsibility

It is a logical (though unadmitted) corollary of theological determinism that there can be no true concept of human responsibility. If man has no free will, he can make no other choices than those for which he has been programmed. Man cannot be held truly responsible for “choices” which were mere illusions of choice and which are really the inevitable outworking of a predetermined program to which he is unconsciously subjected. If the word “responsible” is assigned to such “choices,” the word loses any real significance at all. Determinists who use the word are playing a word-game. We might as well say that the table, on which I have just laid some books, is “responsible” to hold them up!

It is part of the creed of the theological determinist that unsaved man cannot really be called upon to believe the Gospel, since he has no capacity to do so at all. It follows, then, that faith must be a divinely imparted gift which man receives only as a part of his conversion.

This idea is pretty clearly stated by Horton. Speaking of “union” with Christ, he writes:

Regeneration, or the new birth, is the commencement of this union. God brings this connection and baptism even before there is any sign of life—God “made us alive...even when we were dead” (Eph 2:5). The first

gift of this union is faith, the sole instrument through which we live and remain on this vine.³

This statement is theological quicksand to say the least. It is fraught with unbiblical implications.

It is evident that Horton believes that faith is a consequence of regeneration, not regeneration the consequence of faith. It follows that an unsaved man could not possibly believe unless God *first* regenerates him. The non-elect, therefore, are faced with the horrible reality that God has chosen *not* to regenerate them and that, therefore, they *cannot* believe even if they want to.

Yet biblically, the failure to believe is *the basis* of the condemnation of the unsaved, as John 3:17 declares:

He who believes is not condemned. But he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.

The result of Horton's theology is that non-elect people are hopelessly bound for hell because God declines to regenerate them. Thus they are *unable* to believe.

Yet they are *condemned* for that unbelief! The picture of God that emerges from this is a hideous distortion of His loving character and nature.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find Horton also writing (on the same page!) these words:

He [God] cannot love us directly because of our sinfulness, but he can love us in union with Christ, because Christ is the one the Father loves.⁴

What this amounts to is that God does not "directly" love *anyone* unless *first* He regenerates him or her, since "regeneration is the commencement of union."⁵ In other words, God does not love the elect until they are regenerated, and He *never* loves the non-elect at all.

This is hardly the God of love whom we meet in the Bible. The deity of the determinist creates human beings for whom he has no direct love, and who have no free will, and thus they are created solely for a destiny in everlasting torment. Christ's death in no way affects them, and so they stand totally outside of

³ *Christ the Lord*, 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

any redemptive provision. Christ's atoning work is limited to the elect. The non-elect are both unloved and doomed.

The cruelty implicit in such a view is obvious to any observer outside of those who have been brought up in, or have bought into, this kind of theology. Despite specious arguments addressed to every text alleged against such theology, determinists of this type are bereft of true biblical support. It is absurd, for example, to claim (as they sometimes do) that when the Bible says, "God so loved the world," it means only "the world of the elect."

This is not the place to refute the doctrine of limited atonement. The reader of this Journal should consult passages like 1 John 2:2, 2 Cor 5:18-19, and 2 Pet 2:1 for clear biblical declarations. Suffice it to point out that the antagonistic, distorted attack on the Free Grace movement in *Christ the Lord* is understandable against the backdrop of such theology. The theology itself is hard-edged. It transparently lacks a true sense of God's compassion and love toward all mankind.

It seems to this reviewer that the harsh rhetoric which determinists direct toward their opponents is basically a manifestation of the harsh theology they have embraced.

2. *The Doctrine of Assurance Is Muddled*

The tensions produced by determinist theology necessarily affect the doctrine of assurance. Horton is well aware of the problems created by a heavy stress on good works as a proof of saving faith. For example, he chides John MacArthur for writing: "If disobedience and rebellion continue unabated there is reason to doubt the reality of a person's faith."⁶ Correctly, Horton finds such a statement to be in tension with Paul's struggle in Romans 7, which both he and MacArthur take as the experience of a regenerate person.

But, surprisingly, Horton goes on to say:

MacArthur may have been on safer ground to have said, "If there is no struggle against the disobedience and rebellion, there is reason to doubt the reality of a person's faith." In other words, evidence of the new birth is not whether we are, on the whole, achieving victory at any given point, but whether we are at

⁶ Ibid., 49, quoted from John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says Follow Me?* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 113.

war! While Paul struggles in this way, he adds, “For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin that is in my members” (Rom 7:22-23). *While the regenerate do not cease sinning, they also do not cease hating their sin and struggling to eradicate it.*⁷

Although many interpreters have regarded Romans 7 as referring to a *pre-conversion* experience, its reference to *post-conversion* experience now has widespread acceptance. Yet the view that Romans 7 is *normative* Christian experience is open to serious question.⁸ Surely, the conclusion of the chapter suggests that it is not: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25). These words, in fact, prepare the way for the positive perspective of Romans 8 where an experience opposite to that of Romans 7 is suggested: “...that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4).

It is then quite inappropriate for Horton to elevate the experience of Romans 7 to the level of a test, or proof, of saving faith. He really has no grounds for doing this. His own claim that “evidence of new birth is...whether we are at war,” is completely arbitrary. Surely there is nothing in Romans 7 that suggests that the reality of our faith can be tested by such an experience of repeated failure and defeat! The claim that “the regenerate... do not cease hating their sin” is gratuitous, too.⁹

Correctly, Horton observes that

Nevertheless, the Reformers were quite anxious to hold together faith and assurance as responses that demand Christ alone as their object. In other words, one is not justified through faith alone and then assured some time later by examining his or her works.¹⁰

⁷ *Christ the Lord*, 50, italics added.

⁸ For a Reformed defense that Romans 7 is normative, see John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 256-59.

⁹ Especially so in the light of Heb 3:12-13, which is addressed to Christian “brothers”!

¹⁰ *Christ the Lord*, 51.

As far as it goes, this seems to be fine. Throughout his book, Horton *does* react against a radical reliance on works for assurance. Our discussion of his remarks on Romans 7 illustrates this fact.

But what immediately follows the statements just quoted, is obscure. Horton states:

Rather, justifying faith carries with it (in its very definition: trust) a *certain* confidence and assurance that the promise *is true for me*, even though my faith and assurance may be *weak*.¹¹

What does this really mean? What is intended by a *certain* confidence? Does Horton mean a certain *level* of confidence? If so, *what* level? What, in fact, is *weak* assurance? Is “weak assurance” functionally equivalent to “a certain level of doubt”? If so, *what* level? And is that really assurance at all?

In addition, what does it mean for one to have “assurance that the promise is *true for me*”? Does this mean: “I am sure that I’m saved based on God’s promise”? *Or*, does it mean, “I am sure the promise is for me *if* I truly believe”? Most Reformed thinkers would take the latter option.¹²

In his conclusion to the chapter we are quoting from, Horton is even less perspicuous. For example, he states: “Many think they are living holy lives because they do not have the slightest comprehension of biblical holiness.”¹³ Later in the same paragraph he adds:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, italics added.

¹² One might also note here Horton’s later statement: “If saving faith is more than the conviction that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, but that he did this for me, then that conviction is synonymous with assurance. To trust in Christ for salvation is to be assured that he will fulfill his promise. If we are not assured, we are not trusting.

“Of course, this was never to suggest that assurance is complete, any more than faith. Our faith and assurance may be weak, sometimes barely distinguishable, but it is impossible to truly exercise a justifying faith that does not contain the assurance that Christ’s saving work has guaranteed what has been promised in one’s own case” (*Christ the Lord*, 132).

This partakes of the same ambiguity noted above. Horton seems to be saying that one can be sure of the objective facts and of the validity of the promises. But does he also mean that one can know for sure that he is eternally saved at the moment he trusts Christ? If he does, this is far from clear.

¹³ *Christ the Lord*, 55.

Because they have never had premarital sex or been drunk, they are certain they do not require self-examination and a swift flight back to the cross. They may not be “spiritual giants,” they concede, but they’re “good Christian folks”—mediocre, external, and superficial in their devotion. They have never been condemned in their righteousness by the law, so they shall never be justified by Christ’s righteousness.¹⁴

Here, of course, Horton is on solid Puritan terrain, honey-combed though it is with theological land mines. Here the typical Puritan disdain for “superficial” Christianity comes through clearly, along with a loud warning that apart from a deep conviction of sin, wrought by the law, one cannot hope to find justification by faith! So it turns out that one can hardly look to Christ and His cross for salvation unless one first discerns *in himself* a sufficiently deep spirit of conviction and unworthiness.

But how deep? When is my guilt great enough, or my sorrow profound enough, that I can look to the Cross and find peace? Horton, like most Puritans new and old, does not tell us. He is sure, however,

that the reason so many unbelievers can sit comfortably in our churches and even call themselves born-again Christians is that we give them very little to deny. The offensive message of the cross has been replaced with “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” with the cross tucked somewhere underneath it.¹⁵

Again, this is strong Puritan stuff. But it will only do what Puritanism almost always does. It will drive the believer away from resting in the Cross and will require him to examine the reality of his own faith and conversion. Yet Horton writes, a few pages earlier, “We must be careful not to react to the antinomian threat by driving the sheep back to themselves, away from Christ.”¹⁶

But when Horton is read carefully, it seems to me he violates his own principle. The believer cannot simply rest in Christ and in what the Savior has done for his salvation. The believer must also take note of whether he is “at war” with sin. (And *how much*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

struggle must there be?) He must take care not to be like superficial professing Christians who think of themselves as “good Christians” but have never really felt the condemnation of the law. Moreover, he must be careful that he has been given enough wickedness “to deny,” lest he be like “so many unbelievers” who “can sit comfortably in our churches and even call themselves born-again Christians.”

Shakespeare said, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” And we might add, “Self-examination by any other name is still self-examination.” In seeking to avoid the Scylla of “assurance by works,” Horton has been sucked into the Charybdis of “assurance by self-condemnation and guilt.” Both alternatives are ruinous to genuine assurance, which can only be gained by looking away from ourselves to our Savior.

In the last analysis, Horton cannot give up what deterministic theology requires. And that is some kind of consistent evidence that man’s sinful and enslaved will has been re-made by God’s work of salvation. Since unsaved men cannot use their wills in a way that pleases God, the absence of any apparent response to God in a professing Christian is taken as an indication that God has not worked in that person.

The biblical reality is more complex. The new life imparted at regeneration carries with it “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3). But Peter must also appeal to the will of his readers to give “all diligence” to the process of character development (2 Pet 1:5ff). Even in a Christian, the human will can impede growth and fruitfulness, or stop it altogether (2 Pet 1:9).

The search that the new Puritans undertake for some consistent universal evidence of God’s action on the will of the regenerate person, is like the medieval search for the Holy Grail. It is always beyond reach and ultimately unattainable.

I think that Horton’s position on assurance implodes due to its inherent instability and inconsistency.

3. Sanctification Is Seriously Distorted

Theological determinism also plagues Horton’s view of the process of sanctification in the believer’s life. The result is a serious distortion of this biblical doctrine.

Horton’s background tells us a lot about his present perspective. He writes:

Here we must bring this critique to a pastoral reflection, and for that I will have to explain why the issue is so important to me. I was raised in Bible churches pastored by those who had been taught by Zane Hodges, Charles Ryrie, and other proponents of the “carnal Christian” teaching...As a teenager I had discovered the writings of the Reformers and the later exponents of that teaching. The more deeply I delved into those works, *the more cynical I became* toward the schizophrenia I had experienced all along in trying to get from the bottom of the spiritual ladder to the point *where I could finally be victorious, fully surrendered, yielded, and consecrated.*¹⁷

The reviewer can certainly empathize with Horton here. My own experience at Wheaton College was very similar to his. There I often heard the Christian life presented as though “surrender” and “yieldedness” were the panacea for all of a Christian’s problems with sin. Later at Dallas Seminary, it sometimes seemed as if the “filling of the Spirit” was a similar panacea. Simplistic approaches to Christian experience *can* be devastating, because they don’t really work.

The biblical teaching on the Christian life has much greater depth than such “panacea approaches” often suggest. (The basic biblical primer is Romans 6–8.) I am truly sorry if any student of mine has taken a simplistic approach in teaching Horton or others about Christian living. But I would maintain that he didn’t get this approach from me—or, at least, I never *intended* such a result. Teachers are all too often saddened by what their students claim to have learned from them!

Horton’s reaction to his background, however, leads to an even worse result. Theological determinism, of a Puritan type, takes over. Since man has no free will, except as he is wrought on by God, Horton need no longer struggle with aligning his will with God’s. Everything comes from God.

Most interesting are these words from Horton:

Union with Christ is not the result of human decision, striving, seeking, yielding, or surrendering, but of Christ’s. While we are called to be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18), *that is merely a figure of speech*: “Do not get drunk on wine...Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” In other words, make sure you’re under

¹⁷ Ibid., 30-31, italics added.

the right influence! *Every believer is Spirit-filled* and, therefore, a recipient of every heavenly blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3-4).¹⁸

Here we see what psychologists might call a “reaction formation.” Having frequently been exhorted to “be filled with the Spirit,” Horton escapes from this admonition by claiming it as a benefit belonging to *all* Christians. The command itself is a mere “figure of speech”! All “seeking, yielding, or surrendering” is done by Christ, not by Horton!

But Horton cannot quite escape the “demand” obviously made by Paul’s text. That demand is now reduced to “make sure you’re under the right influence”! But how does Horton do even that? By his decision (or, “will”) to do so? Or does Christ do that too?

The dilemma is acute for the theological determinist. Many commands of the Bible (like Eph 5:18) call upon believers to decide to do, say, or think the right things. If such things can only be done by God Himself working on man’s will—or by Christ living through the man—why does He not do it *all the time* for *all true Christians*? Why must the Christian (as Horton holds) always be “at war,” like Paul is in Romans 7? Cannot God bring victory and peace? Where is God’s power?

Let us hear Horton further on this matter:

The believer has died, is buried, is raised, is seated with Christ in the heavenlies, and so on. These are not plateaus for victorious Christians *who have surrendered all and willed their way to victory* [italics added], but realities for every believer, regardless of how small one’s faith or how weak one’s repentance.

Thus, we must stop trying to convert believers into these realities by imperatives: “Do this.” “Confess that.” “Follow these steps,” and so on. Union with Christ ushers us immediately into all of these realities so that, as Sinclair Ferguson writes, “The determining factor of my existence is no longer my past. It is Christ’s past.”¹⁹

A little later he states:

We are justified through receiving what someone else has earned for us. But we grow in sanctification through *living out* (italics his) what someone else has

¹⁸ Ibid., 113, italics added.

¹⁹ Ibid., 113-14.

earned for us. Both are *gifts* we inherit from someone else, but the former is passively received and *the second is actively pursued* (italics added).²⁰

This kind of discussion has about it a certain superficial plausibility. Indeed, it contains some real truth. But upon close scrutiny, it is impossibly vague and solves nothing.

It is true, of course, that the believer has died, risen, and ascended with Christ (Eph 2:5-6; Rom 6:3-4). But who among Horton's opponents has ever described these things "as plateaus for victorious Christians"? I have never heard it done, and Horton leaves his charge undocumented. Furthermore, who has tried to "convert believers into these realities by imperatives"? Again, I don't know of anyone. The truth in question is usually called "positional" and ascribed to all believers.

But if Horton's objection is to "imperatives" per se,²¹ then his quarrel is with each and every NT epistle. The epistles are *full* of imperatives. It may even be said that the NT *commands* us to recognize that we are dead to sin and alive to God and *commands* us to live accordingly. Thus Paul writes:

Likewise you also, reckon [imperative] yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign [imperative] in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present [imperative] your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present [imperative] yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom 6:11-13).

What can Horton's words possibly mean? A Christian life without imperatives—without an appeal to our will—does not exist.

Further confusion occurs when Horton goes on to describe sanctification as "*living out* what someone has earned for us" and as a gift which "is actively pursued." Of course, there is an element of truth in both observations. But both statements are as simplistic as some of the ideas Horton criticizes.

If all one must do is to "live out" a righteousness he already possesses, why is this so difficult—as even Horton acknowledges with his reference to Romans 7? Further, if it is a *gift*, why must I

²⁰ Ibid., 114.

²¹ Recall he wrote, "Thus we must stop trying to convert believers into these realities *by imperatives*" (italics added), p. 114.

actively pursue it? Why indeed is this gift so imperfectly attained in every Christian life? Horton's rearticulation of the doctrine of sanctification solves nothing. The same old down-to-earth problems remain.

I would contend therefore that Horton's doctrine of sanctification is an example of theological cosmetic surgery. Some of the wrinkles (commands like, "do this," "confess that") have been made to disappear—almost. But what remains is the fundamental problem of how to attain holiness in Christian living.

One cannot wave this problem away by downplaying the role of the Christian's will in living for God. One cannot evade the Bible's direct appeals to believers to be obedient. If God's sovereign power is *all that counts*, even Horton's life—and mine!—would be far better than they are. For that matter, why would not both our lives be perfect?

IV. CONCLUSION

Admittedly, in this review, we have ignored Horton's fellow-writers in *Christ the Lord*. But Horton not only edits the book, he also writes the lengthy introduction (pp. 11-57) and two of its chapters (pp. 107-15 and pp. 129-47), the greatest amount of material of any of the contributors. (Paul Schaeffer does have two chapters, covering pp. 149-93). In addition, Horton is president of CURE, which sponsored the book. The rest of the writers for the most part do not seem to diverge significantly from Horton's position.²² The reader of this review should therefore now have a basic theological "fix" on *Christ the Lord*, though many other subjects could have been discussed with profit. But the reviewer has to stop somewhere!

It is difficult to summarize the mixed feelings produced by this volume. On the one hand, its failure to state accurately the

²² One of a number of possible contradictions to Horton is found in the words of Robert B. Strimple, who seems to regard good works as expected evidences of true faith: "That a person's possession of eternal life is necessarily evidenced by that person's life of faith, hope, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control—is thought [by Hodges!] to be a totally unbiblical idea. And I suspect, I certainly hope, that you would immediately think of many New Testament passages to which you could turn to refute Hodges here, like 1 John 2-3 and James 2..." (*Christ the Lord*, 63). This sounds much more like MacArthur than Horton, for whom the evidence is more akin to the "war" in Romans 7!

views it opposes leaves an impression of deliberate unfairness. But on the other, Horton's own flight from his previous theological background evokes a real measure of sympathy. Yet this very rebellion against earlier teaching is what seems to poison the discussion.

On balance, the contributions of Horton reveal the damage that a Christian teenager can sustain when his mentors do not effectively address his struggles. At the same time, one wishes that even at this late date Horton could return to his roots, get rid of the unbiblical weeds that choked them, and finally escape from the intellectual prison of theological determinism.