

The background of the entire cover is a reproduction of the Mona Lisa painting. The face of the Mona Lisa is the central focus, with her enigmatic smile and dark hair. The background of the painting, showing a hazy landscape, is visible around her.

GRACE (in) FOCUS

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2022

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Masterpiece or Masterpieces?

Uneducated and Untrained Men • Naomi and Ruth • Refrigerator Art
The Reliability of the Bible • Elisha's Great Faith • **And Much More**

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Letter from the Editor

My spiritual birthday was 50 years ago. I don't recall the exact day. But it was in September of 1972 that I had my fifth meeting in about a week with Campus Crusade for Christ staff member Warren Wilke. Each time we met, he would quote Eph 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Not just once each time we met. He'd quote it ten or more times each session. During the fifth meeting with Warren, I believed. I believed that simply by faith in Jesus, I was saved once for all, totally apart from any works I had done or might do in the future.

I was sure of my eternal destiny! I've never stopped being sure. And my life has never been the same.

I went from being pre-med one minute to pre-ministry the next. I wanted to devote my life to telling people about the gift of God in Christ. Assurance of everlasting life is such a blessing. I wanted to share it with others.

This magazine is an outgrowth of the love that the GES board and staff and partners have for the Word of God and for the promise of everlasting life to the believer and of everlasting rewards for the faithful believer.



Robert N. Wilkin, Editor

Whether you've been a believer for 5 months or 50 years, this magazine can help you grow in your faith so that one day soon when our Lord and Savior returns, you might hear Him say to you, "Well done, good servant." Wouldn't that be great? While our eternal destiny became sure the moment we believed in Jesus for the gift of God, approval and praise by Christ at the Bema is not yet secure. We need to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith (2 Tim 4:6-8). ■

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Bob Wilkin". The signature is fluid and cursive.

UNEDUCATED and UNTRAINED Men (ACTS 4:13)

By Bob Wilkin



Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. – Acts 4:3

.....

Education in the first century was far different from what it is today. Children of the rich were taught how to read and write either with a tutor in the home or in public education. Poor children, especially in Gentile families, lacked formal education. Illiteracy was widespread in the first century. Some estimate that only 1.5% to 3% of the Jews in Israel in the first century could read and write. Even if those figures are low, it is clear that well over 50% of Jews and Gentiles in the first century were illiterate.

Most of the education first century Jews received was in the synagogues when they heard the OT Scriptures being taught.

For rich children, their initial education, consisting of reading, writing, and arithmetic, ended around age 11 or 12. They would then continue for several more years for additional training, ending their education around age 14, unless they were to go on for even more advanced training.

While there were schools for higher learning, they did not have large faculties like we have today. Most schools would have one teacher or rabbi who would mentor a group of students. Of course, they had trades, and many entered apprenticeship programs where they would learn under a skilled craftsman.

Peter and John had not gone to any of the recognized schools. You see, when they were trained at the feet of Jesus for three and a half years, that was not thought of as school by the religious leaders. However, that is how rabbis mentored their students. The rabbi would sit, and his students would sit around him and learn. Remember when Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to Him teach. She was actually sitting in on one of His classes.

It has been estimated that Jesus taught the disciples for several hours each day privately. In addition, they were able to hear Him teach publicly on most days as well. In three and a half years, they received more instruction from the Lord Jesus Christ than a seminarian would receive in earning a doctorate today. While Peter and John were viewed as “uneducated and untrained,” they actually had doctorates in theology and pastoral ministry from the King’s seminary. It dawned on those who heard Peter and John that Jesus must have been a fantastic teacher (“they realized that they had been with Jesus”).

I’ve heard disparaging statements today about people who lack formal theological education. I’ve even heard this about people who graduated from schools like Dallas Theological Seminary, my alma mater.

When René López was in the doctoral program at DTS, he attempted to quote Zane Hodges and Jody Dillow in his dissertation. He was told that those quotations were inappropriate for his dissertation because they were not published in scholarly publications. Even though Hodges taught for 27 years at DTS and Dillow had both a Th.M. and Ph.D. from DTS, their writings were considered unscholarly since they were not published in peer-reviewed journals or by scholarly publishers.

Some think that the only truly scholarly theological schools today are those that are recognized by the scholars as being scholarly! In the U.S., there are only a handful of scholarly schools for theology, including Harvard, Yale, Duke, Princeton, and the University of Chicago. Oxford, Cambridge, Tübingen, and Edinburgh are highly

regarded in Europe. You are a true scholar if you receive a doctorate from such a school today.

But what if you get a doctorate from Talbot, DTS, Southwestern, Southern, Southeastern, Liberty, Moody, Multnomah, or a host of other schools that are not one of the top 100 theological schools in the world? ¹ Then you would not be someone recognized as a scholar.

I do appreciate all the hard work and effort it takes to get a doctorate from a leading theological school. I am impressed by the person's intellect, drive, and perseverance. However, I also feel sorry for him. Having gone to such a school almost guarantees that he has lost his way spiritually.

What impresses me is a person's ability to exegete and explain God's Word well. If someone like Spurgeon or Ironside can do that, even without having gone to college,² I value his writings

I do appreciate all the hard work and effort it takes to get a doctorate from a leading theological school. I am impressed by the person's intellect, drive, and perseverance. However, I also feel sorry for him. Having gone to such a school almost guarantees that he has lost his way spiritually.



regardless. If someone can't exegete and explain God's Word well, then I do not value that person's writings.

I remember my rabbi, Zane Hodges, applying James 4:4 one day in class. That is where James says that "friendship with the world is enmity with God." Zane said something like this, *If you wish to be a Bible scholar that the scholarly world will recognize as a true scholar, then you will not be a friend of God. You need to decide now, men, whether you want the approval of the world or of the Lord Jesus Christ.* I was moved by his comment.³

Theologians with doctorates from leading schools consider men like Hodges and Dillow to be uneducated and untrained. Their writings don't count. But maybe God thinks otherwise, just as God thought that John and Peter were two

of the most educated and trained men in all of human history. ■



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 46 years, Sharon. He is an avid race walker and marathon walker.

- 1 For a list of what are considered the top 100 theological schools in the world, see here: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2020/theology-divinity-religious-studies>.
- 2 Ironside quit school after eighth grade.
- 3 Starting in September of this year, GES will begin offering free online courses for seminary and Bible college students, pastors, church leaders, and missionaries. The first class will be taught by me and will be on soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. If you are interested in taking that or subsequent classes, email us at ges@faithalone.org. (The first course will be free. As long as one passes a given course, subsequent courses will be free as well.)

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a black diploma folder. The folder has the words "Diploma of Graduation" embossed in a gold, serif font. The person is wearing a black graduation gown with gold stoles. The background is blurred, showing an outdoor setting with steps and greenery.

Diploma of Graduation

We are His. Masterpiece

(Ephesians 2:10)

The background of the cover is a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper'. The painting depicts Jesus Christ seated at the center of a long table, surrounded by his twelve apostles. The scene is set in a room with a wooden ceiling and a large arched window in the background. The apostles are shown in various states of shock and confusion, with some gesturing and others looking towards Jesus. The table is set with bread, wine, and plates. The overall color palette is muted, with earthy tones and soft lighting.

BY
JOHN H. NIEMELÄ



THE LAST SUPPER, LEONARDO DA VINCI // COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG // PUBLIC DOMAIN

*For we are His
workmanship, created
in Christ Jesus for good
works, which God prepared
beforehand that we should
walk in them (Eph 2:10).*

.....

Perseverance theology has treated this verse as a proof-text for Calvin's infamous 1547 dictum: "It is therefore faith alone which justifies [cf. Eph 2:8-9], and yet the faith which justifies is not alone [per the Calvinist twisting of Eph 2:10]."¹

Calvinists imagine that Eph 2:10 teaches that all true believers will persevere in good works. They reason as follows:

1. Every believer is God's workmanship.
2. God's workmanship involves foreordaining certain works for each believer.
3. Every true believer necessarily will perform the works God foreordained.

Steven J. Cole's treatment of Eph 2:10 is typical: "Thus, genuine salvation involves God creating something new [God's creative workmanship]. It inevitably results in a life of good works because God ordained such works before He saved us."² Notice the words "a life of good works." Calvinists assume that in Eph 2:10, Paul was teaching perseverance in good works until death (the P in TULIP).

The apostle Paul would shudder at such a gross twisting of his words.

It is noteworthy that verse 10 follows immediately after Eph 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that³ not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

The apostle Paul would shudder at such a gross twisting of his words.

Notice the pronouns in verses 8-9. “You” is second person plural. To distinguish singular from plural, I will call the plural *y’all* and the singular *you*.

Why did Paul switch from *y’all* in verses 8-9 to *we* in verse 10? Surely, he had a reason. Couldn’t he have written, “For *y’all* are Christ’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that *y’all* should walk in them”? In fact, if he had wished to focus on individuals, he could have used second-person singular pronouns in verse 10: “For *you* are Christ’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that *you* should walk in them.”

Ephesians 2:10 contains a subject (*we*),⁴ a linking verb (*are*), and a predicate nominative (*workmanship*, bet-

ter translated as *masterpiece*). The subject (*we*) is plural, but the predicate nominative (*poiēma* = *masterpiece*) is singular.

Such constructions convey a corporate, not individual, emphasis. The following passages exemplify the corporate focus of singular predicate nominatives with plural subjects:

Romans 12:5. **We**, being many, are **one body** in Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:27. **Y’all** are **the body** of Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:9. **Y’all** are God’s **field**; **y’all** are God’s **building**.

Unfortunately, virtually everyone⁵ has missed the corporate focus of Eph 2:10, a passage within a corporate context.⁶ Many English translations hide Paul’s plural subject and singular predicate nominative with the rendering *workmanship*. That word lacks a distinct plural form, as the following sentences show:

The *Mona Lisa* is da Vinci’s workmanship.

The *Last Supper* is da Vinci’s workmanship.

The *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper* are da Vinci’s workmanship.

By contrast, *masterpiece* has distinct singular and plural forms:

The *Mona Lisa* is da Vinci’s masterpiece.

The *Last Supper* is da Vinci’s masterpiece.

The *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper* are da Vinci’s masterpieces.

Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (left)
and *The Last Supper* (below).



Paul calls the universal church the Lord's masterpiece.⁷ Christ's body, the church, was created to accomplish certain good works that God prepared beforehand. How did He prepare beforehand for those works to be accomplished? He gave the New Testament—the very book that tells the church what pleases Him. Though the universal church has had many failings in almost 2,000 years of existence, God certainly will affirm that it has accomplished those good works of which Eph 2:10 speaks.

Crucially, Paul repeatedly uses the first person plural, *we*, in verses following Eph 2:10. After reminding the readers (y'all) in verses 11-13 of their former status, Paul then refers to *our peace* (v 14), to *making both* [Jews and Gentiles] one [the church] (v 14), to *having abolished the enmity* between Jews and Gentiles (v 15), to creating *one new man from the two* [Jews and Gentiles] (v 15), to *reconciling them both in one body* [the church] (v 16), and to y'all [Gentiles] *who were far off* and to those [Jews] *who were near* (v 17), and to *we both* [Jews and Gentiles] (v 18).

The glorious truth in Eph 2:10 is that the church—in which Jews and Gentiles are united

into the one body of Christ—is God's masterpiece. Perseverance theology misconstrues and waters down these words into an excuse for fruit inspection and the abolishing of assurance of everlasting life. It would horrify Paul.

Samuel John Stone, a nineteenth-century song writer, captured from Eph 2:10 what has eluded theologians and commentators. His hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, perceives that the church is the Lord's created masterpiece.

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, our Lord;
we are a new creation... ■■



John is president of Message of Life Ministries. He and Diane recently moved to rural Knox County, TN, to be near their son, George. John is working diligently on his forthcoming commentary on John's Gospel.

- 1 John Calvin, *Antidote to the Council of Trent* (1547), https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html. Accessed August 21, 2021.
- 2 Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 15: Salvation and Good Works (Ephesians 2:10)," <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-15-salvation-and-good-works-ephesians-210>. Accessed August 21, 2021.
- 3 Greek grammar does not allow the word *that* (contrary to many Calvinists) to mean "*that faith*." Instead, *that* points to "by grace salvation." See John H. Niemelä, "Is Faith Even a Tiny Part of God's Gift (Ephesians 2:8-9)?" *JOTGES* 33 (Autumn 2020): 53-66.
- 4 The first plural verb *esmen* ("we are") has *hēmeis* ("we") as the understood subject. When used of believers, the word "we" in Ephesians often refers to the church.
- 5 My background reading on Ephesians is extensive, since I taught it in seminary Greek courses about forty times. However, the

literature is silent on this issue—apart from publications by a former student of mine and by myself: 1. Timothy R. Nichols, "Reverse-Engineered Outlining: A Method for Epistolary Exegesis," *CTSJ* 7 (April 2001): 38-39; 2. John H. Niemelä, "If Anyone's Work Is Burned: Scrutinizing Proof-Texts," *CTSJ* 8 (January 2002): 31-32; 3. Timothy R. Nichols, "Dead Man's Faith: Spiritual Death, Faith, and Regeneration in Ephesians 2:1-10," (Th.M. thesis: Chafer Theological Seminary, 2004; and 4. Timothy R. Nichols, *Dead Man's Faith: Spiritual Death, Faith, and Regeneration in Ephesians 2:1-10*, (N.p.: Headwaters Christian Resources, 2016), 38-39.

- 6 Ephesians 2 is all about how God joins Jewish and Gentile believers into Christ's body, the church.
- 7 If Paul had wished to refer to individuals, he could have said, "Each one of us is His masterpiece." Instead, he argues here that *the church is His masterpiece*.

Every Naomi Needs a Ruth

By Marcia Hornok



“And how are you?” said Winnie-the-Pooh.

Eeyore shook his head from side to side. “Not very how,” he said, “I don’t seem to have felt at all how for a long time.”¹

WHEN DREAMS DIE

One Bible person with an Eeyore outlook was Naomi. A famine uprooted her family, and they moved to Moab. Her husband’s death left her a widow and single mother, stranded there in a foreign land. Her two sons married Moabite women before they also died, leaving no one to carry on the family name.

With nothing to show for more than ten years of isolation from her homeland except three graves, she called herself Mara (“bitter”) instead of Naomi (“pleasant”). She concluded God had dealt bitterly with her. “I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:21). If you are like me, you sympathize with Naomi and her worst-case scenario, because you have also felt that way.

When Naomi left Moab to return to Bethlehem, Ruth insisted on going along. She immigrated permanently to a foreign country where the law said of her people, “Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live” (Deut 23:6). To her own widowhood, she added the loss of relatives, friends, and homeland. Yet she purposed to move on and trust in the God of Naomi, “under whose wings [she had] come for refuge”

(Ruth 2:12). Ruth reached out to her embittered mother-in-law in four ways.

RUTH TO THE RESCUE – HER COMMITMENT

First, Ruth verbalized her commitment. She promised to stay with Naomi for life. “Where you lodge, I will lodge...where you die, I will die” (Ruth 1:16-17). A main factor of despondency is isolation. Someone who feels depressed often withdraws from people, which only reinforces loneliness. How can we be Ruth to that person? By staying available and initiating frequent contact. We can pursue a relationship even if our friend or relative tries to drive us away, like Naomi did three times to Ruth in chapter one.

When my husband gets discouraged, I want him to know I am on his team no matter what. His problems are my problems, and his goals my goals. We partner together in life and ministry until death parts us or our Lord returns. I try to be his advocate and support.

RUTH OFFERED TO HELP

Second, Ruth sought Naomi’s approval before trying to help. At barley harvest, Ruth saw she could obtain food for them by gleaning. But before grabbing her basket and running off, she asked Naomi’s permission. “Please let me go to the field and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter” (Ruth 2:2).

Discouraged people often believe they have no control over their bad situation. We add to that sense of powerlessness when we force our

answers on them. That sends the unintentional signal that our insight surpasses theirs. A year after my mother died, I made this mistake with my 78-year-old father. Sensing his pessimism, I pointed out his faulty thinking and offered advice. That only made him feel more helpless. He needed sympathy, not solutions and Scriptures. I should have asked what *he* wanted: *How can I help? May I tell you what another widower I know did? Would you read this book if I ordered it for you?*

RUTH MET NAOMI'S PHYSICAL NEEDS

Third, Ruth gleaned and threshed all day and kept back some of her lunch to take home to Naomi. “Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. So she brought out and gave to her what she had kept back after she had been satisfied”

(Ruth 2:18). Naomi’s need for food reminds us to discern a depressed friend’s practical needs. Is she sleep deprived—should I offer childcare? Does she need a change of scenery? Exercise? Help with chores?

Physical touch is another need we can meet for loved ones and same-sex friends. A hug reminds them of their connectedness to other humans. Discouraged spouses need us to pay special attention to them sexually. Physical intimacy provides escape from cares and releases tension. It can be a happy antidote to feeling ineffective or overwhelmed.

After Ruth verbalized her commitment, included Naomi in her plans, and met her physical needs, Naomi’s minor key changed to a major key. She praised Boaz and even the Lord: “Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not forsaken His kind-



PHOTO BY KAROLINA GRABOWSKA // PEXELS.COM

ness to the living and the dead!” (Ruth 2:20a). Quite the opposite of how she felt about God in chapter one!

RUTH SUPPORTED NAOMI'S PLANS

When Naomi told Ruth to bathe and anoint herself, go out at night, uncover Boaz's feet while he slept, and lie there until he woke up, Ruth might have experienced culture shock, but she did not challenge Naomi. She said, “All that you say to me, I will do” (Ruth 3:5).

We honor others by hearing them out, and this often sparks them to think of their own remedies. When my widowed dad decided to write a book involving a doctrine I do not hold, I typed it for him, made editing suggestions, and got it ready to self-publish. The book met his need for significance and gave him purpose.

What if a depressed or grieving friend wants to make a major change that others think is rash and unwise? Ask your friend to discuss the pros and cons with you to help you understand his or her viewpoint. Without deflating your friend's self-esteem, you can attempt to channel his or her thinking toward more constructive options by asking relevant questions.

In summary, Ruth never agreed with Naomi that God had treated her unfairly. Nor did she contradict Naomi's distorted outlook or chide her for being ungrateful. Instead, she helped Naomi emotionally and physically by being a loyal companion, making her feel needed, providing food, and affirming her ideas.

CLOUDS LIFTED

Naomi's idea for Ruth and herself was a success. When Boaz and Ruth gave her a grandson, Naomi's friends said, “May [the baby] be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him” (Ruth 4:15). Because Ruth nurtured her, Naomi regained her ability to nurture. She “took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him” (Ruth 4:16). Through Ruth, Naomi experienced God's blessings, and her hope revived.

When people we care about go through periods of pessimism, melancholy, or grief, they need more than our prayers.² They need the gift of our presence, practical provisions, and emotional support. If we find them “standing in the thistly corner of the forest” like Eeyore, we can follow Ruth's example. Every Negative Naomi needs a Reassuring Ruth. ■■



Marcia is Ken's grateful wife, serving with him in Utah where he pastored for 39 years and they raised six children. Now they enjoy 13 grandkids. Her latest work is a guilt-free Bible study of Proverbs 31.

1 A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Poo* (New York, NY: Dell, 1926), 45.

2 This article does not address clinical depression or suicidal tendencies, which may need professional help.

The Bible Is Reliable, Part 1

BY DIX WINSTON

To defend the Bible, you must answer two questions. Is the Bible *good* history, and secondly, is it *true* history? Let me explain and illustrate. If someone told you his great-great-grandfather said he was Napoleon Bonaparte, it would be *good* history if the man actually said he was Napoleon Bonaparte. That is, it would be an accurate report of the events that occurred; the man *said* he was Napoleon. But it would not be *true* history if his great, great grandfather was the Duke of Wellington or anyone else besides Napoleon, because only Napoleon was Napoleon. Claiming to be someone else does not mean the

claim is true; the person has lied, but the record of that lie is an example of *good* history.

This article will look at the first issue—is the Bible *good* history? Does it accurately report what happened and what was said? A subsequent article will examine the second question.

GOOD HISTORY

Many people today do not accept the NT to be an accurate reflection of what took place almost 2,000 years ago. They think it is full of myths, half-truths, and spiritual legends. They think that



it has been translated and retranslated and even mistranslated numerous times. They think there are books missing and that what we have is incomplete and inaccurate. In other words, many people do not think the NT is *good* history.

But there are four lines of evidence to substantiate that the NT is *good* history. These deal with the surviving or extant manuscripts.

We do not have the autographs, which are the original documents. In fact, we do not have autographs from any work from antiquity. But as we shall see, this actually works in our favor in assuring the NT is *good* history. The manuscript

evidence for the NT is far superior to any other work from antiquity. This is based upon four lines of evidence. First, we have more *copious* manuscripts. Second, we have *closer* manuscripts. Third, we have more *corroborated* manuscripts. And finally, we have more *consistent* manuscripts.

MORE COPIOUS MANUSCRIPTS

When it comes to ancient manuscripts, more is better. Habermas says, “The strongest case is made when many manuscripts are available, as close in time to the original autographs as possible. Wide geographical distribution of the copies

and their textual families are likewise crucial. Of course, having complete texts is essential.”¹

Say you had only two manuscripts. One begins with “The,” the other one begins with “A.” Which one reflects the autograph? You cannot be sure. It could be either one. But if you had hundreds or even thousands of manuscripts from different “families” or regions, this would help you to determine what was in the original. If all but one or two manuscripts begin with “The,” and the two that begin with “A” were from a text family that did not have the word “The” in their vocabulary but used the letter “A” as the other manuscripts would use “The,” you could probably conclude the original began with “The.”

But in order to make this type of evaluation, you need copious amounts of manuscripts. And we have copious NT manuscripts. In fact, we have almost 5,800 handwritten NT manuscripts! Geisler comments, “Counting major early translations in Syriac, Arabic, Latin and other languages, there are 9000 copies of the New Testament. This makes a total of over 14,000 copies of the New Testament.”²

This is unparalleled in works of antiquity. There are only 643 manuscripts of Homer, 200 of Demosthenes, 20 of Tacitus, 10 of Julius Caesar, 8 of Herodotus, and 7 of Plato and Pliny.³

CLOSER MANUSCRIPTS

The next area in which manuscripts must be compared is the time between the autograph and extant manuscripts. In this case, the older the copy, the closer it is to the original.⁴ Obviously, if there are large gaps of time in between the original and the copy, transmission errors could have crept into the text.

Again, the NT manuscripts are superior to any other work of antiquity. Geisler writes, “The New Testament . . . survives in complete books from a little over 100 years after the New Testament was completed. Fragments are available from only de-

cades later.”⁵ This is certainly not the case with other ancient works. Habermas says, “Concerning the date between the original writing and the earliest copies, ancient classical works generally exhibit gaps of at least seven hundred years.”⁶ For example, the earliest manuscripts we have of Homer are 500 years later; Pliny, 750 years; Julius Caesar and Tacitus, 1000 years; Herodotus and Demosthenes, 1,400 years.⁷

John A. T. Robinson points out the significance of this: “The wealth of manuscripts and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best text of any ancient writing in the world.”⁸ In fact, John Wenham goes so far as to credit the NT as being “99.99 percent accurate and the .01 percent does not affect any significant doctrinal area.”⁹

MORE CORROBORATED MANUSCRIPTS

Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, a nine-year persecution of Christians began in AD 303. During this time many Christians were martyred; churches were torn down, and manuscripts burned. Clearly this was an attempt to destroy the Christian movement and Biblical manuscripts. Geisler and Turek point out the significance of this:

But even if Diocletian had succeeded in wiping every biblical manuscript off the face of the earth, he could not have destroyed our ability to reconstruct the New Testament. Why? Because the early church fathers—men of the second and third century such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and others—quoted the New Testament so much (36,289 times, to be exact) that all but eleven verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed just from their quotations. In other words, you could go down to your local public library, check out the works of the early church fathers, and read

nearly the entire New Testament just from their quotations of it! So we not only have thousands of manuscripts but thousands of quotations from those manuscripts. This makes restoration of the original text virtually certain.¹⁰

So, in reality we do not even need the manuscripts to reconstruct the Bible. In effect, all but eleven verses of the NT were “backed-up” in the writings of the early church fathers!

MORE CONSISTENT MANUSCRIPTS

Based upon the closer, copious, and corroborated manuscripts of the NT, scholars can from these manuscripts reconstruct with certainty what was in the original. This process is called textual criticism. The scholars will take many manuscripts and compare them with each other in an attempt to decipher what was in the original.

Let me illustrate, using Rom 1:17. It says, “The just shall live by faith.” Suppose you find four hypothetical manuscripts (ms=manuscript), each one spelling the last word differently. These manuscripts might resemble the following:

Ms One: The just by faith shall live.

Ms Two: The just by pfath shall live.

Ms Three: The just by fath shall live.

Ms Four: The just by pfaith shall live.

Now even though there are three different errors, or misspelled words, in three of the hypothetical manuscripts, there is no question what was in the autograph. Over 70% of the textual variants in the NT are like that, that is, simple variations in spelling that do not cast any doubt on the original wording.¹¹

The evidence for the NT as *good* history is overwhelming. Fredrick Kenyon, who has compared the Bible to other ancient manuscripts, puts it this way:

It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said for no other book.¹²

Truly, the NT is *good* history. It is an accurate reflection of what was written down almost 2,000 years ago. But, as we mentioned at the beginning, you could have an accurately recorded lie. So, the question we must address in part 2 is: Is the NT *true* history, or is it a lie? ■



Dix is the senior pastor of Crosspoint Community Church in Centennial, Colorado. This past September, he and Cynthia had their first grandson, Gunnar Titus. Dix is unashamedly Dispensational and Free Grace!

- 1 Gary R. Habermas, “Why I Believe The New Testament Is Historically Reliable,” in *Why I Am A Christian*, ed. by Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 148.
- 2 Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 532.
- 3 See Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books), 226.
- 4 Editor’s note. Of course, late-dated careful copies of early manuscripts can exist.
- 5 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 532.
- 6 Habermas, “Why I Believe The New Testament Is Historically Reliable,” 148.
- 7 Geisler and Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, 226.
- 8 John A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust The New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 36.
- 9 John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 180.
- 10 Geisler and Turek, *Enough Faith*, 228.
- 11 Dan Wallace, cited at <https://biblequestions.info/2020/07/11/is-a-textual-variant-both-meaningful-and-viable/>.
- 12 Fredric Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 4th edition, ed. by A. W. Adams (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1958), 23.

WORKS OF ART FOR THE REFRIG- ERATOR

(MATTHEW 25:20)

By Ken Yates



INTRODUCTION

If you walk into pretty much any home, you will see works of art. There will be paintings or nicely framed prints on the walls. You might see sculptures on an end table. Many homes display in a highly visible place professionally done family portraits. As a general rule, the more expensive the house, the more expensive such displays will be.

But there are other works of art you will see. There will be drawings and paintings, crafted by the children or grandchildren, stuck to the refrigerator.

The quality of these works is not the same as the quality of the art in other parts of the home. A visitor observing the refrigerator will often not know what he is looking at. The parent will have to explain that he is looking at a drawing of a family pet or maybe a lion. A stick figure with what looks like a really large nose is the owner of the house, even if the homeowner's nose is rather a normal size. The words written in all capital letters in crayon will have to be deciphered as well.

Monetarily, these things on the refrigerator are worthless. But to the parents and

grandparents, they have great value. They know that their children or grandchildren drew the art for them. Those kids put a lot of work into these acts of love. They wanted their parents or grandparents to be pleased with what they did.

I am sure that my experience with such works of art is shared by all parents. When my children got older, and these drawings were taken off the refrigerator, my wife and I kept them. They now are found in a memory chest in our home, stored like the treasures they are. Others see no value in them, but we sure do.

DRAWING WITH CRAYONS

It occurred to me recently that this reality with parents will be shared by the Lord when He returns. In Matthew 25, the Lord gives a parable about His coming kingdom. In the parable, He goes away, but before doing so He tells his disciples to work in preparation for that kingdom. He gives each of them some money with which to do that. For people in the first century, the amount was a tidy sum. But for the Lord,



because of His immense riches, it was small indeed.

A couple of these disciples are very excited about doing something for the kingdom.

They “immediately” get to work with what the Lord gave them (Matt 25:16-17). The idea of having something to give Him when He comes back excites them.

In the parable, when the Lord returns, He calls His disciples to Him to find out what they have done. We can hear the excitement in their voices. They say to Him, if I could paraphrase, “Look at what I made with what You gave me!” They each had doubled what they were given (Matt 25:20, 22).

In their own eyes, they had done great things. A doubling of the money they had been given was impressive indeed. For them, it was a lot of money. They could look upon it with great satisfaction.

But what about the Lord? How would He value such things? Compared to His riches, what they brought to Him was nothing. It would be like a picture done by small children with crayons.

THE LORD’S REFRIGERATOR

If we compare the coming kingdom of God to the house of the Lord, what a house it will be. We are told that Christ will inherit the universe. His rule will include everything. What riches will be His!

If we look at this “house,” how would we describe the art work found in it? What priceless objects would He be able to hang on the walls? Even in the OT, we are told that we can

give nothing to God, because He owns it all (Job 41:11; Ps 50:10). Try to imagine what it will be like when Christ sits upon His throne after He returns. Imagine the walls in the palace of the King of kings.

When we see the two faithful servants in this parable, how quaint they appear. They are thrilled to offer this King their works of art, things they have done with their own hands. They want Him to see what they have made.

Surely, the Lord will not be impressed. I have no artistic ability at all. If I were told to draw a landscape and take it to a fine arts studio, I would be laughed out of the building. But that is what these two servants are doing, offering their pitiful works to the One who owns everything.

The reaction of the Lord is at first surprising. He lavishes praise upon them (Matt 25:21, 23). He is proud of them. He rewards them.

I know it is only an illustration, but I look at this as if the Lord had a refrigerator. He takes what these two servants do and sticks their works on that refrigerator. All who come into His palace will see what they have done. A visitor might not understand how Someone that great could value something that seems so small.

But these servants are His children. Maybe only parents with children would understand.

LESSONS LEARNED

When children make something for their parents, they don’t realize how worthless their work is. I remember that when I was in the second grade, we made a Christmas gift for our parents. My dad was in Vietnam, so I made something for my mom. I took an empty salad dressing bottle and painted it orange. I put

sprinkles on it and stuck a long candle in the opening. I couldn't wait until my mom opened that gift on Christmas morning. I knew she would love it.

And she did. She told me it was the best Christmas present she had ever received. I was giddy. For the rest of the time we lived in that house, until my dad returned from Vietnam, that awful looking candle remained on a shelf in the living room of our home. I don't know what happened to it after that. My guess is that she kept it in a memory chest.

If we stopped for a minute and thought how meager our works must be in the eyes of the King, we might come away thinking there is no need. We might even think that such work would be met with scorn from Him. What we do for Him in raising our families, serving in the church, or trying to please Him in our areas of responsibility seem so insignificant in the light of His glory.

But He has told us that is not the case. Never in the history of the world has a kid made something for his parent thinking that parent would rebuke him for it. The child does not approach the parent in fear. He knows the

parent will be pleased. It never occurred to me that my mom would have said that my candle was the ugliest thing she had ever seen and then thrown it into the garbage.

Isn't that what we see in the parable? Even if the servants in the parable paused to think about how rich and great the King was, it did not deter them from working for Him. They knew He would be pleased.¹

He indeed is like a parent with a refrigerator. ■



Ken Yates retired as a Lt. Col. from the Army after 20 years as a chaplain. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC, but will soon move to Indianapolis to be near their grandkids. Ken leads the GES international ministry.

1 Of course, the Lord was not pleased with the third servant (Matt 25:24-30). Why? Because the third servant did not have a return on investment. There was no crayon drawing, no candle in a bottle, nothing. The third servant pictures a believer who fails to persevere in His service for Christ (cf. Luke 19:20-26; 1 Cor 4:1-5; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 2:26). If a believer is unfaithful, then He will be rebuked by Christ. But even then, his eternal destiny is secure. Compare Luke 19:20-26 with Luke 19:27.



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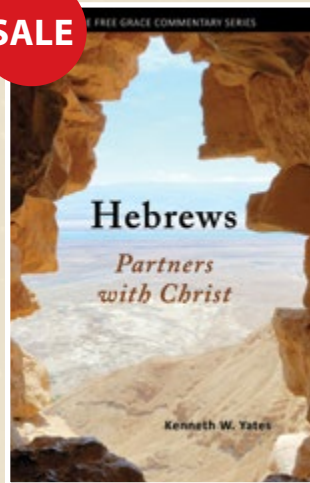
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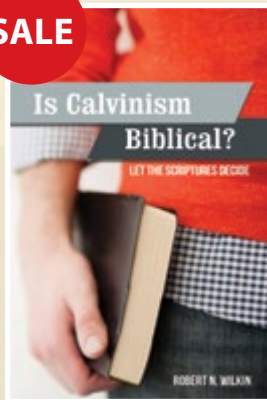
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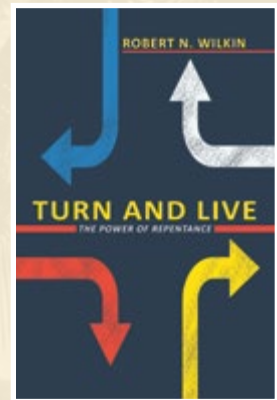


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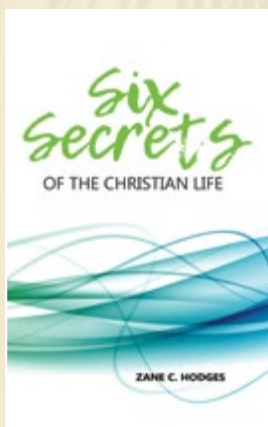
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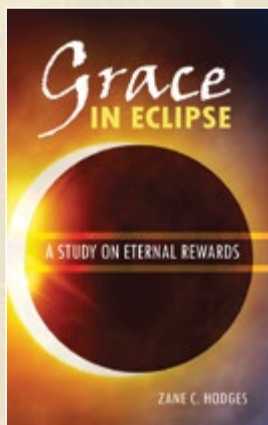


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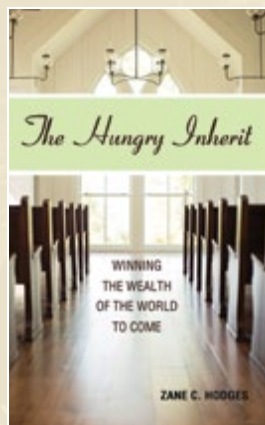


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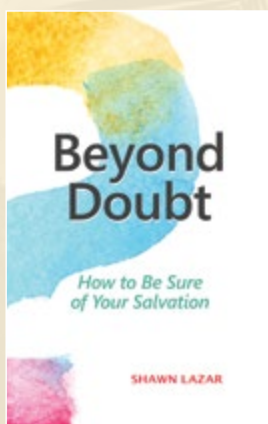


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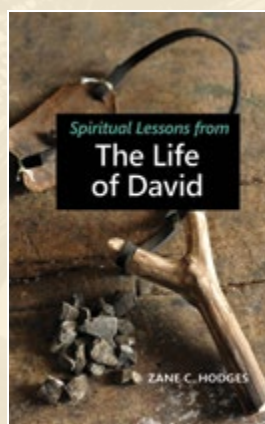


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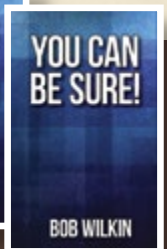
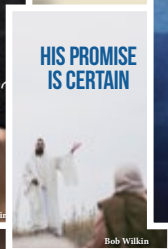
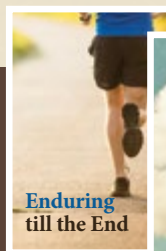


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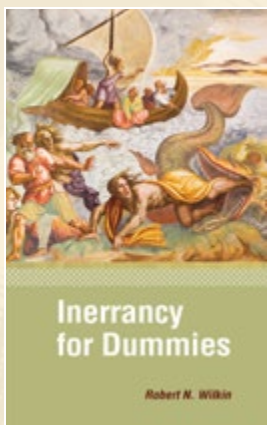
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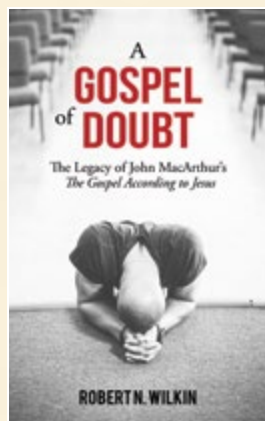


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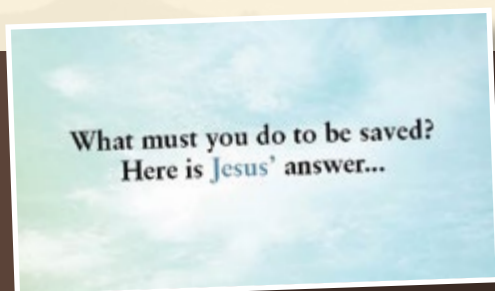


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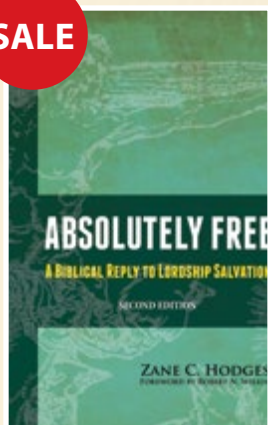
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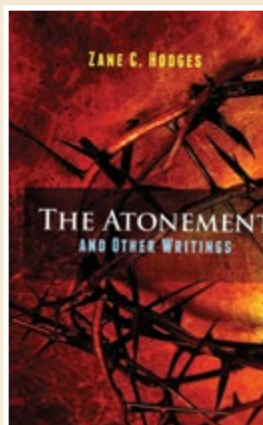


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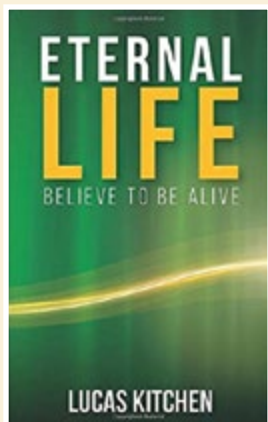


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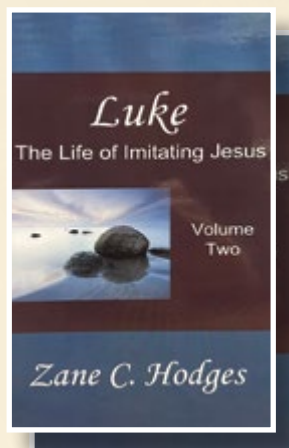


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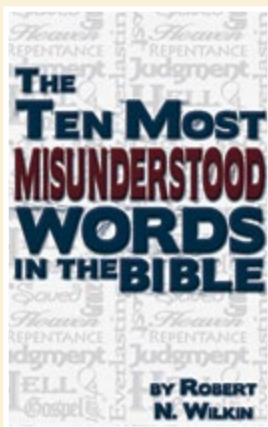


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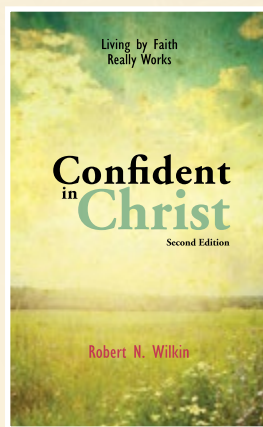


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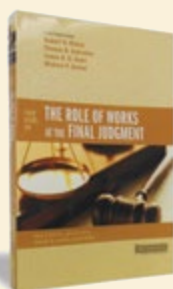


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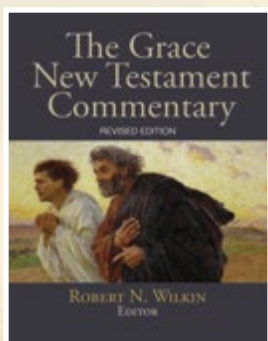


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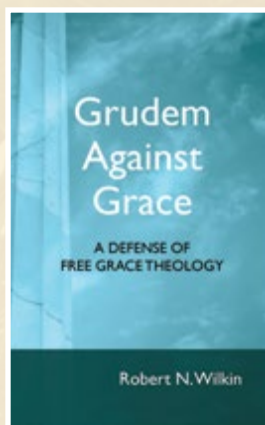
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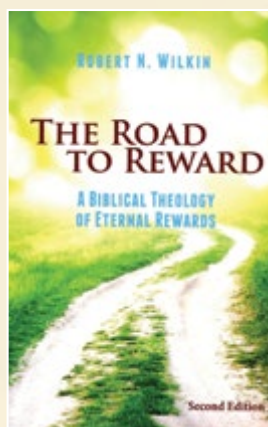
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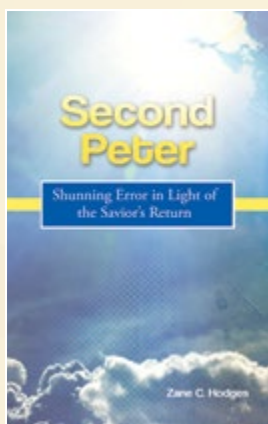
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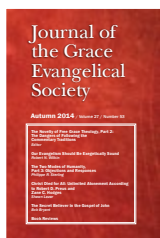
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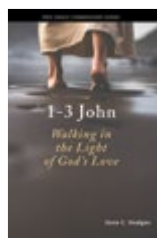
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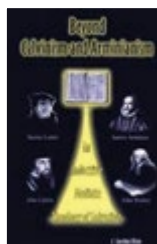


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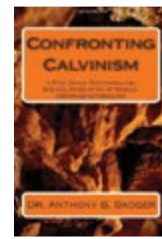


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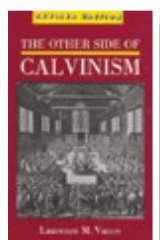


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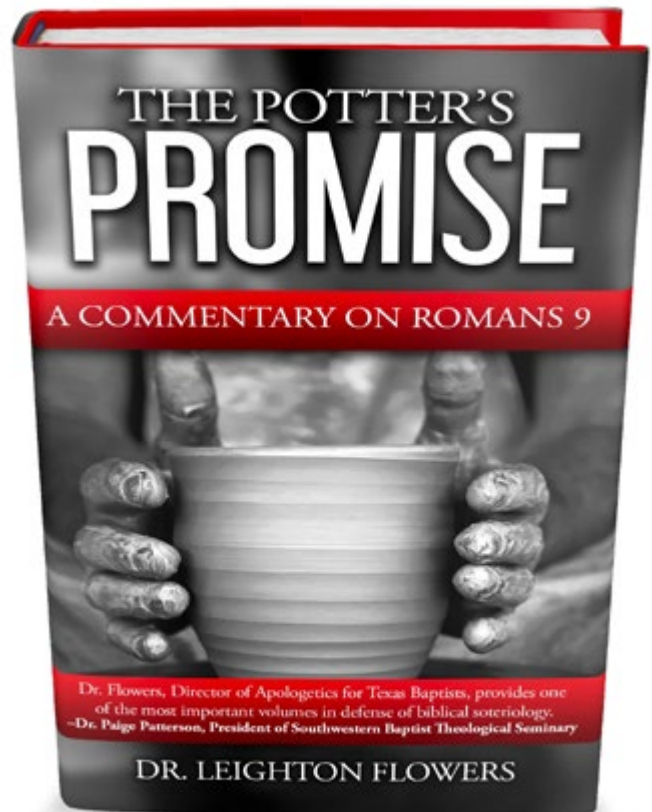
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A Review of Leighton Flowers's *The Potter's Promise: A Biblical Defense of Traditional Soteriology*

By Kathryn Wright

Leighton Flowers is a former Calvinist Baptist minister and currently the Director of Evangelism and Apologetics for Texas Baptists. In *The Potter's Promise*, he describes how he gave up on his belief in Calvinism. It took him three years of study to change his view.

The start of the journey occurred when he discovered that some writers he respected, like A. W. Tozer and C. S. Lewis, did not accept the five points of Calvinism (p. 4). He came to reject the idea that God would create people for the “sole purpose of pouring out His everlasting wrath” on them in order to manifest His glory (p. 6). Flowers discovered that Romans 9 did not teach election of people to the lake of fire. After that, all his arguments in favor of Calvinism fell away. He adopted what he calls a “traditional” soteriology. Predestination means that God has predetermined that those who freely believe will be



eternally saved. All believers have a responsibility to “humble themselves and trust Christ in faith.”

In chapter one, Flowers argues that the character of God argues against Calvinism. God is love. He loves His enemies. How could such a One create His enemies with no chance of being saved from an eternal hell? Romans 9 speaks of God’s choosing Jacob over Esau in order for Jacob to be the one to carry God’s blessing (p. 25).

Chapter two takes up the idea of election. The NT does speak of God choosing, but *these elections are never for people to go to heaven or hell*. God chose the nation of Israel through whom would come the Law, and they were to give it to the world. When it comes to salvation from hell, election is not unconditional. It refers to those who respond freely to God’s invitation (p. 32).

God’s sovereignty is a major emphasis of chapter three. Flowers says it is not to be understood

in the idea of God's determining everything that will happen, but in accomplishing His purposes in the free choices of every person. He also says that if Calvinism is true, God must have created evil. This was the position of Calvin himself (p. 43).

The fourth chapter has an interesting discussion on what it means when God hardens a person's heart. Flowers says that the Jews were self-hardened. They refused to believe and thus God also hardened them in order to bring eternal salvation to the Gentiles (Romans 11, p. 48). The judicial hardening of God is directed towards those who are already rebellious and is always to accomplish a greater redemptive purpose. While it is great that Flowers rejects the Calvinistic view that God chooses people for hell or the kingdom, he assumes that the result of the hardening of the heart is in reference to eternal salvation. He does not consider that this hardening is describing a communal aspect that deals with other issues.

Flowers correctly points out that Christ elected the Twelve to be apostles and take the gospel to the world. He did not elect them to eternal life (p. 75). In addition, God elected Israel as a community (p. 80). Flowers says that the election in Ephesians 1 refers to the sanctification and glorification that all who believe in Jesus will receive because they have believed. He implies that progressive sanctification is guaranteed for every believer (pp. 78-79). Flowers also sees in Ephesians 1 the universal aspect of God's election of the church as well (p. 81). He rightly states that God elects nations and individuals to fulfill a purpose (p. 106).

When it comes to the foreknowledge of God, Flowers takes the position that this refers to believers in the OT whom God loved in the past. These believers will be conformed to the image of Christ because of His sacrifice on their behalf (pp. 90-91).

The biggest disappointment of this book, in this reviewer's opinion, is that Flowers does not clearly define what he means by "traditional soteriol-

ogy." He rejects the Calvinistic doctrine, but it is difficult to determine what he believes is required of the unbeliever. Sometimes he only mentions the need for faith (pp. 47, 65, 81). In other places he says faith and repentance are necessary (pp. 64, 76, 105, 163), and in this regard the prodigal son's repentance is a picture of receiving eternal salvation. He sometimes says that the unbeliever needs to admit his sinfulness (p. 65) and implies that one needs to humbly ask for salvation.

Flowers does not appear to believe in rewards, so it is not surprising that he takes the position that passages which deal with rewards are speaking of eternal salvation (p. 88). Since he appears to believe in the perseverance of the saints in good works, he does not address the issue of assurance in this life.

Even though Flowers does not present a Free Grace gospel of eternal life and assurance, there is value in this book. It shows how a man steeped in a tradition can change his position. He correctly points out how Calvinists have misinterpreted passages about election and predestination. Many readers of the *JOTGES* will agree with many of his conclusions on these passages. Since Flowers once belonged to their camp, some Calvinists might be persuaded by his arguments in these areas more readily than they would from a proponent of Free Grace. For these reasons, I recommend the book. ■

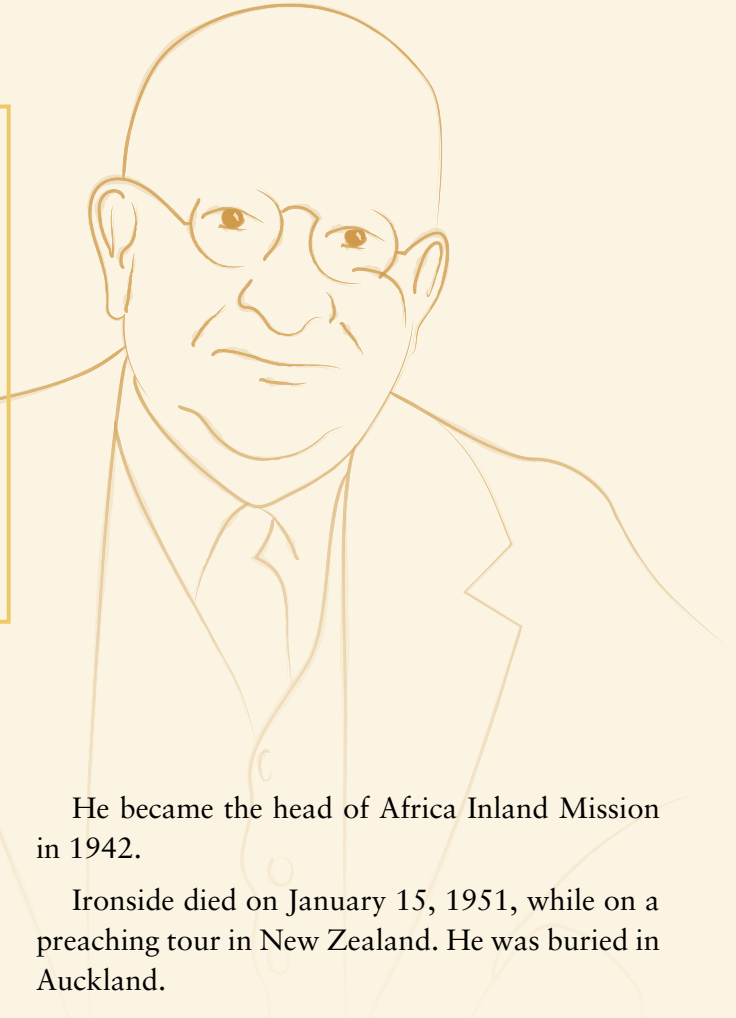


Kathryn Wright is the GES Missions coordinator and does far more work than that title suggests.

H. A. Ironside

(1876-1951)

By Bob Wilkin



Henry (Harry) Allan Ironside was born on October 14, 1876, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Interestingly, Ironside quit school after eighth grade and never had any further formal education. Yet he authored more than twenty books. Some of his more famous works were *Holiness: The False and the True*, *Except Ye Repent*, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: Ultra-Dispensationalism Examined*, and *Eternal Security of the Believer*. Many of his works are available today as free ebooks (see here: <https://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/biorpironside.html>).

He received honorary doctorates from Wheaton College (now University) and Bob Jones University.

According to Wikipedia, Ironside “preached almost 7,000 sermons to over 1.5 million listeners” (s.v. “Harry A. Ironside”).

For much of his life he served in Plymouth Brethren assemblies. However, in 1929 he became interim pastor of Moody Church in Chicago. He became the official pastor in 1930, serving there until 1948.

He became the head of Africa Inland Mission in 1942.

Ironside died on January 15, 1951, while on a preaching tour in New Zealand. He was buried in Auckland.

I have suggested in the past that Ironside was a Free Grace proponent (June 1989 *Grace in Focus*). I suggested that based on many quotes to that effect in his writings. However, Lordship Salvation proponents have claimed that Ironside held to Lordship Salvation. For example, John MacArthur wrote:

Even in his day Ironside recognized the dangers of an incipient easy-believism. He said, “Shallow preaching...results in shallow conversions... Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that ‘faith without works is dead’; and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God” (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, 1989 edition, p. 160, quoting Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, p. 11).

I believe that quote does not represent the bulk of Ironside’s writing and preaching, and even that quote merely shows that Ironside at that time was

explaining certain tough texts and issues in the same way that most Free Grace people did at the time.

In fact, that quote does not even accurately represent what Ironside wrote in his book *Except Ye Repent*. Note this strong Free Grace statement on the second to last page of that book:

If these pages fall into the hands of any anxious, troubled soul, desirous of finding the way of peace and earnestly seeking to be right with God, let me urge such a one to give up all struggling. Just believe God. Tell Him you are the sinner for whom the Saviour died, and trust in Christ alone for salvation. His own word is clear and simple: “Verily, verily I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life” (John 5:24).

As I read Ironside’s book on eternal security, I saw that he strongly defended the faith-alone message, the Free Grace message. However, he did occasionally fall back on explanations that true believers will live godly lives and will demonstrate their faith in their works. For example, there is a small amount of fuzziness in the first sentence in this statement:

It is not merely that if we are faithful to the end, we shall receive eternal life. There is a sense in which that is true, there is a sense in which our hope is eternal life. I am a Christian now if I believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; believing on Him I have eternal life, but I have it in a dying body. I am now waiting for the redemption of the body, and when the Lord Jesus comes the second time, He shall change this body of my humiliation and make it like unto the body of His glory. Then I shall have received eternal life in all its fulness, spirit, soul, and body entirely conformed to Christ. In that sense I am hoping for eternal life. But over, and over, and over again, Scripture rings the changes on the fact that every believer is at the present time in possession of eter-

nal life [under the heading, “Eternal Life Possessed Now”].

A few pages after that section and quote, Ironside ends his book on eternal security by answering 24 objections. The fuzziness seen in the preceding quote increased in his answer to Question 3 about John 8:31. After quoting John 8:31 about being Jesus’ disciples indeed only if we abide in His word, he wrote, “Every man who knows the truth of eternal security believes it. There is no use for a person to profess to be a disciple of Jesus if he does not continue. *It is this that proves there is a genuine work of the Spirit of God in his soul*” (emphasis added).

See also his explanation of Heb 6:4-8 that the people referred to were not genuine believers (in answer to Question 11). Likewise, he says that the people who fell away in 2 Pet 2:20-22 were not genuine believers (in answer to Question 10).

Those explanations, while fuzzy, were the ones popular with people like Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie. They do not mean that he held to Lordship Salvation. He did not.

Ironside does have a nice explanation of Ezek 18:24 (Question 9). He writes, “the ‘life’ spoken of in Ezekiel is not eternal life in Christ. It is life here on earth prolonged under the divine government, because of obedience, or cut short because of sin.”

Harry Ironside was a remarkable person. With little education, he rose to be one of the most famous preachers and authors of his day. While he might have said or written some things that are inconsistent with the Free Grace position, so did most of the Free Grace people of his generation. He did not have the opportunity to read *The Hungry Inherit, The Gospel Under Siege, Grace in Eclipse, Reign of the Servant Kings, Confident in Christ*, or *Secure and Sure*. ■

Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 46 years, Sharon. He is an avid race walker and marathon walker.

Being Part of a Play

(MARK 15:16-20)

By Ken Yates

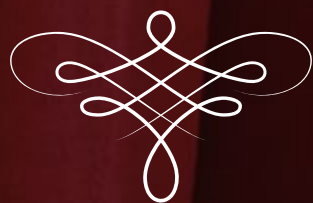




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INTRODUCTION

Most of us participated in a play while we were in school. I remember one I was in that was about the founding of the United States. I don't know what kind of play that would be called. I would call it a historical play. But I have been told that is not a proper category. Most plays are comedies or tragedies. In Mark 15:16-20, Mark describes a play. The reader will have to decide what kind of play it is.

A PLAY BY AMATEURS

Sometimes plays are put on by people trained to do so. We can go to places like New York City and see them. The actors and directors are professionals. They practice their lines. The costumes are fashioned specifically for the performance at hand. There are props and costumes that are made, fitting each character.

But we have also seen plays put on by amateurs. We have been a part of them. A few years ago, a famous one was put on by some U.S. soldiers at a place called Abu Ghraib. Some prisoners of war were dressed up in various costumes. They were used to put on a show for the soldiers who humiliated them. The soldiers definitely saw it as a comedy.

A similar show is put on in Mark 15:16-20.

A HASTILY PUT TOGETHER PLAY

In these verses in Mark, some men put on an impromptu performance. They also want to produce a comedy. There is a fairly large audience, probably around 200-300 spectators. Many of these spectators will actually take part in the play because they recognize the humor and want to contribute to it.

A play needs actors. While many of the men will act in the play, Jesus is the Star. He has just been convicted of being the King of the Jews; for anyone other than the emperor to be considered the ruler was considered an act of rebellion against Rome. In the eyes of these men, the fact that Jesus has been found guilty of being King of the Jews is hilarious in and of itself. It is absurd. The real king of the Jews is the most powerful man on earth, Caesar. When Jesus comes to them, He is a poor, itinerant rabbi who has just been brutally beaten by the Roman authorities. He is covered in blood. It would be hard to picture a man more unlike a king, more unlike Caesar. These men are Roman soldiers, and they lead Him into an open-air hall. This hall will become a theater stage as these men put on a show based upon what this Man is accused of. Even the very first sight of Him as He enters onto the stage would have brought laughter from all the spectators.

A play needs costumes. One of the soldiers then takes off a common Roman soldier's coat and puts it on Jesus. It would have been worn out and probably dirty. But the coat is purple, and that is the color of royalty. This King needs a royal robe.

There also needs to be dialogue in this play. So, they provide it. If Caesar were to come, the soldiers would yell, "Hail, Caesar!" as an address of respect. Jesus needs to be addressed as well. So, they yell, "Hail, King of the Jews!" to the One on the stage. The picture is one of a stream of soldiers passing by this truly pathetic Figure, with each pretending to pay homage to Him. The comedy is so intense, many of the soldiers cannot say the words plainly as they pass by because they are laughing so hard.

There are also props in this play. A king needs a scepter, a symbol of his authority. In this comedy, this King is given one. It is a long leaf of a plant, and it is used to strike Him on the head. The King of the Jews also needs a crown, so they make a crown out of thorns and push it into His scalp, bringing more blood.

Those who are privileged to be in the presence of a king are sometimes given the honor of kissing him as a sign of respect. The soldiers, the subjects of this King, transform that honor into spitting on this King. Such action is a sign of great disrespect.

Finally, if Caesar were to visit these soldiers, they would make a sacrifice to the gods in his honor. After all, Caesar was like a god on earth and was worthy of their worship. These soldiers bow down before Jesus and feign worship of Him.

Even though the play was hastily thrown together, those involved were even able to put in a scene change. Five of those soldiers who took part in the play took the Star of the production to a hill a little way out of town. There, they hung Him on a cross and put a sign over His head, which declared in a hilarious way that He was the King of the Jews. This allowed many more spectators to enjoy the show.

One can almost imagine the laughter that came from this theater as this comedy was put on. Those in attendance would have gone home and told their family and friends of the show they saw. Many would have regretted that they were not present.

WHAT KIND OF PLAY WAS IT?

I don't know how to classify the play I was in many years ago. In the same way, what would we call this play in Mark 15? Certainly, it wasn't a comedy, even though the spectators thought that is what they were seeing. As believers, would we call it a tragedy because it eventually resulted in the biggest crime in the history of the world?

It is hard to think of it in those terms because this "crime" provided the payment for the sin of the world. This would make possible the gift of eternal life for all who believe in Christ for that gift. For those of us who have received this gift, we are grateful for what happened and praise God for it.



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I have been told that another category of plays deals with irony. Is that what this play is in Mark 15, because the spectators don't realize that this really is the King of the Jews, and the joke was on them?

I simply don't know what to call the play these soldiers put on. I know that there was nothing funny about it. I look at that stage and see my Savior and King put Himself through that humiliation for me. In fact, He did it for us all.

WE ALSO ARE CALLED TO BE ACTORS

It is important for us to study the play we see in Mark 15. The reason is that we are told to become actors in a similar one. The author of Hebrews tells his readers that they have already been put on a stage in front of people who laughed at them for their faith. Like Christ, they too suffered as a result of that humiliation (Heb 10:32-34). Their suffering was a source of entertainment for those who watched the stage.

The NT teaches that believers are called to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. If He was put in front of the world for ridicule and to become the butt of their jokes, faithful believers can expect the same.

And it wasn't just for the original readers of Hebrews. Later, the author will say for all believing readers of the book to follow Christ while "bearing His reproach" (Heb 13:13). He was the leading actor of the show put on in front of the world, but we are called to be the supporting cast.

CONCLUSION

We might not know the proper classification of the play described in Mark 15. It causes us to have a mixture of sadness and gratefulness when we watch it on the pages of the NT.

But isn't it wonderful that we can take part in it in some small way? I have sometimes heard of lesser-known actors describe the thrill they experienced when they got to share the stage with a legend such as Marlon Brando. Think of the privilege that we have. The Lord calls every believer to suffer with Him. When we do, before the eyes of the world that mocked and rejected Him, we get to step on the stage with Him. ■

Ken Yates retired as a Lt. Col. from the Army after 20 years as a chaplain. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC, but will soon move to Indianapolis to be near their grandkids. Ken leads the GES international team.

Elisha's Great Faith



PHOTO BY COTTONBRO // PEXELS.COM

By Bill Fiess and Pam Esteven

While listening through 2 Kings, I was impressed anew with Elisha's great faith. Again and again, he faces problems that occur in ordinary life, yet Scripture never records that he becomes flustered. Instead, he demonstrates great faith in the Lord; time after time, he sees God's power and deliverance.

COOL, CLEAR WATER

One of the incidents in Elisha's life that strikes me is his encounter with the men of Jericho shortly after Elijah's translation into the third heaven. The men of Jericho come to Elisha because the water supply has been compromised with something that has made the water undrinkable. Nice city, bad water. At the Lord's direction, apparently, Elisha throws salt into the water source, and through the prophet's obedience, the Lord heals the waters which were still good by the time 2 Kings was written (2 Kgs 2:19-22).

THE WIDOW'S OIL WELL

One of the most famous examples of Elisha's great faith is his gracious dealing with the widow of a fellow prophet. She is in danger of losing her two sons to servitude because of a debt she cannot repay. Faithfully following God's desire to take care of widows and fatherless children, Elisha discovers that the only foodstuff this widow has is a small jar of oil. He directs her to shut her door after she has borrowed as many pots and pans as she can and to fill up those many pots with oil from the one jar she has. She obeys and discovers a real oil well. Elisha then tells her to sell the oil, discharge the debt, and live off the rest. In God's hands, her small amount has become a nest egg to provide for her and her family. I especially love this story (2 Kgs 4:1-7).

THE FLOATING AX HEAD

Because of his great faith, Elisha was used by God after this incident to help more people by

doing more miracles. God used Elisha to raise to life the dead son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:32-37) and to heal the Syrian commander Naaman of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1-14).

Another incident in Elisha's life reveals just how much God is concerned with the everyday trials in our lives. This is the account of the floating ax head. Elisha's theological students are expanding their seminary campus. As one student chops down a tree, the ax head flies off and disappears into the muddy Jordan River. As it turns out, the ax has been borrowed, and we all know that seminary students have only cobwebs in their wallets. How can this student repay the ax's owner? However, this seminary student has positioned himself in his woodcutting so that if the ax head did fly off, it would land in the water and not a colleague's head. This student has also been so careful as to have observed exactly where the ax head has sunk. Very graciously and very simply, Elisha throws a stick into the water where the student has directed him. As everyone knows, iron ax heads cannot do the backstroke, but Elisha knows the One who can make that happen. Miraculously the iron ax head floats. What a tremendous example of God's concern for our daily troubles (2 Kgs 6:4-7).

CHARIOTS OF FIRE

The final example is the famous story of the chariots of fire. Elisha and his servant have ended up on the Syrian king's *most wanted list* because intelligence information has continued to leak from the king's most private meetings. He has finally realized that the leak is one who has not even been present at those meetings: Elisha!

The king then sends his forces to surround Dothan, the town where Elisha is residing, and to fetch the prophet. Elisha's servant is quite nervous about this development, but Elisha himself is not and assures him that "those who are with us are more than those who are with them." What great faith. Elisha asks the Lord to remove the blinders from the servant's eyes that he may see the army

of heaven. It is an awesome sight: "the mountains full of horses and chariots of fire." The servant had no need to fear. Elisha's great confidence in God's protection is completely justified and has kept him from needless worry (2 Kgs 6:8-17).

GREAT FAITH

Do you and I have that kind of complete confidence in the Lord's care for us? Or are we like the father in Mark 9:24 who said, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief"? Sometimes we, like Elisha's servant and this father, need help with our unbelief. There are times in our lives when we need someone like Elisha, someone whose great faith points us to see God's hand when our own faith falters.

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He was impressed with those of great faith. For example, He commended the centurion in Capernaum whose faith was such that he believed Jesus could, from a long distance, heal a gravely ill servant (Matt 8:5-13). Like Elisha in the OT and like the centurion in Jesus' day, let us also be people of great faith so that we, too, may hear the commendation of our Lord. The greater our faith, the greater blessing we can be to others in this life. The greater our faith, the greater our service to God now and in the life to come. May we long to hear our Lord's commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant." ■



Bill Fiess teaches mathematics at Southwest Virginia Community College.



Pam Esteven lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with her husband, Roy



VOICE FROM THE PAST

Doctrinal Déjà Vu

An Old Issue: Faith and Assurance*

By Zane C. Hodges

**This article originally appeared in the February 1989 issue of what was then Grace in Focus newsletter.¹*



“What goes around, comes around,” people often say. And though they rarely do so, they could say it about theological controversy, too!

Recently my attention was called to a hundred-year-old book entitled, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., L.L.D., Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Texas, and for Many Years Professor in Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.*² I’m not kidding—all of that was part of the title! The particular discussion I have in mind was one called “Theology of the Plymouth Brethren” (pp. 169-213). In this segment of the book, Dabney roundly criticizes the errors of Plymouth Brethren teaching.

Dabney himself was a Southern Presbyterian theologian, strongly committed to the Calvinist, or Reformed, system of his denomination. To read him here is like reading the contemporary debate about salvation. Virtually all the central issues are surfaced in Dabney’s critique: the nature of saving

faith, the grounds of assurance, sanctification and the two natures, etc.

Dabney is particularly adamant in rejecting the Plymouth Brethren view that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. But with a remarkable candor that we could use more of today, he traces this “error” to Luther and Calvin! Listen to this:

The source of this error is no doubt that doctrine concerning faith which the first Reformers, as Luther and Calvin, were led to adopt from their opposition to the hateful and tyrannical teachings of Rome...These noble Reformers...flew to the opposite extreme, and...asserted that the assurance of hope is of the essence of saving faith. Thus says Calvin in his commentary on Romans: “My faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has pardoned and accepted *me*” (p. 173, italics in Dabney).

Following the discussion from which I have just quoted, there is another bearing the same

title (“Theology of the Plymouth Brethren,” pp. 214-228). In this one Dabney replies to a critical correspondent (M. N.), who had found fault with the previous discussion. Apparently, M. N. had objected to Calvin’s being charged with the view that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. Dabney replies that he still asserts, “That Calvin and Dr. Malan, and the Plymouth Brethren, hold a definition of nature or essence of saving faith which is, in one respect, contrary to the Westminster Confession and to the Scriptures, as well as to the great body of the confessions of the Presbyterian Churches, and of their divines since Calvin’s day” (p. 215).

To M. N.’s apparent unwillingness to admit this, Dabney adds: “. . . for as sure as truth is in history, Luther and Calvin did fall into this error, which the Reformed churches, led by the Westminster Confession, have since corrected” (p. 215)!

Quite an admission, don’t you agree?

To drive the final nails into the coffin of M. N.’s argument, Dabney goes on like this:

He [Calvin] requires everyone to say, in substance, I believe fully that Christ *has saved me*. Amidst all Calvin’s verbal variations, this is always his meaning; for he is consistent in his error. What else is the meaning of that definition which M. N. himself quotes from the *Institutes*: “Our steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence *toward us*.” But I will show, beyond all dispute, that the theological “Homer nodded,” not once, but all the time on this point. See then *Institutes*, Book III, Chap. II, Sec. 16. “In short, no man is truly a believer, unless he is firmly persuaded that God is a propitious and benevolent father *to him*. . . and feel an undoubted expectation of salvation” (p. 216, italics in Dabney).

Other quotations from Calvin follow in Dabney’s text, but my space here does not allow me to quote them.

But what is Dabney’s view? It is the typical Reformed view that works are needed to verify my faith. The hopeless quagmire into which Reformed theology plunges its adherents is neatly (though unwittingly stated) by Dabney:

There is a spurious as well as a genuine faith. *Every man, when he thinks he believes, is conscious of exercising what he thinks is faith*. Such is the correct statement of these facts of consciousness. Now suppose the faith, of which the man is conscious, turns out a spurious faith, must not his be a spurious consciousness? And he, being without the illumination of the Spirit, will be in the dark as to its hollowness (pp 180-181, italics in Dabney).

What a tragic position! The believer in Christ cannot know whether his belief is genuine or spurious. He must, therefore, search for a way to have faith in his faith—to believe that he has believed. But what if, after self-examination, he is wrong there, too?

Obviously, the kind of theology Dabney represents strips believers of their grounds of assurance and dangles them over an abyss of despair.

But, as you can see, we are not the first people to fight this battle over assurance. Calvin fought it, long ago, with Rome. ■



Zane taught NT at DTS for 27 years, authored over a dozen books, and was passionate about the grace of God.

- 1 Some suggested that after Zane went to be with the Lord in 2008, he had only recently adopted the view that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. This 1989 article shows that he held that view from the start of GES. Indeed, based on his writings and messages, it appeared he held this view since the time he came to faith in Christ (approx. 1942).
- 2 Originally published in 1890, the book is available free electronically online at library.logcollegepress.com/Dabney%2C+Robert+Lewis%2C+Discussions+Vol.+1.pdf.

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