

The Spiritual Status of the Elect Sinner Before He Believes

As we have seen, the elect sinner, until he believes, is not *actually* justified.¹ He is, of course, justified in God's eternal decree and in Christ's redemptive work, but he is, as yet, unjustified in his own person. Since every unjustified sinner is under condemnation, every unbeliever is in that state. It is only as he believes that a sinner passes from condemnation and is justified. This, in turn, means that the elect sinner, before he comes to faith, is as much under the wrath of God as any sinner.

It is not just a question of deduction. Scripture states it explicitly. Take Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Paul, addressing believers, the elect who have been regenerated and come to faith,² reminds them of their experience. And he is unequivocal about it. He tells them what they once were – in the days of their unregeneracy. Further, he tells them the sort of people among whom they used to live. What is more, he tells them the kind of life they lived in those days. Above all, he tells them of their condition and their status before God at that time. And he is explicit, pulling no punches. All men are by nature under the wrath of God, of course. These believers were no exception. Before they were regenerated, before they came to faith, they too – like all men – were under the wrath of God. In fact, Paul stresses the point. More. It *is* his point. The Ephesians 'were', he tells them, 'by nature the children of wrath, *just as the others*'. Indeed, he includes

¹ The extracts for this chapter begin on p197.

² Faith is not in the passage, but it clearly underlies the context (Eph. 1:1,12-13,15; 2:8; 3:12).

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himself: 'We all... were by nature children of wrath, just as the others' (Eph. 2:3).

In other words, all this is true for all the elect before they come to faith. Paul is categorical: 'We all... were by nature children of wrath, just as the others'. It makes no difference whether or not a sinner is elect; by nature he is under the wrath of God – as much as any sinner. In this sense, all men are proverbial peas in a pod.

As the apostle said elsewhere, God formed 'the vessels of mercy' (that is, the elect) 'from the same lump' as 'the vessels of wrath'. 'From the same lump', please notice. That is, in eternity, in his sovereign foreknowledge, purpose and will, God chose his elect out of the lump of fallen humanity – they were as much part of the lump as the rest – and predestinated them to form them into vessels of mercy. God, having chosen his elect from the lump, left the rest as the vessels of wrath (Rom. 9:21-23).

So, when the elect are born into this world, they are, in themselves, under the wrath of God, even though God has eternally chosen and appointed them to be vessels of mercy. Thus they remain, until they are brought to faith. In short, the elect, before conversion – every bit as much as the non-elect – are by nature under the wrath of God, part of the fallen lump of humanity in Adam – notwithstanding the fact that God has predestined them to everlasting life. Until they come to faith in Christ, the elect are still in the kingdom of darkness and under the condemnation of God.

Paul went on to remind the Ephesians of their pre-conversion days: 'Remember that... at that time you were without Christ... strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ' (Eph. 2:11-13). Before faith, the elect are outside Christ, separated from God, hopeless and spiritually ignorant – as much as any sinner.

This is confirmed to us by the apostle's declaration to the Colossian believers. News reached Paul that the Colossians had heard the gospel and come to faith under it. He rejoiced in this, and was able to link himself with them and assure them that God 'has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of his love' (Col. 1:3-13). When were the Colossians transferred into Christ's kingdom? As they believed:

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‘We give thanks to... God... praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus... He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of his love’. Of course the apostle rejoiced! The Colossians’ experience was the heart of the commission he had received from the Lord Christ at Damascus: ‘I... send you to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me’ (Acts 26:17-18). He was, therefore, delighted when he heard of any sinner being delivered from Satan’s power, and brought into Christ’s kingdom.

Here is the principle. At the appointed time – in time and experience – God delivers his elect out of one kingdom – darkness – into another kingdom, a very different kingdom – Christ’s. He delivers them from Satan’s power to Christ’s. He does this as and when he brings the elect to faith. Before they believe, therefore, the elect are as much in, and as much part of, the kingdom of darkness as any sinner. They are, as much as any sinner, under Satan’s power, blinded in unbelief, and on the road to perdition (2 Cor. 4:3-4).³ Until sinners are effectively called, they are in darkness, cut off from God, without Christ. It is only after they are called, and come to faith, that it can be said of the elect: ‘God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1 Cor. 1:9).

In short, the elect – along with all sinners – before being born again and coming to faith, are part and parcel of the lump of fallen humanity, members of the kingdom of darkness, under Satan, condemned under the wrath of God. This the Scriptures unequivocally and repeatedly declare.

No, says the hyper-Calvinist. Not at all. The elect never were part of the lump of fallen humanity, never in the same lump as they. The elect never were in the kingdom of darkness. The elect never were under the wrath of God, never condemned. The elect were

³ Not that they will perish, of course. But since an unbeliever is an unbeliever, and there is no way of telling if he is elect except by his believing, he is on the road to perdition. That is how it appears to him and to everybody else.

always justified. Gill was blunt and unequivocal: ‘The elect... never were in a state of condemnation’.⁴

But what about all the above passages? What others?⁵ In particular, what about Ephesians 2:1-3? Surely this must put the nail in the hyper-Calvinist’s coffin? How did Gill deal with this passage?

Gill on Ephesians 2:1-3

Gill, I remind you, asserted that ‘the elect... never were in a state of condemnation’. So what did he make of: We ‘were by nature the children of wrath, even as others’ (Eph. 2:3, AV)? He conjured up an astonishing, as well as lamentably weak, interpretation of the verse:

By which is meant, not only that they [the elect] were wrathful persons[!]... but that they [the elect] were deserving of the wrath of God.⁶

And it is not the only time he said it: ‘By nature [the saints] are... deserving of the wrath of God’.⁷

This is quite wrong. Truth to tell, it takes my breath away! It was unworthy of so pedantic a commentator. How could Gill say such a thing? The elect ‘were wrathful persons... deserving of the wrath of God’? These two assertions must be probed and exposed: The elect ‘were wrathful persons’, and were ‘deserving of the wrath of God’. Let me take them in order:

First, before coming to faith, the ‘elect were wrathful persons’. Wrathful persons? The Ephesians were angry people? Is that what Paul is saying? Words fail. True enough, the elect – as all men – were ‘wrathful persons’, angry people (Tit. 3:3), yes, but that is not what the apostle is talking about in Ephesians 2:1-3. Certainly not!

Gill, commenting on Titus 3:3, observed that the elect, before conversion, were ‘abominable in the sight of God, as considered in themselves, and on account of their nature and practices’.⁸ Quite

⁴ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p55.

⁵ See below.

⁶ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p425.

⁷ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p505.

⁸ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p669.

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right. That is precisely what the apostle is saying in Titus 3:3. *But he is not dealing with that in 'were dead in trespasses and sins... were by nature children of wrath, just as the others' (Eph. 2:1-3).* I agree that in Ephesians 2:1-3 (excluding these two clauses – ‘were dead... were by nature...’), Paul is dealing with the lifestyle of the unregenerate, yes. But in these two clauses he is most definitely dealing with their *standing* before God. Whereas in Titus 3:3 the apostle is speaking of the lifestyle and manners of the elect (‘considered in themselves’) before conversion, in these two clauses in Ephesians 2:1-3, he is undoubtedly speaking of their *standing* before God before their conversion. Something very different! In their experience before conversion, they were angry people, yes (Tit. 3:3), but, in their standing before God prior to their conversion, they ‘were dead in trespasses and sins’ and ‘were by nature children of wrath, just as the others’ (Eph. 2:1,3). In short, they were unregenerate and under God’s wrath.

Gill confused the sinner’s condition and the sinner’s status. I have already hinted at this nice point. When speaking of ‘condition’, we are thinking of lifestyle, circumstances, situation. When speaking of ‘status’, we are thinking of standing, relationship, category, position. In everyday parlance, ‘condition’ and ‘status’ may be virtually interchangeable, but, when dealing with the issue in hand, we must be careful to distinguish the two. In his natural condition, the sinner is a sinful being, displaying all sorts of ungodliness in his life. In his natural status before God, he is in Adam, unregenerate and condemned under God’s wrath.⁹ Every unbeliever is a child of (God’s) wrath and is condemned: ‘He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God’ (John 3:18).

I noted that there were two points about Gill’s interpretation of Ephesians 2:1-3. Now for the second. Before coming to faith, the elect ‘were deserving of the wrath of God’. This is what Gill said.

⁹ Let me make a nice, but relevant and important point. I have skirted it once or twice already. The unbeliever is condemned already, even now (John 3:18,36). But he does not experience God’s wrath to the full. Obviously so: he is on earth and not in hell! Likewise, the believer is justified now. But he is not yet in glory, and will not be fully justified until the last day.

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Note the glaring gloss. It is totally unwarranted, and a grievous imposition on the text.¹⁰ Gill said the elect were merely *deserving* of the wrath of God. I admit that Calvin said the same: ‘the children of wrath are those who are lost, and who deserve eternal death’, but he did not leave it there. As he went on to say: ‘The children of wrath are those who are condemned before God’.¹¹ To both men, I would point out that Paul asserts that believers, before coming to faith, are *under* the wrath of God, not merely deserving of it. And by ‘the children of wrath’, the apostle, using a Hebraism, a Jewish idiom, was in effect telling the Ephesians that as unbelievers they had been the ‘objects of God’s wrath’.¹² The NIV got it spot on: ‘By nature objects of wrath’ (Eph. 2:3, NIV). As with all men by nature, ‘the wrath of God abides on [them]’ (John 3:36).

Gill’s remarks smack of special pleading, desperate pleading. The fact is, I can hear a man who, finding himself in a difficult place, is scratching around for any convenient straw to lay his hands on. Gill has not been on his own. For other hyper-Calvinistic statements of a similar ilk, including one posted on the internet as recently as 2010, see the Extracts. I also quoted it in the Introduction.

At the risk of over-egging the pudding, I must repeat the apostle’s emphasis. It must not be missed. It is very important. Paul’s point in Ephesians 2:1-3 is not, merely, that all sinners are by nature under the wrath of God. Not at all! That is true, of course. But the apostle goes much further than that to tell us that *even the elect* are by nature like the rest – ‘just as the others’ – under the wrath of God. It is only after coming to faith that they – the elect – are no longer under that wrath.¹³

¹⁰ I admit the niceness of the difficulty here, as my previous note indicates. Nevertheless, Gill was frying another fish here.

¹¹ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.21 Part 1 p223.

¹² Hendriksen: *Ephesians* p116; Hodge: *Ephesians* p106. See the Extracts.

¹³ I do not agree with Calvin who thought Paul was speaking about Jews and Gentiles (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.21 Part 1 p223). At this point, the apostle was not dividing mankind in that way. Rather, he was referring to the elect and the reprobate.

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What I am saying about the status of the unbeliever (elect or not) – being under God’s wrath and condemnation – does not depend on one text alone, of course; nor even one passage – though Ephesians 2 as a whole is replete with the doctrine (see my remarks on it in the previous chapter). The appalling status of the unbeliever (elect and non-elect alike) is clearly stated or implied in all the following:

God is angry with the wicked every day (Ps. 7:11). All our days have passed away in your wrath (Ps. 90:9). He who does not believe is condemned already... He who does not believe is condemned... the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:18,36). The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men... Having been justified by faith... having now been justified... we shall be saved from wrath through [Christ] (Rom. 1:18; 5:1-9). The wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph. 5:6). The wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them (Col. 3:6-7). You turned to God... to wait for his Son... even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Only the most fatuous exegesis – or deliberate wrenching and distorting of Scripture – can avoid the obvious thrust of these passages. In particular: ‘He who does not believe’ – elect or not – ‘is condemned already’. ‘He who does not believe’ – elect or not – ‘the wrath of God abides on him’ (John 3:18,36).¹⁴ It most definitely does *not* say that he that is not elect is condemned already; he is, but that is because he is unbelieving. Condemnation is not a question of election; it is a question of believing or not believing. The elect, even the elect, before believing are under the wrath of God.

How could Gill make such a bad mistake on this point – Ephesians 2:1-3, in particular? And what defence did he put up for his assertion? The answer is, he got out of one problem only by

¹⁴ As with justification, there is more than one aspect to condemnation. The ungodly are condemned in God’s decree; they are under his wrath even as they live now; and, if they die in an unbelieving state, they will be eternally condemned following the last judgement. The elect, of course, although before their conversion they were under the wrath of God, upon believing and being justified, they are for ever beyond condemnation, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ (Rom. 8:1,33-34).

plunging himself deeper into another; that is to say, he compounded his mistake, in that he evaded the consequences of Ephesians 2:1-3 only by making a nonsense of Paul's teaching on Adam and Christ. I said I would return to this vital matter. I do so now.

In Adam or in Christ?

Adam and Christ are the two heads of the human race. All men are under either Adam or Christ as their head. They are either 'in Adam' or 'in Christ' (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22). They cannot be in both at the same time. The two are mutually exclusive. But Gill denied this by asserting that the elect, having two natures, Adamic and Christian, are in both Adam and Christ *at one and the same time*. In their Adamic nature, the elect are under the wrath of God, but in their Christian nature, they are justified. They are in these two – in Adam and in Christ – not only from eternity, but in time – both before conversion and after, their Adamic nature and condition being exterminated only at physical death. The elect, Gill declared, 'were under a sentence of condemnation, as considered in Adam... but as considered in Christ, as the elect of God always were... they were never in a state of condemnation'.¹⁵ In other words, the elect are condemned in Adam and justified in Christ – at one and the same time, both before conversion and after!¹⁶

Really?

First, a word or two on this 'two natures' business. This notion is, I admit, exceedingly popular among evangelicals, most of whom would run a mile at the thought of being accused of Calvinistic tendencies, let alone being a hyper-Calvinist! Popular, as the 'two-nature teaching' may be, however, it does not stop it being a serious mistake. Only one person ever had two natures – Christ. Christ was and is both God and man. God, angels, men all have but one nature. Christ alone has two natures. That is the end of it!

¹⁵ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p55.

¹⁶ Ella: *Gill and Justification* pp107-109,178-179. See Berkouwer p152. See the Introduction and the Extracts for contemporary hyper-Calvinists who part company with Gill to say that the elect were condemned, not in Adam, but in Christ. The elect are both condemned and justified *in Christ?!?* Leaving the '?!?' to sum up my view of this, I will concentrate on Gill's position.

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While what I now say does not apply to all who think in terms of the ‘two natures’, one of the grievous consequences of the ‘two-nature teaching’ (coupled with a mis-reading of Rom. 7:14-25), is the seeming support it gives to those believers who want to relegate all their carnal ways to their so-called sinful nature – for which they are not responsible. This Adamic waste-paper basket has proved a handy depository for all the ‘inconveniences’ arising out of scriptural commands to holiness and rebukes for sin. It allows such people to live as carnally as they like, and yet cast all the responsibility and consequences upon Adam and their sinful nature. A satanic master-stroke. The rigmarole is an utter nonsense from beginning to end.¹⁷

The ‘two nature’ doctrine usually takes the form of saying that the two natures in believers correspond to the old and the new man. Now the concept of the old and new man is, of course, thoroughly biblical (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10; see also 2 Cor. 5:17). But the ‘old man’ and the ‘new man’ do not stand for two natures. Not at all! They stand for two statuses. The ‘old man’ is what the elect sinner was before he came to faith; he was ‘in Adam’; that *was* his standing before God. The ‘new man’ is what the elect sinner is after coming to faith; he is ‘in Christ’; that *is* his standing before God.¹⁸

We are talking about what we may term ‘federal headship’, ‘representative headship’. In Scripture, it is clear that God deals with mankind under two ‘heads’ or ‘representatives’, Adam and Christ. We have no choice in this. God deals with men under one or other of these two heads. These two men – in his disobedience, Adam; and, in his obedience, Christ – were not acting merely as private persons. As public persons, what they did was imputed to all for whom they stood, imputed to all they represented. Adam fell; so did all ‘in Adam’ – that is, all men. Christ pleased his Father

¹⁷ In the USA, so I understand, it is not unknown for some professing believers to misunderstand or misapply 1 Cor. 3:1-4 by making a virtue out of what the apostle saw as an offence – ‘the carnal Christian’. Paul was rebuking the Corinthians, of course, not commending them; he was not tolerating their carnality! Heb. 12:14 must never be forgotten. Sanctification, in the progressive sense, is essential.

¹⁸ See Lloyd-Jones: *New*.

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absolutely; so did all ‘in Christ’ – that is, all the elect. It is not for us to question this. God has revealed it. This is the way in which he deals with all mankind.¹⁹

When we read of Adam and Christ, we are not reading of two *natures*. They are the two *persons*, two *heads* of the human race. All men are either in Adam or in Christ. Adam is my head; or Christ is. The old man is what the believer was in Adam. The new man is what he is in Christ. If I am a believer, my old man is what I was in Adam, before my conversion, and my new man is what I am now in Christ. When I passed from death (in)to life (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14), I passed from being ‘in Adam’ to being ‘in Christ’.²⁰ No man can be under two heads at one and the same time. He must be, he can be, under only one head at any given time. No man can be in two mutually exclusive states at one and the same time. Romans 5:12-21 makes it clear. All men, including the elect, by nature are born ‘in Adam’. Believers are ‘in Christ’.

As I showed earlier, when commenting on Romans 8:1, Gill critically missed the glorious overtones of the eschatological argument in Romans 3:21 – 8:4, punctuated, as it is, by Paul’s use of ‘now’ or ‘but now’ (Rom. 3:21; 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; plus Rom. 11:30; 11:31 (second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB); 16:26; see also John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10).²¹ These words, ‘but now’, should be read as though they were pulsating in neon. Gill missed this, badly. And he was making precisely the same mistake here, when thinking of ‘in Adam’ and ‘in Christ’. He failed to see that the apostle is speaking of two realms, two reigns – namely, the reign and realm of Adam, flesh, sin, law and death; and the reign and realm of Christ, the Spirit, spirit, holiness, grace and life. Men

¹⁹ Incidentally, this is why it is essential to maintain the biblical account of Adam in Genesis. If the early chapters of Genesis fall, so do Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15. And if they fall, so does all the rest.

²⁰ Take John 5:24. ‘He who... believes... has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life’. Clearly, he who does not believe – or who has not yet believed – is spiritually dead and heading for judgement because he is, as yet, under God’s wrath. See John 5:24-29.

²¹ 1 Pet. 2:10 does not have the ‘now’ but it is clearly implied.

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who are in Adam are in one epoch or age or realm. Men who are in Christ are in a totally different epoch or age or realm:

For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive... The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man (1 Cor. 15:21-22,47-49).

I have said much more about this in my *Christ is All*. To fail to give this biblical principle its due weight is tragic. The believer, before coming to faith, as all the unregenerate, was 'in Adam'. Now, after coming to faith, he is 'in Christ'. In Adam, he was condemned under God's wrath. In Christ – now – he is justified, clothed in Christ's righteousness.

In short: Until a sinner believes, he is in Adam, dead in sins (Rom. 5:6; Eph. 2:1,5), does not have peace with God (Rom. 5:1), but is under the wrath of God (John 3:18,36; Eph. 2:3; Col. 3:6-7), in darkness (Eph. 5:8), in the flesh (Rom. 8:4-9; Eph. 2:3), alienated from God and an enemy to him (Rom. 5:10; 8:7; Col. 1:21), regards spiritual things as foolish (1 Cor. 2:11-14) and hateful (Rom. 8:7), is not saved (Acts 16:31), does not have the righteousness of Christ imputed to him (Rom. 4:3,5,11,24), is not justified (Rom. 3:22-30; 5:1; 8:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8,24), is condemned of God – not having received Christ's propitiation (Rom. 3:25). And so on (see Rom. 1:18 – 3:23, in particular). In other words, until a sinner believes, even though he may be elect, he is in Adam, and bears all the consequences that go with such a status before God. The unbelieving sinner is all this. The unbeliever, I repeat. Not the unbeliever as in Adam, not the unbeliever in his fallen nature. The unbeliever, full stop! The unbeliever – every unbeliever, including the elect!

Yet Gill, as Naylor summarised it, 'taught that before conversion [the] elect... were simultaneously in both a state of condemnation and a state of justification'.²² Incredible! But it gets worse. Let me explain.

²² Naylor p179.

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Let us remember what we are talking about. We are dealing with a sinner before conversion. How should we regard him? This is a question of the utmost importance. Imagine a surgeon, lancet in hand, not knowing what was wrong with the patient lying anaesthetised before him! Well, then, imagine a believer trying to address an unbeliever, not knowing what is really wrong with the person before him!

The sinner before conversion: How should we regard him? He may be elect. He may not. We have no way of telling. In any event, with regard to the way we proceed, it is irrelevant whether or not this unbeliever is elect (which, in any case, we cannot possibly know). He is a sinner. That is his status. According to Scripture, he is ‘in Adam’ with *all* that *that* entails. He desperately needs to be brought out of Adam and brought into Christ. So speaks the Bible.

Not so for the hyper-Calvinist. When the hyper-Calvinist is faced with an unbeliever whom he claims he can recognise as what he calls a sensible sinner, he is convinced that this sinner is elect. This means that the sinner in question is both ‘in Adam’ and ‘in Christ’. But, at this point, for reasons of his own (reasons which I am unaware of), the hyper-Calvinist *conveniently drops the ‘in Adam’ bit*. He concentrates on the ‘in Christ’. The thing that matters above all else to him is that this sensible sinner is elect, he is ‘in Christ’, and has been so from eternity, and, therefore, as such, has never been under the wrath of God, never condemned. He is certainly not under the wrath of God at this moment – even though, as yet, he has not come to faith. Let me repeat the earlier extract from Gill: ‘The elect... never were in a state of condemnation’.²³ It gets even worse. As I have mentioned, and as I will fully demonstrate when I produce the Case Study I have spoken of, some hyper-Calvinists go as far as to call sensible (though unbelieving) sinners ‘safe’ and ‘blessed’. They preach that way, and denounce all who tell unbelievers that they must flee to Christ, and command them to do so at once – because, until they do, they remain under the wrath of God.

Well, that’s plain enough. But plainly wrong. According to Scripture, sinners, before coming to faith, are ‘in Adam’,

²³ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p55.

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condemned under the wrath of God. They are anything but ‘safe’ and ‘blessed’. And this includes the elect.

An objection

How is it possible to reconcile the fact that, before faith, the elect are under the wrath of God, with the fact that God loves his elect with an everlasting love? If God loves his elect from before the foundation of the world, and in his love decreed to give his Son as a sacrifice for their redemption, how can it be said that they are under his wrath before they believe? After all, God loved his elect when he gave Christ to die for them (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9-11).²⁴ So... how can the elect be under the wrath of God before they believe, if God regenerates them because he loves them (Eph. 2:4-5; 1 John 3:1; 4:9)? And so on (Rom. 8:37; Eph. 1:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13-17; 1 John 3:16; 4:19; Rev. 1:5). How can we reconcile these two truths? That is, how can we come to terms with the fact that God everlastingly loves his elect – from eternity to eternity – and yet, before they come to faith, the elect are condemned under his wrath, condemned as much as any man? How can we square this circle?

We can’t.

Here, once again, we meet another of those ‘seeming contradictions’. And, as usual, we could adopt the ploy of denying or ignoring one of the strands – or, like Gill, invent the unbiblical nonsense of the elect being in Adam and in Christ at one and the same time. But this is not the way to go on.

What is the right way?

First, we must do what we can, in accordance with the whole of Scripture, to reconcile the two parts of the seeming contradiction. But even so, in this life, we will never be able to get logical consistency within a closed theological system. Calvin tried, but as I show in the Extracts, even he failed. Of course he did.

There it is. We are up against a seeming contradiction which we cannot resolve. But both parts are plainly revealed in Scripture.

²⁴ Indeed, God so loved the world that he gave his Son (John 3:16). This raises other questions which I have dealt with elsewhere. See my *Offer; Particular; Septimus*. But it not only raises questions. It speaks the most wonderful truth imaginable!

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How can both parts be true? How could God hate the elect and yet love them with an everlasting love? The answer is the same as always: we must hold both parts in tension. It does not make God a schizophrenic. It is simply that, in his grace and condescension, he has accommodated himself and his unfathomable truth to our poor, limited understanding. By stating the two truths, giving equal prominence to each, we get a rounded picture of God, and the reality of the case in question. Naturally, as a consequence, we are left with an unresolved paradox.

And that is the end of the matter. What I have said will not satisfy the hyper-Calvinist. That goes without saying. But I have one answer: ‘Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?’ (Rom. 9:20, NIV). I stand with Isaac Watts:

*How well thy blessed truths agree!
How wise and holy thy commands!
Thy promises, how firm they be!
How firm our hope and comfort stands!*

*Should all the forms that men devise
Assault my faith with treach’rous art,
I’d call them vanity and lies,
And bind the gospel to my heart.²⁵*

And again:

*Almighty God! to thee
Be endless honours done,
The undivided Three,
And the Eternal²⁶ One:
Where reason fails, with all her powers,
There faith prevails
And love adores.²⁷*

If I may be allowed to take some words of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on another matter and apply them to the case in hand:

²⁵ *Gospel Hymns* number 400.

²⁶ Some versions have ‘mysterious’; ‘inscrutable’ would have done nicely – but it wouldn’t scan.

²⁷ *Gospel Hymns* number 932.

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If you object to the idea, you are objecting to the Scriptures, you are setting up some philosophic idea of your own, contrary to their plain teaching. You are not arguing with me; you are arguing with the Scriptures. You are arguing with these... apostles; you are arguing with the Son of God himself. If you believe the Bible is divinely inspired, then you must not say: 'But I don't understand'. You are not asked to understand. I [myself] do not understand it; I do not pretend to understand it. But I start from this basis, that my mind is not only finite but is, furthermore, sinful, and that I cannot understand fully the nature of God and the justice and the holiness of God. If we are going to base everything on our understanding, then we might as well give up at this point... The business of preaching is not to ask people to understand; the commission of the preacher is to proclaim the message.²⁸

I agree. Not only do I not understand these paradoxes, but nor, as I often tell my hearers when preaching, and now tell you, reader, do I set myself up as the explainer of all mysteries, the resolver of all conundrums. I 'merely' try to preach and write what I see in Scripture. I do my best to copy the biblical pattern of preaching, leaving the reconciliation of all logical consequences to God.

Paul certainly had no qualms about stating both sides of this particular paradox – and doing so in the closest proximity:

And you he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (Eph. 2:1-3).

That's the first part of the paradox. The elect, before conversion, are under the wrath of God. Having stated it as bluntly as he did, the apostle goes straight on – without a gap, I stress – to the second part:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... (Eph. 2:4-6).

²⁸ Lloyd-Jones: *God's* pp53-54.

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God has loved his elect with an everlasting love, and because of that love, he calls them to Christ. That is the second part of the paradox.

And the apostle states both parts with equal force, making not the slightest effort to reconcile them, and so leave everything neatly sewn up. Not at all! Now, what is good enough for Paul – I intend no disrespect, nor am I trying to be clever – is good enough for me. There is nothing more I can say, and so I will say no more, but leave the objection there, and move on.

Taking up the thread again: Consider Romans 4:5 and 5:6

Let me remind you, reader, that I am arguing that, before faith, the elect are ungodly, and therefore as much under the wrath of God as any sinner. It is only as they come to saving faith that they are actually delivered from condemnation and justified.

Consider Paul's statements: Speaking of the elect, God 'justifies the ungodly' (Rom. 4:5), and 'Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom. 5:6). God justifies the elect in and through Christ's death when they are ungodly. The question is: are we talking about justification in God's decree and Christ's death, or are we talking about actual justification by faith? We must be careful to distinguish the two. Take Gill. He started right:

That God's elect are, by nature, ungodly, will not be denied; as such, Christ died for them (Rom. 5:6)... And it is as evident, that, as such, God justifies them (Rom. 4:5)... He justifies them being ungodly.

Sadly, Gill then drew a red herring across the path. He did this, of course, because he was preparing his readers for the punch line he had in mind. In itself, the initial point he made was right, and one with which I whole-heartedly agree; namely, that a believer cannot be called – and, in Scripture, is never called – ungodly. I agree. In fact, I would turn it back upon Gill. No believer *is* ungodly – he is no longer in Adam! But before he came to faith, he *was* ungodly, being in Adam! Nevertheless, let Gill's words stand. No believer is ever called ungodly. Just so.

But Gill's observation was a red herring, one which enabled him to make a foolish deduction: 'I conclude then, that if God

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justifies his elect when they are ungodly, then he justifies them before they believe'.²⁹ This, of course, was his punch line.

Let me tease out his argument. Believers are never called 'ungodly' in Scripture. God justified the ungodly (elect) when Christ died for them. The elect, therefore, were justified as ungodly; that is, before they were believers. Hence they were justified in eternity and at Christ's death. In other words, eternal justification. *Q.E.D.*

Not at all! In eternity, God decreed the justification of the elect through the work of Christ. But until they come to faith, the elect are still in Adam, still ungodly. It is as they come to faith and are united to Christ, that they are actually justified, and are no longer to be thought of as ungodly. That is precisely what Paul is speaking about in Romans 4:5. He is not talking about justification in terms of God's decree and Christ's work. He is talking about actual justification by faith! In the context, Paul is arguing that God justifies his elect without their works:

If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God... Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:2-6).

As the apostle goes on, justification is not by our works – not by circumcision (Rom. 4:9-12) or by law (Rom. 4:13-16). We are not justified by our works, but by faith: 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Rom. 5:1-2). This is the context, and it is invincible in getting to the correct meaning of the verse in question. Their works contribute nothing to the elect's justification. They have to believe in order to be justified, yes, but their faith is not the cause or ground of their justification. If it were, then faith would be a work, and the elect would be justified by their works. Paul, making the point that the elect are saved without their works, stresses it by observing that

²⁹ Gill: *Sermons* Vol.4 p200; Ella: *Gill and Justification* pp63,142.

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they are justified when ungodly – so how could they contribute to their justification?³⁰

Before they come to faith, the elect are ungodly in two senses, of course. They are ungodly in God's sight – in that they are in Adam; that is, they are ungodly in their status. In addition, they are ungodly in their actual behaviour. Upon coming to faith, however, they are united to Christ, justified, accounted godly in God's sight; that is, they are no longer in Adam but in Christ. In addition, they then begin to live (as a consequence of their conversion experience) a godly life. But the apostle's overriding point in Romans 4 is that God justifies – *actually* justifies – the ungodly, those who are under his wrath (John 3:36; Eph. 2:3), and he does so as they believe, without their works. Of course, when Christ died for the elect according to his Father's decree, they were ungodly (Rom. 5:6) in that they were in Adam – even though most of them had not yet been born! But in Romans 4 Paul is arguing that the elect are actually justified when they believe – that as they believe God imputes Christ's righteousness to them. And this without their works.

Gill conflated Romans 4:5 and 5:6, compounding two aspects of justification – actual and eternal – and thus denied the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. He was arguing that the elect are always justified. When they come to faith, they are no more justified than before – it is simply that they now realise they have always been justified. *That* is what Gill wanted to maintain. And he was wrong!

To sum up: While there is an aspect of justification which 'dates' from eternity through union with Christ, until the sinner comes to saving faith he is not as yet actually united to Christ, he is not as yet actually justified, but is under the wrath of God. He needs to be justified. He can only be justified by trusting Christ. This faith is not the cause of his justification, but it is its means. All this, the Scriptures plainly teach.

³⁰ See Lloyd-Jones: *Atonement* pp171-173. Hyper-Calvinists are not alone in getting Rom. 4:5 wrong. Sandemanians do.

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Why such fuss? Why am I making such a song and dance about it? Does it matter? Is the quarrel with the hyper-Calvinistic notion that an elect sinner is justified in eternity a storm in a theological teacup? Certainly not! The issues at stake are vital. Is it *that* important? It certainly is. Why? First and foremost, it is unscriptural. Enough said! Nevertheless, as is my wont, I will say more!

The doctrine of eternal justification matters because of the immense effect it has upon the way we regard unbelievers. More particularly, it matters a great deal because of the bearing it has upon our addresses to the unconverted – what we tell them, and how we tell them – and upon their response to such addresses. And, needless to say, before we come to preach to others, it matters to us in our own experience. What is saving faith? – a question, not only for the sinners we address, but for ourselves. Who or what are we believing when we come to saving faith? and why? and what for? The fact is, eternal justification has a ruinous effect on the concept of conversion. Let me explain.

Eternal justification and conversion

How we view justification will have a very serious effect on our view of conversion. If we move away from the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, one of the inevitable casualties will be the doctrine of conversion. In previous works, I traced this out among Reformed infant-baptisers, Baptist sacramentalists, Exclusive Brethren, and promoters of the New Perspective, as well as, it goes without saying, Romanists.³¹ Now I do the same for hyper-Calvinists with their doctrine of eternal justification.

Whenever the doctrine of justification is tampered with, certain things inevitably follow. The church (or Church) becomes more important than salvation; ‘belonging’ becomes more important than ‘believing’; and the biblical doctrine of conversion is degraded.

Conversion: putting it simply, according to Scripture, conversion involves a change in both status and condition. As for status, before conversion, the sinner was in Adam. He is now in Christ. And this change of status leads inevitably to a change of life (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24). The sinner is regenerated by the

³¹ See my *Infant, Baptist Sacramentalism; Conversion*.

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Holy Spirit, convicted of his sin, and in repentance turns from his sin, and turns to Christ, trusting him for salvation. This experience gives the sinner a new attitude, mind, will, heart, desire, and so on, producing a corresponding change of life. Obviously so. Regeneration is renewal, re-birth. It can be nothing less than a momentous change!

Let me make myself clear: I am not saying that the sinner must be able to specify the time and place of his conversion. No! But that he must have such an experience is irrefutable. What is more, in his course of life, he must give clear evidence of such a change. No one is born a believer. No one is born into the faith (John 1:13). Faith is not an evidence of belonging to the people of God;³² it is the way of becoming one of the people of God. And by that I do not mean ‘attend a place of worship’! I mean become a child of God! So, to become a child of God, one has to believe. And in order to be able to believe, one must be regenerated. To see the kingdom, to enter the kingdom, the sinner, every sinner without exception, must be born again (John 3:3-8).³³ This inward regenerating work of the Spirit is sovereign and secret, but its effects are open and clear (John 3:3-8). There comes a time when unbelief is changed to faith, when the broad road is forsaken and the narrow way taken. There is a burning of the boats. Conversion is a ‘crisis’, a crux, a turning point, a change, not a gradual process. Sinners do not drift into the kingdom. They do not coast out of the realm of darkness, and glide seamlessly into the kingdom of light. They do not ‘go with the flow’. Rather, they are radically, vigorously, abruptly ‘delivered’ from the kingdom of darkness and ‘translated’ (AV), ‘conveyed, transferred’ (NKJV, NASB) into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). It does not happen by a kind of spiritual osmosis.³⁴ The words the

³² As I have shown, Gill taught that ‘faith is the... evidence of our justification’ (Gill: *Sermons* Vol.4 p213). For hyper-Calvinistic use of Heb. 11:1, see later. Of course, only the elect will believe (John 8:47; 10:26-27), but faith is the means whereby a sinner comes to belong to the people of God; the believer’s subsequent works are the evidence of it. In this matter, the hyper-Calvinist and the advocate of the New Perspective draw close together – see my *Conversion*.

³³ Contrary to what many believe, this cannot be accomplished by water.

³⁴ A subtle or gradual absorption or mingling.

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apostle used – ‘deliver’, *rhuomai*, and ‘translate’, *methistēmi* – speak of power and change, alteration. Note the *met(a)*, which speaks of change. Other New Testament uses of *methistēmi* confirm the point. The steward was ‘put out’ of his job; Saul was ‘removed’ from the throne; Demetrius complained that Paul had ‘turned away’ many from idolatry; the mountains were ‘removed’ (Luke 16:4; Acts 13:22; 19:26; 1 Cor. 13:2).

Thus conversion is a ‘crisis’. Hoping yet again not to be misunderstood, I assert that conversion is ‘dramatic’. A man does not get the sack, a king does not lose his throne, idolaters do not destroy their idols, mountains do not collapse, and so on, in a genteel sort of unknowing haze. Nor does a sinner get converted in such a way. Moreover, once he has been converted, the sinner is never the same again (2 Cor. 5:17). When a man gets the sack, when a king is de-throned, when idolaters give up their idols, openly confessing their sins, burning their magic books in a public bonfire (Acts 19:18-20), to worship only the one true God, when mountains suddenly disappear, nobody is left in any doubt about it. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, while it undoubtedly has extraordinary elements about it, nevertheless affords us a clear illustration of the principles involved (Acts 9:1-22; 22:1-21; 26:1-29; Gal. 1:3-24; Phil. 3:2-21; 1 Tim. 1:12-17).³⁵

Again, hoping not to be misunderstood, conversion is a ‘before-and-after event’. Paul’s conversion was a hot topic of relieved and thankful talk among the churches (Gal. 1:23-24); and the Jews certainly didn’t miss it – they wanted to kill him (Acts 9:23)! While I am not demanding *that* kind of reaction, change and reaction there must be! In a very real sense, every convert ought to provoke a response similar to that of the Jewish bigwigs who were trying to put a stop to the gospel: ‘When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus’ (Acts 4:13, NIV). Unbelievers, when they witness the new life of a convert compared to his past (1 Pet. 4:1-4), or the way believers (including – perhaps especially – new converts) stand up to persecution for the sake of Christ (Acts 14:22; Phil. 1:27-30; 1

³⁵ For more, see, for instance, Berkhof pp480-492.

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Thess. 2:13-16; 3:1-5; 2 Thess. 1:3-12; Heb. 10:32-34), might well be moved to raise questions along the lines of 1 Peter 3:15.

Then again, Jesus' miracles illustrate the gospel, do they not? Well then, take just one – the healing of the man with the legion of devils (Mark 5:1-20). The change in him was evident to all, even before he spoke of it – which he did. He certainly had a 'before and after', and nobody was in any doubt about it.

Consider Ephesians 4:20 – 6:9 (NIV). Believers, all of whom were once 'dead in transgressions and sins', living ungodly lives (Eph. 2:1-3), have come to 'know Christ' through the gospel. In renewing them, the Spirit of God has changed them, brought them to faith, and 'taught' them to live in a godly way. So radical is this experience, a definite, clear, root-and-branch change in their lifestyle is inevitable. They are converted! They are indeed a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17, NIV). The apostle could not have made the significance of this 'crisis', this conversion, this consequential change, any clearer. Note the contrasts he draws in Ephesians 4 – 6: 'former way of life', 'old self', 'made new', 'new self', 'no longer', 'you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord'. And those are only the 'obvious' ways in which the apostle makes his point; the entire passage is packed with allusions to this change, this conversion. And it all stems from the sinner coming to know Christ through faith, and being justified. Before conversion, the sinner was dead in sins, and all that goes with that. By God's grace, he is now regenerated and has come to trust the Redeemer, and so is accounted and made righteous in God's sight. As a consequence, he now begins to live a holy life to the glory of God (Eph. 2:1-10). This is what I mean by 'conversion'.

There is no clearer example of what I am talking about than the apostle's description of the conversion of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:5-10):

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith towards God has gone out [everywhere, NIV],

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so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Where do hyper-Calvinists go astray in this matter? Let me make my point by stressing the ‘faith’ and the ‘change’. As I have shown, and will yet show more fully, hyper-Calvinists *radically* alter the nature of justifying faith. Inevitably, therefore, they correspondingly alter the nature of conversion. What is more, because they hold to eternal justification, for hyper-Calvinists, when the elect sinner is regenerated and comes to faith, they expect no ‘change’, there is no ‘change’. Gill was explicit! The sinner is no more ‘in Christ’, no more ‘justified’, than he was before he came to faith.³⁶ It is simply that he now knows that he is and always has been justified. He never was in Adam.³⁷ He has always been in Christ. There is no change of status, no change of realm or kingdom.

The Bible is against them! In both these elements – the faith and the change – hyper-Calvinists are wrong, and therefore, I maintain, their doctrine has ruined the biblical concept of ‘conversion’.³⁸ *And this has had a devastating effect on those gripped by it.*

In my experience of hyper-Calvinists, let me describe how it appears to me. Such people faithfully attend chapel, sit under the preaching, and so on, for years, if not decades, privately and publicly reading the Bible, believing the Bible, singing the hymns, praying, seeking to live according to the Bible... But if asked if they are saved, at best they can only say they hope so. Or as a deacon, many years ago, replied to me when I asked if his boss at the mill was a Christian: ‘That’s a big question’. They are waiting – waiting for the ‘manifestation’, the confirmation that they are elect, redeemed and justified. They may even die in such a waiting, hoping state. But... perhaps... one day the long-awaited assurance

³⁶ Gill: *Body* Vol.1 p299. I will look at this more closely.

³⁷ See above, where I dealt with the nuances of the hyper-Calvinistic view of being ‘in Adam’.

³⁸ The Gospel Standard Articles of Faith do not even mention conversion. See the Extracts for the nearest they get to it.

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comes, and they are given the manifestation. What now? They now continue faithfully to attend chapel, sit under the preaching, and so on, privately and publicly reading the Bible, believing the Bible, singing the hymns, praying, seeking to live according to the Bible... But if asked if they are saved, at best they can only say they hope so...

I believe I am being fair in what I have just written. Let me say at once, I myself think that many of these dear people do have a saving trust in Jesus, despite their creed, and are godly to a high degree. But *prima facie*, there has been no conversion, NOTHING HAS CHANGED – except perhaps, instead of hopefully waiting, they are waiting in hope – or *vice-versa*. In the wrong sense they can sing: ‘For nothing changes here’. And if they believe the doctrine they are taught, they are convinced that they are no more justified now that they have had the manifestation than they were before they had it. Nothing can change; nothing should change. As far as such people are concerned, the concept of ‘conversion’ might never be in the Bible. And this, it surely goes without saying, is exceedingly serious.

I readily admit that Gill, for instance, did set out the biblical doctrine of conversion. In the Extracts, I let him speak for himself. But – and there is a ‘but’ – as can be seen from what we have discovered throughout this chapter, for the hyper-Calvinist, coming to faith means coming to realise that I have always been justified and have always been in Christ. The biblical doctrine – that I need to be awakened to the fact that I am a sinner, that I am under the wrath of God, that only Christ can save me, and that in repentance I turn from my sin to him, and look to him, trusting him to wash me in his blood and clothe me in his righteousness to justify me, and thus present me faultless before his Father – is lost. To put it mildly, this is serious beyond words. This is the consequence of eternal justification.

In particular, if it is true that the elect unbeliever is in Christ and justified, then, anticipating the aforementioned Case Study, John Gadsby was right and Septimus Sears was wrong; the unbelieving sensible sinner is ‘safe’. But that has turned the New Testament on its head! According to Scripture, until sinners believe, they are not ‘safe’ – and it is quite wrong to tell them they are. I go further. I

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must put it in blunt terms. Telling the unbeliever that he is ‘safe’, is nothing less than diabolical. The opposite is the truth! All unbelievers are under the wrath of God. And they must be told they are, in unmistakable terms. True, the elect are justified in God’s decree from eternity, but the point at issue here is not *God’s decree*; rather, it is the *sinner’s experience*. Remember my subtitle: ‘Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism’. We are talking about addresses to sinners, to unbelievers – not to the elect before they come to faith!

With that in mind, let us now look a little more closely into what Scripture means by justifying or saving faith. What *is* going on when a sinner believes? What is he believing for? In what way does he believe? Just to parrot ‘believe... believe...’, and not to spell out what we mean by ‘believe’ is worse than useless. So let’s roll up our sleeves, get down to it.