

What About Today?: The Reformed

As I said at the close of the previous chapter, it is the Reformed, with their law-teaching, who most closely merit Paul's strictures on the *pseudadelphoi* today. To state the merest truism, the Reformed are heavy on law; very heavy. Indeed, they glory in their stance on the law, turning the law – particularly the sabbath – into a shibboleth by which to judge orthodoxy, instinctively writing-off any who dare question them on it. Once again, I speak of what I know: I was solidly Reformed for forty-five years – until I preached through Hebrews and Galatians.¹

But, yet again we immediately run into other problems. The Reformed are a hybrid. Beyond question, the Reformed, careful never to stray far from Calvin on the law² – he being their virtual pope – are categorical law-men.³ But, strictly speaking, they are not fully-fledged, signed-up *pseudadelphoi*: they are adamant that there is no justification by the law, and constantly, continually and vehemently state as much. That seems to let them off the hook. 'No salvation by the law' means, to them, no justification by the law.

So how can I possibly mention the Reformed and *pseudadelphoi* in the same breath?

We need to pause and probe a bit. It is not unknown for some Reformed men, when they are preaching on the believer's reward, can, especially because of their obsession with the

¹ See my 'New-Covenant Theology Made Simple: "My Testimony"' on YouTube.

² Except over the sabbath. Calvin regarded the sabbath as ceremonial. This, of course, blows the notion of the tripartite division of the law to smithereens.

³ As I argued in my *Christ*, the Westminster Confession is exceedingly heavy on law. See also my 'The Law and The Confessions'.

law, stray very close to salvation by works. Funeral orations – even in Reformed circles – often give that impression also.

There again, some Calvinistic preachers insist on the necessity of preparation for Christ and the gospel, this preparation brought about only by weighty and long-term preaching of the law;⁴ that is, they will not even offer Christ to sinners, or command, invite, exhort or encourage sinners to repent and trust Christ, until those sinners have had what the preparationists call ‘a sufficient law work’. In this way they complicate matters on justification itself. Even the mildest – let alone the severest – preparationism does lasting damage to unbelievers in their coming to Christ, and to believers long after.⁵ So, on that score, many of the Reformed are still in the frame.

And on progressive sanctification, the Reformed are unequivocal: the law – or what they call ‘the moral law’ – is absolutely mandatory for the believer. Without that ‘moral law’, there can be no progressive sanctification.⁶ ‘Not under the law’ (Rom. 6:14-15) means to them ‘not under the ceremonial or judicial law’, leaving believers securely under the so-called ‘moral law’.⁷ This teaching puts the Reformed

⁴ Often based on an appalling mistranslation of Gal. 3:23-25. See my *Three*. Robert Flockhart’s: ‘It is of no use trying to sew with the silken thread of the gospel unless we pierce a way for it with the sharp needle of the law’ is a favoured mantra. C.H.Spurgeon was self-contradictory about preparationism. Compare ‘Conversion As Our Aim’, C.H.Spurgeon: *Lectures To My Students*, Vol.3, with ‘The Warrant of Faith’ (sermon 531).

⁵ See my ‘Preparationism in New England’; ‘Was Isaiah a Preparationist?’. See also my *Christ* pp51-61,348-358; *The Gospel Offer*; *Septimus*; *No Safety*; *Eternal*; *Four*.

⁶ I have written many books and articles to show this and refute it.

⁷ Although, in this present volume, I have not developed my arguments against the Reformed ‘threefold division of the law’, I have done so elsewhere on numerous occasions. See my *Christ*; ‘Flogging a Dead Horse’; ‘An Appeal to the Reformed’; and many others. This threefold, man-made (Aquinas’ fingerprints are all over it), imposition on Scripture has a great deal to answer for.

right on the spot, in the full glare of the searchlight. And that is why I have spent so much time in my book stressing that justification and progressive sanctification cannot be separated. The New Testament – the new covenant – never does. The Reformed, *in theory*, never do.

Take Walter Marshall:

Holiness of heart and life is to be sought for earnestly by faith, as a very necessary part of our salvation... None do or can trust on Christ for true salvation, except they trust on him for holiness; neither do they heartily desire true salvation, if they do not desire to be made holy and righteous in their hearts and lives. If ever God and Christ give you salvation, holiness will be one part of it; if Christ does not wash you from the filth of your sins, ‘you have no part with him’ (John 13:8).⁸

Just so.

But in practice things are very different! On justification, the puritans speak out vehemently against law. But when it comes to progressive sanctification, just watch the Reformed; they instinctively reach for the law, and go into overdrive with it.⁹

For ‘the law’ read ‘the old covenant’. Yes indeed! Let’s not be mealy-mouthed about it. The same goes for ‘the moral law’. Just as Paul was adamant that though the *pseudadelphoi* might insist on circumcision, that really meant they wanted to impose the Mosaic law in its entirety (which inevitably spelled a return to old-covenant principles), so the Reformed have to face up to the fact that with their insistence on what

⁸ Walter Marshall: *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*.

⁹ In Marshall’s book on progressive sanctification, I counted 352 references to ‘law’. I repeat something from ‘Paul Destroys their Error’. I referred to Ligonier (on Gal. 3) and their web page. I said: ‘Ligonier seems to have shot itself in the foot. Is it not fair to say: “But to view one’s [progressive sanctification in the Reformed system]... is to look to a law that will bring with it the curse?” Progressive sanctification by a system which brings the curse?’

they like to call ‘the moral law’,¹⁰ they are in fact committing the error of bringing the old covenant into the new. Even accepting their tripartite division of the law – which I do not for a moment accept as scriptural – their demand, in Calvin’s words, for progressive sanctification by ‘the whip’ of ‘the moral law’, keeps them securely in the dock. And the pastoral consequences of that are very serious: slavery, a legalistic outlook, agonising lack of assurance, and the like, are the obvious direct effects of such teaching.¹¹ Those who preach the doctrine of the new covenant are labelled and dismissed as ‘antinomians’, which, as far as the Reformed are concerned, puts them way beyond the pale.

Slavery? Surely not! Is it not a case of argument weak, turn up the volume? Wait a minute!

Reformed slavery

Unless we are rabid sabbath-keepers, we have, perhaps, been highly amused by Compton Mackenzie’s satirical exposure of the dilemmas facing those who are in bondage to sabbath-observance as promulgated by Reformed teachers,¹² but it was no laughing matter for the man (known to Lloyd-Jones) who went to bed on a Saturday night with his boots on in order to avoid breaking the so-called sabbath by having to tie the laces on Sunday morning. Nor has this thinking died out.¹³

¹⁰ The Reformed like to hive off the ten commandments as ‘the moral law’, claiming that this moral law is the great essential – the believer’s perfect rule – in progressive sanctification. 2 Cor. 3 securely knocks that idea on the head!

¹¹ See my *Christ; Assurance in the New Covenant*.

¹² Compton Mackenzie: *Whisky Galore!* Ironically, the 1949 film was shot on Barra – a Roman Catholic island. The locals, I understand, were mystified.

¹³ If you try logging into the website of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland on a Sunday, you will meet this: ‘We are Closed for the Sabbath... This website is closed today in observance of the Lord’s Day. Please do visit again on any other day of the week’. The ministers can preach, the congregations can sit in the pews and hear,

Again, do not forget the life-long depression suffered by many of those labouring under the Reformed teaching on ‘the wretched man of Romans 7’ – who sit under teachers who are adamant that the highest accolade must be afforded to him who best declares – and most deeply feels – that he is ‘the wretched man’. That’s slavery, if anything is. It’s torment! And it comes from the teaching of modern law-men.¹⁴

But not only modern teachers. Some believers have long been accustomed to the doctrine, and they like it so well that they are prepared to sing about it! Yes, sing about it! Can you credit it? Well, they do... no doubt obeying Paul’s injunction:

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18-20; see Col. 3:16)...

but nobody is allowed to benefit by the internet, even an unconverted sinner who might be on the verge of dying: ‘While most of the material on this site is suitable for reading on the Sabbath, we are cautious about using the internet on the Lord’s Day. There are aspects to using the internet that are not conducive to keeping the Sabbath. There is a lot more to faithful Sabbath-keeping than is usually acknowledged’. All this, by the way, is visible and downloadable on a Sunday (I am doing it now). ‘The Synod which met at Glasgow on Tuesday, 22nd May 2012, advises the people of the Church not to use the internet on the Sabbath, except for the purposes of necessity and mercy’. Hmm! Countless questions suggest themselves, but I leave it there. I also leave the capitals as on the website.

¹⁴ Modern law-men give the impression that they cannot find words to praise this enigmatic figure too highly. See, for example, Cornelis Pronk: ‘The Christian Life – Do Christians Feel “Wretched”?’: Who is the Wretched Man of Romans 7?’, *Banner of Truth*, Aug. 2012; Sinclair B.Ferguson: ‘The Wretched Man of Romans 7’ on sermonaudio.com website. Ferguson was ‘law, law, law’, the believer’s sense of ‘pollution by the law’, ‘the need to be crushed almost to defeat’, ‘battle in life until final glory’, ‘law making us wretched, exposing sin’ in ‘the very best of Christians’. Phew! For my view on the passage, see my *Christ*.

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...using such words as these...

Joseph Hart:

*How sore a plague is sin,
To those by whom 'tis felt.
The Christian cries: 'Unclean, unclean!'
E'en though released from guilt.*

*O wretched, wretched man!
What horrid scenes I view!
I find, alas! do all I can,
That I can nothing do.*

*When good I would perform,
Through fear or shame I stop,
Corruption rises like a storm,
And blasts the promised crop.*

*Of peace if I'm in quest,¹⁵
Or love my thoughts engage,
Envy and anger in my breast
That moment rise and rage.*

*When for a humble mind
To God I pour my prayer,
I look into my heart, and find
That pride will still be there.*

*How long, dear Lord, how long
Deliverance must I seek;
And fight with foes so very strong,
Myself so very weak?*

*I'll bear the unequal strife,
And wage the war within;
Since death, that puts an end to life,
Shall put an end to sin.¹⁶*

¹⁵ The believer on a quest for inward peace? 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have [or let us enjoy – DG] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5:1). It is unbelievers who do not know peace (Rom. 3:17). The spiritual man has peace (Rom. 8:6; Phil. 4:7; 1 Pet. 1:2), and should be filled with it (Rom. 15:13). Peace is an integral part of the kingdom (Rom. 14:17), part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

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Clearly, Hart saw the believer, though free of guilt, nevertheless living a life of grief, looking for peace, but fighting against overwhelming odds, his only hope of release being by his death.

Henry Fowler:

*Lord, what a wretched, wretched heart,
I feel from day to day;
Vile and unsound in every part;
Subdue it, Lord, I pray.*

*I groan, and pray, and cry, and strive,
To have it all removed;
Can it be thus in those who live?
In those whom God has loved?*

*Can such besetting evils dwell
In sinners born of God?
Could black corruptions rise and swell
Where Christ applies his blood?*

*To thee, dear Lord, for light I cry,
On this my darksome path;
O let thy mercy me supply;
O Lord, increase my faith.¹⁷*

What a grim picture!

John Kent:

*Sold under sin, was Paul's complaint,¹⁸
He felt its galling load,
Though he, by calling, was a saint,
And rightly taught of God.*

*Like him, we daily feel the same,
And long to be dissolved;¹⁹
Oppressed by sins of every name,
How oft are we involved!*

¹⁶ Gadsby's Hymns 314.

¹⁷ Gadsby's Hymns 1030.

¹⁸ Kent saw Paul as 'the wretched man', speaking about himself.

¹⁹ That is, die.

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*But he that feels pollution most,
Defiled throughout by sin,
Will never of his goodness boast,
But mourn the plague within.*

*Distressed at heart, he'll tell his God
He feels it every day;
And to the fount of Jesus' blood
For pardon haste away.*

*Sinless perfection we deny,²⁰
The chief of Satan's wiles;
Do thou, my soul, to Calvary fly,
As oft as sin defiles.²¹*

Did these hymn-writers not know that the New Testament never even addresses believers as sinners? Does Scripture ever give the impression than the first believers sang about their sin, wretchedness and defeat? I am not saying believers are sinless, but the fact remains that no saint is called a sinner in the new covenant. The one exception is when Paul, speaking of himself, said: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost' (1 Tim. 1:15), but was he thinking of his unregenerate days? The context seems to support it. The truth is, the unbeliever is a sinner, but the believer is a saint. And the Bible knows only of sinners and saints.²²

Such 'wretched man' teachers pay little or no attention to the big picture (or forget it when they get into Romans 7:14-25): do the post-Pentecost Scriptures portray Christians as miserable or joyful? How many passages in the New Testament 'encourage' believers to 'enjoy' a life of inward struggle, a life of defeat and wretchedness by striving for

²⁰ Of course, But that is not the alternative – liberty in Christ is.

²¹ *Gadsby's Hymns* 1089.

²² The Bible always polarises the human race: in the days of the old covenant, Israel and the rest; now, near or far off, broad or narrow way, darkness or light, in Adam or in Christ; natural men or spiritual, goats or sheep, and so on.

progressive sanctification and assurance under ‘the moral law’?

No doubt the advocates of ‘the wretched man’ draw much inspiration from the puritans. Take Walter Marshall:

Even those that are in a new state in Christ, and do serve the law of God with their mind, do yet with their flesh serve the law of sin (Rom. 7:25). As far as it remains in them, it lusts against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17); and it remains dead, because of the sin, even when the Spirit is life to them, because of righteousness (Rom. 8:10)...

Beware of thinking so highly of... assurance as if it were inconsistent with any doubting in the same soul. A great reason why many Protestants have receded from the doctrine of their ancestors in this point is because they think there can be no true assurance of salvation in any that are troubled with doubtings, as they find many be, whom they cannot but own as true believers and precious saints of God. True, indeed, this assurance must be contrary to doubtings in the nature of it and so, if it be perfect, in the highest degree, it would exclude all doubting out of the soul; and it now excludes it in some degree. But is there not flesh, as well as spirit, in the best saints on earth (Gal. 5:17)? Is there not a law in their members warring against the law of their minds (Rom. 7:23)?

And John Knox (if he can be properly described as a puritan, being Scottish, and not struggling for reform within the Anglican Church):

For as soon as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whom God’s chosen children receive by true faith, takes possession of the heart of any man, so soon does he regenerate and renew him,²³ so that he begins to hate what before he loved, and to love what he hated before.

Apart from my note, true! But then Knox let rip:

²³ This is very odd. A sinner truly, savingly believes, then receives the Spirit, and then he is regenerated and renewed? How could a Reformed man talk like that? I cannot think that Gal. 3:2 should be interpreted thus.

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Thence comes that continual battle which is between the flesh and Spirit in God's children... Other men do not share this conflict since they do not have God's Spirit, but they readily follow and obey sin and feel no regrets, since they act as the devil and their corrupt nature urge.²⁴

Again:

I know how hard the battle is betwixt the Spirit and the flesh, under the heavy cross of affliction, where no worldly defence, but present death does appear. I know the grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh; I know the anger, wrath, and indignation which it conceives against God, calling all his promises in doubt, and being ready every hour utterly to fall from God.²⁵

Of course, the spiritual man is engaged in constant warfare against evil in the world. Of course he is. Nothing I say indicates otherwise. Believers have been transformed, translated out of Satan's dominion:

The Father... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:12-13).

And Satan doesn't like it. Not one bit! And he's not going to roll over, paws in the air. Far from it! From the moment he's in Christ, the devil and his minions are after the believer. The believer has no choice in the matter. From the word go, until his last breath, he is plunged right into the front line against Satan. In Adam or in Christ is the question; against Christ or for him. Christ himself polarised the issue: 'Whoever is not with me is against me' (Matt. 12:30). That's Satan's view too.

²⁴ John Knox: *The Scottish Confession*, apuritansmind.com website. 'Corrupt nature' conveys quite the wrong impression. A man – unregenerate or regenerate – has one nature: human. God has one nature. Angels have one nature. Animals have one nature. Christ alone has two natures in one person: God and man. The regenerate man is not a schizophrenic.

²⁵ John Knox: *A Confession and prayers...*, truecovenant.com website.

And he's going to prove it. And as soon as a sinner is converted, Satan will be out to put his mettle to the test!

And thus the believer is immediately and inevitably plunged into spiritual warfare. And he has to fight. As Paul told the Ephesians, they had to:

... be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood [that is, physically with carnal weapons], but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:10-12).

But many evangelicals – not least the Reformed – move that conflict to an inward battle within each individual believer. Among other mistakes, this repeats the common error of turning the biblical emphasis on the corporate into the individual. What I am saying is, as Nehemiah nerved the Jews to work and fight, each in their own station, when in fact the battle was really Judah as a whole against God's enemies as a whole, not a personal, inward battle for each Jew on his own, so it is similar in the day of the new covenant. Although every individual believer is in the conflict, and it means that every individual believer has to take his or her place in the line of battle, the battle is between believers – as a whole – against Satan and all his host.

But it is the Reformed misunderstanding of Galatians 5:17 (admittedly not an easy text) which supports the way they turn the battle into an inward battle for each believer. Not content with that, they actually – can you believe it? – make it a losing battle. Some go even further. Combining Galatians 5:17 and 'the wretched man' of Romans 7:14-25, they actually make the believer's sense of defeat in his or her endless inward

struggle the supremest mark of spirituality, and I suppose, proof that he might be actually winning the battle!²⁶

But do not overlook my use of ‘misunderstanding’.

So large a part does Galatians 5:17 play in this discussion, it is necessary that we look more deeply into the verse, *and its context*.

Excursus on Galatians 5:17

Let’s remind ourselves of the verse:

The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Gal. 5:17).

I have admitted that this verse is not easy to unravel, but...

Calvinists, I realise, might rule Luther out of the Reformed court, but since his confusion over the passage probably exercises an influence far-wider than Lutherans, it is worth considering his teaching. He commented:

When Paul declares that ‘the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh’, he means to say that we are not to think, speak or do the things to which the flesh incites us.

I pause. Is that really what the text says? I fail to see it. I agree with Luther’s sentiment but not his exegesis.

²⁶ Rather like so many Gospel Standard Strict and Particular Baptist (hyper-Calvinists) who seem to draw their sense of assurance (such as it is) from the fact that they can vehemently say they have no assurance, and dismiss those who claim to be assured as presumptuous. Things have gone full circle, with these evangelicals actually at one with Romanists on the matter. ‘If anyone says that a man who is born again and justified is bound of faith to believe that he is certainly in the number of the predestined; let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Canon 15).

Luther, assuming the conflict in question is inward, that the believer is, in Paul's terms, both flesh and spirit, went on:

'I know', he says, 'that the flesh courts sin. The thing for you to do is to resist the flesh by the Spirit. But if you abandon the leadership of the Spirit for that of the flesh, you are going to fulfil the lust of the flesh and die in your sins'... These two leaders, the flesh and the Spirit, are bitter opponents. Of this opposition the apostle writes in the seventh chapter of... Romans: 'I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into the captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' The scholastics are at a loss to understand this confession of Paul and feel obliged to save his honour. That the chosen vessel of Christ should have had the law of sin in his members seems to them incredible and absurd.

I pause again. Scholastics or no scholastics, it *is* utterly incredible, demeaning to the Spirit – not merely absurd – to think that any regenerate man can be dominated by the law of sin! John, for one, would certainly have no truck with it. However the fine details are interpreted, his overall doctrine is black and white. No man is this hybrid, a mixture of flesh and spirit. He is either one or the other:

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that [Christ] appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God (1 John 3:4-10).

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That's the point. Flesh is flesh; spirit is spirit. The unregenerate man is flesh; the regenerate man is spiritual. He is not both! He is not in Adam and in Christ! Ben Witherington quoted F.J.Matera:

Flesh and Spirit represent two different ways of living. The Galatians must choose one or the other; they cannot choose both.²⁷

And, as we have seen if any believer chooses to live according to the flesh – act carnally – he merits and receives Paul's rebuke (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

But no regenerate man is dominated by – led captive by, is a slave to – the law of sin. Christ was explicit:

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him: 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'. They answered him: 'We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say: 'You will become free'? Jesus answered them: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father' (John 8:31-38).

That's the point. A man is a slave to sin or he is not. He is not both a slave and free at one and the same time. A believer sins – who denies it? I don't. But a believer is not captive to sin, certainly not captive to the law of sin. He is not 'the wretched man of Romans 7'.

Luther went on with 'the scholastics':

They circumvent the plain-spoken statement of the apostle by saying that he was speaking for the wicked. But the wicked never complain of inner conflicts, or of the captivity of sin.

²⁷ Ben Witherington III: *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on... Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, T.&T.Clark, Edinburgh, 1998, p395.

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Sin has its unrestricted way with them. This is Paul's very own complaint and the identical complaint of all believers.

Just so. In Romans 7, the apostle was clearly not speaking of an unregenerate man. Nor was he speaking of a regenerate man. As I have explained elsewhere,²⁸ I don't think he was speaking of an actual man at all.

Luther would have disagreed; indeed, to Luther there was one prime candidate:

Paul never denied that he felt the lust of the flesh. It is likely that at times he felt even the stirrings of carnal lust, but there is no doubt that he quickly suppressed them. And if at any time he felt angry or impatient, he resisted these feelings by the Spirit. We are not going to stand by idly and see such a comforting statement as this explained away... Christ alone can supply us with perfect righteousness. Therefore we must always believe and always hope in Christ. 'Whosoever believes shall not be ashamed' (Rom. 9:33).

Luther found this very... very what? Depressing? Far from it! For Luther, this was all very stimulating. So much so, he wanted to encourage all his readers in this endless conflict, even though, of course, as Romans 7:14-25 teaches, the opposition is too strong and defeat is inevitable:

Do not despair if you feel the flesh battling against the Spirit or if you cannot make it behave. For you to follow the guidance of the Spirit in all things without interference on the part of the flesh is impossible. You are doing all you can if you resist the flesh and do not fulfil its demands... No man is to despair of salvation just because he is aware of the lust of the flesh. Let him be aware of it so long as he does not yield to it. The passion of lust, wrath, and other vices may shake him, but they are not to get him down. Sin may assail him, but he is not to welcome it. Yes, the better Christian a man is, the more he will experience the heat of the conflict.

²⁸ See my *Christ* pp171-172. See also Romans 7 items on my sermonaudio.com page.

Think of that! ‘The better Christian a man is, the more he will experience the heat of the conflict’, and that, of course, means – in terms of ‘the wretched man of Romans 7’ teaching – ‘the better Christian a man is, the more he will have the sense of utter defeat in the conflict’. ‘The better Christian a man is, the more he will know himself to be a slave to sin’. Phew! Which version of the Bible is this? Book me an aisle-seat on this flight! Really? This is a recipe for spiritual neurosis!

Nothing daunted, Luther had advice for any neurotics who were still listening to him:

Everybody is to determine his peculiar weakness and guard against it. Watch and wrestle in spirit against your weakness. Even if you cannot completely overcome it, at least you ought to fight against it. According to this description a saint is not one who is made of wood and never feels any lusts or desires of the flesh. A true saint confesses his righteousness and prays that his sins may be forgiven.

So much for Luther. Whether or not he has got Galatians 5:17 right, I leave you, reader, to decide. I know what I think of his effort. If I may offer a word of warning: if you buy into Luther’s teaching, you’d better prepare yourself for years of anxiety.

Moo, in his *Commentary*, in thoroughly examining the text of Galatians 5:17 spoke of ‘three general directions of interpretation’:

1. The willing could be willing to do what the Spirit wants... the Spirit and the flesh are so opposed to each other that you are not able to do the good that you wish to do²⁹... ‘The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry

²⁹ A view held by Augustine, William Plumer, John Calvin, Herman N.Ridderbos and Leon Morris, *et al.*

out your good intentions'.³⁰ Advocates of this view sometimes [better, often – DG] appeal to Romans 7:14–25 as a parallel passage in which Paul bemoans his failure, as a Christian, to do the good that, at one level, he really wants to do. The interpretation of this passage in Romans, however, is too uncertain to render this parallel very helpful; moreover, even if Romans 7[:14-25] is referring to Christian experience (which we doubt...) [it does not – DG], the absence of any reference to the Spirit renders it a very imperfect parallel to Galatians 5:17 [weak – this is the crux of the radical difference between Romans 7 and Galatians 5 – DG]. There are two other main problems with this view...

Now for the second view:

2. The willing could be a willing to follow the flesh. On this view... the Spirit opposes the intention of the flesh with the purpose that you not do the fleshly things that you are still tempted to do...

Now for the third view:

3. The willing could be an autonomous willing (both good and evil)... the flesh and the Spirit are fighting each other, and their power and influence determine the direction of one's life; as a result, you cannot do what you yourselves want (but only what the flesh or the Spirit wants). This is probably the most popular interpretation among modern scholars... Believers lose any autonomy because of the influences of these opposing forces, preventing them from doing 'whatever' they might want. Only by allowing the Spirit to take control, then, can the believer experience victory in this battle...

Moo came to his decision:

None of these views can claim to explain all the difficulties in this verse. On the whole, and reluctantly, we think the third has perhaps the fewest problems. Paul insists that the

³⁰ Quoting New Living Translation. 'Sinful nature' conveys quite the wrong impression. A man – unregenerate or regenerate – has one nature: human. God has one nature. Angels have one nature. Animals have one nature. Christ alone has two natures in one person: God and man. The regenerate man is not a schizophrenic.

new position of believers, ‘in Christ’ and controlled by the Spirit, has put them into an entirely new relationship to flesh and to sin, a relationship that will be manifested in and vindicated by the fruit of the Spirit in that person’s life (Gal. 5:24; Rom. 6:1–11; 8:9–11). But his purpose in this verse is to remind believers of the warfare between the powers that is ultimately determinative of this relationship. Christians should not think they have the choice to do ‘whatever they want’; whether conscious of it or not, their actions at every point are governed by either the flesh or the Spirit... In contrast to what could be understood as an equal battle between the flesh and the Spirit (Gal. 5:17), Paul now stresses that the Spirit is the victor for the Christian... Here, then, is another implicit appeal to the Galatians to reject the message of the agitators [that is, the *pseudadelphoi*]: ‘You are under the powerful influence and direction of God’s Spirit, so why try to put yourself under the law?’ At the same time, however, Paul is pursuing a theme that surfaces repeatedly in this part of the letter: the utter effectiveness of the Spirit to provide the power and ethical guidance that the agitators [that is, the *pseudadelphoi*] are claiming only the law can supply...

It seems to me that while Moo got closer than Luther, even he failed to appreciate the power of the context of Galatians 5:13-26. The big picture must always dominate the individual verse.

Schreiner was better:

Perhaps the best explanation understands ‘so that’ (*hina*) here to denote purpose. Paul gives the reason why the flesh and Spirit resist one another, *i.e.*, so that the desires of the flesh will not become a reality and so that the desires of the Spirit will not be realised. With the coming of the Spirit, a new eschatological reality has dawned. A conflict between the flesh and the Spirit has ensued, explaining why it is so vital for believers to walk in and to be led by the Spirit.

Therefore, walking in the Spirit is not the same thing as coasting along in a fair breeze, for the flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit wars against the flesh. Still, Paul is fundamentally optimistic here, claiming that as one walks by the Spirit and is led by the Spirit, there is substantial, significant, and observable victory over the flesh.

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We must not think, however, that Paul's view of the Christian life is fundamentally pessimistic. The gift of the new age, the Holy Spirit, now belongs to believers. Believers who live by the Spirit will not carry out the flesh's desires. Those who yield to the Spirit will not live under the dominion of law and sin. A new quality of life (Gal. 5:22–23) is the result of the Spirit's work. The old age no longer reigns over believers. The old Adam has been crucified with its passions and desires, so that the flesh no longer enslaves believers.

In other words, believers enjoy a substantial, significant, and observable victory in their new life in Christ. Since believers live in the interval between the already and not yet, perfection is not their portion. Yet believers now have the firstfruits of the Spirit and are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and hence Paul is fundamentally optimistic about the new life that is possible for saints.³¹

I think this is better, but still misses the point. The believer – the spiritual man – is in a constant battle with the world, the flesh all around him, but the Spirit, who is in the believer, is greater by far than the world and all who are against the spiritual man:

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him (1 John 3:19-22).

As I keep repeating, I am not saying the believer is sinless; that would be manifestly absurd. And, as I have said over and over again, the believer has a responsibility to put to death any tendency to return to the old Adamic way to live as an unregenerate man. But in Galatians 5:17 Paul was dealing with something else. It is the big picture once again.

³¹ Thomas Schreiner: 'What Can We Learn About Walking in the Spirit from Galatians 5?', zondervanacademic.com website.

Let me explain. In my experience, the Reformed often get Paul wrong, turning his doctrine on its head: when he speaks of the personal, they make it general; when he speaks of the general, they make it personal.³² When Scripture speaks of the change of covenants, the discontinuity between them, the Reformed want to make it inward, individual, personal instead of the change of epoch. Of course the covenantal-discontinuity does have enormous consequences for the individual, but Scripture is often more interested in the epoch-changing aspects of it all. So it is here. The conflict Paul is speaking of is the overall warfare between the elect and the

³² This is a topic of massive importance. As the merest sample, I quote from my *Christ*: ‘The tragedy of misunderstanding and misapplying Gal. 3:10-25 is far wider than this question of preparationism, however – though that is serious enough, in all conscience. The Galatian passage is vital for understanding the place and purpose of the law in salvation history. Failure to see *this* point is tragic beyond words. *We must not miss the big picture!* Paul was speaking about the two great epochs – law and grace, law and gospel, before Christ and after Christ. The apostle in this passage most definitely was not concerned with an individual’s experience of conviction of sin and subsequent conversion. No! While the individual’s experience is, of course, of the utmost importance (to the individual, as it was to Paul – see Gal. 5), the apostle here was speaking of something on a much vaster scale; namely, the historical aspect of the law in the history of salvation...’. A bit later I wrote this: ‘Reader, you will recall that some misread Paul in Gal. 3. They think that there he was speaking of the personal experience of believers. But he was not. He was speaking of two historical ages – ‘under the law’ and ‘under grace’; the time before Christ, and the time after Christ; the age of the law, and the age of grace. Here, however, he *is* speaking of the personal experience of believers, and *not* the two ages. Not surprisingly, some who go wrong at Gal. 3, also go wrong here. They think Paul was speaking individually in Gal. 3, and of the two ages in Gal. 5, when in fact he was doing the very opposite. There are indeed two great epochs – law and grace. *But this is not the point of Gal. 5.* It is Gal. 3 which deals with the epochs of law and grace in the history of the ages. Gal. 5:13-18 deals with the epochs of law and grace in the life of the individual believer’ (my *Christ* pp136,149).

fallen world. To major on the personal, along with making a false link with Romans 7:14-25, is not just a doctrinal mistake; it spells serious trouble: it leads them to think in terms of slavery for them as believers, ensuring a sense of defeat is their lot until death or until Christ comes again. Let me spell it out: according to this teaching, the individual believer is in a life-long inward struggle, without the Spirit, the flesh raging within him and defeating him. That is the ‘wretched man’ teaching! And this is the best mark of spirituality! Slavery I have called it, and slavery it is. And that is something which is utterly foreign to Scripture.

If any doubt remains – if any think my use of ‘slavery’ is OTT – then look at the number of times Paul used the word or its equivalent, as quoted throughout this book,³³ besides other passages I have not quoted.

And not only Paul. Take this from Peter:

They [that is, the false teachers] promise them [that is, those who buy into their teaching] freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved (2 Pet. 2:19).

Reformed slavery continued – lack of assurance

Perhaps one of the starkest and most common indications of Reformed slavery can be seen in their almost universal lack of assurance. Little wonder! If people who are reared on a diet of ‘the wretched man of Romans 7’ happen to remember this passage:

If [since] you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love,

³³ I remind you of them: see, for instance, Rom.6:6-21; 8:15; 2 Cor. 11:20; Gal. 2:4-5; 3:26-29; 4:1-31; 5:1.

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joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:18-24)...

...what else can result but a harrowing sense of confusion and doubt? ‘Here am I, like a good Reformed believer, doing my best – sweltering – under my teacher’s doctrine of “the wretched man of Romans 7”, when in Galatians 5 Paul tells me that if I am that “wretched man” I will not inherit the kingdom. What hope have I got of getting assurance? Indeed, am I saved? Will I be saved?’ If this is not a recipe designed to produce misery and neurosis, I don’t know what is.

All this stems from linking Romans 7:14-25 and Galatians 5:17.

But that is not the finish of it!

As I have fully documented,³⁴ most of the Reformed teachers and their followers are all at sea over assurance. They severely underplay the role of the witness of the Spirit,³⁵ replacing it with evidence of personal assurance by progressive sanctification. This, of course, is a sure-fire way of producing anxiety. How can anybody be confident that his progressive sanctification has reached such a standard as to put the matter beyond all doubt? Indeed, the system is custom-designed and custom-built to produce anxiety. As I have said, in the new covenant the main source of assurance for the believer is the witness of the Spirit, with progressive sanctification in his life the evidence to others. Many past and contemporary Reformed law-men turn this on its head, with highly-depressive consequences. Before I give three illustrations from my work on assurance, here is something I have just come across in the work of Walter Marshall, perhaps the doyen of Puritan writers on progressive sanctification:

³⁴ See my *Assurance*.

³⁵ Perversely, they can elevate it to playing a role in only the elect among the elect

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When once men have lost the knowledge of the right way to assure themselves of salvation, they will catch at any straw, to avoid drowning in the gulf of despair...

Many believers walk heavily in the bitterness of their souls, conflicting with fears and doubtings all their days. And this is the cause that they have so little courage and fervency of spirit in the ways of God, and that they so much mind earthly things, and are so afraid of sufferings and death; and if they get some assurance by the reflex act of faith, they often soon lose it again by sins and temptations. The way to avoid these evils is to get your assurance, and to maintain it, and renew it upon all occasions by the direct act of faith, by trusting assuredly 'on the name of the Lord, and staying yourself on your God, when you walk in darkness, and see no light' in any of your own qualifications (Isa. 50:10).³⁶.

Yes, indeed, but what a sad puritanical admission. And why no mention, here, of the witness of the Spirit?

And now the three illustrations from my earlier work on assurance. *First*, commenting on Joel R.Beeke's 412 pages on the quest for – what a telling phrase! – assurance,³⁷ published by The Banner of Truth Trust, I asked:

Why... is there nothing in the sacred pages that comes anywhere near Beeke's title: *The Quest for Full Assurance*? Why does the New Testament not tell us of believers who are engaged in a 'long and arduous search' for assurance?

Secondly, commenting on Thomas Brooks' 320 pages on assurance:

Thomas Brooks was another Puritan to put a grim prospect before his readers:

Now though this full assurance is earnestly desired, and highly prized, and the want of it much lamented, and the enjoyment of it much endeavoured after by all saints, yet it is only obtained by a few. Assurance is a mercy too good for most men's hearts, it is a crown too weighty for most men's

³⁶ Walter Marshall: *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*.

³⁷ Joel R.Beeke: *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1999.

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heads. Assurance is *optimum maximum*, the best and greatest mercy; and therefore God will only give it to his best and dearest friends... Assurance is that 'tried gold' (Rev. 3:18)... God only gives to tried friends. Among those few that have a share or portion in the special love and favour of God, there are but a very few that have an assurance of his love. It is one mercy for God to love the soul, and another mercy for God to assure the soul of his love.³⁸

Not much hope here, then! Hardly any at all! Heaven on earth? Maybe – but only for the few. I wonder where Brooks found the scriptural warrant for telling believers that 'assurance... [is] only obtained by a few... [it being] too good for most' believers. Indeed, I ask myself why Brooks wrote his book – a book describing a wonderful experience for believers, but one which the majority of them will never get, even after a life-time of desperate searching for it, since they are not good enough for it! It would seem tantamount to cruelty on Brooks' part, taunting the overwhelming majority of believers with the golden apple always just out of reach! I wonder why such a book is thought to be worthy of publication today – unless, of course, it is to bolster the Reformed emphasis on law. Do the publishers *want* believers to be miserable? Hardly a recommendation for their law-system, is it?

Thirdly, James Sawyer:

In San Diego in November, 1989, at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, Dr John MacArthur was asked when a believer could be assured of his salvation; his reply was that such assurance could be had only after death.³⁹

In other words, according to this, believers have to live out their pilgrimage without being sure that they truly are in Christ. Indeed, they spend their lives feeling that 'the wretched man of Romans 7' (Reformed-style) describes them

³⁸ Thomas Brooks *Heaven on Earth: A Serious Discourse, Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance in The Works of Thomas Brooks*, Vol.2, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980 (also in paperback, 1961), p335, emphasis mine.

³⁹ M.James Sawyer: 'Some Thoughts On Lordship Salvation' (bible.org).

to a T – so that they are permanently engaged in a life-long struggle for assurance, but all the while knowing, and professing, that they are defeated in the struggle, and that in any case they know that the assurance they seek is out of reach, reserved for the elect of the elect. How this teaching is conducive to the making of believers mature and happy – those who know by experience what Peter said was the experience of true believers – I am at an utter loss to see:

Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

Just to make it clear: Peter was not saying that when Christ comes the believer, entering eternal bliss, will finally, at last, and only then, come into inexpressible joy. Nor was he saying that death signals the time when believers begin, for the first time, to experience such joy.⁴⁰ Peter explicitly stated that every believer experiences inexpressible joy now – now – even as he is engaged in his pilgrimage towards the final revelation and experience of salvation at the appearance of Christ – even now, while warring against the wiles of the devil. Let me quote the entire paragraph to prove it:

In this [salvation] you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:6-9).

It's a good job that Augustus Toplady didn't address the Reformed with his request:

⁴⁰ See my *Undervalued*.

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*Happiness! thou lovely name,
Where's thy seat? O tell me where?*

I don't think he would have been chuffed to have been given a copy of Beeke's and Brooks' books! Indeed, his own answer knocks those volumes into a cocked hat. As his hymn goes on to say, Toplady's happiness was rooted in Christ's felt presence. I would expand that confidence by explaining that Christ's presence in the believer is by the Spirit, and that the believer feels Christ's presence by the witness of the Spirit. Is there any hymn which speaks of the believer's assurance rising from the fact that he knows he is 'the wretched man of Romans 7'?⁴¹ I know of none. Why?

I have just made some very serious charges against the Reformed. So much so, I looked again into their teaching on assurance. I can only say that it left me more confused than before. Can the Reformed ever enjoy assurance in this life? That's what I'm left wondering. It appears that a major text for them in this matter is:

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall (2 Pet. 1:10).

Of course, it's easy to see why this verse is so important for the Reformed, coming as it does as the climax to a passage on the believer's duty. At first glance, it fits the bill, almost like a glove. It has all – well, nearly all – the credentials to support their view; it ticks all the boxes – well, most of them: assurance is by progressive sanctification. It's a pity Peter didn't add a bit to say that 'the moral law' is number one for progressive sanctification, but 9/10 of a loaf is better than nothing.

I am convinced this is a serious misunderstanding of the verse.⁴² The inevitable consequence for the Reformed, however, is that their view that assurance depends on

⁴¹ None of the three hymns I quoted earlier got remotely close.

⁴² See the final Appendix in my *Assurance*.

progressive sanctification is set in concrete – which of course means that uncertainty is certain, guaranteed. As I have observed, who can ever say that his progressive sanctification is so advanced, so complete, so pristine, that it leaves him with no room for doubt? Yet coupled with this interpretation, they also talk of the witness of the Spirit. The result, at least for me, is confusion.

MacArthur gloried that Reformed preaching produces anxiety:

Some lack assurance because of being under strong biblical preaching on God's holy standard [that is, in his terms of course, 'the moral law' – DG]. Such preaching forces people to see their sinfulness and acknowledge that the holiness of God calls them to a lofty standard of living. Is that bad? No, the pulpit should be the creator of anxious hearts. How else can it unsettle those who have false assurance? However, the consistent call to righteousness may unsettle some Christians, particularly those who are frequently succumbing to temptation.⁴³

Romans 7:14-25 came into the picture. MacArthur had received a heart-moving letter. In his sermon, he referred to it:

Is the author of that poignant letter a Christian? One thing that jumps out at me is his desire to do right, which sounds more like Paul in Romans 7 than an unbeliever. [MacArthur, clearly, regarded 'the wretched man of Romans 7' as a

⁴³ This was not a one-off. MacArthur: 'I think it's fair to say the pulpit is *rightly* the creator of anxious hearts. That's part of the duty of the preacher – to make the heart anxious. Why? So that, as 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, you examine yourself to see whether you're in the faith. [It] would be a breach of ministerial responsibility, it would be a forfeiture of the duty we have before God, to let people live comfortably and [have] an illusion about their true spiritual condition... The pulpit is to be a purveyor of a message that creates anxious hearts... Where there is that strong preaching, there will be a battle with assurance. And I'll tell you something, it's not bad to have that; it's good because how else are we drawn to the important issue of self-examination?' John MacArthur: 'Why Christians Lack Assurance', emphasis mine, in a sermon to believers lacking assurance!

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believer, one to be commended – DG]. The pulpit is the creator of anxious hearts, but it is also to give comfort and assurance to those who love Christ.

Hmm! Bit confusing. For me, at least.

In addition to thinking of the battle with the flesh as within the believer, MacArthur advised his hearers to adopt what I can only call ‘a pick-and-mix’ or selective approach to Romans 7:

It’s easy to read Romans 7:14-25 in an imbalanced way. If you see only the parts that say: ‘Nothing good dwells in me’ and ‘wretched man that I am’, you’ll become overly introspective. [He could say that again – DG]. Focusing on the flesh will warp your perspective and lead you to overstate your spiritual condition. However, if you see only the parts that say: ‘I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man’ and ‘the willing [of doing good] is present in me’ you’ll fail to deal with the reality of the flesh. You need to keep a balance.

Which means what, exactly? Continue in your anxious confusion?

And then the witness of the Spirit. MacArthur, failing to see how Scripture speaks of the all-important role of the Spirit, that the king-pin of assurance is the Spirit’s witness within and to the believer, underplayed that work, even, it seems to me, adopting an element of faint praise:

One of the most important ways the Holy Spirit ministers to believers is by assuring them of their salvation. A believer who’s not living by the Spirit’s power forfeits that important ministry. Let’s look again at Romans 8: ‘You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out: “Abba! Father!”’ (Rom. 8:15)... We have been adopted into God’s family and are on intimate terms with him. How do we know that’s true? Because ‘the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ’ (Rom. 8:16-17).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ John MacArthur: ‘A Believer’s Assurance’.

This needs some clarification. Perhaps this will help. MacArthur told us what he thought about the law, Romans 7 and progressive sanctification:

The law cannot redeem; the law cannot save; the law can't even, in and of itself, sanctify because the law has no power. But the law is not sinful. Rather, the law sets such a perfect, holy standard that it becomes clear to us what sin is. Paul gets very personal back in Romans[7:14-25]. Very personal. And you see the first person pronoun – I. 'I would not have come to know sin except through the law'. It's talking about the moral law here, not ceremonial law and ritual law which had been set aside, was being, of course, set aside – first when Jesus came and was really finally crushed in his death, and eventually obliterated in the destruction of Jerusalem. All of that went away. But he's talking about the moral law. Now, what he's saying here is very personal. He's not saying that the law reveals sin theoretically. He's not saying the law reveals sin scholastically or academically or theologically. It's not revealing sin by some definition that he's concerned about, although the law certainly does that, but he is saying: 'I would never have come to know sin in my own life except through the law. It is the work of the law to show me my sin'. It's not outside of me; it's not theoretical. It's experiential, practical, and personal. 'I myself, when I put my life up against the law of God, found out that I was a sinner'.

And, of course, this is where the path to salvation begins and continues there. The path of [progressive] sanctification in the life of a believer is a direct reaction to the law. How do you know your falling short of what God wants you to be? Because you know what the standard is.⁴⁵

So here it is: assurance is by progressive sanctification which depends on 'the moral law'. But the believer has the Spirit's witness. Even so, he always knows he is 'the wretched man of Romans 7'. Clear?

Finally, a look at R.C.Sproul on assurance. Robert N.Wilkin, in his 'When Assurance Is Not Assurance', had these headings:

⁴⁵ John MacArthur: 'Four Functions of the Law, Part 1'.

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‘Various Ways of Explaining an Assurance Which Is Not Certain’

‘A. Uncertainty with Jesus Is Better than Any Other Option’

Wilkin went on:

Dr R.C.Sproul is a very articulate spokesman for the view that assurance is not certainty. A few years back he described his own struggles with assurance, and in so-doing he explained his view of assurance:

There are people in this world who are not saved, but who are convinced that they are. The presence of such people causes genuine Christians to doubt their salvation. After all, we wonder, suppose I am in that category? Suppose I am mistaken about my salvation and am really going to hell? How can I know that I am a real Christian?

A while back I had one of those moments of acute self-awareness that we have from time to time, and suddenly the question hit me: ‘R.C., what if you are not one of the redeemed? What if your destiny is not heaven after all, but hell?’ Let me tell you that I was flooded in my body with a chill that went from my head to the bottom of my spine. I was terrified.

Sproul got relief by John 6:68:

Jesus had been giving out hard teaching, and many of his former followers had left him. When he asked Peter if he was also going to leave, Peter said: ‘Where else can I go? Only you have the words of eternal life’. In other words, Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realised that being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option!

As Wilkin said:

According to this way of thinking, certainty is not an option. The very best option available is ‘being uncomfortable with Jesus’.⁴⁶

Well... that really is assurance! This second look at the Reformed on assurance has left me even more confused than I was. Talk about confusion confused!

⁴⁶ Robert N. Wilkin: ‘When Assurance Is Not Assurance’.

Law-men do, indeed, have a great deal to answer for. Many saints are living far below the new-covenant level of spiritual experience, with no sense of assurance by the Spirit's witness, but pretty frequently encouraged to go on feeling that he or she is 'the wretched man of Romans 7', and all this as a direct result of the legal teaching they receive. This cannot go unrebuked. Believers can talk of joy and liberty, can sing about joy and liberty, can preach and write about it, but in reality the experience of many believers is more akin to simply coping with life, existing rather than living, getting through by the skin of one's teeth. They hope!

* * *

Here is where 'the old-boy network' kicks in. If a man is categorical and outspoken on justification without the law, some will excuse, as minor peccadilloes of little or no account,⁴⁷ all the errors he preaches and practices. For instance, some will quietly forget – ignore, even dismiss – a teacher's insistence on the law for progressive sanctification.⁴⁸ It seems a matter of indifference. Take the two teachers just quoted – John MacArthur and R.C.Sproul. Despite their differences, MacArthur was very close to Sproul; in his obituary for the latter, MacArthur declared:

I'm a committed Baptist premillennialist; [R.C.Sproul] was a steadfast Presbyterian with somewhat fluid eschatological opinions. But we agreed on far more than we ever disagreed – especially when it came to the core issues of soteriology [the doctrine and way of salvation] and the five Reformation *solas*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ I employ the tautology deliberately.

⁴⁸ For something similar, see my 'The Case of the Curious Blind Spot: John Jewel – Model Reformer?' on my sermonaudio.com page.

⁴⁹ John MacArthur: 'R.C.Sproul', Grace to You website. The five *solas* (that is, 'alones') are 'saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed by Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone'. Tick those five boxes and all else is quietly forgotten.

Do not overlook what MacArthur failed to say here about Sproul; namely, that he was heavily committed – totally committed – to Calvin’s threefold use of the law.⁵⁰ Does that matter? Should it matter?⁵¹

And that’s not all. As I have been arguing, the fundamental issue is not simply the law; it is the old covenant. Now it is at this point that the Reformed divide into two: the more consistent part – Presbyterians – going the whole hog, have erected a complete theology and practice based on the old covenant, with devastating results. Let me explain. Mixing the two covenants, saying they are simply two different

⁵⁰ R.C.Sproul: ‘The Threefold Use of the Law’.

⁵¹ But, of course, MacArthur was close to that view, but, I admit, I find him difficult to understand. See John MacArthur: ‘Sanctification, Sin, and Obedience’. Again: ‘Now you need to remember that in the 7th chapter of Romans, Paul is basically talking about the place of the law. And he is trying to demonstrate that because he preaches salvation by grace through faith does not mean that he sees no place for the law. That is not to say to Jews who esteem the law that he does not esteem it, he is simply giving it its proper function, and its proper function is not to save people, or to sanctify people, but to convict them of sin and show them, as verse 13 indicates, the exceeding sinfulness of sin. And he is pointing out that even as a believer, the law continues to have the function of demonstrating to the Christian the exceeding sinfulness of sin. When he sees the law of God, which his heart longs to fulfil, and in comparison sees the sin in his life, he loves the law and loathes the sin... The law is spiritual, and I’m unspiritual. Now you say: “Can a Christian say that?” Yes, in a perspective [that is, a certain way]. That is one perception that we rightly should have of our own lives. We are not all that we should be, right? The law of God is spiritual but we are fleshly, we’re unspiritual. We are carnal... The conflict in the life of a believer is a conflict between a new creation which is holy, which is created for eternity, which is the eternal seed, which cannot sin, and that is in you, that is the real you, that is the basic you, the recreated you. The conflict is between that redeemed you and your unredeemed mortality, your unredeemed humanity, which is still present. And that’s where his struggle lies. And that’s his lament’ (John MacArthur: ‘The Believer and Indwelling Sin, Part 2’).

administrations of one covenant of grace, Presbyterians argue that the children of believers – just as the sons of an Israelite in the old covenant – are specially favoured. Some go so far as to say that because one parent ‘is in the covenant’ – whatever that may mean – the child is also automatically in the covenant,⁵² and they sprinkle them as babies (replacing circumcision – how things have turned full circle!) to seal this, to make it sure. Others say that the sprinkling actually produces this state of affairs – in effect, the sprinkling has regenerated the baby.⁵³ Others fudge the issue, leaving it, in effect, to those standing around the font to draw their own conclusion from the metaphysics handed down by their theologians.⁵⁴

Reformed Baptists, on the other hand, while they are eager to adopt Calvin’s threefold use of the law, and while they follow their late-seventeenth-century ancestors who bought into the Westminster Confession to produce the politically-correct 1689 Particular Baptist Confession,⁵⁵ refuse to take the consistent Presbyterian route. As a result, they find themselves engaged in a Sisyphean⁵⁶ struggle as they flirt with the old covenant while trying to find a way through – round – the ‘awkward’ passages of Scripture which they gloss in light of their Confession.

Nevertheless, within this mixed Reformed world, and on its fringes, as long as anybody is resolute on justification by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, and is a staunch

⁵² As the son of an Israelite was an Israelite, so, some Presbyterians say, the child of a believer is a believer. Diabolical nonsense! See my *Infant*.

⁵³ See my ‘Reformed Infant Baptismal Regeneration’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

⁵⁴ I have written at large on this, and any who feel that I am overstating the case here should read my arguments set out in my *Infant*.

⁵⁵ See my ‘The Law and The Confessions’.

⁵⁶ That is, never-ending. Sisyphus was forced to continuously roll a boulder up a steep hill, but it always rolled back.

opponent of Romanism, the Reformed are mutually prepared to sink their differences on the old covenant and the law, sink their differences on infant baptism, and all that that entails, and not infrequently join hands in a mutual-admiration society to present a common front in opposing Rome. As MacArthur – see above – with Sproul, as long as the right boxes on justification and Romanism are ticked, all is well, all ‘inconvenient disagreements’ quietly suppressed or ignored.⁵⁷

It went the other way, too! Sproul:

I think it’s pleasing to God to baptise infants of believers. My friends in the Baptist community think that it’s displeasing to God. Both sides want to do what is pleasing to God. What I do believe is that we should not break fellowship over that issue because there’s not an explicit teaching in the New Testament that says that ‘you must baptise children of believers’. Nor is there an explicit prohibition in the New Testament that says: ‘No, you may not baptise the children of believers’. And so you have to rest your case on inferences drawn from narratives and other texts of the Bible and any time a doctrine is left to development by inferences you’re open to all kinds of mistakes.⁵⁸

Well, now, there’s no specific command in the Bible for or against eating Deadly Nightshade (*atropa belladonna*) berries. Does that mean it’s a matter of indifference?

Try as I might, I can’t see Paul taking MacArthur’s or Sproul’s line!⁵⁹ Can you imagine him faced with this argument:

⁵⁷ I have already noted my ‘The Case of the Curious Blind Spot: John Jewel – Model Reformer?’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

⁵⁸ R.C.Sproul: ‘Question and Answer Session pt.2’, 2010 Expositor’s Conference, (R.Scott Clark: ‘R.C.Sproul On Infant Baptism, Sin, And Patience’, on Heidelblog.net website).

⁵⁹ MacArthur and Sproul even turned infant baptism – which has been responsible for sending countless numbers to hell – into a sort of debating game. See ‘Case for Infant Baptism: The Historic Paedo-Baptist Position’ and ‘Case for Believer’s Baptism: The Credo-Baptist Position’ on the Grace to You website. I am not saying that

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The *pseudadelphoi*, for all they are getting wrong, rightly believe this and that orthodox doctrine – that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God; that he came into the world through the virgin birth; that he loved sinners and died for them; that he was raised again. After all, the *pseudadelphoi* are only tinkering at the edges, adding a bit of law to the mix. So why get all het up about it? In the fight against the world, flesh and devil, we need all the help we can get. So let's not fall out over circumcision; of all things, circumcision, I ask you! Let's not get up tight about sprinkling a baby. Let's major on the fundamentals! Keep a sense of priority, please! Don't lose your cool over secondary issues!⁶⁰

I just can't imagine Paul saying it or buying it. But why resort to imagination? We have seen precisely what he said and what he did! Spurgeon wasn't in two minds about the apostles' stance of truth. As truth mattered to those men, truth before friendship, so it (the same) could be said of that nice, humorous Mr Spurgeon:

Wherever the apostles went they met with obstacles to the preaching of the gospel, and the more open and effectual was

debate concerning truth is always wrong, but the words of Lloyd-Jones should, I think, at least be weighed. 'I think it is wrong as a total approach. My impression is that experience of that kind of thing shows clearly that it very rarely succeeds, or leads to anything. It provides entertainment... So often we discuss theology in a light manner, as we debate many other subjects, and as if we were handling something quite apart from our lives and our well-being and eternal destiny. But that is obviously wrong. We are always involved personally and vitally in this if we really believe what we claim to believe and say that we believe. These matters should never be dealt with in terms of a debate or in the atmosphere of debate and discussion; they are too serious and too solemn, our true living in this world and our eternal destiny are involved' (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, pp46-51).

⁶⁰ The problem is, of course, who defines primary and secondary? An issue might be primary in one set of circumstances, and secondary in another. Take circumcision. Clearly the way the *pseudadelphoi* were insisting on it made it a desperately vital matter. Yet, in Acts 16:3; Rom. 3:1; 1 Cor. 7:18-19; Gal. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:11, it has a different hue.

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the door of utterance the more numerous were the adversaries. These brave men who wielded the sword of the Spirit as to put to flight all their foes; and this they did not by craft and guile, but by making a direct cut at the error which impeded them. Never did they dream for a moment of adapting the gospel to the unhallowed tastes or prejudices of the people, but at once directly and boldly they brought down with both their hands the mighty sword of the Spirit upon the crown of the opposing error...

The velvet has got into our ministers' mouths of late, but we must un-robe ourselves of soft raiment, and truth must be spoken, and nothing but truth; for of all lies which have dragged millions down to hell, I look upon this as being one of the most atrocious – that in a Protestant Church there should be found those who swear that baptism saves the soul. Call a man a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, or a Dissenter, or a Churchman, that is nothing to me – if he says that baptism saves the soul, out upon him, out upon him, he states what God never taught, what the Bible never laid down, and what ought never to be maintained by men who profess that the Bible, and the whole Bible, is the gospel.⁶¹

I have spoken thus much, and there will be some who will say – spoken thus much bitterly. Very well, be it so. Physic [that is, medicine] is often bitter, but it shall work well, and the physician is not bitter because his medicine is so; or if he be accounted so, it will not matter, so long as the patient is cured; at all events, it is no business of the patient whether the physician is bitter or not, his business is with his own soul's health. There is the truth, and I have told it to you; and if there should be one among you, or if there should be one among the readers of this sermon when it is printed, who is resting on baptism, or resting upon ceremonies of any sort, I do beseech you, shake off this venomous faith into the fire as Paul did the viper which fastened on his hand. I pray you do not rest on baptism.⁶²

And for 'infant baptism' and 'baptismal regeneration', read 'any corruption of the new covenant with the old'. That is my position.

⁶¹ Original 'religion of Protestants'.

⁶² Spurgeon sermon 573.

Spurgeon again:

We must show our decision for the truth by the sacrifices we are ready to make. This is, indeed, the most efficient as well as the most trying method. We must be ready to give up anything and everything for the sake of the principles which we have espoused, and must be ready to offend our best supporters, to alienate our warmest friends, sooner than belie our consciences. We must be ready to be beggars in purse, and offscourings in reputation, rather than act treacherously. We can die, but we cannot deny the truth. The cost is already counted, and we are determined to buy the truth at any price, and sell it at no price. Too little of this spirit is abroad nowadays. Men have a saving faith, and save their own persons from trouble; they have great discernment, and know on which side their bread is buttered; they are large-hearted, and are all things to all men, if by any means they may save a sum. There are plenty of curs about, who would follow at the heel of any man who would keep them in meat. They are among the first to bark at decision, and call it obstinate dogmatism, and ignorant bigotry. Their condemnatory verdict causes us no distress; it is what we expected. Above all we must show our zeal for the truth by continually, in season and out of season endeavouring to maintain it in the most tender and most loving manner, but still very earnestly and firmly. We must not talk to our congregations as if we were half asleep. Our preaching must not be articulate snoring. There must be power, life, energy, vigour. We must throw our whole selves into it, and show that the zeal of God's house has eaten us up.⁶³

Of course, admitting the obvious, I am not Paul. Now in saying that, I am stating something far deeper than the obvious: as an apostle, he would have known the mind of God on these things. I don't. I can only comment on Scripture and make application as I see it, doing so with my limited understanding and, I have to admit, my own presuppositions. Alas, I have to confess that the fear of man can be an enormous snare. But since the Reformed are not shy about

⁶³ C.H.Spurgeon: 'The Need of Decision for the Truth', *Lectures to My Students*, Vol. 3.

dismissing men such as me as antinomians, they can hardly complain if I, for one, flip the coin over and respectfully pass it back.

As I have pointed out, and pointed out repeatedly, a key part of the meaning of *pseudos* involves motive; primarily the intention to deceive, using stealth, lies, the employment of craft and guile. This makes for a very serious difficulty, even an impossibility for me. I cannot read men's hearts, determine their motive. Indeed, I do not question their motive. It would be utterly wrong of me to attempt it. *Ad hominem*⁶⁴ is no way for believers to discuss principles. The Reformed are as sincere as any of us. It is their doctrine I question, not their motive. But at the very least they are mistaken in their doctrine, and so, by their teaching, they are inevitably holding many of their followers in bondage to the law. This means they are depriving them of a full enjoyment of their liberty in Christ. While they are not *pseudadelphoi* as to motive, their doctrine gets too close for comfort. And they, as all of us, are responsible for what their teaching produces. As James told us (Jas. 3:1), preaching, teaching, writing, communication of every kind, inevitably carries responsibilities. For me, as much as any man. But the Reformed, for all their pedigree, for all their status, are not exempt.

I remind you of an earlier point. Paul was blunt in exposing the blatant hypocrisy of the law-men, as well as their detestable motive:

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh (Gal. 6:13).

I am convinced that today's law-men, even allowing them the best of motives, are caught in the apostle's net. Take the sabbath. It is all very well pressing sabbath-observance upon the faithful, but who, among the most vocal sabbath-promoters will claim to keep the sabbath in terms of, say,

⁶⁴ Arguing, not against the doctrine, but the man.

Isaiah 58:13-14? Who can subject himself to that passage and come away unscathed? Professing to keep ‘the moral law’, writing in praise of ‘the moral law’, and demanding that believers keep ‘the moral law’ is easy; it’s the doing of it that is so difficult. The sabbath, whatever Calvin taught, is bang in the centre of ‘the moral law’ (allowing the phrase for the sake of argument). But for law-advocates, nothing less than full-hearted obedience will do, nothing less must be tolerated.⁶⁵ In addition to Galatians 6:13, Paul spelled it out:

You have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man – you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself – that you will escape the judgment of God?... For it is not the hearers of the law [for the advocates of the law – DG] who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified... Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision (Rom. 2:1-3,13,25).

I am sure it doesn’t need me to spell out the obvious warning to modern law-men and their followers. We all know Aesop’s quip that when all’s said and done, there’s a lot more said than done.

⁶⁵ Unless, that is, the would-be ten-commandment-keepers accept the verdict of Maurice Roberts, who was prepared to say that such law-keepers, including himself, should keep the ten commandments ‘as carefully as we can’ (Alun Ebenezer and Keith Batstone: *Before They Leave The Stage*, DayOne Publications, Leominster, 2023, p189). Several questions suggest themselves: Where does God state that he accepts an obedience which is ‘as carefully as we can’ give? How does a law-keeper know that his obedience is ‘as careful as he can’ manage? How ‘carefully’ is ‘carefully’? The law is unequivocal: ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them’ (Gal. 3:10). To sum up: Roberts seemed to imply that God accepts a good try, do your best.

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Clearly, since Paul was so moved, so direct, about the fearful consequences of law-teaching, its seriousness today cannot be denied. We can afford no confusion when we find it rearing its head among us. We dare not be half-hearted in dealing with it. The issue is not a subject for genteel debate in which we can agree to differ; it is always an issue of the highest significance. It is not hypothetical, academic; it is of deep pastoral concern. The neurosis which many believers suffer under law-teaching, and which I have documented, must not be waved aside as of no importance. For those who are paying the price, it is no trivial matter.

I was much encouraged in my thinking by reading some words by D.A. Carson. Closer scrutiny, however, left me somewhat disappointed. Let me explain. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 11, Carson wrote:

Paul is afraid that the Corinthians are being deceived (2 Cor. 11:3), for they are much too tolerant of those who teach heresy (2 Cor. 11:4)... The exact shape of the false message the intruders preached is unclear. The best guess, judging from the emphases in the surrounding chapters, is that it was some form of Judaising.

I break in. This is far too cautious. There is no doubt whatsoever: Paul *was* referring to teachers who were pushing the law; they *were* Judaisers. Carson actually admitted as much:

The false apostles made much of their Jewish heritage (2 Cor. 11:22)... Paul detected in their pretensions exactly the same danger that Judaisers with slightly different emphases introduced into the churches of Galatia. The result of their additions is that another Jesus is being preached (2 Cor. 11:4; cf. Gal. 1:8-9)...

Carson rightly warned of the consequences of allowing the teaching of the Judaisers' to get a foothold:

If believers revert to a legalistic system in which trust in Christ and joyous responsiveness to him are displaced by dependence upon personal merit and virtues, many will fall again into a spirit of slavery and fear that masks the

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privileges of our sonship (Rom. 8:15). *In sum*, what is being preached is a different gospel...

Hence:

Paul criticises the Corinthians for bowing to a Jesus ‘other than the Jesus we preached’ or for accepting a gospel ‘different from the one you accepted’...

Carson came to deduction:

The... church needs a little more both of Paul’s discernment and intolerance. Like the ancient Corinthians, we too are sometimes deceived. Provided there is fluent talk of Jesus, gospel, truth, and Christian living, and spiritual experience, combined with effective, self-confident leadership, we seldom ask if it is the same Jesus as the one presented in the Scriptures, or if the gospel being presented squares with the apostolic gospel. Most who read these pages will already have come to recognise that the Jesus preached by, say, the Jehovah’s Witnesses is not in every respect like the Jesus of the New Testament. The total synthesis of the Witnesses results in another Jesus.

Well, that’s true enough. But, as Carson immediately went on:

But the same can be true of some presentations of Jesus that are closer to home. Is it a biblical Jesus who promises us nothing but health, prosperity, wisdom, and joy? Is it a biblical Jesus who guarantees heaven and says nothing of hell? Is it a biblical Jesus who promises eternal life but says nothing about entailed righteousness [that is, progressive sanctification]? Is it a biblical Jesus who needs to have his saving work supplemented by our merits, ceremonies, and sacrifices if we are to be redeemed? If the Corinthians could be deceived in the first century into transferring their allegiance to a Jesus who did not really exist, what entitles us to think we shall always be exempt from similar dangers and deceptions? Our only safeguard is a humble return, again and again, to the apostolic gospel, the biblical Jesus, preserved for us in the pages of Scripture.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ D.A.Carson: *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10 – 13*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2007, pp98-100.

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Yes, indeed, but although Carson has applied the Corinthian passage to us today – and he is to be commended for that – he has restricted his application to present-day teachers such as prosperity-gospellers, non-wrath-of-God merchants, Jesus-as-Saviour-but-not-Lord peddlers, Jesus-and preachers. Such teachers are indeed preaching another gospel. But – and it is a massive ‘but’ – Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians has within it the real focus of attention – law-mongers, Judaisers. And, as I have said, these have not died out. Consequently, this must be our focus.

But this is where the rubber hits the road, and hits it hard; the conclusions inevitably get personal and inevitably will be seen as offensive. Nevertheless, as Carson himself observed, we need ‘a little more both of Paul’s discernment and intolerance’. Yet even here, this wants thinking about, and serious thinking at that. As I have said, I am not an apostle. I don’t have the apostle’s discernment. But I have pointed the finger at the Reformed with their heavy emphasis on the law. I can only take what the Reformed teach and test it by Scripture; I cannot read motive – as demanded by Paul’s use of *pseudēs*, *dolloi* and *metaschēmatisomenoi*, and the like. Even so, having come to a decision about Reformed teaching, I am sure that we need ‘more... of Paul’s... intolerance’. To be clear, I would not qualify this (as Carson did) and say that we need ‘a little more... of Paul’s... intolerance’, but that we need ‘much more... of Paul’s intolerance’. I have to confess that I have become far too fearful to call a spade a spade.

Calvin was better. Commenting on Acts 15, he made the point that:

...when the truth of God is assailed, let them [that is, the servants of God] refuse no combat for defence thereof; nor let them fear to oppose themselves [that is, set themselves in opposition against the false teachers and their teaching]

Previously published under the title from *Triumphalism to Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10 – 13*, 1984.

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valiantly, though heaven and earth go together [that is, against him – DG].

Again:

[Since] we see the primitive church on an uproar, and the best servants of Christ exercised with sedition, if the same thing befall us now, let us not fear as in some new and unwonted matter; but, craving at the Lord's hands such an end as he [that is, Paul] now made, let us pass through tumults with the same tenor of faith.

While I am not in the least making any comparison with the genocide conducted by the Nazis, the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1946, writing on the Holocaust, certainly resonate with what is driving me here:

I have the feeling [she wrote] that we let our consciences realise too late... the need⁶⁷ of standing up against something that we knew was wrong... I hope that in the future, we are going to remember that there can be no compromise at any point with things that we know are wrong.⁶⁸

In no spirit of bravado, but, I hope, sincerely, that is what I have tried to do here. I have tried to balance two scriptural principles. I know I must obey the apostolic command, and I want to obey it; in short, I pray that I might be 'speaking the truth in love' (Eph. 4:15), speaking the truth, yes, but trying to do it in love – love for God, love for truth, love for the souls of men. But I also echo the plea Paul issued to the Galatians: 'Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?' (Gal. 4:16).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ I have left out the 'and' from 'too late and the need'. See Eleanor Roosevelt: 'Speech Before Women's Division Of The United Jewish Appeal Of Greater New York', 20th Feb. 1946, Encyclopedica.com website.

⁶⁸ See 'Journal Handout', Holocaust Museum, Houston.

⁶⁹ John Gill commented: 'Truth... should be spoken openly, honestly, and sincerely, and in love to the souls of men, and in a way consistent with love, in opposition to the secret, ensnaring, and pernicious ways of false teachers'.

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These are the principles in question:

First:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother: 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matt. 7:1-5).

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour? (Jas. 4:11-12).

But *secondly:*

[The Bereans] received the word [that is, the preaching of Paul and Silas] with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good (1 Thess. 5:19-21).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world... We [that is, the apostles] are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:1,6).

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works (2 John 9-11).

I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

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Christ commended the Ephesian *ekklēsia*:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false (Rev. 2:2).

It is not always easy to strike the right balance between these two principles.

Paul did not find speaking out easy. He pleaded with the Ephesians:

Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:18-20).

Calvin, commenting on that request, declared:

Fear hinders us from preaching Christ openly and fearlessly, while the absence of all restraint and disguise in confessing Christ is demanded from his ministers [better, from every believer – DG]. Paul does not ask for himself the powers of an acute debater, or, I should rather say, of a dexterous sophist,⁷⁰ that he might shield himself from his enemies by false pretences. It is that [he] may open [his] mouth to make a clear and strong confession; for when the mouth is half shut, the sounds which it utters are doubtful and confused. To open the mouth, therefore, is to speak with perfect freedom, without the smallest dread.

⁷⁰ A sophist is a person who uses clever but false arguments. Originally, he was a teacher of rhetoric in Greece.