

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

The Christian's Armor: The Breastplate of Righteousness

Recently, *Christianity Today* carried an article entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Read The Bible.” In it we were told: “Americans love their Bibles. So much so that they keep them in pristine, unopened condition. Or, as George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli said in a widely quoted survey finding, ‘Americans revere the Bible but, by and large, they don’t read it.’ Anecdotes abound. *Time* magazine observed in a 2007 cover story that only half of U.S. adults could name one of the four Gospels. Fewer than half could identify Genesis as the Bible’s first book. Jay Leno and Stephen Colbert have made sport of Americans’ inability to name the Ten Commandments—even among members of Congress who have pushed to have them posted publicly. Perhaps the first step toward improved Bible literacy is admitting we have a problem. A 2005 study by the Barna Group asked American Christians to rate their spiritual maturity based on activities such as worship, service, and evangelism. Christians offered the harshest evaluation of their Bible knowledge, with 25 percent calling themselves not too mature or not at all mature. And we know it’s not ‘those other churches.’ We are not surprised by a 2004 Gallup finding that a mere 37 percent of teenagers can find the quotation from the Sermon on the Mount when given four choices. And we are not surprised that only 44 percent of born-again teenagers could do the same.... In 2011, English-speaking Christians will commemorate 400 years since the debut of the King James Version of the Bible. So why does a sense of consternation trump celebration? ‘More than 200 million people have no access to spiritual food, with no Scriptures in their own language,’ says Krish Kandiah, a director at the Evangelical Alliance UK. ‘Yet we in the West, despite owning more Bibles per household than we will ever use, are slowly starving to death because we have lost our appetite for Scripture.’”

With the rapid growth of the seeker-sensitive, user-friendly mega-churches you would think more and more people would be exposed to the Bible—but you would be dead wrong. These kinds of “churches” are actually the culprits. *The Los Angeles Times* carried a story that dealt with the popular TV program, “American Idol” and its distinctive *Christian* connection. As it turns out, mega-churches across the country’s heartland have served as the training grounds for many of the Fox show’s contestants, with parishioners doing their part with prayers and text votes.” The article noted how the entertainment industry veterans nevertheless say that “Idol,” and many of today’s Christian churches are made for one another. “Music is a huge part of modern American church culture, so kids get exposure and experience that I don’t think they would get otherwise,” said Brad O’Donnell, vice president of artists and repertoire for EMI Christian Music, which signed Mandisa. O’Donnell, who regularly treks to churches across the nation trolling for talent, added: “I can’t think of one I’ve been to that doesn’t have music as a major component.” Of course, music has been incorporated into the worship services of many faiths for centuries. The 18th century English poet Alexander Pope, in his “Essay on Criticism,” wryly noted that “some to Church repair but not because of doctrine, but because of the music! Meanwhile, experts say it’s no accident that the popularity of “Idol” over the last eight years has dovetailed with the continued growth of mega-churches, which, in addition to offering a broad menu of social activities and groups, often stage elaborate musical performances at weekly services attended by hundreds or thousands of worshippers. Scott Thumma, a scholar at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research who has written widely about mega-churches, recalls visiting a youth service at a large church in the Washington, D.C., area. The entertainment portion featured dramatic stage lighting and electric guitars. “It was easily a rock concert,” he said. “The only thing missing was ‘Free Bird’ and us holding up our lighters.”² Let me state the obvious: If soldiers on the front lines of Battle received little if any training for combat, but were instead nurtured in an

entertainment atmosphere and passed their time cultivating their various singing talents, what kind of soldiers would they be? Either dead or P.O.W.

REVIEW: In order to stand against the devil's schemes, the believer needs to put on the full armor of God; but before it can be appropriated, the believer needs to be made strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. The armor is for the strong; without this strength the armor cannot be worn. The order is: to be made strong, be armed and THEN to stand. The first piece of armor (and the order is important) is the "belt of truth" - our personal apprehension of truth - the truth held in conviction. We have grasped the truth, but, more importantly, the truth has grasped us, so that the truth affects us in how we think and how we live, this is what gives us freedom of movement and strength in the fight.

I. THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

"Having put on (ENDUSAMENOI, indirect middle participle, something you do for yourself) the Breastplate(TON THŌRAKA, our English word 'thorax,' that part of the body between the base of the neck and the lower abdomen) of righteousness (TES DIKAIOSUNĒS)..." The phrase TON THŌRAKA TES DIKAIOSUNĒS is known as a 'genitive of apposition.' This is sometimes called the 'genitive of identity.' "It stands in exact apposition with the noun, it modifies and describes the noun to the extent of identifying it in a specific way. Thus, the two words - the noun in the genitive and the word which it modifies - denote the same person or thing."³ This may be translated the breast-plate, WHICH IS, or NAMELY, righteousness.

A. The Nature of the Armor

The Greek word THORAX, when used to denote a piece of armor, usually referred to a sleeveless-like jacket that covered the body from the shoulders to the lower part of the stomach (sometimes including the hips). The make-up of this *jacket* differed, depending on the rank of the soldier. The regular foot-soldier's Breastplate was made of layers of leather, with perhaps pieces of metal attached at important places. The officer wore something that resembled chain-mail or actual cast metal fitted to the outline of the chest and stomach. The armor of an officer was far more protective, and therefore, in keeping with the allusion mentioned in the old Testament, Paul probably had in mind the Breastplate worn by a high-ranking officer, rather than a foot-soldier. This only makes sense when you consider that the Apostle is trying to depict the splendid armor of God that is to be worn by the believer in his warfare with the devil.

B. The Nature of the Metaphor

What does this piece of armor refer to in Paul's thinking?

1. Some have understood this to be nothing more than personal moral integrity (this is how *The New English Bible* translates the word DIKAIOSUNĒS). This is absolutely NOT in the mind of the Apostle (comp. Phil. 3:8, 9). "As in no case in this connection does the apostle refer to any moral virtue as constituting the armor of the Christian."⁴ Markus Barth agrees and writes, "As little as truth could be defined merely by reference to the virtue of veracity, can 'righteousness' be restricted to the moral sense of the term."⁵
2. Some have understood this as a reference to the righteousness of faith. That is, faith which brings righteousness in daily living. Thus, it is an ethical conduct produced by faith. Now it is true that this is taught elsewhere in Scripture (esp. II Cor. 6:7, and even in Eph. 4:24 and 5:9). Paul uses the word righteousness in a moral sense in reference to the Christian's character and conduct. Furthermore, it is true that our conduct and character should correspond to our belief. While recognizing the truth stated here, I am NOT convinced that this is what Paul meant.
3. In the great majority of instances, Paul uses the word "righteousness" to refer to the imputed righteousness of Christ. This is confirmed by the allusion in Isa. 11:1-9 where righteousness has reference to salvation wrought by Messiah.

NOTE: What is meant by "imputed?" The English word is derived from the Latin "imputo" which is used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek word LOGIZOMAI in passages like Rom. 4:8 and 5:13. The word means to put to one's account, to lay to one's charge, to credit, reckon; a vivid example is found in Philemon v. 18. Imputation "itself is simply the act of setting to one's account; and the act of setting to

one's account is in itself the same act whether the thing set to his account stands on the credit or debit side of the account, and whatever may be the ground in equity on which it is set to his account."⁶ The Scriptures speak of three great imputations: (1) the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity (immediate imputation), (2) the imputation of the sin's of the elect to Christ, (3) the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect. In essence, the three great imputations deal with the sinfulness of man, the penal satisfaction of Christ and Justification by Faith—therefore the Gospel itself hinges upon imputation. It is the imputed righteousness of Christ that guarantees our acceptance before God. The two classic texts that convey this truth are Phil. 3:8, 9 and II Cor. 5:21. It is on the basis of this righteousness that Paul can declare, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1).

It hardly seems likely that the Apostle, who personally denounced personal righteousness (Phil. 3:4-11) would advocate this here - nor would the righteousness wrought in the believer (progressive sanctification) serve the purpose Paul has in mind. "The righteousness infused in regeneration is never in this life perfect. Consequently, the infused righteousness does not measure up to the standard required for perfect Justification. Only a perfect righteousness can supply the ground of a complete, perfect and irreversible Justification."⁷ This, as we shall see, is absolutely essential in order to stand against the schemes of the devil. In addition to *imputed* righteousness, the Bible also speaks of *imparted* righteousness. Lloyd-Jones helpfully notes, "The difference between 'imputed' and 'imparted' righteousness is, that if we stop at imputed righteousness, I am left where I was before. I have no righteousness inherent in me at all, although I am clothed and covered by the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the beginning; that is what makes me a Christian; that is the foundation. But God does not stop at that, He now begins to work in me the righteousness of His own Son. He 'imparts' it to me, He makes it a part of me, He puts it into me. This happens of necessity as the result of the rebirth, regeneration, the new life. There is a new seed of life 'implanted' in me. The seed has been put into me, and that seed grows and develops. This is what is meant by the idea of 'imparting' righteousness. Another term that has sometimes been used states that the righteousness is now 'infused' into me. It is not only put upon me as a cloak and a covering, but also 'infused' into me. It is comparable to a blood transfusion where the blood from one person is put into the circulation and the blood of another. It can be 'transfused' or 'infused,' 'injected,' 'imparted' - these are all terms which stand for the same operation. This is how the Apostle expresses the truth to the Philippians: 'Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure' (2:12, 13). We are to 'grow in grace,' and in the knowledge of the Lord. These are different ways of expressing 'imparted righteousness.' It is important for us to remember this, and particularly in the context of the matter with which we are dealing. For the devil attacks us in many ways. He not merely attacks us concerning our justification, he also attacks us in the realm of desire and of will, in the realm of feelings."⁸

C. The Importance of the Armor

The breastplate served to protect the vital organs of the body from attack. The heart, lungs or intestines are important to make the connection implied by this. The Bible speaks of the heart and "bowels" as the seat of the affections, emotions, and feelings (cf. Gen. 43:30; Jer. 4:19; 31:20; Phil. 1:8; 2:1; also Rom. 6:17; 9:2). Therefore, we are to understand the breastplate of righteousness as that piece of armor that protects us in our emotions, feelings, and conscience. In many ways these in turn affect our will and mind - our whole disposition, and it is here that the devil strikes;—he accuses us before God, and he accuses us directly (cf. Zech.3:ff, Rev. 12:10). "Let us note some of the ways in which he does so. He does so above all when we try to pray to God. We turn to God in prayer, perhaps because of some need, or perhaps because we have felt the desire to do so; and the moment we get on our knees the devil begins to act. What he does is to suggest that we are in no condition to pray to God. He reminds us of our unworthiness, of our sinfulness, rakes up perhaps from a dim and distant past something we

did, and holds it before us. Then turning himself into an angel of light he tells us about the greatness and the glory, the majesty and the holiness of God, and he says: 'How can such a person as you pray to God? What access, what entry, has such a miserable, sinful worm into that glory everlasting? God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all; He is of such a pure countenance that He cannot even look upon sin, and here are you proposing to enter into the presence of God!' The devil ridicules the whole thing and shows how utterly 'and' completely impossible it is."⁹ It is essential, absolutely, positively essential that the truth of Justification by Faith alone be grasped by us and we in turn be completely apprehended by this truth.

CONCLUSION: The situation that I alluded to in the introduction regarding the alarming high degree of Biblical illiteracy in much that passes for *Evangelicalism* is only the tip of a massive iceberg of theological ignorance that characterizes so many churches today—and it is actually being cultivated! Don Carson, one of my former professors has observed, "Western Evangelicalism tends to run through cycles of fads. At the moment, books are pouring off the presses telling us how to plan for success, how 'vision' clearly consists in clearly articulated 'ministry goals,' how the knowledge of detailed profiles of our communities constitutes the key to successful outreach. I am not for a moment suggesting that there is nothing to be learned from such studies. But after a while one may perhaps be excused for marveling how many churches were planted by Paul and Whitefield and Wesley and Stanway and Judson without enjoying these advantages. Of course all of us need to understand the people to whom we minister, and all of us can benefit from small doses of such literature. But massive doses sooner or later dilute the gospel. Ever so subtly, we start to think that success more critically depends on thoughtful sociological analysis than on the gospel; Barna becomes more important than the Bible. We depend on plans, programs, vision statements – but somewhere along the way we have succumbed to the temptation to displace the foolishness of the cross with the wisdom of strategic planning. Again, I insist, my position is not a thinly veiled plea for obscurantism, for seat-of-the-pants ministry that plans nothing. Rather, I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry."¹⁰ We are in a very real conflict. To ignore this fact is dangerous. Churches, like the ones I alluded to in the introduction, are guilty of dereliction. "When we are pressed down and lowered in spirit, when we are troubled on every side, fightings without and fears within, when our more exalted and encouraging experiences of joy and victory disappear, then we are left with faith alone alongside the Word of God. Gone is the thrill of the marching band, gone is the voice of song, gone is the aura of excitement and fellowship. The believer is alone. Behind him and before him are adversaries bent on his destruction. The last thing he 'feels' like doing is fighting, but fight the good fight of faith he must. He has no joy, only pain. What else does he have? He has faith and the armour of God... A man may go to battle without any feelings of joy, power of blessing and yet fight as well as he has ever fought as he exercises the knowledge that goes with his faith. In other words, it is a well taught and well-experienced faith that sees him through, not the memories of happy times he may have had. We should be concentrating on preparation for war, not spending our energy on sensation and excitements"¹¹ We should make sure we have the breastplate of righteousness on, and that we completely understand its importance.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Christianity Today*, May 25, 2010. This article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/may/25.38.html>

² <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/tv/la-ca-0523-idol-religion-20100523,0,75538...>

³ C. Vaughn & V.E. Gideon, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Broadman, 1979), p. 32.

⁴ C. Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (rpt. Revell, 1979), p. 384.

⁵ M. Barth, *The Anchor Bible: Ephesians II* (Doubleday, 1960), p. 769.

⁶ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield IX* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 302.

⁷ *Collected Writings of John Murray II* (The Banner of Truth, 1981), p. 211.

⁸ M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10-20* (Baker, 1977) p. 230.

⁹ M. Lloyd-Jones, p. 248.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, (Baker, 2008), p. 25

¹¹ E. Hulse, *The Believer's Experience: Maintaining the Scriptural Balance Between Experience and Truth* (Zondervan, 1978), p. 134.