

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### A GREAT BENEDICTION (Part IV)

One very widespread notion is the assumption that all the various religions actually believe in the same God, they simply use different names in reference to the Supreme Being. In addition to this misconception is the equally false presumption that simply acknowledge the idea that God exists constitutes *belief* in God. "Belief in God," says Clouser, "is a wholehearted love for God that commits the believer's entire being to God in unconditional trust."<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen made this important observation, "It is perfectly true, of course, that faith in a person is more than acceptance of a creed, but the Bible is quite right in holding that it *always* involves acceptance of a creed. Confidence in a person is more than intellectual assent to a series of propositions about the person, but it *always* involves those propositions, and becomes impossible the moment they are denied. It is quite impossible to trust a person about whom one assents to propositions that make the person untrustworthy or fails to assent to propositions that make him trustworthy. Assent to certain propositions is not the whole of faith, but it is an absolutely necessary element in faith. So assent to certain propositions about God is not all of faith in God, but it is necessary to faith in God; and Christian faith, in particular, though it is more than assent to a creed, is absolutely impossible without assent to a creed. One cannot trust a God whom one holds with the mind to be either non-existent or untrustworthy."<sup>2</sup> One of the major difficulties that we encounter in our society (and within the rank and file of contemporary evangelicalism)<sup>3</sup> is the growing popularity of mysticism. Among other things, mysticism (especially the type that is around today) exalts experience at the expense of thought. Feelings are what mysticism pursues. But this is not the Biblical way. Machen correctly warned, "In particular, those who discard theology in the interests of experience are inclined to make use of a personal way of talking and thinking about God to which they have no right."<sup>4</sup> James 2:19 tells us, "The devils believe and tremble." Felix, an unbelieving wicked man, did the same (Acts 24:25). How does this differ from what is stated in Isaiah 66:2 and echoed by Paul when he tells us to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), or Peter's words to the same effect to "conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17). David Clarkson (1622-1686), who served as John Owen's assistant pastor, has a penetrating sermon on the absolute necessity of having the righteousness of Christ, declaring: "God is an enemy to every person destitute of Christ's righteousness; he hates him, his wrath is kindled against him, his indignation burns like fire against such a sinner, and will seize on him, and consume him to eternity, if nothing interpose between this wrath and a guilty soul; and nothing can effectually interpose but the righteousness of Christ, nothing can quench this fire but his blood. This enmity between the Lord and a sinner is only abolished by Christ's righteousness, Eph. 2:15, 16. The Lord would never be reconciled to a sinner but by the mediation of this righteousness; no peace for sinners but by virtue of Christ's undertaking, Col. 1:20-22. Every person without this is a woeful slave to Satan, a slave to the vilest thing in the world, to his own lust; no redemption from this slavery but by a ransom; no ransom will be accepted but only Christ's righteousness, 1 Peter 1:18, 19. No way to bring such vile persons into a capacity of being the sons of God, except the Son of God would become a servant, and be made under the law, to fulfil the righteousness of it; and so he did effect it, Gal. 4:4, 5. Thus you see the necessity and usefulness of Christ's righteousness as to our persons; without it no acceptance, no redemption, no reconciliation, no adoption. . . Thus you see the usefulness of Christ's righteousness in respect of grace, for its being, increase, exercise, perseverance. In respect of our obedience and services, and that many ways.

"1. That we have any power or will to tender any service or obedience unto God, it is from Christ's righteousness; therefore, you find obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus joined by the apostle, 1 Peter

1:2. What the apostle saith of prayer, Rom. 8:26, is true of all other duties. We are so far from being able to perform any duty spiritually, that we do not so much as know how to do it; it is the Spirit that helps our infirmities, and the assistance of the Spirit is the effect of Christ's righteousness, Gal. 3:14.

"2. There are many failings and infirmities, such as are sinful, and cannot appear in the pure eye of God, in our best services. In every act of obedience we offend in many respects, in manner, measure, intention, and other circumstances: *In many things we offend all*. Now what shall expiate these offences? Why, nothing is effectual but Christ's righteousness. This seems to be typified in the method of the legal service; the daily sacrifice, which was a sacrifice of expiation (to take away guilt), was offered before any of their other oblations. In vain had the rest been offered had not the Lord provided a propitiatory sacrifice, which by virtue of Christ, the Lamb without spot, thereby typified, did expiate the guilt of their other offerings. There is enough in our best sacrifices to condemn us, if the blood of Christ doth not cleanse, if his righteousness does not expiate them.

"3. As they cannot be expiated, so they cannot be accepted but through the righteousness of Christ; if our services be not mixed with the incense, they will never ascend to God as the savour of a sweet smell.

"Nothing can be well-pleasing unto him but through the mediation of Christ, Heb. 13:20, 21. Though we do the will of God, and do it impartially in every good work, and do it sincerely, be perfect in doing it, yet will not this be well-pleasing in his sight but through Christ, that is, by virtue of his mediation and righteousness."<sup>5</sup>

**I. THE INTERNAL WORK OF GOD'S GRACE IN US.** It is against this rich redemptive background that our author prays that God may *equip you with everything good* – an inelegant translation; NEB, "make you perfect in all goodness," is much better – *that you may do his will*. The new man in Christ is a man restored to the harmonious integrity of his humanity. The new creation is at the same time the recreation; for redemption means reintegration and reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17 ff.). And just as being cannot be divorced from doing, so the creature is redeemed not only to *be* a new man but also to *do* the works that spring from and make manifest the new nature, which means specifically to do God's will, for the performance of the divine will is the proper function of every creature. Yet this "doing" is not the doing of the creature only, but at the same time the doing of the Creator; for it is the God of peace who is said here to be *working*, or doing, *in you that which is pleasing in his sight*. That is to say, the harmony which is restored to man derives from the fact that, thanks to the mediation of our divine-human High Priest – hence the addition, *through Jesus Christ* (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19) – there is a restoration of harmony between man and God.<sup>6</sup> Edward Reynolds (1593-1676) another of the great Puritan preachers, said, "Good works begin not at the hand, but at the heart: we must be *renewed in the spirit of our mind*, and *strengthened by God's Spirit, in the inner man*, as the apostle speaks. He in the philosopher who could not make a dead body stand, gave it over with this conclusion, *oportet ut sit aliquid intus*. We may not judge of ourselves by mere external conformities; the lip or knee may be near, when the heart is afar off. We must try, how our conscience is freed from the allowance – and our will, from the love of sin; what life of grace is in our heart, how our soul stands in awe of God's commandments. The outward act may be dissembled, but no man can love God in hypocrisy. Again, the outward act may be disabled, but nothing can hinder the heart from delighting in God's law. Every man is that in God's eye, which he is in his spiritual capacity. A bodily service, like a body, is dead without a soul to animate and enliven it."<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** I close with the counsel of a modern-day heir of the Puritans, A. W. Pink: "First, let us endeavour to live day by day in the consciousness that all we do is done in the sight of God. Nothing can escape His view. He observes those who break His law, and those who keep it: *The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good* (Prov. 15:3). How it should curb and awe us to realize that God is an observer of every action: *in holiness and righteousness before Him* (Luke 1:75). Second, let this be our great aim and end: to please God. That is sound piety, and nothing else is. Pleasing man is the religion of the hypocrites, but pleasing God is genuine spirituality. More than once does the apostle inculcate this as the right end: *Not as pleasing men, but God; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing* (Col. 1:10). Third, let us see to it that all our works are *so ordered as to be pleasing to God*. In order to this our actions must square with the rule of His Word: only that which is agreeable to His work is acceptable in His sight. But more: it is not sufficient that the substance of what we do be right, but it must issue from a right principle, namely, love to God and faith in Christ; *For without faith*

*it is impossible to please Him* (Heb. 11:6), yet it must be a faith that *worketh by love* Gal. 5:6) – not as forced, but as the expression of gratitude. Finally, as to the *manner* of this: our good works must be done with soberness and all seriousness: *serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear* (Heb. 12:28) – as becometh a menial in the presence of His Majesty. Remember that God actually takes delight in such works and those who do them: Heb. 11:4 – what an incentive unto such!”<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> R. Clouser, *Knowing With the Heart: Religious Experience and Belief In God* (IVP, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> J. G. Machen, *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, in their highly-acclaimed work *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (Jossey-Boss, 1998) documented how widespread this tendency is in much of modern evangelicalism, “These congregations are marked by flexibility. Services may have no fixed order, and they can be held in afternoons or on Saturday. The sermons are more a source of teaching than preaching. They focus on practical matters, such as family concerns and personal growth, not doctrine, sometimes mixing psychotherapeutic concepts with biblical teaching. They often emphasize religious experience. They seek to feel God’s love, not understand church theology – a theme that plays well with the decreasing importance of denominational doctrine among baby boomers”, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of David Clarkson I* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1988), pp. 307-308.

<sup>6</sup> P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary On The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 591.

<sup>7</sup> *The Works of Edward Reynolds V* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), p. 473.

<sup>8</sup> A. W. Pink, *Exposition of Hebrews* (rpt. Baker Books, 1976), p. 1283.