

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

Romans 11:6 – But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

WHERE WE ARE

The last lesson took up the fifth petal (preservation / perseverance of the saints) in its own words. Reformed Theology holds that the believer's faith cannot fail and that his life must show the works, and it makes those works necessary for final salvation. A result that must appear for the promise to hold is a condition and a gospel with a condition added after faith is a works-based gospel, a gospel of another kind, a false gospel.

That requirement does not begin in chapter 17 of the Westminster Confession. It is already present in three words Reformed Theology uses at the front of the gospel: faith, grace, and the Holy Spirit. Each word is redefined or given new content. Faith becomes a quality in the man that yields obedience. Grace becomes a power that must bring about change. The Spirit becomes the guarantee that the change appears. Once those three definitions are in place, the required result is not an addition to Reformed Theology; it follows from the definitions.

A gospel can be preached word for word and still mean something else. We saw that the first four petals leave the offer intact while changing the One who makes it. The redefined terms leave the words of the offer intact while changing what the words ask. "Believe" is still said. "By grace" is still said. "Indwelt by the Spirit" is still said. What the hearer agrees to depends on what those words have been made to carry.

I. FAITH REDEFINED

In their own words. Westminster defines saving faith in two sentences:

By this faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. (WCF 14.2)

Westminster also calls it "*the grace of faith*," a work of the Spirit in the heart that is "*increased and strengthened*" by the ministry of the Word, the sacraments, and prayer (WCF 14.1). Dort states where it comes from: faith is the gift of God "*not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure; but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him*" (Third and Fourth Head, Art. 14). Calvin made room for a "temporary faith" in those who are not elect (Institutes 3.2.11). Grudem defines saving faith as "*trust in Jesus Christ*

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

as a living person for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life with God," and joins it to repentance, which he defines as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ" (Systematic Theology).

Two things are fixed in these statements. Faith has been made a quality in the person rather than that which is believed: it is infused, it acts, it yields obedience, it is strengthened by ordinances, and it can be temporary. And because it is a quality, it can be examined.

What the text affirms. To believe, πιστεύω *pisteuō*, is to be persuaded that something is true. Faith, πίστις *pistis*, a noun, is that which is believed, the content, not the activity of believing. In the Gospel of John, the synonyms for believing are receiving, looking, eating, and drinking (John 1:12; 3:14–15; 6:35). Faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17), and it stands opposite work rather than beside it: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

Abraham supplies the definition in narrative. *"Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness"* (Genesis 15:6). Romans describes that believing: he was *"fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform"* (Romans 4:21). Nothing in the account measures the strength, the fruit, or the endurance of his faith. What is measured is whether he was persuaded that the promise was true.

What is imported. The question put to Abraham, and to the reader of Romans 4, is whether he believed, not whether he believed with a faith of the right kind. When obedience is placed inside the definition of faith, the word "believe" already contains the work requirement. On the terms of Reformed Theology, the hearer who is told to believe the promise is being told to begin a life of obedience that will certify whether he believed. That is not the faith of Abraham, and it is not the faith of Romans 4:5, which is credited as righteousness to the one who does not work.

Ephesians 2:8 is pressed to show that faith itself is the gift infused into the elect. This was previously settled that "that" refers to the whole of salvation by grace through faith, and the grammar agrees: the demonstrative τοῦτο *touto* is neuter and does not take up the feminine πίστις *pistis* by itself. The gift is salvation, received by faith, and it is *"not of yourselves."*

II. GRACE REDEFINED

Reformed Theology is right to oppose merit. It holds that justification is by grace and that no work of man contributes to it, and it is credited for recovering that truth against Rome. The disagreement is over what grace is.

In their own words. In Reformed Theology grace is an operation of God in man. Grace means something God works in a person rather than His favor toward them. The fourth petal already names

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

it: "irresistible grace" is grace understood as a force applied to the will. The same understanding governs the means of grace:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation. (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 88)

Believers are also to be "*diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them*" (WCF 16.3).

Reformed Theology distinguishes a meritorious cause, which earns, from an instrumental cause, which receives. Faith is "the alone instrument of justification" (WCF 11.2), and the Word, sacraments, and prayer are the instruments by which faith is increased and strengthened. On that distinction, the use of the means is obedience and not payment, and it places God under no obligation.

What the text affirms. χάρις *charis* is favor freely given to those who have not earned it. It describes God's disposition and act toward the undeserving, and Scripture sets it against works without exception: "*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace*" (Romans 11:6). Grace is also a place where the believer stands: "*through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand*" (Romans 5:2). The verb ἵστημι *histēmi* stands in the perfect. It describes a standing entered and continuing, not a force at work.

Titus 2:11–12 is the strongest Reformed text on grace. "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.*" The grace that appeared (ἐπιφαίνω *epiphainō*, in the aorist) is the saving grace of God (σωτήριος *sōtērios*, an adjective describing the grace). That grace instructs (παιδεύω *paideuō*). The saving grace of God is the reason for the life described and the motivation to live it. The purpose clause states what the instruction is for. It does not state that the result is guaranteed.

1 Corinthians 15:10 is read the same way. "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*" The setting is the list of witnesses to the resurrection and the calling of the last of the Apostles (15:8–9). God demonstrated grace toward a persecutor for a purpose: to make him an Apostle, a proclaimer of the gospel, and a revealer of the mysteries of God. The same pairing is stated elsewhere: "*grace and Apostleship*" (Romans 1:5); "*a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me*" (Ephesians 3:7). The labor is Apostolic labor, and the grace is "*with me*" (σύν *sun*), alongside the work. Nothing in the verse concerns moralistic life change.

The same verse says grace "*did not prove vain,*" and Scripture treats the opposite as a real possibility among believers: "*And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain*" (2 Corinthians 6:1). The Corinthians are the ones urged. A grace that must bring about

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

change could not be received in vain. Grace that is God's unearned favor can be received and then neglected, and that is why the appeal is made.

What is imported. The distinction answers whether God owes, not whether the man must do. An instrument that is infused, enlarged by ordinances, and certified by fruit is no longer a receiving hand. Scripture, however, does not draw the line at merit. "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due" (Romans 4:4). In Romans the wage, μισθός *misthos*, follows from the working itself, whether or not the work is called meritorious, and Romans 11:6 sets grace against works, not against merit alone. Receiving the sacraments, praying, and being diligent to stir up grace are things done. Faith is not; it is that of which we are persuaded, and Romans 4:5 sets it opposite working. When the ordinances are "made effectual to the elect for salvation" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 88), and the fruit they are meant to bring about is required at the end, a performance has been placed beside faith in the line that leads to salvation. Reformed Theology does not call it a wage, but Romans 4:4 does.

Scripture presents grace as unmerited favor. Reformed Theology makes it a force. A force is known by its effects, and so the man who holds grace as a force must look to his effects to know he has it. *Unmerited favor is known by the One who gives it.*

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT: STATED AND ASSUMED

In their own words. Westminster assigns sanctification to the Spirit dwelling in the believer:

They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness. (WCF 13.1)

Good works are credited wholly to God: "*Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit to work in them to will and to do of his good pleasure*" (WCF 16.3). In Reformed Theology the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of the result. Because He indwells, He must sanctify, and because He must sanctify, the believer's life must show it.

What Scripture states of the Spirit. Scripture states a great deal of what the Holy Spirit does for the believer, and all of it is held without reservation. He seals, σφραγίζω *sphragizō*, the one who believes (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:22). He is given as the pledge, ἀρραβών *arrabōn*, of the inheritance (Ephesians 1:14; 2 Corinthians 5:5). "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). He indwells (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 6:19). "He saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), and the whole clause hangs on one aorist verb, so that the washing and the renewing are one past act. He sets apart (1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2), each time positionally, when the believer was quickened. "The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

What is imported. Reformed Theology adds several things that are not on that list: an infallible progressive sanctification, fruit that must appear, faith sustained so that it cannot fail, and the Spirit as the one who energizes the walk. Each one sounds reasonable. None is stated.

The texts brought forward. Philippians 2:12–13. The language of WCF 16.3 is taken from Philippians 2:13, and Dort uses the same verse for faith: God "who works in man both to will and to do" brings about "both the will to believe and the act of believing also" (Third and Fourth Head, Art. 14). The verse is read as an inward operation that makes the outcome certain.

"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13).

Verse 12 is a command. κατεργάζομαι *katergazomai* stands in the present imperative, and its prefix gives the sense of carrying a thing through to completion. σωτηρία *sōtēria* appears three times in Philippians. In 1:19 it is Paul's deliverance in his imprisonment, and in 1:28 it is set against the opponents' destruction as the church stands for the gospel. The paragraph reaches back to 1:27, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." The church is commanded to carry that deliverance through, living in the mind of Christ, with the reverence due to the Lord before whom every knee will bow.

Verse 13 states what God does. God is the one who works (ἐνεργέω *energeō*, an articular participle describing Him), and what He works is His will and His work, according to His good intention (εὐδοκία *eudokia*). The phrase is ἐν ὑμῖν *en hymin*, "in you," and Westminster and Dort read that inward location as an operation of the Spirit that makes the believer's willing and doing certain. Location is not a mechanism, and it is not a guarantee. The will and the work of God are not hidden or mystical. They are revealed through the Holy Spirit in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and Scripture states them plainly. For example: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29), and "this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). God works His will and His work in the believer through what He has revealed, not as an irresistible cause beneath it. The Holy Spirit is not named in Philippians 2:13. Westminster supplies Him, and with Him an inward mechanism the verse does not state.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

If verse 13 guaranteed the result, the command of verse 12 would be unnecessary, and so would the purpose that follows: "so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent" (2:15). God is already at work, and the believer is commanded to work in light of that truth.

Galatians 5 is the showpiece. "Walk by the Spirit" (5:16) and "the fruit of the Spirit" (5:22) are read as the Holy Spirit forming character in the believer. In 5:16, 18, and 25 πνεῦμα *pneuma* carries no article and no descriptive such as "holy" or "of God." The article does appear in 5:17 and 5:22, and earlier in the letter the Spirit is the Holy Spirit received by faith (3:2; 4:6). The walk commands can still be read of the renewed human spirit set against the flesh, the new man against the old. The dative is a dative of reference, walking in reference to spirit, and "led" in 5:18 (ἄγεσθε *agesthe*) is middle or passive. The fruit is what is borne as the believer walks. The chapter describes the believer's responsibility to put off and to put on. It is not evidence of a work of the Holy Spirit that cannot fail.

The same is true of the other texts. Ephesians 5:18 is "filled in spirit," and the next verse names the means: psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Romans 8:13 and Philippians 2:1 carry no article and no descriptive. The power of Acts 1:8 was promised to the apostles for their witness, and the promises of John 14:26 and 16:13 were given to the eleven. The power of 2 Timothy 1:7, the strength of 2 Timothy 2:1, and the strengthening of Ephesians 3:16 are doctrine and grace understood, not a supernatural endowment, and the Holy Spirit in 2 Timothy 1:14 is the one who supplied the deposit being guarded.

2 Corinthians 3:18. *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."* The Spirit is present in the verse, and the transformation is real. μεταμορφώω *metamorphoō* stands in the present indicative. It is not a command; the command is Romans 12:2. What is transformed is the inner man, by the unveiled sight of Christ in the Word (4:4–6, 16), from present renewal to glory (4:17; 5:1–5), where the Spirit is again named as the pledge. The verse says nothing about conduct, fruit, or a morality the Spirit must bring about.

Ephesians 4:30. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." λυπέω *lupeō* stands in the present imperative. The command assumes the believer can grieve Him. Reformed Theology does not deny that believers sin; it denies that the Spirit's saving work can fail. The verse still does not make the Spirit a guarantee of fruit. The same sentence states the sealing, in the aorist, "for the day of redemption." Grieving is possible, and it does not undo the sealing. The believer's responsibility and the believer's security stand in one verse, and neither is treated as the cause of the other.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 21

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 3

The Same Words, A Different Meaning

IV. FAITH, GRACE, AND THE SPIRIT IN SCRIPTURE

Set side by side, these definitions allow Westminster to confess justification by faith alone and require the evidence of works without any sense of contradiction in their own system, because the works were already written into every term the gospel uses. Scripture uses the same three words without the addition.

Faith is that which is believed. Grace is His unmerited favor. The Spirit is His seal and pledge on the one who believed.

Reformed Theology keeps the words of the gospel and changes their content: faith a quality that yields obedience, grace a power that must bring about change, and the Spirit the guarantee that the change appears. With those definitions beneath it, the fifth petal makes salvation depend on fruit, which is a gospel of works.

Scripture holds all three together in one sentence. The believer has redemption and forgiveness "according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7), and then: "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:13–14). The message was heard, the message was believed, and the believer was sealed. Nothing in the sentence waits on what the believer will become.