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Justification By Faith: What is Faith? Part One by Richard Bacon

***By his knowledge shall my righteous servant
justify many. Isaiah 53:11¹***

We have been studying the person and work of Jesus Christ as his person and work are exhibited here in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. Because verse 11 speaks of justification, specifically of the righteous servant justifying many, we began a series of studies on the doctrine of justification. Our first study was how justification is bound to the person and work of Christ. Our second study was how justification extends throughout the ages, i.e. that it begins in God's decree in eternity past, and it extends into the future beyond time. We also noted that justification is a forensic term, i.e. a legal term. In Romans 8:33-34 we defined justification by looking at its opposite. In that passage we read, "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." These two terms –"justify" and "condemn" – are used as antonyms. If condemn does not mean *to be guilty*, but to be *found guilty*, then also justify does not mean *to be righteous*, but to be *found righteous* in a forensic or legal setting.

We are now going to study three other things that demonstrate how justification and faith are tied together such that justification is said to be by *faith alone*.

I. Background to Justification

A. In Scripture *calling precedes faith*

Calling precedes faith in Scripture. One must be regenerated – he must have a new heart – in order to

believe. We do not believe and then God calls us. Instead, God calls us and *as a result of God's calling*, we believe. We do not mean that God calls us on Tuesday and then we believe on Thursday. When we say "before" or "precedes" we are not talking about time, we are talking about a logical or even causal precedence. We are talking about one thing causing or bringing about the other. Faith does not bring about calling; calling brings about faith. Calling *logically precedes* faith.

Hosea 2:22-23, "And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel. And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God." Who speaks first? First God says, "Thou art my people," and *then* the people answer "Thou art my God." First God has mercy, i.e. first God calls us his people; then we believe, i.e. we answer back he is our God. Hosea 2:22-23 teaches that *calling precedes faith*.

Zechariah 13:9, "And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God." Once again we see this idea of calling. When God calls, "they are my people," the response is "Thou art my God." We are not denying that there was a desire to be *delivered*. The people, according to Zechariah 13:8, did desire to be delivered. But God brought them through the fire and said, "Thou art my people." *Then* they said, "Thou art my God." Once again we see the Bible doctrine that calling precedes faith.

¹ Editor's Note: This text is an edited transcript from a sermon in Pastor Bacon's series on Justification by Faith from Isaiah 53:11.

Psalm 27:8, “When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek.” God called, and then the Psalmist answered.

We are belaboring this point somewhat because its opposite is taught in so many churches and groups today. We must set forth the Scriptural teaching. An error is very much around today: many teach that *first* men call upon God, *then* he hears them and makes them his people. But the Bible teaches otherwise. The Bible teaches that first God calls us and we respond in faith *as a result* of his effectual call.

Jeremiah 3:22, “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God.” First God calls “come unto me,” and then the response is, “Behold we come unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God.”

Romans 8:15-16, “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.” This New Testament verse teaches that we first receive the Spirit of adoption – first God sheds his Spirit of adoption into our hearts – and *then* we are enabled to cry, “Abba Father.”

This doctrine opposes the teaching that you hear at many so-called “evangelistic rallies” today. Yet, however much the biblical teaching may clash with what we have heard in the past, we *must* adhere to what Scripture says. That must be our basic commitment. If the Bible says it, that is what we believe, no matter how outrageous it may *seem* to us. In fact, the reason that some doctrines may seem outrageous to us is that our minds are at enmity with God. Our minds have to be cured and healed *by the Word of God*. We have to submit to God in all things.

B. Yet Scripture emphasizes throughout that we are saved through *faith alone*

Calling precedes faith in Scripture, yet Scripture emphasizes throughout that we are saved by faith alone. *Merely being called does not save us.* We are saved through faith.

In Genesis 15, the Word of the Lord came to Abram. In verse 5 we read, “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.” Abraham was not a young man at that point in his life. Abraham was 75 years old,

but he *believed* God. Verse 6, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” He “counted it to him.” Another way of saying that would be that he “imputed it to him,” or that he “regarded it for him” as *righteousness*. In this passage we see Abraham receiving God’s righteousness *by faith*. Galatians chapter three teaches us that we are the offspring of Abraham *if we believe God* as Abraham did.

In Romans chapter four, Abraham is set forth as the example of how *we* are justified. Verse 1 asks, “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?” What did Abraham discover about this subject of justification by faith as opposed to being justified by the works of the law? Verses 2-4 answer, “For if Abraham were justified by works,” – and the implication here is *if he were*, but he *was not* – [then]“he hath *whereof* to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture?” Paul next quoted Genesis 15:6. “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” If Abraham *had been able* to do some work that his justification was *conditioned* upon, then God would have *owed* Abraham something. Abraham could then say to God, I have met your condition; now justify me.” But verse 5 continues, “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” God imputes the righteousness of Christ *to us* through faith and this faith is counted for righteousness. That is exactly how *Abraham was justified* and Paul tells us in Romans 4 that also is *how we are justified*. Scripture throughout teaches that justification is *always* by faith, and always has been by faith.

Scripture emphasizes throughout that we are justified by faith alone. We are justified by faith not because there is some *worthiness* in our faith; not because our faith is somehow strong enough, or great enough, or high enough, but rather because it lays hold upon that *one who is worthy*. The *object of our faith* is that which has the worthiness. It is not the worthiness of our faith that saves us, but the fact that our faith is placed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the *object of our faith that saves*, not the faith itself.

Think of a frozen river. When we go out on the ice, that ice may be as thin as less than an inch or as thick as several feet. Looking only at the top of the ice, we do not know how thick it is. We could base our faith on the ice

and try to walk across it. What if the ice is a mere millimeter thick? It does not matter *how much* confidence we have; it does not matter if we swagger out onto that ice. If we place our faith in an object that is unable to hold us up, we will fall through no matter how much faith we have. On the other hand, if we try to walk across that same river when the ice is two feet thick, the ice will hold us up! We *may not know* how thick that ice is. We may go onto the ice with great fear and trembling, perhaps crawling out on our hands and knees an inch at a time with very little faith at all in the ice... and yet with enough faith to be out there on it. It is not because of the greatness of our faith that we are held up. It is because we have placed our faith in ice that is thick enough to hold us up. It is the *strength of the ice* and *not the strength of our faith* that holds us up.

So then it is not *how much* faith we have; it is not *the strength of faith*; it is not *how glorious* our faith is; rather it is *the object of our faith* that is important. With respect to justification it is all important. The idea of faith is often presented to us in such a way that we might be said to have faith in faith. Not so. *The object of our faith must be Jesus Christ.* We must have faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The principle act of faith is receiving and resting on *Christ alone* as he is offered to us in the gospel.

We said that effectual calling precedes faith. First God calls us his children and then we call upon him. So how can we say that justification is by faith? It is not the worthiness of our faith that causes God to impute righteousness to us. It is not because our faith is strong enough or good but because of the worthiness of *what faith lays hold on* that God imputes righteousness to us. It is not just any kind of faith that is counted as righteousness. It is *faith as it lays hold on Christ* by which righteousness is imputed to us. Colossians 2:15-17, "And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

In these verses Paul disallowed our dependence upon ritual as having an ability to *make* us righteous. He explained that even those things that God instituted in the Old Testament were not there to give righteousness. The rituals of the Old Testament were only to point to

Christ. They were the *shadow* that Christ's righteousness *cast* upon the Old Testament. As the Old Testament saints lived in that shadow they understood that faith was required to *grasp hold of Christ* and of his righteousness. We must not think that faith has worthiness in itself. If faith had its own worthiness, it would *not matter* what we believed. It is only as *Christ is the object* of our faith that righteousness is imputed to us.

Galatians 3:5-11, "He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" Does the Spirit work by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith? "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Paul again quoted Genesis 15:6. "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." No one is the child of Abraham if his faith does not embrace Jesus Christ as the *object of his faith.* "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before *the gospel* unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in *all* things which are written in the book of the law to do them." How many of God's laws do you have to break to be subject to the death penalty? Just one! "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is evident:* for, The just shall live by faith." There Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4.

Galatians 3:22-24 continues, "But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise *by faith of Jesus Christ* might be given to them that believe." Notice that our *Authorized Version* follows the Greek at this point by saying the faith "*of*" Jesus Christ. The modern translations recognize the genitive there, but they translate it as faith "*in*" Jesus Christ. It is important that we understand that Jesus Christ is not only the *object of our faith*, he is also *the source or producer of our faith.*² Verse 23, "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be *justified by faith.*" Thus we have seen that even though calling precedes faith, the Scriptures do in fact teach that justification is

² Scholars differ considerably concerning this phrase. It is not our intention to determine the issue of whether a subjective or objective genitive is used in this verse.

by faith, or through faith, or out of faith alone. *But* we must understand that faith is *totally non-meritorious*. It is not another work. It is not “evangelical obedience.” It is not some kind of meritorious obedience to God. Faith is altogether *non-meritorious*. The term “non-meritorious” means that there is *nothing about it* that God is obligated to reward.

C. Faith is not a *condition* of our justification

We have seen that faith is *non-meritorious*. Not only is faith not a work, neither is faith a condition as the Arminian avers. God does not say that he will justify *if* we believe, and then wait to see *whether* we will believe. It is not as though God adds something to the bargain and we add something to the bargain, and God is waiting to see if we are going to come up with *our part*. Faith is not a condition any more than it is a meritorious work. Many today allege that faith is a condition of justification. Yet we maintain that if it were the case that faith were a condition of justification, then the implication would be that faith is something that we must come up with on our own. We cannot. We cannot believe by our own power. Faith is not conditional in the sense that God waits for us to generate some faith. How can justification be by faith, through faith, out of faith and yet not be *conditioned* upon faith? In order to understand that, we must look at what faith is. If faith is something that we can generate from within ourselves, then it is a *work*. If faith is something that we can generate from within ourselves, then it is a *condition*. It *would* then be something that deserved a reward. *But* if faith is something that God gives us as the first fruit of our calling, then faith is *not* something that depends upon me either as a work *or* as a condition. Rather, faith is the first virtue that God gives me in the Christian life, *from which all other Christian virtues then flow*.

II. What is faith?

We often are told, “You just have to believe!” Faith is often portrayed like the story from the book *Alice Through The Looking Glass*. There the White Queen tells Alice that she must believe that which is impossible. Alice answers that one *cannot* believe that which is impossible. The White Queen replies, of course we can: we, you just need more practice. “I can believe three impossible things before breakfast,” she claimed.

Is that true? Can we believe that which is impossible? Are we *called upon* to believe that which is

impossible? If faith is *not* “believing what you know is not so,” then what is faith?

The Bible defines faith for us in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

A. Sometimes the term “faith” is used to mean fidelity

Sometimes the word “faith” is used to mean fidelity. Records used to be called “hi fidelity recordings.” That meant that the recording was *very faithful* to the original artist. It sounded very much like the true voice of the singer. At least, that was the implied claim. Faith is sometimes used in the sense of fidelity, or faithfulness. The term “faith” is used for “doing that which we said we would do.” That is how God can have faith. Romans 3:3, “For what if some did not believe?” That is, what if some of the Jews did not believe? “Shall their unbelief make the *faith of God* without effect?” How can God have faith? Can God depend upon another? In this particular instance, faith is used to mean “fidelity” or “faithfulness.” To reword the verse, it would say, “What if they did not believe, shall their unbelief make the *faithfulness or fidelity of God* without effect?”

Sometimes this faith of God refers to the foundation of his justice. Will God be faithful to his Word? Will he do *what he said he would do*? Will he be faithful? Even if people are unbelieving, God will still have faith. God will be faithful. The fact that we know God will be faithful – that what he has said he will do – forms the very foundation for our understanding of his justice (Numbers 23:19; Romans 4:20-21; etc.).

B. Sometimes faith stands for the objective truth which we believe

Sometimes faith is even used as a synecdoche for the truth itself. The word “faith” is used objectively as the truth itself. Galatians 1:23, “But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth *the faith* which once he destroyed.” What was *the faith* that Paul preached? Was he simply preaching “have faith?” No. The word “faith” as it is in this verse meant that he was preaching *the objective truth* of Christianity. Sometimes the phrase “*the faith*” is used to mean objectively that truth which *must be believed*. Jude 3 refers to “*the faith* which was once delivered unto the saints.” Jude was referring to the objective truth of the gospel. The same thing is true in Galatians 3:25, “But

after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.” Also, 1 Timothy 1:19, “Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck.” When we discuss the fact that “faith” means the truth, we can be talking *objectively* about the truth itself, or we can be talking *subjectively* about our assent to the truth. We must carefully distinguish which use is in view.

C. Some faith is not justifying faith

Not all faith is *justifying* faith. Scripture speaks of several kinds of faith. There is historical faith, temporary faith, miraculous faith, even demonic faith. None of which save. If there are many kinds of faith that are not justifying faith—and there are—and if we are justified by *some kind* of faith—and we are—then it becomes important that we *know* what is that *faith that justifies*. Let us first examine kinds of faith that *do not justify*.

1. Historical Faith

The first kind of non-justifying faith is a simple historical assent that there is one God. The devils believe that. They even tremble, yet they are not justified. James 2:19, “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” The devils believe, but their “faith” is not a justifying faith. It is an assent to the truth that there is one God, but it is not a justifying faith in God. This is called an *historical faith*. An historical faith might simply be a faith that believes something happened or exists, but that is not necessarily a justifying faith. It is not a trusting or a fiduciary faith. An historical faith believes a report. It believes the testimony, but it does not necessarily place a confidence in Christ.

2. Temporary faith

The second is often characterized as a *temporary faith*. In Matthew 13:20-21, in the parable of the sower and the seed, some of the seed fell into stony places. “The same is he that heareth the word, and anon” [that is shortly] “with joy receiveth it. Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while.” Note he does not “endure,” but just “dures” for a while. “For when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.” Does he believe at all? Yes, for awhile. *Temporarily*, he believes. But a *temporary* faith, a faith that comes and goes, a faith that leaves us in times of persecution, is not a justifying faith.

3. Miraculous faith

The third type of faith is a miraculous faith. A miraculous faith believes in or even performs miracles. It is a faith that trusts in miracles and signs, but is not a justifying faith. An example is 1 Corinthians 13:2, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” In the time of the apostles, there was a faith by which Judas performed miracles. But it was not a justifying faith. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9, we are told that Antichrist is even able to perform lying wonders such that he can deceive those who love not the truth. Yet, we do not believe that Antichrist has a justifying faith.

4. Justifying faith requires a commitment

A commitment is required for justifying faith. John 2:23-25, “Now when he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, *many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.*” They too had a faith based on believing the miracles that Christ performed. “But Jesus *did not commit himself unto them*, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.” In our Authorized Version we have the word “commit” here in verse 24. In the Greek Testament we have the same basic Greek root word, both for “believe” in verse 23 and for “commit” in verse 24. They believed him, but he did not commit himself to them. Regardless of what historical or miraculous faith they may have had, *it was not justifying because Jesus did not commit himself to them.* I want you to see that the idea of the word “believe” and the word “commit” are virtually interchangeable. We must understand that the root idea of faith, of belief, is *commitment*. When we read that God “had faith” in Romans 3:3, it was a commitment to his own Word: that what he said, he will do; what he has promised, he will perform. It is a fiduciary faith. Latin scholars will recognize the word for “faith” in the word “fiduciary.” It is God’s faithfulness that causes us to characterize him as having faith. So it is in the faith that God gives us there are certain actions that arise from faith. These actions are the *products* of our commitment, or faith. Ω

To Be Continued.

Everything Old is New Again:

by Richard Bacon

[A Review of *The Arrogance of the Modern* by Pastor David W. Hall (Oak Ridge, TN: The Calvin Institute), \$21.95 retail viii+308 pp. Available through The Covenant Foundation, 190 Manhattan Ave. Oak Ridge TN 37830.]

One of the rallying cries of the 1960s student radicals was “trust no one over [the age of] 30.” Basically anyone who had lived during the “great depression” was automatically suspect. Their motives were not the same as those of the flower children (meaning, of course, that they were not as pure); their goals were different from those of the post war — or post depression — generation (the generation that lived during the depression was the last frugal generation that this nation produced); their axiology (system of values) was also different. The drug culture radicals would eventually “tune in, turn on, and drop out.” Then they would elect Bill Clinton President of the United States.

Though it may seem unlikely, the same sort of disdain for the wisdom of the past that characterized the “flower power” subculture of the 1960s also characterizes much of evangelical Christianity today. It must be acknowledged that there is a tension that exists between old and new. We must respect that which has gone before, but we must not idolize it. We must recognize the extent to which previous generations of the church spoke clearly and truly to their generations, but we must also recognize the necessity of speaking to our own generation and not a generation long dead.

Another caution when looking to the past is not to overvalue history in a way that leads to the opposite error of thinking, “everything old is good and true.” First, not everyone who is dead was necessarily in the right. Second, even those who were in the right in *some* things may not have been in *others*. This is an error being made by some that overreact to the “arrogance of the modern.” Thus it is not so uncommon to witness Evangelicals and even some Protestants being deluded by the siren-song of Romanism and Eastern “Orthodoxy.”¹

It may be the case that the Roman Church is *semper eadem*² (though this reviewer would argue otherwise), but if her historical consistency lies in continuing to teach soul-damning error, we must avoid her for the whore of Babylon that she is. For example, we might rejoice that G. K. Chesterton left his agnosticism if it were not for the fact that he simply traded one path to Hell for another. Hall quotes Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* on p. 48, “Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church.” This sounds like a truly Christian sentiment until we stop to realize that the “church” to which Chesterton referred was *not* the bride of Revelation chapter nineteen, or even less to the persecuted woman of Revelation chapter twelve, but to the harlot church of Revelation chapter seventeen!

The warning for us is that not only does the new contain much that we should avoid — so does the old! We must not venerate the old simply because it has a beard. We must hold fast to that which is true, regardless of its age. We must remember that one of the charges leveled against the first century Christians was that they wanted to forsake the “old ways.”³

Lest I be misunderstood—or Mr. Hall be misunderstood—it is important to point out that Pastor Hall does *not* advocate an unswerving allegiance to a particular tradition as though that tradition were the “last word” on Christianity. We know of some who *do* so hold, however, and it is important that we not think we can attach the prefix “paleo” to something and thereby make it one of the “things which are most surely believed among us” (Luke 1:1). Tradition is quite important—as Pastor Hall and I would both agree—so long as the tradition is not *merely* “from the elders,” but from *Scripture alone*.

The true Protestant is aware of a constant tension to accept a tradition because it is biblical or apostolic and to reject tradition which merely has a long history to commend it. To say simply “the church has always done

¹ This is not the place to relate the sad tales of men such as Scott Hahn and “Franky” Schaeffer, but there has been a considerable return to Rome and Eastern “Orthodoxy” among Evangelicals and Evangelical pastors over the past twenty or so years.

² “Always the same”

³ Matthew 15:2; Acts 6:14; Acts 15:5; etc.

it this way” is merely another way of saying “the majority is always right.” Not incidentally, that forms the basis for Chesterton’s defense of his “Orthodoxy.” We must regard something as orthodox which is biblically orthodox, though like Athanasius we stand alone “against the world.” At the same time we must reject that which is biblically unorthodox even though it may have a certain antiquity to commend it.

Pastor Hall suggests that what he calls “feeling-ism” has only recently crept into the church even though it has a long history in Paganism. As we examine the history of Christianity, however, we need look no further than the second-century heresy of Montanism to find precisely the kind of authority-despising subjectivism that pervades modern “Evangelicalism.” The same sort of content-less faith has also been found in the fringe movements of Christianity through twenty centuries. Such subjectivism or individualism is more widespread in this country and in this century, at least in part, because neither side was orthodox in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that helped to define Christianity in this century.

Most Evangelicals in America are the spiritual descendants of Fundamentalists. But the Fundamentalists were and are also infected with what Hall calls “the arrogance of the modern.” When the so-called “Five Fundamentals” of Christianity failed to include such foundational doctrines as the Holy Trinity and justification by faith alone, evangelical Christianity opened the door to Rome. As a result, many Evangelicals today are deceived into thinking that Rome teaches “justification by faith” just as we do. “You poor Protestants have simply misunderstood us all these years,” claims Rome.

Of course it is true that Rome teaches a doctrine of justification by faith. The problem is that Rome means something different than we do by the term “justification,” something different than we do by the term “faith,” and something different than we do by the term “by.”

The underlying problem of much of modernity (as opposed to mere modernism) is its reluctance to believe that anybody has had much of importance to say until recently (“don’t trust anybody over 30”). Hall does a good job of pointing out this tendency and even of documenting it. For example, he points out in his chapter on hermeneutics the fact that much harm can be

done by self-appointed interpreters who have little notion of the *history* of the interpretation of an idea, a book of the Bible, or a Bible passage. I cannot count the number of times I have wanted to scold some young pastor or seminarian by telling him, “at least read the literature on the subject before boring me with your opinion.” Hall gives several illustrations of how modern exegesis has come unstuck from the history of Reformed commentaries.

The second half of Hall’s book seems to be the author’s attempt to apply what he taught us in the first half. Basically Pastor Hall demonstrates that some very important Christians of the past have had some very important things to say about politics. For those unfamiliar with Groen Van Prinsterer (1801 – 1876), Hall has a nice but short introduction to his life and work. The chief value of Van Prinsterer’s work, in this reviewer’s opinion, lies in its demonstration that axiology (our theory of values) is foundational to praxis (what we do). Hall covers this subject well, though quickly.

In the original copy of Hall’s book given to this reviewer, the final chapter was missing and the next to last chapter was incomplete.⁴ A subsequent copy had the final chapter and several useful indices. The book is well built and has an attractive cover. It is refreshing to see a trade paperback that does not have pictures of some unrelated scene on the cover, but simply uses the title as sufficient graphics for the cover. If you are used to paying for college textbooks and for short-run trade paperbacks, the retail price of \$21.95 will probably not put you off.

This reviewer is not quite so “optimistic” regarding present-day Evangelicalism as Hall seems to be. One may hope that at least for the Evangelicals within Hall’s Presbyterian Church in America maybe there truly is a returning to “the old paths.”⁵ However, among Evangelicals in general there is very little understanding of the historical Christian gospel, much less a general returning to the old paths of worship and doctrine.

The chief shortcoming of this book lies in its broad sweep. Hall says little with which we would disagree. It

⁴ [Ed. Pastor Hall assured the editor that this is the first defective copy he has heard about. If there is an index, then the purchaser has a complete printing.]

⁵ Though that seems doubtful, given the fact that the most conservative and history conscious within the PCA are now having to hold the line at six-day creation.

would be helpful to see a more careful caveat regarding G. K. Chesterton. However, we would like to see a more detailed discussion of how those who do have a respect for history might help the "arrogant" learn a similar respect.

Perhaps when we see Presbyterian Churches again singing the Psalms in Sunday worship; perhaps when we see presbyteries requiring candidates for ordination to demonstrate integrity in their ordination vows; perhaps when we see Presbyterian seminaries teaching the original intent of confessional standards; perhaps when we see those same seminaries spending more time teaching axiology than praxis; perhaps *then* we will be convinced that there is once again a genuine regard in this land for history and for history's God. Ω

The Eldership of Matthew 18:17 & 1 Cor. 5:4

Richard Bacon

I have attempted to bring out the Scottish arguments surrounding Matthew 18:17 being the session acting as the ministerial church with the keys. I follow closely Samuel Rutherford's *A Peaceable Plea for Paul's Presbytery in Scotland* (1642)

Do 1 Corinthians 5:4 and Matthew 18:15-20, separately or together, refer to the church consisting of all professors of Christ or only to a ministerial assembly consisting of the church guides or governors (i.e. "elders")? We Presbyterians answer the latter, for the church of all professors is nowhere in Scripture given the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose. We answer the latter, for the church of professors is nowhere in Scripture said to "synagogue with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ" to settle authoritatively disputes between brothers or to cast out and "deliver to Satan" for the destruction of the flesh. But the assembly spoken of in Matthew 18:15-20 and in 1 Corinthians 5:4 has the power to bind on earth and to deliver authoritatively a sinning and convicted church member to Satan. Therefore the assembly spoken of in these two places must be the ministerial assembly of those who *do* have the keys to bind and loose and those who *do* have the "power of our Lord Jesus Christ" to deliver church members to Satan, viz. the church guides or governors (i.e. "elders").

Let us examine Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:4 to see what we shall:

1. The language of Matthew 18 alludes to the synedry and consistory of the Jews of which Christ's hearers were well acquainted.
 - 1.1 The terms, "brother, witnesses, synedry, assembly, congregation, heathen, and publican" are all terms which were peculiar to the Sanhedrin of the Jews.
 - 1.2 Thus Beza commenting on this place, "who would understand Christ here to speak of a Christian presbytery, that has power to excommunicate, except we [first] consider that Christ has a respect in this form of speech to the Jews' church polity."
 - 1.3 Excommunication is expressed in Jewish terms familiar with the usage of that day -- "let him be to thee as a Gentile," i.e. a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel . . . not one of the visible church of that day.
 - 1.4 The multitude of that day did not judge judicial causes and therefore it would be a foreign imposition upon the words to see the church as the entire congregation.
2. The church in a particular place gathers for prayer, preaching, and sacraments; but not for rebuking or judging.
 - 2.1 None but pastors, and certainly none of the women, were to speak in the assembly of all professors.
 - 2.2 But rebuking and judicial censuring where there is binding and loosing requires that many others speak in turn, in addition to the pastors.
 - 2.2.1 Surely the accused, even though it may be a woman, must be able to speak in his or her own defense. This is a basic right which none but the tyrannical would deny.
 - 2.2.2 No binding and loosing is possible apart from the testimony of witnesses, so witnesses must be permitted to speak in this assembly.
 - 2.2.3 The offended party (plaintiff) must be allowed to present his or her case and so speaking must be allowed to the accuser as well.
 - 2.2.4 If the scandal should be between woman and woman, and if all the witnesses were women, then the predominant portion of speaking in this assembly may be by women.
 - 2.3 Therefore the assembly of Matthew 18:17 and the synagogue of 1 Corinthians 5:4 cannot be the same as the assembly for worship because different rules apply to each and if there are different rules then there must be different assemblies.
3. The church spoken of here is a judicial seat and ought to be obeyed in the Lord.
 - 3.1 This assembly has power to excommunicate.

3.2 One man cannot excommunicate another except he be a judge (1 Samuel 2:25).

3.3 The people are *required* to hear (obey) the judges (Deuteronomy 17:8-13).

3.4 The elders are in the place of Christ with respect to judging (Luke 10:16 cp. 1 Corinthians 5:4).

3.5 Even in the matter of private and personal discernment the apostle John distinguished between "you" (members) and "we" (elders or church guides).

3.6 But just as one private person cannot excommunicate another, he does not increase or create a power of excommunication by convincing a multitude of private persons of the rightness of his cause.

3.7 Therefore neither one private professor, nor a multitude of them, has authority to excommunicate apart from warrant from God to bind and loose.

3.8 The result of the opposite view would be that church governors are under the authority of those whom they govern. But such a thing is ludicrous on the very surface of it.

4. Whatever assembly (*a maiore ad minorem*) has the authority to excommunicate also has authority to inflict all lesser censures.

4.1 But all the members together cannot inflict the lesser censures.

4.2 A woman may not publicly rebuke her husband, no matter if all the assembly agree with her.

4.3 A son may not publicly rebuke his father, though all the assembly agree with him (except the son be in some other position than a son to do so).

4.4 A servant may not rebuke his master, etc.

4.5 Therefore those who are under an authority may not rebuke those who are in authority over them (1 Timothy 5:1, 19-20).

4.5.1 But if the assembly of professors has not the right to rebuke, neither has it the right to excommunicate.

5. Those to whom the essence and definition of a ministerial church having power to excommunicate belong (understood by the term "church" in Matthew 18:17) are the [few as] "two or three" in verse 20.

5.1 But an assembly of professors, howsoever large it may be, has not the power of the keys of the kingdom.

5.2 Therefore the church of Matthew 18:17 is not a church consisting of a multitude of professors, but one consisting of as few as two or three though they have the power of binding and loosing in Christ's name.

5.3 From this passage we adduce the definition of a ministerial church, viz. an assembly that has the power of

preaching, of binding and loosing, and so of church censures.

5.3.1 Then this assembly has also authority to convene and to summon, to admit and to bar from church privileges.

6. The power of the keys is not given to all professors alike or assembled because such a church is not a ministerial church having the power to preach or to bind and loose.

7. The referent for the term "church" in Matthew 18:17 is the body to which complaint should be made.

7.1 But one cannot complain (*eipon*, i.e. *lego*) to a multitude.

7.2 Therefore the multitude is not the referent for the term in v. 17.

8. The practice of the apostolic church was not to complain to the multitude.

8.1 The household of Chloe, when grieved by those at Corinth, complained to Paul (1 Corinthians 1:11).

8.2 Paul did not correct their action, but seems to have regarded it as proper.

8.3 The action of the household of Chloe, then, in telling the church, was correctly understood as telling the governor(s) of the church.

8.4 Rebuke and correction from an authoritative governor(s) was needed.

8.5 This rebuking authoritatively is given to the eldership (Titus 1:13, etc.), but never to all professors.

8.6 Therefore the rebuking church and excommunicating church must be the church of the elders or the ministerial church.

9. The church here in Matthew 18:17 is those to whom the keys of the kingdom are given (see Matthew 16:18-19 for the parallel on binding and loosing with the keys).

9.1 The keys were given to Peter (Matthew 16:19) and then to all the apostles (John 20:21-22).

9.2 But Christ has not sent every professor or believer, but only the apostles and elders (Matthew 28:18ff cp. John 20:21-22).

9.3 Thus not every believer or professor has the keys.

9.4 This is also the teaching of Theophilact, Chrysostom, Cyril, Augustine, Jerome, and Cyprian on John 20:21, Psalm 44, and in their epistles.

10. The objection is weak which maintains that the term "church" is never taken for anything but a body of professors or believers.

10.1 The word, admittedly, is but seldom used for the overseers only, yet it is done so.

10.2 This fact is seen best in the letters to the churches at various places in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

10.2.1 It is in this sense only that the "angel" of the church may be called "the address" of the church. God speaks to the church through the angel of the church.

10.2.2 Though the entire church at each place is commended or chided, yet each church is addressed by its minister or angel.

10.2.3 Therefore the angel must authoritatively deliver the words of Christ to the congregation of professors at each place, though in many instances the assembly of professors consists of both wicked and righteous together.

10.3 In the Old Testament the several words as "Qahal, 'Edah, or Ecclesia" do sometimes signify princes or rulers, as Ps. 82:1; Nu. 35:24; cp. Josh. 20:4; Deut. 11:12, 16-17 cp. Josh. 9:6, 15; Sam.I 7:7 cp. 1 Chron. 17:6; 10.3.5 Ex. 20:18-19; cp. Deut. 5:23; Ex. 4:29 cp. 30:31; 1 Chron. 28:1-2; cp. 1 Chron. 29:1

10.4 Judges and priests in Israel could pass sentence without consent of the people (Deut. 1:16-17; 17:8-13) and yet Israel was a nation of "Kings and Priests" to God as well as the church today (Ex. 19:5-6; Ps. 149:1-2).

11. The church which the plaintiff must tell must be one which is empowered by the Lord to admonish, rebuke, or excommunicate the offending person.

11.1 But only the elders are so empowered by the Lord.

11.1.1 Those who are over us in the Lord are also the ones who admonish us (1 Thessalonians 5:12ff).

11.1.2 The elders who rule well (1 Timothy 5:17) are also subject to rebuke (1 Timothy 5:20), but only after due process (1 Timothy 5:19).

11.1.3 Those who "hear" the elders are "hearing" Christ (Luke 10:16).

11.2 Therefore it is the church of elders which is to receive public accusations and to rebuke publicly, as Titus 1:13; 1 Timothy 5:1 cp. vv. 19-20; 2 Timothy 4:2.

12. If Christ in Matthew 18:17 intends the church of professors, then a company of professing women and children may censure and even excommunicate their elders.

12.1 But the consequent is altogether unknown in the word of God.

12.1.1 Private believers, much less women and children, cannot judge the watchmen and those who are over them in the Lord.

12.1.2 In the Old Testament prior to the existence of the nation of Israel, only head of families excommunicated. Genesis 21:10-13.

12.1.3 The priest, not the people, judged the leper. Leviticus 13:3-5; Deuteronomy 24:8-9; Numbers 5:1.

12.1.4 In the New Testament only the Apostles and Elders ordained pastors and officers. Acts 6:6; 13:3; 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 1:5.

12.2 If the two or three witnesses happen to be an independent church, then the two or three in Matthew 18:16 must be the same as the two or three in Matthew 18:20.

12.2.1 But then the plaintiff would be telling the church (v. 16) before he tells the church (v. 17) and there would be no difference between these things.

12.2.2 Thus if the two or three of v. 20 be the church of professors, then the order of Christ has been violated.

12.2.3 But the matter has never properly come before the church (v. 17) because the two or three witnesses have not the authority to bind and loose (else v. 16 would be the final step of this process).

13. The issue in Matthew 18:17 is not that a church of believers be told so that they may believe, but that a church of judges be told that they may judge.

13.1 It would place too many interpretations on the passage to claim that v. 17 refers both to the church of professors and to the church of elders.

13.2 The same church to which the plaintiff must give in his complaint is the same church, therefore, which must be heard by the accused.

13.3 It is an unfair and tyrannical imposition that a brother be cast out of the visible church for not hearing and obeying a congregation who are not scripturally *proistamenoī*, over him in the Lord.

14. The church of believers or professors is commanded to synagogue for worship, but the church of 1 Corinthians 5:4 is commanded to synagogue for discipline.

14.1 There was no need for Paul's "spirit" for professors to meet together for worship (1 Corinthians 11, etc.), but such a requirement existed for the church which convened in accord with 1 Corinthians 5:4.

14.1.1 If any two or three professors suffice as the church which receives complaints in Matthew 18:17-20, then Christ has not provided a sure way to remove scandals. The plaintiff and defendant are both left not knowing who their judge(s) may be if it were the case that *any* two or three may suffice. Even in a single congregation of professors there may be dozens or scores of "two or three" professors.

14.1.2 How many key-bearing churches, then, shall be within the same congregation could only be known by dividing the congregation into groups of two or three. Ω

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