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Calvin in the Hands of the Philistines: Or Did Calvin Bowl on the Sabbath.

by Chris Coldwell

*Thus it is that history is falsified and good men slandered
(David Hay Fleming)*

PART TWO

[Editor's Note: This is the second part of an article tracing the origins of the legend that John Knox once visited Calvin during a game of bowls on a Lord's day. Part one (see the August 1998 issue) summarized Calvin's opinion of Sabbath recreations, and surveyed the 20th century use of the tale. The series will be completed (D.V.) in future issues of *The Blue Banner*. The whole article is available on the Internet at www.fpcr.org or at the Naphtali Press web site in Adobe pdf format, www.naphtali.com.]

2. The 19th Century – The anecdote appears in literature.

While it is possibly an old tale in some form or fashion, it is not till the 19th century that the bowling anecdote debuts in English literature, in Isaac Disraeli's *Life of Charles the First*.³⁸ From there it found its way into the Sabbath literature of the mid-19th century, and as shown, has continued to be regularly referenced since that time.

David Hay Fleming

Early in the 20th century, David Hay Fleming pointed out some of the ways this doubtful tale was spread. In his *Knox in the Hands of the Philistines*, Hay Fleming reviewed William Law Mathieson's *Politics and Religion: a Study in Scottish History from the Reformation to the Revolution* (Glasgow, 1902). It seems those who would put their hands to twist Calvin to support their bias

³⁸ Isaac Disraeli (1766-1848) *Commentaries of the life and reign of Charles I* (London, 1828-31, 5 vols.).

toward a looser view of Sabbath-keeping were not bashful about attempting the same with the Scottish Reformer. Hay Fleming writes:³⁹

Mr. Mathieson has a strong antipathy to what he calls 'grim Sabbatarianism;' and, in attempting to show that Knox was not imbued with it, he has betrayed the superficial nature of his own acquaintance with the history of the period. He says: "Knox on Sunday evening visited Calvin during a game of bowls, and with several other guests enjoyed the hospitality of Randolph." His authority for this statement is Dean Stanley's *Lectures on the History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 99. On turning to Dean Stanley, it will be found that his words are: "He supped with Randolph on one Sunday evening, and visited Calvin during a game of bowls on another;" and that the Dean's authority is *Hessey's Bampton Lectures*, v. 269, 270.40 On examining the passage in Hessey thus indicated, it will be found that Knox did not partake of Randolph's hospitality, but that he and the Duke [of Chatelherault] partook of Knox's. So far as the question of Sabbath observance is concerned, it is immaterial in whose house they met; but if Mr. Mathieson had been acquainted with Randolph's letter, which has been printed *in extenso* both by Stevenson and Wright, he would have escaped this error, and would probably have hesitated before he adduced this little supper-party as a proof of Knox's disregard for the Sabbath. Had he turned up Hessey he would have found that Dean Stanley has magnified the bowling incident. Hessey's words are: "Knox was the intimate friend of Calvin – visited Calvin, and, *it is said*, on one occasion found him enjoying the recreation of bowls on Sunday." As his authority Hessey quotes Disraeli as saying: "At Geneva a tradition exists, that when John Knox visited Calvin on a Sunday, he found his austere coadjutor bowling on a green." Neither by Hessey nor Disraeli is it implied that Knox expected to find Calvin so engaged; and for the story there is no higher authority than late local tradition. Both Dean Stanley

³⁹ *Critical Reviews Relating Chiefly to Scotland*, "Knox in the Hands of the Philistines" (London, 1912), pp. 190-192.

⁴⁰ Hay Fleming refers to James Augustus Hessey's *Sunday, Its Origin, History, and Present obligations considered in eight lectures* (London, 1860), pp. 270.

and Mr. Mathieson have been far outstripped by a learned Scotsman, who, in a recent article, introduced the statement that Knox occasionally took part in a round of golf on Sabbath afternoon. On being asked for his authority, the writer frankly acknowledged that he had none; but declined to delete the statement, because, as he thought, it helped to lighten an article which was too technical to be generally interesting! Thus it is that history is falsified and good men slandered.

Mathieson and Stanley opposed what Mathieson referred to as *grim Sabbatarianism*. To recast Knox to their point of view, they distort one historical account, the supper with Randolph, and overstate the verity of the bowling story, which the secondary source (Hessey) and the original source (Disraeli) clearly portrayed as hearsay, though they certainly did not treat it as such.

Isaac Disraeli

As noted, Isaac Disraeli receives the credit (or blame) for bringing this doubtful tale into anti-Sabbatarian literature. The following is Disraeli's comment in context: 41

Calvin deemed the Sabbath to have been a Jewish ordinance, limited to that sacred people with their other ceremonial laws, and only typical of the spiritual repose of the advent of Christ, which abolished the grosser, rejected its rigours, and reproaches those whose Sabbatical superstitions were carnal and gross as the Jewish.⁴² At Geneva a tradition exists, that when John Knox visited Calvin on a Sunday, he found his austere coadjutor bowling on a green. At this day, and in that place, a Calvinist preacher after his Sunday sermon will take his seat at the card-table. Some of our early Puritans who had taken refuge in Holland, after ten years in vain pressing for the observance of the Sabbatic Sunday, resolved to leave the country where they had been kindly received and went "to the ends of earth" among the wildernesses of America, to observe "the Lord's day" with the Jewish rigours.⁴³ When Laud was charged on his trial for the revival of the Book of Sports allowed on that day, he thought it prudent to deny that he had been the suggester; he however

professed his judgment in its favour, alleging the practice of their own favourite church of Geneva.⁴⁴

It may surprise us that two of the great friends of Calvin, closely connected with him, and with his system, should have espoused a very opposite doctrine. Knox in Scotland after Sunday having been for 1554 years classed among the festival days, both in the Greek and the Latin churches, as the Anti-sabbatarians maintain, Knox no longer calling this day *the Lord's-day*, but taking some Jew for its godfather, named it *the Sabbath*, and thus disguised its nature and custom.⁴⁵ Knox acquired many advocates in England. Whittingham the Puritan Dean of Durham, who had resided at Geneva ... likewise differed with his brother, and on his return home appears to have had his mind imbued with a full portion of the spirit of his Scottish friend. This redoubtable Puritan evinced his zeal by defacing the antique monuments in Durham Cathedral, and converting the stone coffins of the Priors of Durham into horse-troughs. Whittingham was a rigid Sabbatarian...

No unbiased historian here! Disraeli's work is firmly anti-Puritan, anti-Calvin, anti-Presbyterian and outspokenly anti-Sabbatarian. The author has three chapters on the Sabbath controversy in the third volume of his work.⁴⁶ Disraeli's distaste for Calvin and his "horrible theology" is exhibited in footnote 44. His anti-Calvinism

44 [Footnote from Disraeli] Thomas Warton in his first edition of Milton's juvenile poems observed in a note on the Lady's speech in Comus – verse 177, that "It is owing to the Puritans ever since Cromwell's time that *Sunday* has been made in England a day of gravity and severity; and many a staunch observer of the Rites of the Church of England little suspects that he is conforming to the *Calvinism* of an *English Sunday*." In Warton's second edition this note was wholly cancelled. It had probably given offence to heads unfurnished with their own national history; thus are popular errors fostered. There was too an error, and one our critic and poet, not versed probably in Ecclesiastical history, might have easily fallen into, when he ascribed to Calvin, the melancholy institution of Knox's Sabbath. Calvin himself was adverse to it. The Scottish Presbyterian who so eagerly embraced the horrible theology of Calvin, as if that were not sufficiently mortifying to man, dropped the only part which might soften the cares of human life, and added to the gloom of Calvinism the ascetism of the most rigorous Sabbath. Warton having discovered himself surrounded by so many difficulties, and having unintentionally offended the false delicacy of some, in despair seems to have given up the note altogether, which however only required a very minute correction.

45 [Footnote from Disraeli] Pocklington's Sermon *Sunday no Sabbath*, 1636. [Among the clear evidence for Disraeli's biased writing is his placing such weight on Pocklington. "In 1640, the Long Parliament committed a blunder, to say the least, when it condemned the Sermon, with the *Altare Christianum*, another product of the doctor's pen, to be publicly burnt ... a fate inappropriate to performances which otherwise would have found their way to their native obscurity." James Gilfillan, *The Sabbath viewed in the light of Reason, Revelation, and History, with Sketches of its Literature* (New York, [1862]), p. 133.]

46 15. On the Sabbatical Institutions. 16. Of the Observation of the Sabbath Upon Sundays. 17. The Cause of the Revival by Charles the First, of "the Book of Sports" for recreations on Sundays. Disraeli's relating of the bowling incident occurs in chapter sixteen.

41 Disraeli, *Ibid*, v. 3, pp. 354-355.

42 [Footnote from Disraeli] The passage is in the Institutes, lib. ii. c. viii. sect. 34. "Crassa, carnaliue Sabbatismi Superstitione, Ter. Judeos superant," or as he has given it in his own translation of the Institute, "Ceux qui la suivent surmontent les Juifs en opinion charnelle du Sabbath." Calvin would observe Sunday, as a fixed day for assembling for religious communion, but divested of all Judaism; not that there is any distinction between days, but the appointment of a particular one is convenient, that all may meet together. After divine service all are free, and he reprobates those who have imbued the poor populace with Judaic opinions, and deprived the working classes of their recreations. ["And deprived the working classes of their recreations" is clearly an unwarranted extrapolation from this passage in the Institutes. Like many who mistake Calvin on this subject, Disraeli is ignorant of the statements in the Deuteronomy sermons.]

43 [Footnote from Disraeli] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, fol. 5.

is displayed fully in an earlier chapter, *Critical History of the Puritans: Of the Political Character of Calvin*.⁴⁷

Disraeli's vehemence exceeds, if possible, that of the prelatial polemicist Peter Heylyn (see "Peter Heylyn and the Practice of Geneva" in the third installment of this series, which should appear in the next issue, D.V.), who seems to be his teacher in these things, as the vitriol they pour forth is very similar. In any event, he clearly states that the bowling tale is a local tradition. However, as others do after him, Disraeli failed to consider the Deuteronomy sermons, and uses this 'local legend' to bolster his anti-Sabbatarian sentiments. Thus the

⁴⁷ Disraeli, v. 3, pp. 252-268. "In the novel democracy of the Consistory of Calvin, Ministers and Laics sat together. Calvin flattered the weakness of human nature by the appearance of a political equality. But the whole system was a delusion, for the tyrannical genius of its inventor first deprived man of his free-will. The Apostle of Geneva by the bewitching terror of his dogmatic theology had enthralled his followers for ever, by a mysterious bondage of the mind; out of which no human argument could ever extricate them – an immutable necessity! The dark imagination of the subtilizing divine had presumed to scan the decree of Omnipotence, as if the Divinity had revealed to his solitary ear the secret of the Creation. He discovers in the holy scriptures, what he himself has called "a most horrible decree." Who has not shuddered at the fume of the distempered fancy of the atrabilious Calvin?" Ibid., pp. 257-258. "The exterior parity of this new Democracy, so seductive to the vulgar, was a no less cruel delusion. In Calvin's mingled Republic of Presbyters and Elders, the Elders, annually chosen, trembled before their sacred Peers, who being permanent residents had the Elders at all times under their eye and their inquisitorial office. When the Presbyterian government was set up in England, Clarendon observed that the Archbishop of Canterbury had never so great an influence as Dr. Burgess and Mr. Marshall, nor did all the Bishops in Scotland together so much meddle in temporal affairs as Mr. Henderson. ... The same fertile genius which had made "our Father in Heaven" a human tyrant, and raised the mortal criminal into beatitude, now invested his own Levites and his own "Rulers of the Synagogue" with supremacy. In this new Papacy, as in the old, they inculcated passive obedience, armed as they were with the terrors of excommunication. The despotism of Rome was transferred to Geneva. All was reversed, but the nucleus of power had only removed its locality." Ibid., pp. 258-260. "The fervid diligence of this extraordinary man was commensurate with the vastness of his genius. His life was not protracted; he was a martyr to constant bodily pain, and the physical sufferings of the man are imagined to have shown themselves in the morose and vehement character of the legislator. The purity of doctrine, in some part at least, consisted in dethroning bishops; denuding ministers of the sacerdotal vestments, and banishing from the religious service, all the accessories of devotion. Calvin seems to have imagined that man becomes more spiritualized in the degree he ceases to be the creature of sensation and of sympathy, as if the senses were not the real source of our feelings. But as he who is reckless of his own life is master of every other man's, so the great hermit of reformation, who disdained all personal interests, seemed to think and to act only for the world." Ibid., pp.262-263.

"bowling anecdote" had a less than auspicious entrance into the Sabbath literature.⁴⁸

Gilfillan and Cox

Some forty years before Mathieson and Hay Fleming wrote, two other men took sides on this issue of supposed lax Sabbath observance on the part of Knox and Calvin (and the Reformers in general). James Gilfillan and Robert Cox both wrote detailed surveys of the literature on the Sabbath controversy. Gilfillan's *The Sabbath viewed in the light of Reason, Revelation, and History, with Sketches of its Literature* (New York, [1862]), argued that the Reformers had a more strict practice than was commonly noted. Cox took the opposite view in his *The Literature of the Sabbath Question* (Edinburgh, 1865, 2 vols). These two surveys are very commonly cited in Sabbath and anti-Sabbath literature. Cox had previously written, *The Whole Doctrine of Calvin about the Sabbath* (Edinburgh, 1860) and *Sabbath Laws and Sabbath Duties considered in relation to their natural and scriptural grounds, and to the principles of religious liberty* (Edinburgh, 1853).

The title of Cox's first work, *Sabbath Laws and Sabbath Duties*, is a bit misleading. It is really a short article with some very long appendices. The article is titled "A Plea for Sunday Trains on the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway." Cox was a shareholder in this railway and acted as secretary for a group of Scottish and English shareholders who petitioned the company to follow other railroads in opening on Sundays. He was an anti-Sabbatarian in his views, and believed in a broad religious toleration.⁴⁹

In his *Whole Doctrine* Cox compiled all the statements pertinent to Calvin's view on the Sabbath question from his *Commentaries*, *Institutes* and *Genevan*

⁴⁸ As said in the introduction, if Disraeli meant that the bowling tale was "merely" an oral tradition, there may be no traceable record of its origin.

⁴⁹ Cox believed the day was purely for rest and recreation. He writes, "As before observed, the sole purpose of the fourth commandment was the refreshment of labouring men and animals among the Jews and their proselytes. Cessation from work being in all cases indispensable for the end in view, while other means of refreshment could not be invariable, this cessation alone was prescribed; and the purpose of the institution having been clearly made known by the lawgiver, he left each Israelite to determine for himself how the day might be most suitably employed for the invigoration of the exhausted frame." *Sabbath Laws*, p. 420. Gilfillan closed out his survey of the Scottish Sabbath literature by referring to recent anti-Sabbatic writers. The "singular list of Scottish Anti-Sabbatic writers is closed with ... a voluminous publication [obviously referring to *Sabbath Laws*]... and *The Whole Doctrine*... by the already named Mr. Cox.

Catechism. Surely, it must have been of some embarrassment to Cox, after titling this book, *The Whole Doctrine of Calvin about the Sabbath*, to find (supposedly via Gilfillan's book⁵⁰) that he had made a serious omission in not including quotations from the Deuteronomy sermons. He tried to correct this oversight in his later book surveying the literature, but chose rather to complain that Gilfillan should have said the sermons were published after Calvin's death,⁵¹ than admit to the significance of the oversight. ⁵²

⁵⁰ "What a disciplinarian Calvin was, and how he laboured by unwearied preaching and writing to enlighten and reform the Genevese, while on him "came the care of all the churches," we need not say. But he has not received the credit due to him as a friend of the Sabbath. Partial extracts from his notices of the subject have been industriously circulated, while care has not been shown to set forth such passages as the following: 'It is for us to dedicate ourselves wholly to God, renouncing our feelings and all our affections; and then, since we have this external ordinance, to act as becomes us, that is, to lay aside our earthly affairs, so that we may be entirely free to meditate on the works of God' [Ser. 34, Deut 5] 'The Sabbath is the bark of a spiritual substance, the use of which is still in force, of denying ourselves, of renouncing all our own thoughts and affections, and of bidding farewell to one and all of our own employments, so that God may reign in us, then of employing ourselves in the worship of God.' ... And as he excludes secular labour, so also worldly recreations: 'If we employ the Lord's day to make good cheer, to sport ourselves, to go to games and pastimes, shall God in this be honoured? Is it not a mockery? Is not this an unhallowing of his name?'" Gilfillan, p. 408-409.

⁵¹ "Although Calvin's Sermons on Deuteronomy did not appear till 1567, three years after his death, and profess merely to have been 'faithfully gathered word for word as he preached them in open pulpit,' I see no reason to doubt the accuracy of the reporter, a French refugee named Dennis Ragueneau or Raguener, who was employed by deacons of the church at Geneva to commit them to writing. The two sermons on the Fourth Commandment as given in Deut. 5:12-15, not only coincide perfectly in doctrine with Calvin's own writings, but are unmistakably Calvinian in their style and flavor. Nevertheless, Mr. Gilfillan ought to have mentioned that they were not published by the preacher himself, nor are included in the collective editions of his works." *The Literature of the Sabbath Question*, vol. 1., pp. 386-387.

⁵² *Ibid*. Not much time after this, a new standard collection of Calvin's works was begun which would eventually include the sermons. Much of Cox's statement here is merely an attempt to excuse himself from the omission in his previous book. He acknowledges the sermons are Calvin's, but then seems to imply they should have less standing, as they were not issued under Calvin's own hand. Since he recounts the employing of Raguener, he must or should have known the level of importance attached to these sermons by Calvin's hearers. Calvin would certainly not have regarded his preaching as less important than his other productions. As Harold Dekker writes: "It is one of the anomalies of history that John Calvin has become best known as a systematic theologian in spite of the fact that he considered himself to be first of all a preacher. He believed that his sermons, not the Institutes, were his most important contribution. Although he did serve as a part-time lecturer in theology, this was for him always a secondary role. He looked upon himself primarily as a pastor." *Sermons on Job by John Calvin, selected and translated by Leroy Nixon*, Introductory Essay, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952)p. ix.

Cox was decidedly partial in his reading of Calvin's statements in these sermons. In the appendix to volume one of his *Literature of the Sabbath Question*, he reproduces a "characteristic passage" from the 34th sermon (since the sermons were so rare). He quotes Calvin "... we must consider (as I said afore) how our Lord requires to have this day bestowed in nothing else but in hearing of his Word, in making common prayer, in making confession of our faith, and in having the use of the sacraments." Cox not only refused to own the seriousness of his missing the sermons the first time around, he clearly was unwilling to grant the significance of these statements, particularly the phrase "in nothing else." Indeed he is willing to overlook (evidently as *uncharacteristic*) the significant citation by Gilfillan which occurred a few pages earlier (see footnote 50), and apparently was unwilling to confront the implications it held for his view of Calvin.

A careful analysis and refutation of Cox's work is way beyond the scope of this article. But more to the point at hand, it is significant to this survey that neither Cox nor Gilfillan mention the bowling anecdote. This may have been because they would not give cognizance to something so unsubstantiated.⁵³ Cox does chide those who ignorantly repeated another statement by Disraeli,⁵⁴ as he was strongly in disagreement with the idea that Knox was the father of the Puritan Sabbath, and he makes as much as Mathieson did of Knox's supper party with Randolph.⁵⁵

While there is related literature that is of some interest to examine, the only other reference to directly link Calvin to lawn bowling on the Lord's day prior to Disraeli, appears at the time of the Westminster Assembly. Except for one work to be noticed in the next installment of this article, the entire 18th century is passed over.

(To Be Continued)

⁵³ Cf. Cox's statement regarding the myth that Calvin once had a consultation about changing Lord's day observance from Sunday to Thursday. *The Whole Doctrine of Calvin*, p. iv. Cox, as determined as he is for Sabbath recreations, and for finding approval of them in the Reformers, does not recount the bowling tale in his three books on the subject. See *Literature of the Sabbath*, p. 127; *Sabbath Laws*, p. 124. It is not clear, whether this is from ignorance or from concern not to use something so lacking in documentation. The latter is likely.

⁵⁴ "I have already referred to the statement of D'Israeli, which has been ignorantly repeated by other English writers, that Knox was the father of the Sabbatarian doctrine..." *The Literature*, p. 469.

⁵⁵ *Sabbath Laws*, p. 124. *The Literature*, p. 466, 468. Cf. Gilfillan, p. 463-464.

The Light and Power of Scripture

by Richard Bacon

[This is an edited transcription from a series Pastor Bacon taught on Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4. See previous issues of *The Blue Banner*. April-May 1993. October-December 1997. February 1998.]

In previous installments, we studied the various ways that it appears to us that the Scriptures are the very Word of God. The Bible is not simply an interesting book, nor simply a book full of good advice. It is the very Word of God. We looked previously at the majesty and holiness of Scripture. We examined the fact that all the parts fit together forming one comprehensive message. We looked at the fact that all of Scripture has a tendency toward the glorification of God and toward the manifestation of his glory. These are objective reasons we can use to form arguments for believing the Scriptures are the Word of God. But there are also “subjective” reasons for believing that the Scriptures are the Word of God. These are reasons that we understand to be true by experience.

We can testify to the power of the Scriptures by the manner in which it has changed our lives in much the same way that a testimony might take place in a courtroom. A witness stands before a court and testifies as to what happened. “I was there. I saw it. This is what happened. I was an eyewitness.” This is not so much a logical argument as it is a testimony of something that has happened to a witness and now he is telling about that event. Our discussion with respect to the light and power of Scripture must include those things that actually change people’s lives. These are such that we can stand before the world and declare, “Our lives have been changed as a result of God’s Word.”

We will examine four ideas under “The Light And Power of the Scripture.” Two of them have to do with those who are *not yet* believers or who are *becoming* believers, or *will become* believers; and two have to do with those who are *already* believers. The Word of God *convinces and converts* the unbeliever from a life of unbelief. But the Word of God does not end its work there. The Word of God continues its ministry in the life of the believer in order to *comfort and edify* him.

The Word of God convinces the sinner of sin

In John 15:21 Jesus said, “If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin.” We do not understand this

to mean that if Jesus had not come into the world these people would not have been sinners. They would not have *known* they were sinners. They would not have been *convinced* of their sin. As the Word of God comes to a sinner, it *reveals* his sin. It shows the sinner that he is a sinner. The first thing that the Word of God does is to convince us of sin. We dealt with this somewhat under the holiness of Scripture. One of the ways that we say the Scripture is holy is that it lays our sin open to us. It defines sin for us.

In Acts 2, Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost. He explained to his listeners that not only had their fathers stoned the prophets, but they also had crucified the Lord and Christ. Peter told them that Jesus Christ, whom they had crucified, had ascended into the heavens and was now seated at the right hand of God the Father. The One who sits on the throne of the universe and will be judge of all the earth at the last day, is the very one they had crucified. We should reflect upon the impact of that message. Peter was not speaking in the abstract: he was speaking to the very people who fifty days earlier had been crying out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Although we all had a hand *in the abstract* in the crucifixion of Christ, these people had a hand *in the concrete* in the crucifixion of Christ. They were part of the mob that cried out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” As Peter spoke of the very one they crucified being their judge, it impacted their hearts. How did they respond? Acts 2:37, “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

As Peter preached the Word of God to them, they became convinced of their wrongdoing, of their sin, of their lawlessness. 1 John 3:4, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.” There are several words in the Greek that are translated as the word “sin” and each of them has a separate nuance. Here we learn that sin is a transgression of the law. “A-nomia” is really “antinomia.” What had these people done? They had lawlessly taken Christ and crucified him. Peter was convincing them of their sin — of their lawlessness — by the Word of God.

If convincing us that we were sinners is all that the Word of God did, it would not be the “good news.”

We would characterize it as the “bad” news because we tend to look at things as they impact on us. This is exactly what these men were saying in this passage in Acts. “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” How can we make amends?

The next thing we need to look at is that not only does the Word of God convince us of *sin*, it also convinces us of the *truth of the gospel*.

Westminster Larger Catechism #76 asks, “What is repentance unto life?” The answer explains that repentance unto life is not only a turning from and forsaking of sin, it is also an apprehension of mercy. When we talk to people about the “good” news, we do not stop by telling men they are sinners. We do not stop by telling them they must forsake their sins. We must also include the mercy of God in Christ with the gospel message. That is the “good” news of the gospel.

Look at Acts 18:27-28, “And when he [Apollos] was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ.” Apollos used the Scriptures to preach publicly that Jesus is the Christ. He was declaring to the Jews that *not only* had they crucified Jesus, but that Jesus is *in fact* the Christ. There was a *positive* aspect to the message he brought.

I Corinthians 15:3-4 is a sort of encapsulation of the gospel. There Paul declared, “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” The gospel is contained in this one passage. What is the gospel? Christ was crucified. Christ was buried. Christ is risen. Paul also insisted that it is *in accordance with the Scriptures*. Even as Paul preached the gospel, he did not say, “This is my opinion.” He asserted, “Here is the very Word of God. This is what I received as being of utmost importance. I delivered it to you first of all, how Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.” It is not just that Christ died, but that he died *according to the Scriptures*. He fulfilled prophecy *in accordance with God’s Word*. The second thing that the Scriptures convince us of is not simply of sin, but also of the *truth* of the gospel and of the *content* of the gospel. The Scriptures teach us not merely that the gospel *is* true but it convinces us *of the truth* that is contained in the gospel.

John 16:8, “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” The Holy Spirit not only convinces us of our sin, not only convinces us of the truth of the gospel, but also convinces us of the *certainty of judgment*. And he does so through the Word.

It continues to amaze me that there are so many books on the market today that are written for pastors on how to grow a church, and how to speak to the needs of the twentieth century, and yet few of them are commentaries on the book of Acts. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit has given us a book on church planting. If someone were going to write a book on church planting, the obvious thing to do would be to bring the book of Acts to bear on the twentieth century.¹

In Acts 17, Paul was speaking in Athens. Paul knew that the *real need* of his audience was to repent and believe the gospel. He told them in verses 30 and 31, “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” Paul preached the Word of God! He preached that God will judge the world at the last day. He did not preach how nice God is and how God loves everybody. Paul preached that Jesus Christ will be the judge of the world. We know that Jesus Christ will be the judge of the world because God raised him from the dead. We know that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead because the Scriptures say so.

The Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures convinces us of the certainty of judgment and that was *very much* a part of Paul’s approach to planting churches.

I also want to show you how successful Paul was. In verses 32-34, “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” You can see the antithesis in humanity; there were *some* who mocked; there were *some* who put it off; but there were *some* who believed. Paul was not concerned with dealing with their “felt needs” or their expressed needs or things *they* thought were wrong. Paul

¹ Pastor Bacon subsequently preached through the book of Acts. His sermons (57 in all) are available from Blue Banner. Call or write for pricing.

was concerned with dealing with what *God* said was wrong with them. What was wrong with them was that they were headed for judgment without a Savior.

Isaiah 11:4, “But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.” Note that the “rod” is also referred to in the New Testament in Revelation 2:27, Revelation 12:5 and Revelation 19:15. But Christ not only has a rod coming from his mouth, but in Revelation 19:15, there is also a sword coming from his mouth. We know that the sword coming from the mouth of Christ is the Word of God. The rod is for the wayward child. What does the rod do for the child? It *corrects* him. It *reproves* him. What does the sword do for the adult? It *slays* him. The rod is the means of correction that has been given to the family. The sword has been given to the civil magistrate as authoritative punishment. The church has been given the sacrament of the table as means of correction. We can characterize each of these — the rod, the sword, and the table — as a means of correction. The Word of God coming forth from the mouth of Christ in Isaiah 11 is characterized as a rod; the Word of God coming forth from the mouth of Christ in Revelation 19 is characterized as a sword. The Word of Christ is associated with *each* of these means of correction.

The Word of God converts the sinner

Not only does the Word of God convince; it also converts. There is not only *light* to convince the sinner of sin, but there is also a *power* to convert the sinner. If I were to say that I believe Jesus was a fine man, and I believe that Christianity teaches an ethical system that is second to none, I may have a *certain* amount of light, but that does not mean that I have been converted. That is the difference between a hypocrite and one who has been converted. We can have an historical knowledge without having a commitment to Christ. The Word of God not only gives us light; it also converts us by its power.

The Word of God converts us from darkness to light. Psalm 19:7, “The Law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul.” As this light is given to us, as we are converted, we are no longer a part of the kingdom of darkness; but we become members of the kingdom of light. Our actions are no longer governed by our sinful nature; our actions become governed by God’s Word, by God’s Spirit speaking through his Word. When we are converted, our manner of life is converted from one of darkness to one of walking in God’s footsteps, from a

life of darkness to a life of light. Our walk, i.e. our behavior, becomes different.

In James 2:18, James said, “Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works.” But in the verses before this statement, James explained to us what it is about the Word of God that converts us so that we may have those works. James 1:18, “Of his own will begat he us with the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” God, the Father of lights, begat us of his own will. The Word of truth was the instrument he used. We must understand that it was *God* doing the willing, it was *God* doing the begetting and the *Word of God* was the instrument he used to bring it to pass.

James continued in verse 21, “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted Word, which is able to save your souls.” The engrafted Word has the power to save your souls! According to James the Word of God is the instrument by which God converts us. The reason that we receive that engrafted Word with meekness is so that our souls will be saved. God does the willing and we do the receiving. We are in fact *commanded* to receive the Word. We cannot be passive. Once we are begotten, we are commanded to receive the Word.

We see that same terminology in I Peter 1:23, “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” Peter stated that we were born again not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible. When we were born the first time, that is to say, when we were born of our mothers, we were born of corruptible seed. Our sinful parents will die and we will die. That is a corruptible seed. But now we have been born again of incorruptible seed. The Word of God, “which liveth and abideth for ever,” is that incorruptible seed by which we are born again. There was a seed by which we were born the first time. That seed will die. We will die from that birth. But there is another birth, not of that same corruptible seed, but of an incorruptible seed. The Word of God is that incorruptible seed that has the power to convert.

The fact that we claim to be converts to Christianity is a testimony to the fact that the Scriptures are the Word of God. Our very conversion testifies that the Bible is the very Word of God. When we state that we are converted, we are declaring that the Bible is the Word of God which has the power to convert. We are stating with Peter in 1 Peter 1:3 that we have been begotten again unto a lively hope.

The Word of God comforts believers

The Word of God has not finished its work in the elect when we are converted. The Word of God also comforts believers. When we suffer afflictions or when we are in adversity, the Word of God comforts us.

Examine II Timothy 1:8. Paul was in affliction. He suffered persecution on account of the gospel. Paul reminded Timothy that even though Timothy also had come under a certain amount of persecution, it was similar to the persecution that Paul had experienced. So Paul said, “Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel *according to the power of God.*” As God’s power comes through his gospel; as God’s power comes through his Word; it not only convinces us of sin; it not only converts us; it also *comforts* us in adversity. God’s Word is able to sustain us, to uphold us and to comfort us in times of afflictions and in times of persecution.

Psalm 119 — the longest chapter in the Bible — was actually fashioned by God to be memorized. The Psalm is divided into 22 sections and each section has a letter of the Hebrew alphabet as the “title.” In the Hebrew scripture, each of the eight verses in that section begin with that letter. It is a memorization aid. It is structured in that way to make it easier to memorize. What is the theme of Psalm 119? All of the verses point to one basic theme: the usefulness of the Word of God.

Psalm 119: 81-83, “My soul fainteth for thy salvation.” Have you ever felt like your soul was fainting? We often see this dramatized. Someone receives bad news or a shock and they faint. They just fall over with emotion. What would it be for your soul to faint? In English, we might say, “My soul pines away!” Here the author of the Psalm said, “My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy Word.” His hope is placed in the Word of God. People do not really faint that much. There are cures — putting your head down is one — that can keep you from fainting. What is the cure to keep *our soul* from fainting? Psalm 119:81 declares that the cure for a fainting soul is hoping in God’s Word — by relying on the comfort of God’s Word in affliction.

Psalm 119:82-83, “Mine eyes fail for thy Word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes.” The Psalmist cried out, “When will you comfort me?” Where does his hope come from? He declared in verse 81, “I hope in thy Word.” In verse 83, he continued to depend upon the comfort of God’s

Word when he confessed, “I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I *not forget* thy statutes.”²

God’s Word is a comfort to us in *hope*. We can often remember a time of affliction, when God brought a Scripture to us. Whether it was through a brother or sister in the Lord, or from our daily devotions, or in some other way, God brought a Scripture to our minds that exactly filled that “aching place.” There was a new hope that was not already there. There was a comfort that eased the pain. Our circumstances had not changed. The affliction had not passed. It did not mean that the adversity had ceased; but God, through his Word, reminded us how to hope.

God also uses his Word to teach us *holiness*. In Psalm 119:9 we read, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” How are we to cleanse our way? How are we to “scrub away” the sin from our lives? How are we to cleanse the path on which we walk? “By taking heed thereto according to thy Word.” God comforts us *in holiness* by causing our lives to be conformed more and more to the image of Jesus Christ (James 1:21-25).

He comforts us in *guidance*. We must be careful when we discuss this. There are many people who name the name of Christ who open their Bibles at some random place, put a finger on any verse and then decide that is what God is leading them to do that day. This is *not* what we are talking about when we speak of guidance. God does not tell you from his Word what shirt to wear this morning. He does not give guidance in that specific way. He gives guidance in terms of *how* we should live. God comforts us in the knowledge that we can go to God’s Word to learn how to live our lives. We are not like those who have no anchor for their soul. We do have an anchor! Our anchor is the instruction that God has given in his Word as to how we ought to live. God’s Word gives us the ethical norms for our lives.

Psalm 119:105, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” Because God’s Word is a lamp to our feet, we can see the path that we should walk. Because of God’s Word, we can *know* how we ought to live.

The Word of God edifies believers

I hope we can all say we have become convinced of the truth of the gospel. I hope we can all say we have become convinced that we are sinners. I hope we can all say we have become convinced of the certainty of judgment and that we have been converted from

² Pastor Bacon’s sermon on Psalm 119:83, “A Bottle in the Smoke” is available from Blue Banner Ministries.

darkness to light. I hope we can all say we have been born again into the kingdom of God. At this point in our spiritual lives, the principal ministry of the Word of God in our daily lives is to *build us up* in the faith. The Word of God edifies believers.

First: for *success*. As the book of Joshua opens, Joshua was leading God's people into the land of Canaan. God told Joshua he would be successful. Was Joshua going to be successful by raising large armies, by having the best shield and the best weaponry, by making sure that all the weapons were sharpened each morning? No! Joshua 1:8, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." We need to apply this not just to Joshua, but to ourselves as well. How do we expect to have gospel success? Is it by having the most "up-to-date" methods? Is it by having the most "up-to-date" literature? Is it by having the "largest printing press?" We can only expect to have success *if we publish the Word of God abroad* in the land.

Paul said in Ephesians 6:17, "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." *The Word of God is the weaponry by which we can have gospel success*. Paul used numerous illustrations for the Christian life. One of his favorites was that of military service. In this passage he wrote of the soldier who takes up the sword of Spirit. What is the sword? The sword is the weapon with which the soldier goes forth looking for success. Our sword is the Word of God! We need to remember that today. It is the Word of God alone that is going to give us gospel success.

Second: for *wisdom*. What is the difference between right knowledge and wisdom? The Word of God teaches us wisdom, or the application of knowledge. Psalm 111:10, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

Examine Psalm 119: 96, "I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad." The commandment of God is *exceeding broad*. The commandment of God applies to all areas of life. We can approach life wisely by applying the commandment of God to it. Verse 97, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day." This gives us the mechanism by which we are able to apply God's commandment to our lives. We are to apply the commandment of God by meditating on the law of God. The Psalmist goes on to say in verses 98-100, "Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are

ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts." Do you want to be wiser than your enemies? Meditate on the Word of God! Do you want to have more understanding than your teachers? Know the Bible better! Do you want to understand more than the elders? Keep God's precepts! God's law was the meditation of the Psalmist. The commandments made him wise. The testimonies increased his understanding. He even understood more than the elders because of God's precepts.

Law, commandments, testimonies, precepts: these are synonyms for God's Word. As we meditate on God's Word we learn how broad his commandments are. As we study through the Larger Catechism in this series, this is something that you should constantly have before your eyes: what we are studying is the broadness of God's Word. The catechism demonstrates how God's Word applies to every area of life. We will see this as we go through the first part of the catechism learning what it is we are to *believe* concerning God; and we will see this as we go through the second part learning what *duty* God requires of man. The main reason God has given us his Word is not for mental amusement; it is so our lives will be changed. God has given his Word so we can be *edified*.

Third: for *hope*. How do we know what is going to be the outcome of our lives? How do we know what the end of our lives will bring? In Romans 15:4, Paul wrote that all the Old Testament was written for your edification so that you could have hope. The Bible was written so you could have hope. We will discuss this more fully under consolation which is number five following.

Fourth: to change *the way we think*. This is an important point. So often we believe that there is a dualism between thinking and doing. Often we hear that thinking is one thing and doing is another. But *thinking* is something we *do*. Romans 12:2 explains that we have been given God's Word so that we will not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the *renewing of our minds*. We will be changed so that we can know what is that good and perfect and acceptable will of God. As we know God's will, as we know how to think his thoughts after him, our minds are transformed. Our way of thinking is transformed.

Fifth: for *consolation*. The writer of Hebrews stated in Hebrews 6:18-19, "That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a

strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil." God gives us his Word so we will have an *anchor*. We have consolation. We have hope. As the knowledge that God cannot lie — as the knowledge of God's faithfulness — comes to us through his Word, we have an anchor. The opposite of a ship at anchor is *not* a ship that is on a specific course to some appointed destination. The opposite of a ship at anchor is a ship adrift. We are not adrift! We are anchored, we are made firm, sure and steadfast, because God has given us hope in his Word.

Sixth: It gives us a *godly spirit*. In Proverbs 1:22-23 we read, "How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scornors delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you." God makes his words known to us through the Scriptures. He pours out his Spirit to us. As that happens, our spirit is turned from simplicity, scorning, and foolishness and is turned toward godliness. "Turn at my reproof: behold I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you."

In Acts chapter 2, God's Spirit was poured out upon God's people in measure unparalleled prior to that time. We see throughout the New Testament that we are not *to quench* the Spirit. We are not *to grieve* the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out to us through God's Word. The Holy Spirit changes us from the kind of people we were. He transforms us from being *scornors, fools, and simple* into being *wise and spirit-filled* people. We become people characterized by the Holy Spirit. The change takes place because the Scripture *is* the mind of the Spirit! The practice of shouting in unknown languages or having some kind of ecstatic utterances has nothing to do with the Spirit of God. If we would have the mind of the Spirit, we will find it in the Scriptures. If we would have a godly spirit, we will learn how in the Scriptures alone.

Seventh: for *admonition*. For some, this is our least favorite kind of edification. There are times when we need to be confronted about the kind of people we are. We need to be confronted about the kind of people we continue to be. We continue to struggle with sin our entire lives, and so the Word of God edifies us through admonition. In I Corinthians 10:11 Paul spoke about that generation whose carcasses fell in the wilderness. "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." Paul was

claiming that although these people died fifteen hundred years ago, they were an example for the generation then living. They are an admonition *to us*. How can something that happened 3500 years ago be an admonition? Because it was recorded in God's Word! As God's Word it is an example to us. As God's Word sets sin before us, it admonishes us. We should not think that *only* the unbeliever is convinced of sin. We understand that we also need to be convinced of our own sin from God's Word.

In John 17, Jesus was praying for you. He was praying specifically for the apostles, but he was also praying for those who would believe because of the testimony of the apostles. Verse 20, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." The church is *built* on the testimony of the apostles and the testimony of the prophets. So when Jesus was praying for those who would believe because of the testimony of the apostles, he was praying for you. John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." *You will be sanctified by the truth*. Where is that truth found? Is it found in the philosophy courses at the local college? No! *The truth is found in the Bible*. The truth is found in God's Word! Jesus said, "Thy Word is truth." If we are going to be sanctified by God's Word, we need *to know* the Word of God.

What is the application that we need to understand from this teaching?

We must apply the Word of God to every area of our lives. As we go through the Larger Catechism, one of the things I want you to keep in mind is that the Westminster divines were attempting to do just that. Let me give you one example. Westminster Larger Catechism question #146 asks, "Which is the tenth commandment?" The answer is, "The tenth commandment is, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's." In the next question the Westminster divines discuss the duties that are required in the tenth commandment. "The duties required in the tenth commandment are, such a full contentment with our own condition..."

Can you follow their logic? The Westminster divines got that implication by meditating on the Word of God. The implication is that if you are not coveting anything that does not belong to you, then it follows logically that you are content with what God has given you. "...a full contentment with our own condition, and such a charitable frame of the whole soul towards our

neighbour, as that all our inward motions and affections touching him, tend unto and further all that good which is his." In other words, we want him to have success too. We do not envy him. We want him to succeed. How did the Westminster divines arrive at that implication? By meditating on God's Word and applying it to their lives.

Question #148 asks, "What are the sins forbidden in the tenth commandment?" Many people believe that the tenth commandment does not apply to them because their neighbor does not have a donkey. "The sins forbidden in the tenth commandment are, discontent with our own estate;" — "I wish I had." — "...envying, and grieving at the good of our neighbour, together with all inordinate motions and affections to any thing that is his." We are not to covet anything that is his — that includes his roto-tiller; not just his mule. *We must apply the law today.*

The Word of God is for us today! The Word of God has a bearing on our lives. I know that it was written up to 3500 years ago. I understand that it is an old book. But *truth does not change!* God has not changed. The Scriptures tell us what God was like 3500 years ago. He has not changed since then. Not at all! We can depend upon his Word today as much as the Israelites could depend upon his Word 3500 years ago. The plan of salvation has not changed from the time Christ rose from the dead till now. Not at all! It was true 3500 years ago; it was true 2000 years ago; it was true for the Westminster divines; and it is true today.

The Word of God is relevant to us. Therefore it behooves us to know it. It behooves us to study it; to read it; to meditate upon it. The Psalmist was going to become wiser than his teachers by meditating on God's Word. He would have even more understanding than the elders by thinking about what God's Word means and how it applied to his life. If we desire that for ourselves, we must, as he did, apply the Word of God to our lives. We must heed the words of the answer to Westminster Larger Catechism question #160, "It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives." **Ω**

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