

An Examination of the  
Doctrines of Justification  
and Repentance

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### The Doctrines of Justification and Repentance

The purpose of this paper is to address two doctrines which are the subjects of the assigned reading for this course. The first of these is the doctrine of justification, as presented in John Owen's fifth volume, Faith and Its Evidences. The second is the doctrine of repentance, as presented in Thomas Watson's The Doctrine of Repentance. Each of these doctrines will be examined, not only according to the ample light shed on them by the aforementioned Puritan authors but also in consideration of current theological trends in the church at-large.

Before commencing with the study of the aforementioned doctrines, a brief observation must be made concerning the place and importance of doctrine within the framework of modern evangelicalism. Even the most casual observer of the state of evangelicalism today would have little difficulty concluding that, when measured against the Biblical standard, the church at-large is drifting farther and farther into error. With increased emphases on such things as religious pluralism, political correctness (e.g. preaching that doesn't offend, toleration of various sins in the interest of fairness and inclusion, etc.), pragmatic "seeker sensitivity," and the rise of an anti-Lordship understanding of the gospel among an increasing number of so-called "carnal Christians," the church of today would no doubt be virtually unrecognizable among those only a few generations removed. And to what may we attribute this drift away from orthodoxy? As Boice (2001) observed:

We don't like to admit it, but anyone who honestly evaluates the church's life and outlook will understand that these are not good days for evangelicalism. We've achieved success, but in a worldly sort of way--big numbers, big budgets, and big outreaches. Yet church attendance is actually down and alleged "born again" believers do not differ significantly in their worldview from their neighbors. Why? We have forgotten our theology and, consciously or not, have pursued the wisdom of the world, accepted its "doctrines," and utilized its methods. (p. 14)

That the church faces many challenges cannot be denied, but is this a phenomenon that is unique to the postmodern era? Have churches in decades and centuries past not also been confronted with doctrinal laxity and issues similar to what churches face today? Indeed they have. As Solomon astutely observed nearly 3,000 years ago, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1:9). Indeed, the historical record of the church is replete with testimony which corroborates the fact that what we are witnessing in the church today is really nothing new at all. Even the apostle Paul, writing to the young pastor of the first century Ephesian church, expressed concerns that there simply were no guarantees of continued doctrinal purity and fidelity “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions...” (2 Tim. 4:3).

### **John Owen and the Doctrine of Justification**

Given both Solomon’s aforementioned axiom regarding the cyclical nature of history, combined with the immense benefit of historical hindsight, it should be no surprise that Puritan theologian and author John Owen faced very similar difficulties during his own day (1616-1683) in terms of both the willful misrepresentation and unwitting misunderstanding of the doctrine of justification. A discussion of Owen’s treatment of this doctrine will ensue shortly but, for the reader who is perhaps unfamiliar with the doctrine of justification, a bit of definition is in order. According to question 33 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, justification is defined as an “act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” Owen (1981) himself provides an excellent working definition of justification as well. He writes:

To be justified is to be freed from the guilt of sin, or to have all our sins pardoned, and to have a righteousness wherewith to appear before God, so as to be accepted in him, and a right to the heavenly inheritance. (p. 117)

As Reymond (1998) opines (and this writer agrees): “The doctrine of justification is the heart and core of the gospel, the ‘good news’ that God by grace alone justifies sinners through faith alone in Christ alone apart from the works of the law” (p. 740). In a statement most often attributed to Martin Luther (though some actually credit 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted with the statement), “Justification is the article by which the church stands and falls.” According to Preus (1984), in a statement that can in fact be unequivocally attributed to Luther, he says, “It is above all for [the doctrine of justification] on which we insist so diligently, that we bear the hate and persecution of Satan and the world. For Satan feels the power and results of this doctrine.” Indeed, Luther would himself face much opposition to his work in the area of this important doctrine, as have those who continue in his doctrinal legacy.

Seventeenth century Puritan divine John Owen wrote about the doctrine of justification, in large measure, as a necessary reaction to both a resurgence in Roman Catholicism (whose definition of justification differs substantially from that found in the Word of God) and as a remedy for addressing the confusion among many Protestants, some of whom still held in varying degrees to the Romish view of justification by works. Many of Owen’s contemporaries believed and taught that there was no need to be justified by God at all, insisting that man’s own good works are sufficient to place him into a right relationship with God. In his writing, Owen masterfully employs not only crystal clear logic but a veritable barrage of Scriptural evidence supporting his contention that, as believers, our justification rests solely on the merits of Christ and His righteousness imputed to us. A fitting example of Owen’s (1981) use of simple logic can be seen in the following introductory statement:

And everything in and of ourselves, under any consideration whatever, seems to be excluded from our justification before God, faith alone excepted, whereby we receive his grace and the atonement. And, on the other side, the whole of our acceptation with him seems to be assigned unto grace, mercy, the obedience and blood of Christ; in opposition unto our own worth and righteousness, or our own works and obedience. (p. 30)

At times, Owen even uses the language of his adversaries to make the point that his conclusions are simply inescapable. Quoting one of his “most learned adversaries,” Owen (1981) points out that even he was able to understand the importance of an imputed versus works righteousness:

Either a man hath true merits, or he hath not. If he hath not, he is perniciously deceived when he trusteth in anything but the mercy of God alone, and seduceth himself, trusting in false merits; if he hath them, he loseth nothing whilst he looks not to them, but trusts in God alone. So that whether a man have any good works or not, as to his justification before God, it is best and safest for him not to have any regard unto them, or put any trust in them. (p. 32)

These anecdotal examples notwithstanding, Owen still faced a great deal of opposition to his writings on the doctrine of justification. It is to this opposition that he addresses the bulk of this seminal work. Worthy of special note is Owen’s (1981) statement, at the outset, regarding how he intends to defend his position:

The reader may be pleased to observe, that I am not debating these things argumentatively, in such propriety of expressions as are required in a scholastic disputation; which shall be done afterward, so far as I judge it necessary. But I am doing that which indeed is better, and of more importance, - namely, declaring the experience of faith in the expressions of the Scripture, or such as are analogous unto them. And I had rather be instrumental in the communication of light and knowledge unto the meanest believer, than to have the clearest success against prejudiced disputers. Wherefore, by faith thus acting are we justified, and have peace with God. Other foundation in this matter can no man lay, that will endure the trial. (p. 41)

So, why is this debate important? Why must we discuss today a specific theological argument that was made nearly four centuries ago concerning the doctrine of justification? Has the argument not been long settled in the minds of contemporary theologians? Have we not evolved intellectually to such a degree as to render such debates moot? Hardly. Commenting on this same subject more than 300 years later, John Murray (1955) made the following observation:

And we are all wrong with him because we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. Far too frequently we fail to entertain the gravity of this fact. Hence the reality of our sin and the reality of the wrath of God upon us for our sin do not come into our reckoning. This is the reason why the grand article of justification does not ring the bells in the innermost depths of our spirit. And this is the reason why the gospel of justification is to such an extent a meaningless sound in the world and in the church of the twentieth century. We are not imbued with the profound sense of the reality of God, of his majesty and holiness. And sin, if reckoned with at all, is little more than a misfortune or maladjustment. (p. 117)

A more recent illustration of the need for continued clarification of this precious doctrine can be seen in the latest writings of highly regarded (yet often controversial) theologian and scholar N. T. Wright who, according to Mathison (2008), believes that justification “does not involve the imputation of Christ’s righteousness because such an idea is nonsensical.” It is to this end that Owen’s work is so invaluable as a corrective to any and all misunderstandings and misrepresentations of this precious doctrine whether they be past, present, or future.

The author begins this work by establishing eight general observations which, in and of themselves comprise a fitting defense of the doctrine of justification. These general observations are followed by 20 chapters containing, not only a systematic explanation of the various theological nuances surrounding the doctrine, but also a beautifully cogent defense thereof. He begins by establishing the causes and object of justifying faith arguing that, in terms of the abundance of Scriptural evidence, it is simply beyond disputation that the means of justification, as far as we are concerned, is faith. Any and all claims that justification is the result of anything but faith alone are quite simply to be ignored. Before this can be adequately understood, Owen points out that there is a necessary distinction to be made within the definition of what he refers to as a “twofold faith.” On the one hand, there is a faith which has nothing at all to do with justification. This is a purely intellectual faith, a faith which, while perhaps in perfect agreement with the historicity of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, is yet a spurious, non-

saving faith. It is a faith that originates, not as the gift of God (see Eph. 2:8-9) through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, but stems solely from the intellectual believability of Christ's person and work. This, Owen says, is *πιστις πσευδωνυμος*, or a "pseudo-faith." This faith, Owen writes, "may produce great effects in the minds, affections, and lives of men, although not one of them that are peculiar unto justifying faith" (p. 73). On the other hand, there is indeed a kind of faith whereby we are in fact justified. Whereas the aforementioned intellectual faith resides purely in the mind, true justifying faith is that which, having been planted there by the Holy Spirit in regeneration, is deeply rooted in the heart. This faith is a faith which demonstrates its presence in true sorrow over sin, a fear of punishment for sin, and a desire to be delivered from the presence and power of sin. These internal realities will then manifest themselves in the form of external duties, chiefly, abstinence from known sin, a sense of religious duty in worship, and an overall reformation of life and conversation. The reader will understand that these are not cited as *conditions* of salvation but as the *fruits* thereof.

On a contemporary note, this writer is amazed (though certainly not surprised) at the similarities between the struggles for doctrinal clarity which Owen faced and those which the church faces today, especially relative to the truths associated with the precious doctrine of justification by faith alone. As reported by Michael Foust (2011) of Baptist Press, a 2011 survey conducted by Barna Research revealed the following in this regard:

Millions of adults reject the clear teachings of Scripture that faith alone, in Christ alone is necessary for salvation...By a 48-44 percent margin, U.S. adults believe that 'if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others, they will earn a place in heaven.'

As Owen consistently and cogently argues, contrary to what remains a quite popular opinion even among professing Christians today, justification is in no way based on the sinner's actions. Rather, it is, and has always been all of grace. The author further develops this truth by pointing

out the fundamental error which most often undergirds this presupposition: the belief that the catalyst resulting in saving faith is little more than an intellectual acknowledgment of a corpus of theological facts (i.e. intellectual assent equals saving faith). This, Owen argues, is a most untenable position given that, among other equally compelling reasons, “To suppose a man to have justifying faith, and not be justified, is to suppose a contradiction” (p. 83). In other words, if saving faith is the byproduct of something having gone before (i.e. justification) then we dare not suppose that a man may be in possession of said faith without having first been justified.

Owen states this another way in his discussion of the nature of justifying faith saying:

For we do deny that ordinarily, and according to the method of God’s proceeding with us declared in the Scripture, wherein the rule of our duty is prescribed, any one doth, or can, truly believe with faith unto justification, in whom the work of conviction... hath not been wrought. All descriptions or definitions of faith that have not a respect thereunto are but vain speculations. (p. 93)

The act or work whereby we are justified lies alone with Christ in His priestly office as He was both the surety of and the provider of it. In short, our justification (and the accompanying faith with which it is inextricably tied) is based solely on the free grace of God given to His elect through the provision of Christ (Rom. 3:24). It is not based upon works (Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9). And yet the controversy continues unabated between those who believe in this free and sovereign grace and those who openly deny it. Roman Catholicism, for example, not only vehemently denies the doctrine of justification by faith alone, they also believe and teach that anyone who does believe this is to be cursed. Consider the following statement from the Council of Trent, Canons on Justification:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema. (Canon 9)



This sentiment is also expressed in another place:

If any one saith, that man is truly absolved from his sins and justified, because he assuredly believed himself absolved and justified; or, that no one is truly justified but he who believes himself justified; and that, by this faith alone, absolution and justification are effected; let him be anathema. (Canon 14)

Not surprisingly, the Roman Catholics are not alone in their view that, instead of being a monergistic act of God, justification is a synergistic process requiring a cooperative effort between God and man. The followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) likewise expressed this notion in the Five Articles of Remonstrance (1610) which includes, among other debatable teachings, the idea that salvation is freely offered to all but only those who, by the exercise of their own free will, choose to cooperate with God's offer will actually be saved. This is currently the predominant view of many mainline denominations including Methodists, Nazarenes, and many Baptist churches (i.e. those who lack a reformed understanding of soteriology). Owen provides a very necessary corrective to this erroneous view of justification when he astutely observes:

The apostle [Paul] speaks not one word of the necessity of our sanctification, or regeneration, or renovation by the Holy Ghost, antecedently unto our justification... He assigns our regeneration, renovation, and justification, all the means of our salvation, all equally unto grace and mercy, in opposition unto any works of our own. (p. 133)

Each of these components (regeneration, renovation, and justification) are simply but a few facets of the singular gem that is salvation. The Biblical argument against a works-based salvation (again, which includes justification) has as its nexus the doctrine of imputation. If man, in his natural state, has no righteousness of his own with which to garner God's favor (Is. 64:6) then he must acquire said righteousness before he can be saved. And whose righteousness has God deemed sufficient to that end? The righteousness of Christ alone. Therefore, only as Christ's righteousness is, by God's sovereign grace alone, imputed to the sinner, is he fitted for

justification. In other words, try as he might to work his way into God's good graces, unless and until God Himself is inclined, by divine prerogative, to act first through the necessary imputation of Christ's righteousness, his working is in vain. As Charles Hodge, in his commentary on the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, remarked:

There is no more pointed way of denying that we are justified on account of the state of our own hearts, or the character of our own acts, than by saying that we are justified by a propitiatory sacrifice. This latter declaration places of necessity the ground of acceptance out of ourselves; it is something done for us, not something experienced, or produced in us, or performed by us.

In chapter 14 of his work, entitled "Works Excluded in Justification," Owen goes to great lengths to establish this particular truth. Paul, Owen argues, excluded all works from justification, not only those which are done before the attainment of saving faith but even those works following conversion. The apostle thus excluded his own works in Gal. 2:16, 1 Cor. 4:4, and Phil. 3:9 as well as the works of others in Eph. 2:9, 10. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul excludes from justification all of the works that false teachers insist are necessary for both its attainment and its sustainment. The reason for this is quite clear from a theological standpoint. Because no man can yield perfect obedience to the law of God (which, according to Rom. 2:13 and 10:5 is God's righteous requirement), if he is to be justified at all he must be so on the basis of the perfect obedience of another. To borrow from Luther, "Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He." As is clearly indicated by Paul in Gal. 3:24, "...the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we may be justified by faith." In other words, as elucidated in similar passages, the purpose of the law of God was two-fold: 1) to reveal to man the futility of striving for perfect obedience to it, and 2) based on this sense of futility, to lead him to the One by whom the law was in fact perfectly obeyed.

Owen also points out that, while some indeed affirm that Paul excludes all works from what Owen refers to as our “first justification” (i.e. our having been declared *positionally* righteous by God) he does no such thing with regard to those works associated with our “second justification” (i.e. our sanctification). This claim, says the author, has been examined and found groundless. Once again, on a contemporary note, there are yet many in the church at-large today who insist that while works have no part in our justification, they are indeed integral to our continuation in grace as we grow more and more in Christ’s likeness. Jerry Bridges (1991), in his best-selling book Transforming Grace, likens this belief to what he refers to as the “performance treadmill.” In chapter 1 (which, incidentally, has this as its title), the author states:

All true Christians readily agree that justification is by grace through faith in Christ. And if we stop to think about it, we agree that glorification is also solely by God’s grace. Jesus purchased for us not only forgiveness of sins (justification) but also eternal life (glorification). But sanctification – the entire Christian experience between justification and glorification – is another story. At best, the Christian life is viewed as a mixture of personal performance and God’s grace. It is not that we have consciously sorted it all out in our minds and have concluded that our relationship with God, for example, is based on 50 percent performance and 50 percent grace. Rather it is a subconscious assumption arising from our own innate legalism – reinforced and fueled by the Christian culture we live in. (pp. 19-20)

While one must certainly avoid the tendency to resort to outright antinomianism, a healthy, Biblical perspective toward the idea of works is one in which they are seen, not as a means to a given end (i.e. justification or sanctification) but as the fruit or natural outworking of our salvation; the external evidence of the very real inward work of the Holy Spirit who, in addition to His initial work of regeneration, daily molds us and shapes us, conforming us further to the image of Christ Himself. J. C. Philpot, nineteenth century Particular Baptist pastor, captures this sentiment beautifully in a sermon preached in 1858 entitled, “Spiritual Fruit” saying:

I believe there is a desire in every soul under divine teaching, to bring forth fruit, to come out of the world and the things that are of the world, to walk in God's fear, and to have some testimonies that he is accepted, that he is a saved soul, and that he has a saving

interest in the atoning blood of the Son of God. And all through a Christian's life wherever the Spirit moves, wherever the Spirit operates upon that man's heart and conscience, there will be a desire to bring forth fruit; and this is a mark and test of being one of God's family. A profession does not put us into Christ—mere head knowledge does not put us into Christ—talking and chattering do not put us into Christ—none of the works of man give us a birth and being in Christ, and a title to receive out of the fullness of Christ. Therefore, from first to last, beginning, middle, and end it is all of sovereign grace, of the work and workmanship of the Holy Spirit in the heart and conscience.

In chapter 15 of his work, Owen states his case for his entire argument for a Scriptural understanding of the doctrine of justification via two very simple yet profound points. First, that the necessary righteousness of God imputed to us, unto the justification of life, is the righteousness of Christ, by whose obedience we are made righteous. This is clearly stated in the third chapter of the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians where he writes in verses 7-9:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...

The second of Owen's points is that "it is faith alone which on our part is required to interest us in that righteousness, or whereby we comply with God's grant and communication of it, or receive it unto our use and benefit" (p. 291). Simply stated, if unregenerate man is to have any interest at all in obtaining a righteous standing before a thrice-holy God, he must first obtain the requisite faith which will, in turn, spawn that interest. That faith is indeed the operative component in man's having an interest in righteousness itself can be seen throughout Paul's writings. In Rom. 1:17, for example, the apostle writes that "...in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – *a righteousness that is by faith* from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live *by faith*'" (italics added). Similarly, he writes in Rom. 9:30 that "...the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is *by faith*"

(italics added). And how is this faith obtained? It is God-given. This foundational truth can be seen in numerous places in the Word of God. Perhaps the most oft-cited reference is Eph. 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it [saving faith] is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Strangely, though not surprisingly, in spite of the wealth of Scriptural evidence to the contrary, many today (as was certainly the case in Owen’s own day as well), view faith as something that every man possesses innately and not as that which he must receive as a free gift from God in salvation. This of course conveniently comports with the erroneous notion that man, in his fallen state is not actually dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) but is merely sick, tainted, marred, etc. by his “poor choices” in life. Owen effectively refutes this erroneous (even heretical) view by pointing out that, not only is faith itself spoken of in terms of the believer’s “receiving” it, but the same thing is said about the whole object of our faith: the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:12, Col. 2:6). In fact, the same language is used of those who do not receive Him (Jn. 1:11; 3:11; 12:48; 14:17). By joining faith and its object, the author masterfully constructs an ironclad argument in which he establishes both as the singular basis for our justification. In other words, it is simply not possible for one to possess saving faith without likewise possessing the object of said faith, the Lord Jesus Christ. This truth systematically destroys the aforementioned erroneous belief that faith, apart from the justifying work of God, is inherent in all men. Simply stated, the object of the believer’s faith simply cannot be divorced from faith itself. Any claim to an “objectless faith” (as is the claim of those believing in an inherent faith) is not only nonsensical but entirely alien to the teaching of God’s Word.

In addition to that which is received, the procurement of saving or justifying faith is also expressed as the act of “looking.” Is. 45:22, for example, says, “Look unto me, and be ye

saved.” Likewise Is. 17:7 reads, “A man shall look to his maker, and his eyes shall have respect unto the Holy One of Israel.” In Zech. 12 we read, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced.” In John’s gospel, we are given an explanation of the events surrounding Moses’ lifting up of the bronze serpent on a pole during Israel’s wilderness sojourn as recorded in Num. 21. When the fiery serpents appeared and began to decimate the children of Israel, they were told that if they would look to the bronze serpent they would be spared from death. According to Jn. 3:14, 15, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whoever believes on Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Although, as Owen states, many took it upon themselves to seek and to avail themselves of other remedies, only that remedy ordained by God (i.e. looking unto His provision) was sufficient to save. By way of necessary clarification, it is essential to note that even though faith can be expressed by the simple act of looking unto Christ, one must be extremely careful not to dismiss the fact that the looking itself is the byproduct of something having gone before. In other words, one must always be mindful of the fact that regeneration, God’s monergistic work whereby He raises His elect from spiritual death to eternal life in Christ (Eph. 2) precedes faith. Thus it can be said that regeneration is the lone catalyst which prompts fallen man to look unto Christ. This Scriptural truth is invaluable in helping to dismiss the erroneous notion that there are those who, while yet unregenerate, are somehow “seeking” Christ (Rom. 3:11).

Justifying faith is also frequently expressed as “coming unto Christ.” This of course is based on passages such as Matt. 11:28, “Come unto Me, all ye that labor...” (see also Jn. 6:35, 37, 45, 65; 7:37). This, too, must be understood as the result of something having gone before (i.e. regeneration). As Owen observed:

He who hath been convinced of sin, who hath been wearied with the burden of it, who hath really designed to fly from the wrath to come, and hath heard the voice of Christ in

the gospel inviting him to come unto him for help and relief, will tell you that this coming unto Christ consisteth in a man's going out of himself, in a complete renunciation of all his own duties and righteousness, and betaking himself with all his trust and confidence unto Christ alone, and His righteousness, for pardon of sin, acceptation with God, and a right unto heavenly inheritance. (p. 293)

Justifying faith, Owen continues, can also be expressed as “fleeing for refuge” (Heb. 6:18) and “leaning on Christ” (Mic. 3:11).

In chapters 16, 17, and 18 the author turns to the internal testimony of the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament evangelists, and the apostle Paul respectively to argue for the doctrine of justification. These testimonies, he observes, are those “unto whose authority all the arguings and objections of man must give place.” By them, the author continues, “is more light conveyed into the understanding of believers than by the most subtle disputations.” Among other fitting examples of the testimony of the Old Testament prophets concerning justification, the author cites Jer. 23:6 wherein the promised Christ is referred to as “The Lord our Righteousness,” which is a wonderful representation of two integral parts of our justification: first, His identification as the divine person of Jehovah, and secondly, His being our righteousness (or the basis for our being counted righteous in Him).

In bringing to bear upon this subject the testimony of the evangelists, Owen begins with a reference to Jesus' sermon on the mount as recorded in chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, a sermon the purpose of which the author considers to be “to declare the true nature of righteousness before God” (p. 299). The scribes and Pharisees, Owen argued, were intent on leading the people to an understanding of righteousness as dependent upon their obedience to the law. In Luke 16:15, Jesus rebukes them in this regard saying, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” These are they who, according to Paul in Romans 9:32 and 10:3 sought to

“establish their own righteousness, as it were by the works of the law.” As the author indicates, such actions were totally unnecessary (not to mention ineffective) in light of the fact that the purpose in Christ’s coming was to fulfill the law in order that the righteousness of it might be fulfilled in us. In illustrating the futility of man’s attempting to justify himself through his own obedience to the law, Owen refers the reader to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Lk. 18:10-14:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee’s plea for justification consists of two parts. In the first place, he argued that he had already fulfilled the condition whereby he might be justified with his good works. By going above and beyond the course of “normal” piety, the Pharisee claimed to fast, not once, but twice a week. He was thus relying on self-exaltation and trusting unto his own righteousness for his justification. Secondly, although the Pharisee did pay a certain homage to God (“God, I thank thee...”), it was not out of appreciation for the work of God in justifying him but an expression of thankfulness that he was superior to other men. As the author astutely observes, “The persuasion of justification by works includes in it a contempt of other men” (p. 302). Ironically, the Pharisee was thankful that he was not like the publican who had placed his entire trust in grace and mercy alone. As the Lord instructs us, when we have done everything we can out of obedience to Him, instead of making a case for our obedience as the basis for our justification, we need only judge ourselves as “unprofitable servants” (Lk. 17:10). As the apostle Paul noted in 1 Cor. 4:4, “I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified.” The one who would



prove himself to be among those justified by God's grace is he who sees himself as deserving of nothing but the judgment and wrath of God. The attitude of the publican, however, stands in stark contrast to that of the Pharisee. Instead of depending on his own sense of self-righteousness, he is characterized by humility and self-deprecation. This is especially evident in his standing "afar off," is "not so much as [lifting] up his eyes," and the "[beating] of his breast" while saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" As Owen observes:

This is the nature, this is the effect, of that conviction of sin which we before asserted to be antecedently necessary unto justification. Dispicency, sorrow, sense of danger, fear of wrath, - all are present with him. In brief, he declares himself guilty before God, and his mouth stopped as unto any apology or excuse. And his prayer is a sincere application of his soul unto sovereign grace and mercy, for a deliverance out of the condition wherein he was by reason of the guilt of sin. (p. 303)

Here, the author says, are the four components which are required on man's part in order for him to be justified before God (which, incidentally, will also be the necessary byproducts or fruits of true saving faith): self-condemnation and abhorrency, dispicency and sorrow for sin, a universal renunciation of all works of his own, as any condition of his justification, and an acknowledgment of his sin, guilt, and misery.

Owen also brings the prolific writing of Paul to bear on the subject of justification. While the apostle did in fact write more on the subject of justification than any other Biblical author, his most well-known work in this regard is his letter to the Romans. In fact, in the opinion of many (this writer included), a fitting thematic title for Romans might well be "Justification by Faith Alone." On an interesting historical note, one of the catalysts sparking the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther's realization, after reading the book of Romans, that God's righteousness could become the possession of the redeemed. He arrived at this conclusion on the basis of what he read in Rom. 1:17, "Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from

faith to faith: as it is written, ‘the just shall live by faith.’” As Jung (2007) observed, Luther described this theological epiphany in these words:

My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

Owen’s discussion of Paul’s invaluable contribution to the doctrine of justification begins with a defense of the apostle’s particular style of writing. In the opinion of some of Owen’s contemporaries, Paul’s writings about justification were not only unique to himself but were obscure and intricate. These charges, in Owen’s estimation, were “both false and scandalous to Christ religion, so as that, in this place, we shall not afford them the least consideration.” In Owen’s opinion, that the apostle wrote as he was moved by the Holy Spirit was proof enough of the letters’ authenticity and veracity and should settle the matter once and for all.

The author then begins to expand on his understanding of the basis for Paul’s teaching on this subject. In so doing, he refers to Rom. 3:21, 22 where Paul describes the righteousness imputed to the believer using three properties. The first of these is that said righteousness is “without the law.” According to verse 21, it is completely separate from the law and not attainable by it or any works of it. In the second place, this righteousness, although unattainable through obedience to the law, is nonetheless witnessed unto by it. Indeed, according to Rom. 3:21, Paul says that “...the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” By this, Owen contends, Paul understands the books of Moses to give testimony to this fact in four ways: 1) By a declaration of the causes of its necessity in our

justification. In other words, it is said repeatedly in the law and the prophets that fallen man is hopelessly lost and in a state of sin (which removed any righteousness he may have possessed before the fall). If he would stand before a thrice-holy God, fallen man needs a righteousness that he doesn't possess. And whose righteousness is sufficient to that end? The righteousness of God.

2) The Law and the Prophets generally declare the remedy for man's lack of personal righteousness for they contain "the promise of the blessed seed, by whom this righteousness of God was to be wrought and introduced; for he alone was 'to make an end of sin, and to bring in everlasting righteousness.'" Owen cites Dan. 9:24 as proof that the righteousness of God would be the means of justification for all who would believe in all ages, and under all dispensations.

3) The Law and the Prophets, through the threatening aspect of the Law, allow no other righteousness as a satisfactory provision for justification.

4) The Law and the Prophets are filled with teaching which indicates that God will be satisfied only one way; that the righteousness of God could only be wrought by that which the entire sacrificial system prefigured, namely, the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God who was slain from before the foundation of the world. The third property that Paul uses to describe the righteousness imputed to the believer concerns our part of the communication of it or the only way we are able to participate therein. This is by faith alone. As Paul states in Rom. 3:22, the righteousness of God is received "...through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe." Owen continues with Paul's treatment of this issue in Rom. 3, wherein the apostle states that justification is a gift of God's free grace. We are justified, says Paul, "without price," (i.e. without merit, without cause, or any other means of procurement ourselves). Incidentally, Owen argues, this truth is further substantiated by a general rule set down in Rom. 11:6, "...if it [in this case, justification] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." Owen then moves on to Paul's

treatment of this subject in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans. In this chapter, Owen observes that the apostle denies that Abraham was justified by works but was instead justified by faith, having believed in the promise of Christ made by God. That works are excluded as a means of justification can be clearly seen in Rom. 4:4, “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.” Abraham was saved purely by God’s grace and any righteousness he possessed was a righteousness which had been imputed to him: the righteousness of Christ. The apostle Paul also speaks of this righteousness in Phil. 3:9 when he states his great desire to be “found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...” Carrying this concept even further, Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:21 that believers are actually “made the righteousness of God in Christ.” As the author clearly indicates, there is simply no room for two kinds of righteousness (e.g. one which God supplies and another which man is able to generate on his own). If this was the case, man would have sufficient cause for boasting. To preclude this, God has given the believer a righteousness which can only be attributed to and reflected back upon Himself so as to exclude any such boasting (see Rom. 3:27; Eph. 2:9).

Owen also spends a great deal of time discussing Paul’s declaration of justification in the fifth chapter of Romans. And well he should as this single chapter is, to use a favored puritan term, “pregnant” with such teaching. In Rom. 5:8-9, for example, the apostle reasons that, “since we have now been justified by [Christ’s] blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” This, Paul asserts, is ample cause for rejoicing “in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (v. 11). He then continues to explain the believer’s justification by comparing Adam’s sin (that fall whereby, according to v.

12, all men are alienated from God) with the free grace of God in salvation. This gift, says Paul, is not like the trespass (v. 15). The single trespass of Adam brought condemnation to all mankind, but the free gift, which abounded for many who likewise sinned, brought justification (v. 16). Paul summarizes this wonderfully in verses 18-19 saying, “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” Owen also takes great pains to explain what he refers to as the dissimilitude (lack of resemblance or similarity) in the comparison that Paul makes between the sin of Adam and the gift of Jesus Christ. By one sin, *all* men fell. There are no exceptions. However, the gift of grace in Christ is not given to all but *many*. It is true that condemnation came upon all by a single offense whereby death spread to all men. It is equally true that the single gift of grace was provided as a remedy for that condemnation. If, however, the gift of grace was purposed to cover that offense alone, we could not be delivered. Why? Because, as Owen states, “we contract the guilt of many more [sins] innumerable” (p. 328). As Boice (1992) observed, “Since Christ died for such a vast accumulation of sins, is it any wonder that Paul marvels in Romans 5 how ‘judgment followed’ one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (p. 590)? Certainly, the gift of grace is able to erase those innumerable sins but it was never designed to do so in all men (see Rom. 9:15-18, for example). As Owen makes clear, “There is a gift of righteousness required unto our justification, which all must receive who are to be justified, and all are justified who do receive it; for they that receive it shall ‘reign in life by Jesus Christ’” (p. 331). And what is one to conclude from this truth? First, that this gracious gift of righteousness is exactly that: a gift. Therefore, the one who is in possession of it can lay no claim to having possessed it inherently or

having performed any deed(s) which would have merited it. Secondly, it is a righteousness that gives us a right and title to eternal life.

Owen next addresses the reason that our justification is preeminently revealed in Scripture to be the result of Christ's shed blood and ultimate death. First, Owen says, Christ's suffering and death (in obedience to God's prescription as a remedy for our sin) are not only the ultimate demonstration of God's love and grace but also, more importantly, bring God the glory that He alone deserves. As Paul says in Phil. 2:8-11:

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Secondly, Owen observes, the love of Christ Himself, as well as His grace, are "peculiarly exalted in our justification" (p. 337). This is borne out in numerous places in Scripture (2 Cor. 8:9; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 2:6-7; Rev. 1:5-6). In the third place, Christ's suffering and death give the clearest testimony that what the Lord Christ did was for us and not for Himself.

The author goes on to provide much more invaluable information in his discussion of Paul's declaration of justification, however, the scope and span of this paper will simply not allow a more exhaustive examination of it. Suffice it to say, there is much that one can glean from both the evangelists and the apostle Paul in this regard.

In the next chapter (chapter 19), Owen takes the opportunity to consider the objections which were often raised during his day concerning the doctrine of justification. As he indicates, he has already dealt with a number of these objections within the previous chapters (e.g. the Roman church's teaching on justification by works, the belief of some that true justification is an admixture of works and Christ's righteousness, etc.). He therefore limits his discussion in this

chapter to only two objections “which are generally pleaded by all sorts of persons, Papists, Socinians, and others” (p. 372). The first of these two general objections (which is, in the author’s opinion, foundational to all others) is the idea that justification by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness somehow renders null and void our need for any personal righteousness. The second, which is like unto the first, is the insistence that James, in his epistle, plainly attributes our justification to works (in contradiction of other Scriptures). On a contemporary note, it must be said that these two arguments remain alive and well. Not surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church still vehemently denies the doctrine of imputed righteousness. They are not, however, alone in their rejection of this critical doctrine. The Church of Christ, for example, insists that the doctrine of imputation is simply inconsistent with objective truth. As Spears (2003) opines:

Righteousness is a personal trait. As such, it belongs to the person possessing it. It cannot be transferred to another. Neither our personal good or bad can be passed on to anyone. We may influence others, but whatever good or bad anyone has is non-transferable. It is completely inconsistent with truth to argue that the personal and perfect righteousness of Jesus is transferable. All accountable beings who sin are condemned without forgiveness from God. There is no “umbrella” concealing us from the all seeing eye of our God and Father. We are culpable because we sin.

Another of the Church of Christ’s luminaries, Elmore (2013), agrees saying:

The Bible does teach that Jesus was sinless, that He rendered perfect obedience; if this were not true, Jesus would have died as the thieves did. His perfect life and atoning death paid the penalty for sins, but I do not read that the moral excellence of Christ enabled us to don a robe of Christ’s righteousness which covers our sins.

This denial of imputed righteousness is also characteristic of Methodist theology. Writing for the Methodist Quarterly Review to Peck (1844), “Imputed righteousness is the coming in of actual righteousness. They whom God’s sovereign voice pronounces just forthwith become just. He declares it a fact, and makes it a fact by declaring it” (p. 11). It must be understood that this “actual righteousness” to which Peck refers is granted by God at the moment He forgives past

sins. From that point on, the believer must actively live in righteousness lest he lose his salvation.

The denial of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer is widespread among those of the Arminian persuasion. Consider the following from nineteenth century Wesleyan minister Benjamin Field (1870):

It is nowhere stated in Scripture that Christ's personal righteousness is imputed to us. Not a text can be found which contains any enunciation of the doctrine." Even the fourth chapter of Romans, where it has been supposed to exist in all its proofs, gives no countenance to the theory. It is repeatedly said, that "faith is imputed for righteousness;" but in no place here, that Christ's obedience to the moral law is imputed to any man. (p. 199)

Similarly, Arminian theologian Adam Clarke (1842) observed:

To say that Christ's personal righteousness is imputed to every true believer, is not Scriptural: to say that he has fulfilled all righteousness for us, in our stead, if by this is meant his fulfillment of all moral duties, is neither Scriptural nor true; that~ he has died in our stead, is a great, glorious, and Scriptural truth; that there is no redemption but through his blood is asserted beyond all contradiction in the oracles of God. (p. 140)

These are only a few of what are in fact many such sentiments expressed concerning the so-called "erroneous" doctrine of imputation. Even the most cursory of searches for similar examples throughout the church's history will yield similar results. Interestingly, as Owen points out, the apostle Paul himself anticipated similar arguments. In Rom. 3:31, he asks his imaginary antagonist, "Do we make void the law through faith?" This simply could not be the case as it would have made Paul out to be an advocate of antinomianism. And yet the charge persisted. As Owen shared, some during his own day had similar thoughts on the matter:

If what [Paul] taught concerning the grace of God in our justification be true, it will not only follow that there will be no need of any relinquishment of sin on our part, but also a continuance in it must needs tend unto the exaltation of that grace which he had so extolled.



Paul repeats his objection in Rom. 6:15 asking, “What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace?” And yet how did he respond? He said, “May it never be!” (μη γενοιτο; the aorist subjunctive of prohibition and the most vehement of denials). The apostle shuddered at the suggestion that a belief in the imputed righteousness of Christ would be so misunderstood as to promote antinomianism of any kind. The problem that many, even today, have with regard to a Scriptural understanding of the relationship between faith and works is two-fold: 1) they view works as a necessary means of *obtaining* salvation as opposed to their being *fruits* thereof, and 2) they fail to see that the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer renders him *positionally* righteous though not *practically* so.

As for the assertion that James attributes the believer’s justification to works (and this over and against other Scripture), this is also a teaching not only rooted in antiquity but that which remains the ongoing belief among some today. To the student of church history, Luther’s antilegomena is quite familiar. In his preface to James’ epistle, he declares:

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle; and my reasons follow. In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac; though in Romans 4, St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone...

While his views on the subject have become legendary, Luther was certainly not alone in his opinion concerning the non-canoncity of James. Many throughout the history of the church have expressed similar reservations when it comes to what appear to be contradictory views between James and Paul. While a thorough examination of this subject would definitely be worthwhile, it is outside of the scope of this paper. Piper (1999), however, does an admirable job of easing the tension, summing up the argument as follows:

...the faith [James] says cannot justify is a faith that Paul would totally agree cannot justify - dead faith, devil faith, and useless faith -faith that has no vital life that works through love.

Owen also goes to great pains to “clear the air” regarding any perceived contradictions between Paul and James. He does so in a number of helpful ways. First, he argues that Paul and James do not have the same scope, design, or end in their respective discourses. In the author’s words, “they do not consider the same question, nor state the same case, nor determine on the same inquiry” (p. 387). And, since this is true, there can be no alleged contradiction. Secondly, Owen contends that the word “faith” carries various significations in Scripture. Paul and James are simply referring to faith differently and therefore do not contradict one another. In the third place, Paul and James also speak of justification in different ways. Paul, for example, speaks exclusively of our acceptance with the Father on the basis of our having been granted the righteousness of Christ. James, on the other hand, speaks of the kind of faith that is required to corroborate the believer’s justification. Again, genuine saving faith will be evidenced by the presence of works or fruit in the believer’s life. Fourthly, where works are concerned, both James and Paul are talking about the same thing. Each of these things is expounded upon in great detail by Owen but, unfortunately, such minute details are beyond the scope of this particular paper.

In the ‘To the Reader’ section at the beginning of what is arguably Owen’s “magnum opus” on the subject of justification, the author wrote:

I have had no other design but to enquire diligently into the divine revelation of that way, and those means, with the causes of them, whereby the conscience of a distressed sinner may attain assured peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I lay more weight on the steady direction of one soul in this enquiry, than in disappointing the objections of twenty wrangling or fiery disputers. (p. 4)

Indeed, Owen's treatment of this subject is far more pastoral than polemical, which is no doubt one of the greatest contributing factors to both its longevity and its well-deserved reputation as *the* seminal work on a critically important theological topic.

### **Thomas Watson and the Doctrine of Repentance**

Before commencing with an in-depth examination of Thomas Watson's wonderful teaching on the doctrine of repentance, it is crucial that the reader possess from the outset an adequate working definition of the term. While the author does in fact provide such a definition, he does not do so until after addressing some preliminary matters. One of the most helpful definitions of repentance is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). In part, this definition reads:

By [regeneration], a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

Simply stated as a working definition herein, repentance involves one's turning *from* his sins *to* God and purposing thereby to walk with Him in obedience to all He has commanded.

The doctrine of repentance, like the doctrine of justification, is also often misunderstood. Such is the case with many Biblical doctrines which have found themselves conveniently redefined to suit the whims of man. As C.H. Spurgeon (1890) once stated, "Brethren, we shall not adjust our Bible to the age, but the age to the Bible." This is critically important, especially in an age in which man's tolerance for and willingness to receive Biblical instruction has waned so significantly. In this regard, Thomas Watson's treatment of the subject of repentance is simply invaluable. Not only does it help the reader to properly define the Biblical doctrine of

repentance, but the lengths to which the author goes to thoroughly explain every facet of this great doctrine are especially noteworthy.

Watson's work on repentance begins with his expression of the following sentiment concerning the doctrine's importance:

The two great graces essential to a saint in this life are faith and repentance. These are the two wings by which he flies to heaven. Faith and repentance preserve the spiritual life as heat and radical moisture do the natural.

One of the most common misunderstandings of the doctrine of repentance concerns whether or not repentance comes before faith or whether faith must precede repentance. Although Watson is reluctant to avoid expending too much time on the settling of this particular argument he does, however, make his own position known:

That which inclines me to think that faith is seminally in the heart before repentance is because repentance, being a grace, must be exercised by one that is living. Now, how does the soul live but by faith? 'The just shall live by his faith' (Heb. 10:38). Therefore, there must be first some seeds of faith in the heart of a penitent, otherwise it is a dead repentance and so of no value. (p. 12)

This writer would agree with this assessment. True repentance, which involves turning from sin and committing oneself to a life of principled obedience to God, must of necessity be the byproduct of something going before, namely, saving faith.

Watson observes that repentance is wrought in the heart of the believer in a two-fold manner. First, by the Word. In the Word of God, repentance is likened to both a hammer to break and a fire to melt the sinner's heart. The Word of God, says Watson, is the engine He uses to effect repentance. Secondly, Watson observes that repentance is wrought by the Holy Spirit. "Ministers," he says, "are but the pipes and organs. It is the Holy Spirit breathing in them that makes their words effectual" (p. 14). One of the more interesting things about Watson's argument in this regard is his astute observation that unless and until the Spirit works, man will

remain unrepentant. Indeed, many routinely sit under the preaching of God's Word. Does it have the same effect on all who hear? Not at all. Only those to whom God the Holy Spirit is pleased to impart life will ever truly and savingly repent of their sins. Sadly, one of the most damaging aspects of the modern philosophies of easy-believism and decisional regeneration that have made inroads into the church at-large over the last 75 years or so is the idea that sinful man, in and of himself, somehow possesses the faculties which will enable him to repent. This belief persists despite ample Scriptural evidence to the contrary. As Paul clearly states in 1 Cor. 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Earlier in this same epistle (1 Cor. 1:18) the apostle reminds his readers that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Gill (1747), commenting on the former, has written:

There must be a natural visive discerning faculty, suited to the object; as there must be a natural visive faculty to see and discern natural things, so there must be a spiritual one, to see, discern, judge, and approve of spiritual things; and which only a spiritual, and not a natural man has.

Watson is also quite helpful in promoting a more complete understanding of this very issue. In chapter two, he identifies what repentance is *not*. In the first place, he says, repentance is not merely a perceived bitterness over sin. "It is one thing to be a terrified sinner and another to be a repenting sinner." A sense of guilt will certainly breed terror, but only an infusion of grace breeds true repentance.

Secondly, repentance is not necessarily to be seen as a vow against sin. Indeed, people may make resolutions against sin for a variety of reasons. Some, for example, may resolve to not commit a particular sin because it causes them pain or discomfort. Once the discomfort subsides, it is highly likely that the resolution itself will subside as well. Others may resolve to

stop sinning whenever they are faced with the real prospect of death and hell. These “sickbed vows” or “death bed” professions hardly constitute true repentance.

In the third place, repentance is often misunderstood as the giving up of multiple sins. A man, Watson contends, may part with some sins and keep others and an old sin may simply be replaced with a new one. “True leaving of sin is when the acts of sin cease from the infusion of a principle of grace as the air ceases to be dark from the infusion of light” (p. 17).

Watson next endeavors to define what true repentance *is*. He defines repentance as “a grace of God’s Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed.” He then cites six critical components which should accompany an accurate understanding of repentance: 1) the sight of sin, 2) sorrow for sin, 3) confession of sin, 4) shame for sin, 5) hatred for sin, and 6) turning from sin. The author then takes great pains to qualify each of these components. By “sight of sin,” Watson refers to the prerequisite condition of man’s actually seeing himself as a sinner. Simply put, where there is no sight of sin, there can be no repentance from it.

In his discussion of sorrow for sin, the author continues with his recurring insistence that there is a great deal of difference between how man interprets Scriptural truths and how God intends for those truths to be understood. Not all sorrow, for example, evidences true repentance. Watson then provides six qualifications of true sorrow. First, he says, true godly sorrow is an inward sorrow; it is a sorrow of the heart. Secondly, true sorrow is ingenuous. That is, it is a sorrow not predicated on the prospect of God’s punishment for sin, but sorrow over the offense itself. It is a recognition of precisely what the Word of God says sin is: a source of grief to God and an affront to His love. Thirdly, Watson observes, Godly sorrow is fiducial. In other words, it is mixed with faith. As the author states, “Spiritual sorrow will sink the heart if the pulley of faith does not raise it” (p. 11). The fourth qualification that characterizes true sorrow

is that it is a great sorrow. One of the more thought provoking aspects of this particular qualification is Watson's suggestion that true sorrow for sin must surpass worldly sorrow. "We must grieve more for offending God than for the loss of dear relations... Sorrow for sin should be so great as to swallow up all other sorrow..." (p. 24). Fifthly, Watson argues that Godly sorrow in some cases is joined with restitution. Speaking specifically of the gaining of ill-gotten goods, Watson states that restitution must be made or God may very well not forgive at all. Finally, Watson says that godly sorrow is abiding. By this the author dismisses the idea that sorrow is temporary or fleeting. The one who sees himself as a sinner must recognize that his life will be one of continual repentance. This does not mean, however, that there are not occasions which call for extraordinary repentance. Watson mentions two such occasions: before receiving the Lord's Supper and at the hour of death.

The third component of true repentance is confession of sin. True sorrow for sin will result in a confession of it. This, says the author, is the "venting" of true sorrow through the eyes of weeping and the tongue of confession. Confusion is accusing oneself of sin. According to Watson, when we thus accuse ourselves, we prevent the accusation of Satan who is called "the accuser of the brethren." Even beyond accusing himself of sin, the repentant sinner also sits in judgment and passes sentence upon himself, realizing that he deserves to be subject to the wrath of God. As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 11:31, "If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged." The natural question that arises from this observation is this: What is the difference between a spurious confession of sin and a genuine confession? True to form, Watson provides eight characteristics which qualify the nature of genuine confession.

First, genuine confession must be voluntary. As mentioned previously, confession can often be coerced or forced by (usually uncomfortable) circumstances. Fear of imminent judgment can often yield confession of sins, as can fear of bodily injury.

Secondly, true confession will be characterized by compunction. There must be a deep-seated, heartfelt resentment of sin. As Watson observes, “True confession leaves heart-wounding impressions on a man” (p. 29).

Thirdly, true confession must be sincere. Many confessions are made but with little intention of abandoning the sin which necessitated them. True confession involves an abhorrence of sin and an intention to abandon any and all future instances of it.

In the fourth place, true confession is characterized by a particularization of sin. In other words, it is not enough for sinful man to confess to his sin in a general way. True confession will have an element of specificity which seeks to amend for particular sins.

The fifth characteristic of true confession is that it will contain an acknowledgment that our sin originates, not with Satan, but from our sin nature. As the apostle Paul indicates in Rom. 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...” As Watson puts it:

Our nature is an abyss and seminary of all evil, from whence come those scandals that infest the world. It is the depravity of our nature which poisons our holy things; it is this which brings on God’s judgments and makes our mercies stick in the birth. Oh confess sin in the fountain! (p. 31)

Sixthly, the author points out that there are often aggravating circumstances which accompany man’s sin. These, too, must be confessed.

The seventh characteristic of true confession involves man’s acquitting God of any wrongdoing. One of this writer’s favorite hymns reflects this sentiment perfectly, particularly the first and fourth stanzas:



*Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
His holy will abideth;  
I will be still whate'er He doth;  
And follow where He guideth;  
He is my God; though dark my road,  
He holds me that I shall not fall:  
Wherefore to Him I leave it all.*

*Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
He is my Friend and Father;  
He suffers naught to do me harm,  
Though many storms may gather,  
Now I may know both joy and woe,  
Some day I shall see clearly  
That He hath loved me dearly.*

Finally, Watson observes that true confession includes a resolution not to commit sin over and over again. As the author indicates, “Origen calls confession the vomit of the soul whereby the conscience is eased of that burden which did lie upon it.” If we have vomited up our sin, Watson deduces, then we should never return to it.

What is most helpful about this particular chapter is what Watson refers to as his “bill of indictment against four types of people. The first type is the one who would rather cover his sin than confess it. Secondly, there are those who confess their sin, not in total, but in part. The third type of individual is one who seeks to make light of his sin and confesses accordingly. One who truly confesses his sin will see it as the horrible transgression it is as opposed to downplaying its severity. Finally, Watson addresses those who would rather argue in defense of their sins as opposed to confessing them.

And what are the particular benefits of confession? Watson enumerates them as follows:  
1) Confession gives glory to God (Josh. 7:19); 2) Confession humbles the soul. The sinner who truly sees himself as deserving only of hell will have little difficulty in the area of pride; 3) Confession gives vent to a troubled heart. As Watson states, “It is like the lancing of an abscess

which gives ease to the patient” (p. 35); 4) Confession purges out sin. Augustine called it, “the expeller of vice”; 5) Confession of sin endears Christ to the soul. Knowing that our sins have been forgiven by Christ, is there anything that could endear us more to Him? 6) Confession of sin makes way for pardon. So 1 Jn. 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”; and 7) The command to confess is both reasonable and easy.

Continuing with his list of six components or ingredients of true repentance, Watson cites “shame for sin” in the fourth place. The author supports this point by citing nine considerations about sin which may cause shame: 1) the reality that every sin makes us guilty and guilt results in shame; 2) that in every sin there is unthankfulness which is also a cause for shame; 3) that sin has made us naked which is a source of shame; 4) the fact that our sins have put Christ to shame and should likewise cause us shame; 5) that many of our sins are instigated by the devil, also cause for shame; 6) that sin turns us into beasts, a condition for which we must be ashamed; 7) that every sin is folly and the Christian should be ashamed to be called a fool; 8) that the sins we commit are often worse than those of the heathen. This, too, should cause us great shame, and 9) that our sins are worse than the sins of the devils. Given these nine considerations, Watson concludes that believers should spend far more time blushing at the shame of sin instead of glorying therein.

The fifth ingredient of Watson’s “recipe” for true repentance is a “hatred of sin.” This involves both a hatred of abominations and a hatred of enmity. In speaking of the hatred that believers should manifest toward abominations, the author cites Ez. 36:31, “Ye shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities.” “A true penitent,” says Watson, “is a sin-loather” (p. 45). How is it possible for one to claim to love Christ and yet still be in love with his sin? Unless sin is seen in its proper perspective as that which is to be abhorred, avoided, and eradicated at all costs,

the believer will not be able to love Christ as he should. A hatred of enmity, says the author, involves man's setting his spirit against sin in all its forms, whether it be personal sin or the sins of others.

The sixth and final ingredient in Watson's definition of true repentance is a "turning from sin." This turning can be characterized by five things: 1) It must originate in the heart. It is quite possible for one to turn from sin in his head; he may very well resolve intellectually that his sin is an affront to a thrice-holy God, that he would be better off to abandon a particular sinful practice, but until he resolves in his heart (that which the devil strives to turn above all), he will never truly repent. 2) Turning from sin must involve a resolution to turn from all sin. Every sin must be abandoned, every lust brought into subjection to the Lordship of Christ who now rules in the believer's heart. 3) Turning from sin must occur on spiritual grounds. It is absolutely crucial that the believer understand and acknowledge that the battle that is waged against sin is not against flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12) but against spiritual forces. This means that repentance must not be seen as a simple flesh and blood exercise but as that which must be dealt with on a spiritual level. 4) Turning from sin must also include turning to God. According to passages such as Acts 20:21; 26:20 (emphasis added), it is not enough merely to turn *from* sin, one must also turn *to* his only source of help in time of need:

"...testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance *toward God* and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

"...but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn *to God*, performing deeds appropriate to repentance."

As Watson states, "Turning from sin is like pulling the arrow out of the wound; turning to God is like pouring in the balm" (p. 55). And again he says, "In true repentance the heart points directly to God as the needle to the North Pole" (p. 55). 5) True turning from sin involves no return to it.

Once sin has been forsaken (if it be truly forsaken), it can never be revisited. In the immortal words of Solomon, “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly” (Prov. 26:11).

Despite the plethora of clear Scriptural teaching on this issue (as well as the lucidity of men like Watson who assist us in understanding it more clearly), there is yet a growing trend within contemporary Christianity to deny the truth concerning the Biblical understanding and nature of true repentance. Among the most prominent and vocal opponents of the true nature of repentance are those associated with what is known as the “Free Grace Movement.” According to Simpson (2006), among this movement’s beliefs is the teaching that “repentance is never to be included as part of the gospel message.” One of the early pioneers of the Free Grace Movement, Zane Hodges (2001), in response to the question “What must I do to be saved?” responded emphatically, “Repentance is not part of that answer. It never has been and never will be.” Simply stated, when confronting unbelievers with the gospel, in the opinion of those in this movement, one should never mention sin or any sort of repentance from it as necessary for salvation. And why is this? Because, in the collective opinion of those involved in the Free Grace Movement, repentance is not seen as a gift from God but as a human work. This erroneous notion, however, is clearly dismissed in the following passages (emphasis added): “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to *give* repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31); “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God saying, ‘Then God has also *granted* to the Gentiles repentance to life’ (Acts 11:18); “...in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will *grant* them repentance, so that they may know the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). In this writer’s opinion (an opinion,

not surprisingly, shared by Watson himself), this precious gift of repentance is something to be treasured not spurned.

The aforementioned misunderstanding of the need for repentance makes a fitting segue into the fifth chapter of Watson's work, "The Reasons Enforcing Repentance, With a Warning to the Impenitent." The first of the reasons for repentance cited by the author is God's sovereign command. In Acts 17:30, in his sermon on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul unambiguously states, "God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent." As Watson observes:

Repentance is not arbitrary. It is not left to our choice whether or not we will repent, but it is an indispensable command. God has enacted a law in the High Court of heaven that no sinner shall be saved except the repenting sinner, and he will not break his own law. (p. 59)

Secondly, according to Watson, "The pure nature of God denies communion with an impenitent creature" (p. 59). That the enmity between God and man would be erased while he is unrepentant would imply that God actually approves of man's sin. This, Watson says, is simply inconsistent with the sanctity of God's nature. In the third place, sinners continuing in their impenitence are said to be out of Christ's commission. In other words, Christ's commission was to come and grant repentance to sinners who, in turn, would come to Him on the basis of that repentance. It is inconsistent with His mission for defiant sinners to be accepted by Him. Fourthly, the author says that repentance is necessary because we have wronged God in our sin. As is the case with every wrong committed, reparation must be made. Repentance is such a reparation for sin. Fifthly, Watson observes that if God should save men without repentance as a necessary element of their salvation, then He must save all men. Needless to say, universal salvation is simply diametrically opposed to the clear teaching of Scripture.

In the sixth chapter of this work, Watson turns his attention to an exhortation to repentance. Repentance is necessary, he argues, for all men, for kings and queens, for England's

impious, for cheaters, civil persons, for hypocrites, and even for God's own people. It is this last consideration which compelled this writer to increased self-examination as Watson exhorts his readers to repent of passing judgment on others, vain thoughts and fashions, "decays in grace" (the sin of leaving one's first love), the failure to improve one's talents (e.g. one's health, his estate, etc.), the tendency to forget sacred vows, worldliness, divisions, the iniquity of holy things, etc. Indeed, all of God's people are frequently beset with various sins of both commission and omission and would do well to take constant heed of the need for repentance. Watson also comments at length on the need for repentance to be made for all sins observing that "Sin hangs weights upon us so that we move but slowly to heaven" (p. 73). Although there are some Christians who shy away from the admission that remaining original sin in the believer is still a major concern, Watson is clear on this point saying:

Original sin incorporates with our graces. As bad lungs cause an asthma or shortness of breath, so original sin having infected our heart, our graces breath now very faintly. Thus we see what in original sin may draw forth our tears. (p. 74)

In chapter seven, the author speaks of the particular motives for repentance. Among other things, he writes, repentance commends all our services to God: "That which is seasoned with the bitter herbs of godly sorrow is God's savoury meat" (p. 77). Using the example of Mary Magdalene, a great sinner indeed, Watson notes that "great sins repented of shall find mercy" (p. 78). He also points out that "repentance ushers in temporal blessings" (p. 81). While each of these motives for repentance are no doubt tremendous blessings, this writer was particularly impressed with Watson's observation that "repentance staves off judgments from a land" (p. 81). All arguments for God's sovereign immutability and eternal omniscience aside, there *is* a way in which repentance on man's part often appears to result in the same on the part of God. This is quite evident in the cases the author cites (e.g. the repentance of the Ninevites (Jon. 3:10), the

repentance of Elijah (1 Kings 21:29), etc.), however, it is perhaps most clearly illustrated in 2 Chron. 7:14 wherein the Lord says to Solomon:

“...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

On a practical contemporary note, many professing believers are convinced that the solution to all that plagues our land is a political or societal one. As this promise indicates, however, if they were only more dutiful in repentance, God’s temporal blessings on the whole of society would flow more freely and He would indeed heal our land. Another of Watson’s more notable points concerning motives to repentance is the need to consider the impact of sin on Christ. He writes:

Can we look upon a suffering Saviour with dry eyes? Shall we not be sorry for those sins which made Christ a man of sorrow? Shall not our enormities, which drew blood from Christ, draw tears from us? Shall we sport any more with sin and so rake in Christ’s wounds? Oh that by repentance we could crucify our sins afresh! (p. 81)

Is not the suffering and death of Christ motive enough for repentance? If not, then one has every reason to doubt his salvation. Only the blackest of hearts is capable of turning a blind eye to the suffering Savior. Finally, Watson cites the day of judgment as a compelling motive for repentance. This, he argues, is the apostle’s own argument in Acts 17:30-31: “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed...”

In chapter 8, Watson exhorts his readers to avoid procrastination when it comes to repenting of our sins. It is quite natural, he maintains, for man to procrastinate and put off repentance, however, it must be made a top priority. This is true for a number of reasons which Watson goes on to enumerate and explain. For example, the sooner one repents, the fewer sins he will be required to answer for at the judgment and the more glory he might bring to God. The most ominous aspect of the author’s warnings in this chapter stems from the reality that delaying

repentance is dangerous because there are three particular days which may expire before repentance is made: 1) The day of the gospel in general, 2) a man's personal day of grace, and 3) the day of life. If any of these days expire, he will be without the ability to repent and, since no man knows when each of these days might expire for him, wisdom dictates that he repent post-haste.

Among the more helpful portions of chapter 9 of Watson's work are his cautionary thoughts with regard to those who have indeed repented of their sins. The papists, the author insists, are guilty of a double error. In the first place, they make repentance a sacrament. This, Watson argues, Christ never did. Secondly, the papists make repentance meritorious. In other words, they teach that repentance actually merits pardon. As discussed previously in this paper, repentance is actually the byproduct of God's grace at work in a person's life whereupon, having been convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit, he turns from said sin and to God. Watson actually says it best when he notes that "Repentance is a qualification, not a cause" (p. 96).

In the following chapter, the author points out very simply that repentance is not easy. "Is it easy," the author asks, "to rise up under such a weight as the mountain of guilt which sin causes? Can a man jump out of sin into heaven? Can he leap out of the devil's arms into Abraham's bosom?" (p. 100). Of course the response to these rhetorical questions is a resounding, "No!" and yet there are many who yet remain under the satanic delusion that repentance is indeed easy. This is but one of several impediments to repentance that the author maintains plague the believer. Another impediment brought to light in this chapter (and arguably the most common of them all) is what the author refers to as "immoderate love of the world" (p. 105). As he states very clearly, "The world so engrosses men's time and bewitches their



affections that they cannot repent.” This is why all believers must take special care to heed the apostle John’s exhortation in 1 Jn. 2:15-17:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Indeed, the allure of the world has always been, and will always be, a hindrance to repentance.

Watson completes his wonderful work on repentance by reminding his readers to recognize sin for what it truly is (e.g. a recession from God, a walking contrary to God, an injury to God, profound ignorance, etc.). This, the author contends, will compel the believer to repent properly. He then emphasizes the importance of genuinely seeking repentance on the basis of two compelling truths: 1) Because repentance is the gift of God (Acts 11:18). Contrary to prevailing Arminian thought, as expressed previously, repentance is not something that man can do in and of himself because it is simply not among his innate faculties (or inclinations). In order for him to repent, he must be granted the gift of repentance that follows regeneration. 2) Because repentance is one of God’s most precious promises. In Ezek. 36:26, God promises, “I will give you an heart of flesh.” Watson concludes that, on the basis of this promise, believers are to “Show God his hand and seal... Turn this promise into a prayer: Lord, give me grace to return unto thee with my whole heart” (p. 121). Given the thoroughness of his treatment of this crucial doctrine, the author is uncharacteristically brief in his conclusion writing, “Thus I have laid down the means or helps to repentance. What remains now but that we set upon the work. And let us be in earnest, not as fencers but as warriors.”

### Concluding Thoughts

Robert Shindler, close friend of C. H. Spurgeon and fellow 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor, penned a series of articles for the March and April, 1887 issues of Spurgeon's periodical *The Sword and the Trowel* in which he examined the state of evangelicalism from the Puritan era to his own day. In this examination, Shindler noted that every period of true revival among evangelicals had been followed within one or two generations by a notable departure from sound doctrine. In many cases, such departures led to wholesale apostasy among those previously confessing Christ. Shindler likened these declines in doctrinal focus to a downhill slope, hence the name of his work, "*The Down Grade.*" Commenting on this phenomenon, he observed:

In the case of every errant course there is always a first wrong step. If we can trace that wrong step, we may be able to avoid it and its results. Where, then, is the point of divergence from the "King's highway of truth"? What is the first step astray? Is it doubting this doctrine, or questioning that sentiment, or being skeptical as to the other article of orthodox belief? We think not. These doubts and this skepticism are the outcome of something going before. The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures. All the while a man bows to the authority of God's Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary to its teaching. "To the law and to the testimony," is his appeal concerning doctrine. He esteems that holy Book, concerning all things, to be right, and therefore he hates every false way. But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him.

Simply stated, once professing believers abandon the Word of God as the "only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience" (London Baptist Confession of Faith [LBCF], 1689) they will invariably fall into all manner of error. Even to the most casual observer of the state of evangelicalism today, one would find it difficult to deny that there are many who are following a very similar downward trajectory with regard to understanding and applying the Word of God. May the Lord be pleased to usher in a period of renewed interest in the writings of men like Owen and Watson and may that interest

cultivate within many a greater desire to visit the fountain from which they faithfully drank: the Scriptures themselves.

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