

Calvin called justification the “chief axis” or “main hinge on which religion turns.” He proceeded to say that “unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have [no] foundation ... on which to build piety toward God.” That is certainly right, namely, that our justified standing with God cannot be “one motive among many.” It must be the foundation of all our thinking, feeling, and doing; otherwise our default mode— our belief that God is not for us— will pull us back into a covenant of works. [Ferguson, Sinclair B.. *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (p. 15). Crossway. Kindle Edition.]

You need more than just an abstract belief in your legal exemption from punishment; you need a renovation of your view of God. [Ibid. (p. 16).]

However, John Owen, in his work on mortification, shows that the answer is not, on the other hand, just to say, “What you need for sanctification is to work hard to become holy.” Owen argues that the root of our sinful behavior is an inability to hate sin for itself, and this stems from a tendency to see obedience as simply a way to avoid danger and have a good life— not as a way to love and know Jesus for who he is. [Ibid. (p. 16).]

When we behold the glory of Christ in the gospel, it reorders the loves of our hearts, so we delight in him supremely, and the other things that have ruled our lives lose their enslaving power over us. This is sanctification by going

deeper into the gospel, but it is not merely telling yourself that you are accepted and forgiven, as foundational as that is. [Ibid. (p. 16).]

***On the surface the Marrow Controversy was about how we preach the gospel; what role, if any, God’s law and our obedience play in the Christian life; and what it means to have assurance of salvation. But those issues are always, at bottom, about the gospel itself. While these themes have taken center stage at particular periods in the church’s history, that is only the tip of the iceberg. They are perennially relevant because underneath them lies the most fundamental question of all: Who is the God whom we come to know in Jesus Christ (John 17: 3)? What is he really like, truly like— deep down, through and through? The atmosphere that characterizes my Christian life will reflect my answer to these questions. [Ibid. (p. 18-19).]

But the principle or law of grace rules out all possibility of boasting a priori! It takes all contribution to justification out of our hands and leaves it entirely in God’s hands. Grace rules out all qualifications by definition. Grace therefore eliminates boasting; it suffocates boasting; it silences any and all negotiations about our contribution before they can even begin. By definition we cannot “qualify” for grace in any way, by any means, or through any action. Thus it is understanding God’s grace— that is to say, understanding God himself— that demolishes legalism. Grace highlights legalism’s bankruptcy and shows that it is not only useless; it is pointless; its life breath is smothered out of it. [Ibid. (p. 109-110).]

Thus in a subtle way we become insensitive to the difference between offering the benefits of Christ and offering Christ himself. When the Marrow Men’s free offer of Christ without qualification was read from within this paradigm, friction was inevitable. This was a tragically different approach to the gospel and its proclamation from the one found in the New Testament, the teaching of the Reformation, and the mainstream Puritans. What was at the heart of their gospel message?

Calvin has a beautiful expression that summarizes it: the gospel is Christ “clothed with his gospel.” This, to use an Augustinian term, is totus Christus, the whole Christ, the person in whom incarnation has been accomplished and in whom atonement, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly reign are now realized. While we

can distinguish Christ’s person and his work in analytical theological categories, they are inseparable from each other.

Since there is no “work of Christ” that takes place abstracted from, and in that sense outside of, his person, the blessings of his work cannot be appropriated apart from receiving Christ himself with all his benefits. What God has joined together, we must not put asunder. Yet this was precisely what had happened— and continues to happen. The result was that the benefits of Christ’s work were being offered only to those who saw signs in themselves that they belonged to the elect. In stark contrast— as the Marrow Brethren understood, and none more clearly than Boston— the gospel offer is Christ himself in whom the blessings are found. [Ibid. (pp. 46-47)]

- BUT THE SCRIPTURES DECLARE THAT WE ARE ALL PRISONERS OF SIN, SO WE RECEIVE GOD’S PROMISE OF FREEDOM ONLY BY BELIEVING IN JESUS CHRIST (GALATIANS 3:22 NLT).

