

A FAITH THAT IS NEVER ALONE

a RESPONSE *to* WESTMINSTER SEMINARY CALIFORNIA

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P R E S S

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Primitive Truths for Postmodern Times

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To our esteemed colleague

Norman Shepherd

Persevering advocate for a faith that is never alone



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P R E F A C E

The Polemics of Articulated Rationality

P. Andrew Sandlin

Recently I had lunch with a friend, a theologically literate layman. He expressed savage disappointment at the internecine strife presently sundering the Reformed world (and not only there) on the topics addressed in this book. I could not honestly disagree with him. I then told him that theological controversy seems intrinsic to the DNA of the Reformed tradition. The very genesis of this tradition was a reactionary controversy with the Church of Rome, and disputes with its fraternal brothers, the Lutherans and the Arminians, followed in the wake. Throughout its history, the Reformed seem to have carried on a running battle not only with non-Reformed theologies and churches but also with deviations (or apparent deviations) within their own camp. The fact that the contemporary Reformed world would be rocked with controversy is therefore not surprising. The history of the Reformed world is a history of theological combativeness.

Articulated Rationality

What is it that renders the Reformed so susceptible to controversy, including intramural controversy? There are likely several accurate answers, but one stands out. I told my friend at lunch that of all sectors of Christendom, the Reformed is likely the most theologically oriented, where theology is defined as “articulated rationality” (see Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions*) — rational propositions (springing from primitive intuitions) that tend to gen-

erate a worldview. This apotheosis of “articulated rationality” is not a part of other leading traditions. For Rome, truth is encountered primarily in a collective context — the sacramental system of the church. For evangelicals, truth is founded on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ occasioned initially by conversion and regeneration and maintained by a warm experience with our Lord. For charismatics and Pentecostals, truth grows out of one’s experience of the Holy Spirit. For Lutherans, truth is Jesus as the Word of God, which is conveyed in baptism, the Eucharist, and preaching. Conversely, no sector of the church has devoted such attention to confessions of faith (although the Lutherans come close) as the Reformed. Why? Affirming truth is, practically if not theoretically, a matter of fidelity to a system of propositions. Being “in the truth” is a matter of *believing the right things*. Because all self-consciously orthodox Christians grasp the necessity of correct theological beliefs, none would deny what the Reformed are affirming. However, they would likely question the emphasis on “articulated rationality” that stands at the heart of the Reformed belief system. The Reformed are especially susceptible to theological controversy because, for this tradition, deviation from precise doctrine is an unforgivable offense. Where accurate, precise theology is deemed paramount, deviation from accurate, precise theology is deemed abhorrent. The present controversy, like nearly all preceding it, is fueled by just such a commitment to theological precision, an essential component of “articulated rationality.”

Justification, *Sola Fide* and Good Works

The current crisis of “articulated rationality” centers on the *doctrine* (as opposed to the practice) of justification and related themes. The Reformation dictum *sola fide* (faith alone) denotes the unique role that faith plays in appropriating justification (a legal declaration of innocence or righteousness on the ground of Jesus’ death and resurrection). *Sola fide* contrasts with the medieval Roman (and Tridentine) notion of salvation by grace that nonetheless is appropriated by both faith *and* good works within the sacerdotal Church of Rome. In the Roman Catholic conception,

God infuses grace in baptism (usually infant baptism), and the believer cooperates with God's gracious provision in the church and its sacramental system in "being" justified progressively. For most Protestants, justification is an act, not a process. One is justified when he places faith in Jesus Christ, and his justification neither increases nor decreases.

But does the Protestant idea of justification negate the necessity of good works? The answer generally has been an emphatic No. Although good works do not cause justification, they are a necessary effect of union with Christ, another feature of salvation. But the Protestant relationship between faith and works has not always been answered so simply and confidently, and the differing answers (and shades of answers) have contributed to the polemics that plague the Reformed world today.

Lordship Salvation

It is difficult not to believe that the proximate source of much of the present fracas is the Lordship Salvation debate of the 70's and 80's. On one side were theologians who *opposed* what they labeled "Lordship Salvation." These included men like Charles Ryrie and Zane Hodges. Their view, in summary, is this. God saves one totally by grace through faith in Jesus. When we trust Jesus, we trust Him as Savior. Salvation is entirely by grace apart from man's works. When we trust Jesus, moreover, we trust Him *only* as Savior. We don't trust Him as Lord and Master. Chiefly this means that when one trusts Jesus, he doesn't make a commitment to be a disciple. Commitment to Jesus as Lord is desirable, but that decision likely comes later in the Christian life. In other words, salvation is to be separated from discipleship. Jesus wants disciples, but one can be a Christian without being a disciple. The leading point is that if we add commitment to salvation, we deny salvation by grace.

Then there is the opposing view. This is the side that *does* affirm "Lordship Salvation." Spearheaded by John McArthur and R. C. Sproul, the position is basically this. They agree with their opponents that God saves sinners totally by grace through faith in

Jesus. They agree that salvation is by grace through faith alone apart from works. But they do *not* agree that a woman can trust Jesus as her Savior without trusting Him as her Lord. For one thing, we cannot trust a divided Christ. (That's how the devotional pastor A. W. Tozer once put it.) Jesus is both Savior and Lord, and we cannot divide up His offices when we receive Him. That would be like saying, "I take this woman to be my wife, but I do not take her to be the mother of my children." No woman — at least no sensible woman — would tolerate that talk. Wifehood and motherhood in relation to a husband reside in one woman. To take a woman as a wife is to take her as the mother of one's children. We can't separate one from the other.

In addition, faith is a form of submission. In trusting Jesus Christ for salvation, we place our hope and destiny in Him. In trusting Him to save us, we are committing our lives to His care; and in committing our lives to His care, we are submitting to the lifelong process of discipleship. Therefore, in this way of thinking, there can be no salvation without submission to the Lordship of Jesus — "Lordship Salvation." The point was never that Christians would always obey ("sinless perfection"); rather, it was that one commits his *present* life to the Lord Jesus and not merely his eternal destiny.

The "Lordship Salvation" controversy uncovered a deep cleavage just under the surface of evangelical consensus, a cleavage that touched the very heart of evangelical conviction — salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Law and Gospel

About the same time (1980), Daniel P. Fuller, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, published a slender volume *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?*² (Eerdmans) that invoked a firestorm of criticism from a large swath of the Reformed community. Fuller argued that a careful reading of the New Testament would not support traditional Reformed covenant theology. Fuller assaulted two cherished dogmas: (1) the prelapsarian (pre-Fall) covenant of works, the teaching that before the Fall man would have

merited eternal life had he obeyed God at all times and that Jesus' law-keeping life merited eternal life for God's elect, and (2) the Law-Gospel distinction, the notion that all the commands of the Bible are divided into categories of (a) Law ("Do this and live"), a paradigm of legal obedience and reward, and (b) Gospel ("Trust Jesus for salvation"), a paradigm of passive trust in the promises of God.

Fuller contended, by contrast, that man never relates to God by means of legality and merit and that the traditional Law-Gospel distinction does not enjoy Biblical warrant under close scrutiny. To Fuller, the Biblical scheme of salvation is summarized in this way: Jesus died on the Cross in substitutionary atonement and rose from the grave in victory over the powers of darkness to take away our sins. We appropriate this redemptive work by entrusting our lives to Jesus, just as a patient trusts a doctor to cure his disease. The patient places his life in the hands of the doctor, on whom he relies to lead him to a disease-free life. Similarly, our trust in Jesus for salvation is a persevering trust, just as our obedience to the call of the Gospel is a persevering obedience. This trust is a form of obedience, just as the obedience is a form of trust. Faith is not passive but active, grasping the promises of God and following Him throughout our lives.

Fuller was by no means the first Protestant to articulate this unified Gospel-Law paradigm. Heinrich Bullinger, the Swiss Reformer and Zwingli's successor, held a position quite close to it. Moreover, the 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth, Fuller's seminary professor, reversed the traditional order of Law and *then* Gospel. For Barth, the Gospel, which comes first, is totally about God's grace in Christ, but it is a grace that requires loving obedience. The Biblical message is not "Do this and live, but since you can't, trust in Jesus who obeyed so you don't have to," but, rather, "Trust in Jesus alone with a persevering faith and follow Him all your days, since He alone saves you by His death and resurrection."

Like Barth, Fuller laid much of the blame at the feet of traditional Reformed covenant theology, which he identified as the precursor of dispensationalism in the former's discovery (invention)