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GOD'S GIFT TO SINNERS

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(1808-1892)

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GOD'S GIFT TO SINNERS

*This article was originally written as the preface
to Honey Out of the Rock, by Thomas Willcox
(1621-1687), when it was reprinted during
the ministry of Horatius Bonar*

God's Gift to Sinners

Christ is *the Father's gift* to sinners: "This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1Jo 5:11).

Such is the Father's GIFT, and such is His own testimony to us concerning the gift. We do not surely need to add, "this witness is true" (Ti 1:13). We know that His sayings are faithful and true. He speaks what He knows, and He speaks that we

may believe. We receive man's testimony; shall we not receive God's? Is the divine witness less credible than the human? Is God's Word less sure than man's? "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God, hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son" (1Jo 5:9-10). Who, then, among the needy sons of men, will venture to neglect such a gift, or refuse to give credit to such a testimony?

Christ is *His own gift* to sinners. He gives Himself *to* us, as well as *for* us. He goes up to the cross of shame, and says from it to us: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isa 45:22). He takes His place like the sun in our sky, and says: "I am the light of the world, he that believeth in me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (Joh 8:12). He gives HIMSELF to us—not certain blessings merely, but *Himself*. To the sick, and weary, and poor, and dark, and sorrowful, He presents *Himself* as the one gift—the reception of which, by us, would deliver us from sin, want, and grief. Take ME, He says, and all shall be well. Canst thou, O man, slight or refuse a gift so great, so free, so needful?

Christ is the *Holy Spirit's gift* to sinners. It is the hand of the Spirit by which this gift is held out to us! It is by the voice of the Spirit that this gift is proclaimed to us! The Holy Spirit presents Christ to sinners, and presses Him upon their acceptance. He is equally concerned with the other Persons of the Godhead in providing and presenting this gift. Christ is the gift of the Spirit's love, as truly as He is the gift of the Father's love. Do not, then, O man, resist or grieve this Spirit, by thrusting away His gift, or making light of the love which sends it.

Christ is thus the gift of the Godhead to us. It is the threefold love of the three-one Jehovah that we find in this gift. And who can tell the greatness of such a gift, coming from such a source? Who can measure the love wrapt up in it, or the amount of blessing which the possession of it would bring to us? But who, on the other hand, can reckon the guilt of those who despise the gift, or trifle with the love?

Nay, more, what must have been the greatness of the *sin* that needed such a gift? For we must not lose sight of the *nature* of the gift. In looking at its preciousness, we must remember its *peculiarity*. It is not the mere expression of *love*, as if love were all that was needed by the sinner. It speaks of love impeding in its course by law, righteousness, and guilt; so that if the gift is to be of any use to the sinner, it must be of such a kind as to satisfy law, accord with righteousness, and remove guilt—by means of that very instrumentality which had opposed its removal.

The nature of the gift tells us what the *guilt* was that stood in the way. It was not a mere disease needing to be healed, a sore requiring to be bound up, but it was *guilt*, which must be removed by *law*. The gift, then, behooved¹ to be of the nature of sacrifice, substitution, and ransom. Only these could avail. And thus the greatness of the gift shows us the greatness of the sacrifice that must be offered up—the greatness of the surety that must take the place of the sinner, the greatness of the penalty that required to be paid. That is, it teaches us the "exceeding sinfulness of sin," and the fearful character of that *guilt*, in the sight of God, with which our sin had burdened and fettered us.

What must sin be, when it is so hard a thing to take it away! What must a sinner's guilt be, when the threefold love of the Godhead is put forth to devise such a gift as shall remove this guilt; nay, and when, with all that infinite love and willingness to bless, still nothing short of the *death* of the Son of God can accomplish this end. If mere *incarnation* could have done the work, would love have gone further, and demanded something more expensive and terrible? If all that were needed was that the Word should be "made flesh," would the bitterness of *death* have been added? It is in the "blood-shedding"—the giving of life for life—that the real character of the gift is seen as a gift embodying, in its very nature, a legal transaction—an exchange of conditions between two parties, the innocent and the guilty—an exchange which truly has no meaning, and which could be of no avail as a transaction between the law-giver and the criminal, unless consummated by *death*; for "the wages of sin is *death*" (Rom 6:23).

Thus, while the gift of God to sinners is the revelation of wondrous love, it is as truly the declaration of the infinite evil of sin; and that not merely as a disease which has poisoned and disfigured our being, but as *guilt* which has made law and righteousness our enemies. It can, therefore, only be dealt with in the way of a legal transaction, and taken away by a process which will make law and righteousness our friends.

But let us look at this gift of love—holy and righteous love. Let us turn to this "Christ of God," and let us consider this "High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus" (Heb 3:1).

He is *the Christ*—the Anointed One—filled with the Holy Spirit. In this vessel is deposited all "fulness": "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell" (Col 1:19). The vessel was both divine and human—both infinite and finite. It was divine and infinite, that so it might contain the whole fulness of God. It was human and finite, that so it might be entirely suitable to us—of such a nature that it might be let down to our earth and placed by our side. And thus, out of this fulness, we may all receive, and grace for grace. The vessel is, both in itself and by its position, entirely accessible; so that to get at its contents, we have neither to ascend to heaven, nor go down to the depths of the earth. We have but to *use* it as we do the well or the river, which furnishes water to our neighbourhood. On it we find this inscription: "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev 22:17). Dip your pitcher into this well, and draw water for yourself, as largely and as often as you please. Ask no questions as to your right, but know that it is for the needy. You will find that your *need* is your *title*, and that no other will be asked.

What God Has Spoken Concerning Christ

Let us hear what God has spoken concerning this "gift," this "Christ."

¹ behooved – to be necessary.

1. *Christ is our LIFE* (Joh 1:4). In Him is life. He has come not merely that we should have life, but that we should have it more abundantly (Joh 10:10). From its first faint beginnings in the soul, to its consummated perfection in the kingdom hereafter, all our life is from Him. As the destroyer of death, and the enemy of him who has the power of death, He wages war against the death that is in us, and quickens us in every part; removing condemnation which is our *legal* death, and uprooting our enmity to God, which was our *spiritual* death. He commences and carries on a new life-giving process, which nothing but Almighty could do. Us He quickens, “who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). The largest amount of life-giving energy that the deadest ever needed is to be found in Him. Nay, He not only gives life, but the life which He gives is His *own* life. He makes us partakers of His own life. As the “risen one,” He shares the power and the blessedness of His resurrection-life with us. Becoming one with Him, we enter at once on possession of all that He is and has as “the risen one.”

2. *Christ is our RIGHTEOUSNESS* (2Co 5:21). Taking from us what belonged to us, He gives us what belongs to Him. Taking on Him all that was due to us as the *unrighteous*, He gives us what was due to Him as the *righteous*. He is made unto us “righteousness” (1Co 1:30). Most strikingly does John Bunyan (1628-1688) tell us his own experience on this point: “One day as I was passing into the field—and that, too, with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right—suddenly this sentence fell upon myself: ‘Thy righteousness is in heaven.’ And methought I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand—there, I say, as my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me He wanted my righteousness, for that was just before Him. I also saw that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself—the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). Now did my chains fall off indeed. I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God. I saw that the man Christ Jesus, as He is distinct from us as touching His bodily presence, so He is our righteousness and sanctification before God. Here, therefore, I lived very sweetly at peace with God through Christ. Oh! methought, Christ, Christ!—there was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes.”

Thus, too, has another² written regarding this surety-righteousness of the Son of God: “Christ stood in our stead from the cradle to the grave. This is taught by the Bible more expressly than anything else. He has taken upon Him our liabilities and sins. Whatever He did, we have done; whatever He suffered, we have endured. After He had fulfilled all righteousness—namely, after we had therefore fulfilled it in Him, and after He had drained the cup of ‘the wrath to come’ in our stead, even to the dregs, then returned He, amid the congratulations of the whole heaven, back again to that place whence He came forth.

“And what is His occupation now in heaven? The Scripture says, ‘There, He appears in the presence of God for us.’ He presents Himself to the Father with His glorified scars, these proofs of His superabounding obedience; He offers Himself to Him, in His own beauty, and stands unmoved before His eyes. And the Father regards Him with the profoundest good will, and delights in His beauty. Christ is the object of His joy, and of all His paternal grace and affection. “Yes, truly,” you reply, “He is and was that, now and ever!” Assuredly, but now He is no longer as the Word, “which was in the beginning with God” (Joh 1:2). He is now also as the second Adam, as the Son of man, as the head of His Church (Col 1:18), as the surety of His ransomed. Not only does He now present Himself before the Father, He represents, at the same time, all His members.

So, in like manner, as the eternal Father saw in the former period, the whole human race in that one individual Adam, so does He now behold all the generations of believers presented before His countenance in Christ Jesus, their perfected High Priest. In Christ’s person, He beholds our person; in Christ’s obedience, our obedience; in Christ’s loveliness and beauty, ours also. And, whilst He now extends His love, tenderness, and favour to Christ, He in Christ extends these, at the same time to ourselves. Thence do the Scriptures also style the love of God to His children ever as a “love” in Christ Jesus.

“It is in such wise that Christ represents us; still, however, with the important and essential difference that the Father not merely imagines we are as fair as this Fairest of the children of men, but that we really are equally fair—Christ having, in a mysterious fashion, fulfilled all righteousness in our stead. Howbeit, this matter is not to be taken up so sensuously as though, indeed, God no longer knew that we were, in ourselves, still miserable sinners. Undoubtedly He knows that, and for that very reason He leads us through all the purifying fires in which we still pine in such multitudes here below. But He passes judgment—He sentences us not according to what we are in ourselves, but what we are in His Well-beloved. Thus He loves us unspeakably, even in the midst of those manifold weaknesses and offences which still adhere to us; thus He accepts no farther accusation whatever against us. And when we now hear the Saviour say, As the Father loveth Him, even so loveth He us also (Joh 14:21), it cannot now excite our wonder even for a moment; for, as we know, Christ and we are one in the sight of God!

3. *Christ is our PEACE* (Eph 2:14). He has taken out of the way that which broke up our peace, and which made the return of that peace impossible. As the appointed peace-maker, He brings about the reconciliation between us and God; and by doing this, in the way of righteousness; He pacifies our consciences, so that there is no ground for dissatisfaction or fear left in them. He is our peace, because that which He did on the cross removed the grounds of dispeace. He has made peace by the blood of His cross. To see that cross, and to know the meaning of the sacrificial blood which flows from it, is to have peace. For it is not merely true that Christ *gives* us peace, but also that He Himself is our peace; so that the knowledge of Him is peace—peace to the guiltiest, and most sorely troubled. The knowledge of self troubles, but the knowledge of Christ pacifies and gladdens. The knowledge of sin terrifies, but the knowledge of Christ gives peace and takes away all fear.

4. *Christ is our LIGHT* (Joh 1:4, 9). Sin is darkness, and guilt is darkness. By means of these, darkness reigned in us. “Once ye were darkness,” says the apostle; but Christ having come “a light into the world” (Joh 12:46)—nay, “the light of the world” (Joh 8:12)—nay, the “Sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2)—there remains neither excuse nor reason for our darkness. He is light, and light of such a kind as is fitted to remove our darkness. He is light, and that light comes to us in the way most fitted

² F.W. Krummacher (1796-1868).

to drive off the “thick clouds,” and prevent the gloom from returning. He comes to us as the revealer of the Father, and *He* is light itself, and “in him is no darkness at all” (1Jo 1:5).

He comes to us as the revealer of the Father’s love, and that is light; for the knowledge of the love of God cannot but be light to the soul, even as the knowledge of His displeasure cannot but be sorrow and darkness. He shows us the Father’s countenance—He lifts up the light of that countenance upon us—He takes away everything that would hinder the light of that countenance from shining on us and into us, in all its brightness, health, gladness. We look unto Him and are lightened (Psa 34:5); for that which we see in Him is so soothing, and so cheering—so fitted to banish fear, and call up happy confidence—that, *in looking*, our darkness disappears and our sorrow is turned into joy. He, who is “the light of the world,” becomes light to us when we turn our eye to Him and let His light flow in.

Thus writes Bunyan, “Here is my life—namely, the birth of this Man, the blood of this Man, the death and resurrection of this Man, the ascension and intercession of this Man for me, and the second coming of this Man to judge the world with righteousness. I say, here is my life. If I see this by faith without me, through the operation of the Spirit within me, I am safe; I am at peace; I am comforted; I am encouraged; and I know that my comfort, peace, and encouragement is true, and given me from heaven by the Father of mercies, through the Son of the Virgin Mary—the Son of man—the Son of God—the true God.”

5. *Christ is our WISDOM*: “In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). He “is made unto us wisdom” (1Co 1:30); He is “the wisdom of God” (1Co 1:24); we are “wise in Christ” (1Co 4:10). All His riches of wisdom become ours, for they are in Him *for us*. He teaches us, and so He is our wisdom. He reveals Himself to us, and so He is our wisdom. He communicates the stores of heavenly truth that are deposited in Him, and so He is our wisdom. In studying Him—His person, His character, His work—we acquire more wisdom, a thousand times [more], than in making ourselves masters of all the science of earth. All that can make a man *wise* is to be found in Him. God says to us, “get wisdom,” and this means in substance, “get Christ.” Get Him, and you get the *cream* of all wisdom—the ripe fruits of all the trees of knowledge, the perfection and essence of all truth. To know Christ is to be *wise*—wise above all the ancients, wise unto salvation, wise for eternity.

6. *Christ is our STRENGTH*: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phi 4:13), said an apostle; just as a prophet, in other days, had said, “In the Lord have I righteousness and strength” (Isa 45:24). The description which is given of us is, “without strength”; and, throughout Scripture, it is taken for granted that we are as much without strength as without righteousness. Sin brought with it to us not the mere diminution of strength, but its total destruction—the complete paralysis of the whole man to what is good. In remedying this, God does not fill us anew with strength in ourselves—depositing it within us that we may use it at pleasure. Our strength, like our life, is deposited in Christ. He is our strength, and it is only by having continual recourse to Him that we are strong. Yet all His fulness of strength is as near and as accessible as if it had been within ourselves; so that we have no more reason for saying, “I am helpless, and *cannot* go to God,” than we have for saying, “I am a sinner, and *dare* not go to Him.” There is strength in Christ for us; and no one, whatever be his state, need despond by reason of his helplessness.

7. *Christ is our CONSOLATION*. Though the Holy Ghost be “the Comforter” (Joh 14:16), yet it is out of Christ that the consolation is drawn with which He comforts the sorrowful. It is by unfolding the unsearchable riches of Christ that He comforts. Christ is the well out of which He brings the draughts of abundant consolation, with which He refreshes and revives us in our weariness. “Consolation in Christ” (Phi 2:1); nay, Christ Himself is our consolation, this is what the Gospel reveals. It was in acquaintanceship with Him that our first consolation began, when forgiveness dawned upon us; and it is, in continued and increasing acquaintanceship with Him, that our consolation is perpetuated—in spite of a thousand evils daily occurring to mar it. In fellowship with Him, we find ourselves wondrously lifted up out of the dust: “With Him conversing, we forget all care”; sorrow takes wings to itself and flies away. His words reveal Himself, and His words are such as these: “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid; ye believe in God, believe also in me” (Joh 14:1).

8. *Christ is our HOPE*. This is the name which Paul gives Him: “Our hope” (1Ti 1:1); and also, again, he uses this expression: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). It is not that we hope to be His, as some speak; this is not the hope of the Gospel. But having become His, in believing the Father’s record concerning Him, we get the assured hope of coming glory. Having got Him, we get the hope—a hope which maketh not ashamed. In Him is wrapt up our hope of the inheritance to come. Our own doings are not our hope. Our feelings, our experiences, our evidences, our graces, are not our hope. They can neither kindle nor keep alive the heavenly flame. It is Christ that is our hope. In Him we find no darkness, no uncertainty, nothing to lead us to despond. To keep our eye on Him is to feed the hope; to turn the eye away from Him, and to think about our own act of looking, is to let in despondency and heaviness.

Our Connection to Christ

Having thus heard what God says about the gift, let us hear some of those things which God speaks of in reference to our connection with this gift—this Christ.

1. He speaks of our being “rooted in him” (Col 2:7). Christ is the soil; we are the plant or tree. It is into this good ground that we strike our roots. In a similar passage in the epistle to the Ephesians (3:17), the apostle speaks of our being “rooted in love,” as if it were the love of Christ to us that formed the soil in which we are rooted. Both are equally true and needful to be remembered. Yet the primary truth is, doubtless, that which shews us *Christ Himself* as the ground which receives our roots. It is by faith that we are first rooted in Him. In believing the Father’s testimony concerning Him and His work, we are rooted in

Him; for it is through the knowledge of the *truth* concerning Him that we become connected with Himself. He that believeth is rooted in Him.

2. God speaks of our being “built up in him” (Col 2:7). The truth thus taught is similar to the preceding, but the figure is quite different. Instead of soil to root in, it is a foundation-stone to rest upon that is referred to. Instead of being said to grow out of Christ, we are said to be built up in Him, as the several stones of a house or temple rise, one after another, from the foundation-stone. He bears the weight of the building, and through Him solidity and strength are given to all its parts. Our first connection with Him in this character is like the former—faith, simply faith. Between an unbelieving soul and this foundation-stone, there can be no connection. In so far as unbelief prevails, to that extent this connection is imperfect and insecure. It is in believing that we become connected at first; and it is in continuing to believe that the connection is maintained and the process of building proceeds. How much of all that is good, holy, true, and blessed, depends on this connection being maintained!

3. God speaks of our being accepted in him. “Accepted in the Beloved” One is the designation of the saint and of the whole Church of God (Eph 1:6). Loved for the sake of One Who is, in Himself, infinitely loved and lovable! Received into favour simply because of the favour in which Another is held! Dealt with by God irrespective of personal unrighteousness and solely on account of the righteousness of our Substitute—this is the true standing of each sinner who believes, and that from the moment that he believes. For in believing, he may be said to lose his own identity, and to be so completely one with his surety, that God sees nothing in him save what he sees in the surety. He gets the whole benefit of the surety’s acceptableness with God, so as to be treated as if he were another person—as if he were that righteous One with Whom, in believing, he has become identified in the sight of the law, and in the sight of God.

4. God speaks of our being “complete in him” (Col 2:10). He becomes so thoroughly our substitute, that there is no part of our evil that is not covered by Him, and no part of His excellence that does not pass over to us and become legally ours. Our *actual* completeness and entire freedom from sin is reserved for another day; but our *legal* completeness we receive from the moment we believe. God looks on us as possessing all that His Son possesses. And thus, while most incomplete in ourselves, in our faith, our love, our repentance, our holiness, we are “complete in him.” And, in proportion as we realize this—our completeness in another—not only will our peace be deep and true, but our liberty to serve will be all that it ought to be. Our strength to labour will grow continually—our holiness will advance—and our zeal for Christ and for His glory will become purer and more fervent.

5. God speaks of our being “preserved in Christ” (Jude 1). The “keeping” or “preserving” of a soul depends as much upon its connection with Christ being maintained, as does its first deliverance. For indeed, a saint’s whole life is a succession of deliverances—a succession of pardons—a repetition of the same things as were done for it at first. It is thus that we are “kept” or “preserved in Christ,” by having the same connection maintained between us that was formed at first by the mighty power of the Holy Ghost, when He turned our eye to the cross, and turned our unbelief into faith—our enmity into friendship—our distrust into child-like confidence. He keeps us from falling by keeping us “believing.” He preserves us from the snares, evils, and enemies that beset us, by preserving us in our faith. In continuing to believe, we stand; in ceasing to believe, we fall. Preservation *in* Christ is our only security. In Him, as in a fortress or city of refuge, we are secure; out of Him, we fall at once into the hands of our enemies.

6. God speaks of our being “found in him” (Phi 3:9). The idea here seems to be that, in the great day of reckoning when God seeks for the sinner, He finds only Christ; when He seeks Paul, He finds only Paul’s substitute. He finds us, no doubt; but He so finds us wrapt up in Christ and represented by Christ, that it is not us that He finds but Christ Himself. And that which shall be true in the day of appointed judgment, is true at each moment of a believing man’s life on earth. When he draws near to God, God looks at him and asks: “Who art thou?”—art thou such or such a sinner? The man replies: “I am not—I am so covered over with the righteousness of Thy Son, that it is not myself on Whom thou lookest, but thine own Son!”—See God my “shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed” (Ps 84:9! Thus it is that we are “found in *him*, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ; even the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phi 3:9).

Christ Is All

It is thus, then, that “Christ is all” (Col 3:11). He is the great treasure-house of blessing—a treasure-house whose stores are as boundless as they are free.

All that a *sinner* needs is to be found in Christ; for that which is in Him is for *sinners*—not for the righteous. “They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (Luk 5:31). “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luk 19:10) He “receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (Luk 15:2). And the “grace,” in accordance with which that fulness is dispensed, is, as its name implies, love for the undeserving. It is this free love that leads to such an unconditional and unstinted communication of blessing. What is there that this love will refuse? To whom is this love not willing to give all that is needed? For where sin has abounded, this free love has abounded yet more; so that no stretch of human guilt can outrun this love, or cool its warmth, or abate its freeness, or turn it into hatred.

Out of Christ there is, and there can be nothing but, what is evil. In Him there is everything that the soul stands in need of. There is sufficiency in Him for the neediest. His fulness contains supply for the emptiest and poorest. Connection with Him, by believing, makes all this fulness ours—or, rather, it opens up a communication between us and this fulness; so that there is a constant flow from Him into us. And it is when the Holy Spirit, putting forth Almighty power in us, opens the eye to see and to prize these “unsearchable riches,” that peace begins to flow into the soul. Then we learn where our treasure-house is. Then we

become willing to be indebted to the stores of Another for all our supplies. We are content to let Christ fill our empty vessels, instead of trying to fill them ourselves.

The Gospel, then, is good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God—about what He is, and what He did. He is “the Word...made flesh” (Joh 1:14). It is He whom the Father sent “in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin” (Rom 8:3). He was “lifted up” and crucified; He died; He was buried; He rose again on the third day; He went up into heaven and sat down on the Father’s right hand; He ever liveth to make intercession for us. In these simple facts that a child can understand, is contained the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.

The remarkable thing about this good news is that it is wholly respecting Jesus—not a word about ourselves. It is of *His* goodness, not ours, that the Gospel speaks. It is of His love to us that it brings us the [good] news; and it is the riches of His grace that it spreads out before us. A description of Jesus and the things concerning Him—His person, His life, His death, His resurrection—this is the Gospel; and whosoever believeth this Gospel is a saved soul.

Hence, when the apostles went among the nations to bear to them the message which they had received of God, they told a simple tale about Jesus and what had come to pass concerning Him. So it was of this that the Holy Spirit bare witness in the conversion of thousands. It was the grace or free love of the Father, embodied in these facts, that gave peace to the awakened conscience; and it was the abiding in this grace, the constant realizing of this free love, that kept that peace unbroken.

These facts were the letters which composed the Father’s name of love; and, in having that name always before them, they had this source of unfailing joy to them, though the chief of sinners (1Ti 1:15). If their peace was shaken, it was because they looked away from the grace or free love—the knowledge of which first produced it. And if, having at any time lost it, they sought its restoration, they had but to turn again to the same grace—being assured that it was unchangeable—as full and as efficacious as when first they listened to and believed the tidings concerning it. They knew that all they needed was to be “strong in the grace [free love] that is in Christ Jesus” (2Ti 2:1); to “grow in the grace, and in the knowledge of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2Pe 3:18)—that is, to grow in the free love and in the knowledge of Him Who was at once their Saviour and their Lord. This was the one fountain out of which they were to drink; and that, not once nor twice at the outset of their career, but daily, to the very last. Their tasting “that the Lord is gracious” (1Pe 2:3), was not a thing once done when first they knew and came to Him, but always—hour after hour without ceasing—as the only thing that could keep their souls in peace, and stablish them in holiness and consistent service.

This is one of the great points which the church of God requires to have constantly before her; for it is this that saints are so often losing sight of, as it is that which sinners are so slow to discern. Hence in every generation, God has raised up some to testify specially of this grace.

At the Reformation, He put this testimony most remarkably into the mouth of Martin Luther (1483-1546)—all whose writings speak of this grace and tell of the sinner’s standing in the righteousness of the Substitute. From Luther’s stores, many in succeeding ages drew. “Assure yourself, O man,” he writes, “that Jesus Christ requires no portion with His spouse; no, verily, He requires nothing with her but mere poverty; the rich He sends empty away, but the poor are by Him enriched. The more miserable, sinful, and distressed a man doth feel himself, and judge himself to be, the more willing is Christ to receive him and relieve him; so that, in judging thyself unworthy, thou dost hereby become truly worthy, and so, indeed, hast gotten a greater occasion of coming to Him. Wherefore, I do exhort and beseech you to come boldly to the throne of grace, that you may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16).

In the next century, the freest testimonies to the grace of God, and to the fulness of Christ, are to be found in that remarkable book *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, written by Edward Fisher (*fl.* 1640s-50s). Of its drift, the following sentence may serve as a specimen: “Conclude, for a certainty, that it is not the righteous and godly man, but the sinful and ungodly man that Christ came to call, justify, and save; so that if you were a righteous and godly man, you were neither capable of calling, justifying, or saving by Christ; but being a sinful and ungodly man, I will be bold to say, as the disciples said to blind Bartimeus, ‘Be of good comfort, rise; He calleth thee’ (Mar 10:49).”

In this same work of Fisher, we find a striking and needful chapter on this point: “Evangelical repentance, *a consequent of faith.*” One of the speakers in the Dialogue, asks: “Wherein do you think repentance consists?” The other answers, “I conceive that repentance consists in a man’s humbling himself before God, sorrowing and grieving for offending Him by his sins, and turning from them all to the Lord.” It is then asked by *Evangelista*: “And would you have a man to do all this truly, *before* he came to Christ by believing.” The *Legalist* speaker answers: “Yea, indeed! I think it is very meet he should!” To this *Evangelista* answers: “Why, then, I tell you truly, you would have him to do that which is impossible.”³

In the following century, Boston (1676-1732), the Erskines (brothers Ebenezer 1680-1754 and Ralph 1685-1752), Trail (1642-1716), and others followed in the same track. They testified “the gospel of the grace of God” (Act 20:24), showing that it was indeed *free love to sinners*—to sinners as such—not to “sensible” sinners, or “repenting” sinners, or “humbled” sinners—but to *sinners*; and that it is in believing this free love that we pass into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.⁴

A little later, William Romaine (1714-1795) took up the same strain, and spoke fully out concerning the “exceeding riches” of the grace of God (Eph 2:7). In writing to a doubting saint, he remarks: “Thus you argue—‘My judgment is already convinced, and my heart desires to be wholly cast upon the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation; but, in the act of doing this, I always fail.’ What reasoning is here! How directly contrary to the spirit of the Gospel! You are looking not at the object of faith, at

³ Thus Calvin writes: “It ought to be out of question that repentance doth not only immediately follow faith, but also spring out of it. A man cannot earnestly ally himself to repentance, unless he know himself to be of God. But no man is truly persuaded that he is of God, but he that hath first received His grace.”

⁴ See “The Old Gospel Way,” published at Edinburgh, in Mr. Taylor’s large type reprints, 1853.

Jesus, but at your faith. You would draw your comfort not from Him, but from your faith; and because your faith is not quite perfect, you are as much discouraged as if Jesus was not a quite perfect Saviour. My dear friend, how sadly does the sly spirit of bondage deceive you! For what is your act of believing? Is it to save you? Are you to be saved for believing? If so, then you put acts and works in the place of the Saviour. Faith *as an act* is, in your view, part of your salvation. The free grace of the covenant you turn into a work, and the well-doing of that work is the ground of your hope. What a dreadful mistake is this, since salvation is not to him that worketh, but to him that believeth (Rom 4:5).

“You are looking at your act of believing. What is this for? Why certainly, that you may be satisfied with your faith. And, being satisfied with it, what then? No doubt, you will rest in it and upon it, satisfied now that Christ is yours because you are satisfied with your faith. This is making a ‘Jesus’ of it, and is in effect taking the crown of crowns from His head, and placing it upon the head of your faith. Lord grant that you may never do this any more.

“By this great sin, the sin of sins, you are robbed of the sweet enjoyment of the God of all comfort. You lose what you seek; and you lost it in your way of seeking. You want comfort, and you look to your faith for it. If faith could speak, it would say, ‘I have none to give you, look to Jesus, it is all in Him.’ Indeed, my friend, it is! The Holy Ghost, the Comforter, will not glorify your faith. He will not give it the honour of comforting you. He takes nothing to comfort with but the things of Christ—and His things not as used by you, but as given from Him Who is all yours. This lesson I think, He is teaching you—although you pervert it. He is bringing you off from looking legally at your faith. He intends that you should not regard, as you have done, *how* you believe—but to settle you in believing. I have been long at this, and have learned but very little. I can say my lesson, but when I come to practice I find I am a dull scholar. The Spirit of Jesus has been teaching me to draw my comforts, not from how well I believe, but from Jesus, in Whom I believe; not from there being no failing in my act of faith, but that I do act faith on Jesus, though failingly.

“It is not faith, but Christ; it is not my hand but the thing received into my hand, that saves me. The way to get much faith is not to look at it as you do, but at the Saviour; not how you hold Him, but that He is yours, and holds you and your faith too; and, therefore, you shall never perish, but shall have everlasting life (Joh 3:16).

“After I had observed these errors in your looking at the act of faith, I did not wonder at the following parts of your letter, such as your not being pleased with your faith, and therefore, not pleased with your state, nor your graces, nor your attainments, nor your righteousness; but you thought everything made against you. This is still the same teaching of the Spirit, but you pervert it. Have you nothing to look at but Jesus? That is right. Then look unto Him, and be saved (Act 2:21).

What! can you see nothing to rest on of your own? Are you forced to renounce the goodness of your faith as an act? and do you experience that you cannot be saved for it? Very well; hold fast there. Stick to this. No grace, as acted by you, can save. Follow this blessed teaching, and cleave with full purpose of heart unto the Lord Jesus. You must learn to make Him *all* in your salvation. He must save you from your faith as well as from your unbelief; faith, as you act it, being full of sin. If the highest and best act of your faith were to be weighed in the balance of the sanctuary, you would deserve a thousand deaths for it. So much corruption would be found in it, that you could not escape the damnation of hell. Turn about then. Take your eyes off from your acts of faith. Look at Jesus. Expect to be received as a poor helpless sinner, not for great and high believing. Come to be saved from your faith as an act. Follow Him, as all your salvation is laid up in Him. Take comfort from Him. See yourself in Him. Trust Him, not yourself, not your acts; and learn to discern spirits, and to know divine teaching by this—that what ends to humble you, is from the glorifier of the Saviour.”

The author of “Brief Thoughts on the Gospel,” who wrote much about the same time as Mr. Romaine, dwells much on these truths; not only on these “Brief Thoughts,” but in other works. “If,” says he, “a person be really convinced in his mind that Jesus is the only Saviour, and that there is free and complete salvation in Him; if he is persuaded that Christ has done enough, and sees that the Gospel has declared enough to furnish an immediate and sufficient ground of hope, this must certainly rejoice his heart, convey peace to his conscience, and encourage his confidence in God. If it does not, then it is evident that there is some reserve in his belief, some thought lurking in his mind, that he must know something more than what the Gospel testifies to have been done by Christ, in order to his relief.”⁵ ↵

Horatius Bonar was born in Edinburgh on December 19th, 1808. He was one of seven boys, three of which entered upon gospel ministry (John James, Horatius, and Andrew) in their early years. He was ordained a minister in the Church of Scotland on November 30th, 1837, and was later given charge over the North Parish Church in Kelso. Bonar was counted among the dissenting ministers who left the Established Church to form the Free Church of Scotland in what was known as the Great Disruption of 1843. In 1866 he accepted a call to pastor in Edinburgh at the newly erected Chalmers Memorial Church. He was also a great hymn writer. He wrote over 600 hymns, over 100 of which are still in use.

⁵ “A fondness,” he elsewhere remarks, “to have the precise nature of what is called the justifying act of faith described, in order to ascertain a special interest, proceeds from an irregular wish to be certified about mere experiences.”