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Teaching Sanctification by Faith:  
A Qualitative Study  
on the Impact  
of a  
Grace-Centered Discipleship Class

by

David Galletta

A PROJECT/DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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2003



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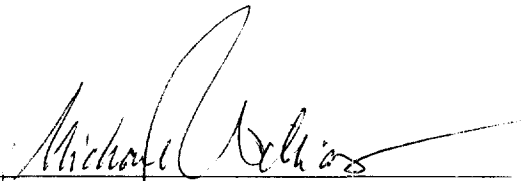
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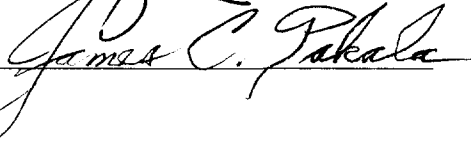
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Teaching Sanctification by Faith:  
A Qualitative Study on the Impact of a Grace Centered Discipleship Class

Abstract

David Galletta  
Covenant Theological Seminary  
2003

This qualitative study was designed to observe what takes place as a small group works through some of the practical applications of sanctification by faith. Though unfamiliar to many, the literature review proves that the doctrine is represented in the best of historic Reformed theology. I defend sanctification by faith and other tenets of *Sonship* teaching from Scripture (mostly Galatians), the writings of Luther, Calvin, Puritans Walter Marshall and John Owen, Reformed theologians G. C. Berkouwer and Anthony Hoekema, and find support in the work of Berkhof, Hodge, and many others. I also interact briefly with some of the recently published criticisms of the *Sonship* program.

Drawing heavily from World Harvest Mission curriculum (*Sonship, Discipling by Grace*, and *Gospel Transformation*), I adapted and developed material for a thirteen week interactive class. The course began by attempting to broaden radically the participants' understanding of the gospel, and subsequently their ongoing need for it. They were

immediately challenged to see that the gospel is far more than receiving Christ into one's heart to have one's sins forgiven and be assured of heavenly reward. Rather, as Timothy Keller says, the gospel is to be seen as the good news that although "we are far more sinful than we ever realized, we can be loved by God and experience grace far more than we ever dared to hope, because Jesus died and rose in our place."

Understanding the gospel this way brings its relevance to our lives as believers as well as to unbelievers. Participants were stretched to see how they ignore the fact of their imputed righteousness and seek to establish personal righteousness in all kinds of ways before themselves, others, and God. Participants were taught that, in the words of World Harvest Mission founder Jack Miller, "we need to preach the gospel to ourselves everyday." Subsequent topics included justification, adoption, sanctification, repentance, and forgiveness.

Data were collected from the ninety minute class sessions (all tape recorded), and two sets of interviews, plus final interviews of four selected from the ten participants. Additionally there were written homework assignments (between one and three questions), Scripture memory verses, and journaling. Students were also asked to fill out a qualitative class evaluation after the course completion.

The responses and impact varied greatly, and I report the data in three different categories: low impact, high impact, and one highly resistant student. For the most part, the concepts were clearly understood by all. Understanding the course content was not difficult, but the difference was in the ability to apply the teachings personally.

The project revealed some shortcomings both in the curriculum itself and in the specific method used. As for the curriculum, the *Sonship* material shows itself to be

more Lutheran than Reformed in its view of the law, and is not developed within a covenantal framework. Consequently, the area of covenant discipline is entirely neglected as is the believer's imaging of God in the present reality of the kingdom of God. As for the method, it became obvious that the group was too big and the format of class discussion was inadequate to determine how well the students were processing the information. Written assignments and interviews were vital, but more frequent one-on-one sessions would have made a huge difference. And though beyond the limits of this particular work, it would have been interesting to study the long term effects of such a project.

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I owe much to my team here in Moscow who have patiently though anxiously encouraged me to finish, since they all know how applicable this work will be here in the task of saturation church planting; perhaps more appropriately, GOSPEL-saturated church planting.

My family has borne the brunt of the time and energy spent on this work, and knew many a time when I became irritable and forgot the gospel myself. They are probably as glad as I am that I have finished. And no, I won't really make my girls call me "Doctor Dad." But it's tempting.

Automated grammar checking is a wonderful thing, but is no substitute for good editing. I wish to thank my primary editor and good friend Suzanne Rice for her eagle eye in spotting mistakes and for her helpful comments prompting me for clarification. I am still waiting for her bill.

As for the two churches I have served as pastor, the dear people of Crestwood Presbyterian Church in Edmonton, Alberta (Canada), and Presbyterian Church of the Atonement in Silver Spring, Maryland—you loved me and taught me so much more than I could ever have taught you. I am especially grateful to those at Atonement who participated in the class. It would seem too trite to say that without you it wouldn't

have been possible, but it is obviously true. Thank you for your patience, flexibility, and open hearts, in addition to many marvelous insights which I hope I have reflected.

I am grateful to the staff of World Harvest Mission for all their kind assistance and generous permission to use so much of their material. I want especially to acknowledge Dr. Neil Williams, who shared the curriculum of *Gospel Transformation* with me even as he was still writing it. He has not only articulated the theology of the *Sonship* course quite well, but has also, I believe, clarified and sharpened it, and in so doing, has sharpened mine as well.

But above all I praise the Triune God: my *Abba* Father who spoke the words of the gospel into being and has made me his own child; my Savior, my Lord, and friend, Jesus, who gave his life's blood for me, accomplishing for me forgiveness for my wretched sins and crediting me with all righteousness; and the Holy Spirit who breathed the words of the gospel, even sang them into these ears he had opened, and wrote them on this heart he had transformed.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

There is certainly no greater news possible than the message of the gospel. Though this should hardly need debating within evangelical Christianity, my own experience and observation informs me that this good news is highly undervalued even among those who claim to have received and embraced it. For far too many Christians, belief in Jesus Christ serves merely as a guaranteed rescue from hell, and alternatively, admission into heaven at the Judgment Day (not unlike a GET OUT OF JAIL FREE card in *Monopoly™*). Other believers consider Christ mostly as inspiration and example, the standard by which they ought to live. And still others regard the Lord God Almighty as their personal genie, whose purpose is to make their lives easier and to be available to help them solve problems as they arise.

Is that what the gospel is about? Is that all that was accomplished by the ministry of Jesus Christ—his life, death, and resurrection? I am concerned that the *great* news of the gospel has been demoted to merely *pretty good* news. Most Christians understand that by Jesus' death on the cross, believers are forgiven for their sins, and thereby saved from God's wrath and final judgment. What they don't seem to understand is what happens between their conversion and their death. Many are idling in some kind of holding pattern, hoping to remain faithful until their death or the return of Christ, whichever comes first. Theologically, the term in question is one's sanctification. But as

we shall see, confusion about the process of sanctification results from a failure to grasp the doctrines of justification and adoption.

In other words, once saved, then what? (I am purposely using the word *saved* in the commonly narrow and discrete sense of regeneration or conversion in this context.) How are we supposed to live? What is our relationship with God? How concerned should we be with obedience to his law? My observations tell me that most Christians continue to live with uncertainty about their acceptance before God, often with far greater concern than before they became Christians. They worry that their continual struggle with sin brings his disapproval. They don't know how to reconcile the righteousness imputed to them from Christ (if they even understand this concept) with the reality of an ongoing experience of sin. For many evangelicals, their operating theological assumptions closely resemble the synergism found in Catholic theology, which teaches that Christ's righteousness is infused with ours when we believe. Essentially, this faulty and unbiblical theology teaches that the Christian should now be capable, and therefore responsible, for complete obedience to God's law and a life of holiness. Of course, this is not far from the mark. Our desire for holiness and our progress in becoming more Christ-like *should* be visible. The error lies in the assessment of our own capacity for righteousness apart from Christ. It betrays a far too optimistic assessment of human nature.

Another false view, though not entirely dissimilar, is that once we receive Christ in our lives, the record of our sins is eradicated, leaving us with a clean spiritual slate. Then, from that point on, it is up to us to fill that slate up with good deeds to earn God's favor. In either of these views, Jesus serves more as a boost to our righteousness than the

entirety of the same. This is not the truth. This is not the authentic gospel. And if it were, the news would not be very good at all.

Yet this is precisely what we encounter in our churches. People may earnestly affirm salvation by faith, but act as if sanctification rests entirely on their shoulders. As one author puts it, “We are saved by grace, but we are living by the ‘sweat’ of our own performance.”<sup>1</sup> Consequently, many are boasting in their works as if grace meant nothing at all (Eph. 2:8-9). Richard Lovelace sums it up well:

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are [*sic*] solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God’s holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence *they rely on their sanctification for justification* [italics mine], in the Augustinian manner, drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.<sup>2</sup>

According to Lovelace, our churches are essentially full of Pharisees! All of this comes back to a faulty understanding of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. If one tries to embrace Christianity without realizing the alien nature of righteousness—found in and received in Christ alone—the result will be legalism or Pharisaism. Interestingly, even liberal streams of Christianity, which reject the sole authority of Scripture and its affirmation of Christ as unique and exclusive Savior, practice a form of legalism as they base salvation on good effort and works. Of course, when one denies the necessity of Christ’s work for salvation, Christianity is naturally reduced to moralism (Gal. 2:21)—another form of legalism. Legalism in any form

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 101.

grossly overestimates man's ability for goodness while underestimating both the extent and debilitating power of sin.

My concern is with Bible-believing legalists, which in truth characterizes and incorporates the majority of us in the Church. It is nothing less than tragic that so many Christians look to God for their salvation, and then change gears by looking to themselves to complete it. Because of the enormous (and impossible!) task, the typical expression of this error is a guilt-laden disciple, who is never quite sure he or she is in God's favor. The sense of one's acceptance by God is essentially tenuous, and based more on feeling than fact. And since feelings fluctuate, so does the assurance of salvation. The principal tragedy is that this well-intentioned piety brings no glory to God. And the reason it fails is simply that it denies grace and is a perversion of the authentic gospel. It is so much easier to pay attention to the outer expressions of holiness, and to ignore the sinfulness of one's heart.

What is so ironic is not so much the futility of the effort exerted to please God by our own merit, but its absolute likeness to any other world religion. Philip Yancey reports the story of a British conference on comparative religions some decades ago. Between sessions, some experts were informally debating whether any belief is unique to Christianity. Incarnation and the resurrection from the dead, for example, are well represented in other faiths. I wandered C. S. Lewis, who inquired about the subject of the discussion. When told, he immediately responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."<sup>3</sup> Lewis succinctly identified the basic tenet of orthodox Christianity: that we are saved by grace, and not by our works (Eph. 2:8-9).

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 45.

A far less common aberration of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is characterized by the disregard of God's law. This comes from the true teaching that in Christ there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Rationalizing their disobedience by this verse and others, some believers will flaunt their freedom in Christ and thereby refuse to be bound by any obligation to obedience or submission to other believers, the Church, or to God's word. Martin Luther described and condemned this group as antinomians.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, Luther himself was labeled an antinomian by his enemies. Likely this comes as a result of misunderstanding his teachings on grace, as encapsulated in the often quoted: "Be a sinner and sin mightily, but more mightily believe and rejoice in Christ."<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, it is tragic how the second half of Luther's statement goes largely ignored. In fact, according to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, ministers of the gospel should be happy to keep company with such accused antinomians as Luther:

That is my comment; and it is a very important comment for preachers. I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are dead in trespasses and sins, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Veteran pastor, speaker, and author Steve Brown expresses little concern for the "risk" that the preaching of the true gospel might produce antinomians:

I have never heard a single Christian say, "Now that I'm forgiven I can be as bad as I want." (Of course, that kind of Christian may be somewhere. I've read about them in a lot of books and heard about them in a lot of sermons. I just can't find

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Brown, *When Being Good Isn't Good Enough* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Frank S. Mead, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1965), p. 407.

<sup>6</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 6, The New Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 10.

them. Perhaps there is one Christian like that. If any of you can find him, please tell him to stop. He's doing a lot of damage.)<sup>7</sup>

Of course, I am not proposing antinomianism or anything resembling it. If Brown and Lloyd-Jones are correct, there really isn't a serious danger that the genuine gospel message will result in such heresy. Is the individual saved by observing God's law and striving toward obedience? Certainly not! This would negate grace altogether. On the other hand, is the believer relieved from obligation to keep God's law, and may he or she choose the path of disobedience? Again, not at all. Simply put, Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command...Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:15, 21). The freedom that grace grants the believer does not remove him or her from the obligation to obey the Lord. We are saved by grace, but grace will or *ought to* result in the believer's commitment to obedience.

### **Problem and Purpose Statement**

A Christian counselor identifies the significance of grasping the implications of God's grace by connecting it to the majority of emotional problems among evangelical Christians. According to David Seamands, such problems are rooted in "the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people."<sup>8</sup> This inability to live out the practical implications of God's grace is nothing less than tragic, and the reason is that the evangelical Christian, above all, should know these

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Yancey, p. 15.

things. However, what often happens instead is that the earnest believer sees a standard in God's law that is too high to meet, and consequently despairs. The usual choices are either to abandon the faith or live under constant guilt.

One might wonder whether it is even possible to be a Christian without enjoying one's relationship with God as Father. In fact, J. I. Packer uses the vitality of this relationship as a measuring rod of sorts: "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father."<sup>9</sup> I believe it is certainly possible to be a Christian without understanding what it means that God is one's Father—and by this, I don't refer to a universal fatherhood. What I believe we have is a Church full of people who may well be Christians, but cannot enjoy God as their Father.

The prevalence of these misunderstandings and deficient views of the gospel in the Church are reason enough to be greatly concerned. As one who has personally begun to discover the implications of my own justification and adoption, I am especially compelled to exert significant effort in this area. The reader need not be alarmed; I am not on a mission inspired by some vision or audible voice from God. Neither do I claim that the Church has lost its way, and that I might presumably restore its direction. The inability to grasp hold of the grace of God, yes, even to lock it in our hearts that we might remember it always and live from its marvelous truth, dates back to Adam and Eve. One might say we come by it honestly.

Many have gone before me to teach and correct the Christian's understanding of God's grace. Thankfully, there are many resources from which to draw. My study uses material and methodology from an organization with concerns similar to mine. Indeed it

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<sup>9</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 182.

was through the ministry of World Harvest Mission that my enthusiasm for this subject was ignited.

World Harvest Mission is an organization “founded out of a conviction that the gospel has the power to continue to transform those who believe it.”<sup>10</sup> The mission was organized under the leadership of the late Presbyterian (OPC) pastor and Westminster Theological Seminary professor Dr. Jack Miller, as an outgrowth of a church he pastored in the Philadelphia area in the late nineteen-seventies. Its purpose is to “foster renewal in the local church which would lead to world missions as a natural byproduct.”<sup>11</sup>

The mission is best known for its *Sonship* Discipleship Course, an intensive training program involving lecture, written and “practical” assignments, memory work, and counseling. The framework is mostly Reformed (albeit with marked Lutheran influence, drawing heavily from Luther’s commentary on Galatians), and stresses the doctrines of justification, adoption, and sanctification by grace through faith. The *Sonship* course has become well known within evangelical Presbyterian denominations, and is now commonly required of both church planters and missionaries within these groups. After a number of acquaintances had taken the course and praised it highly, a couple of years ago my wife and I also became *Sonship* students.

For several practical reasons, as well as the fact that I am not technically qualified, I did not choose to use the *Sonship* course for this study, but rather another less structured one, called *Discipleship by Grace* which is designed for small groups within churches. The course was written by Dr. Miller, but has been revised by various staff members over the years. At the time of this research, the course was undergoing a

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<sup>10</sup> World Harvest Mission general information brochure.

<sup>11</sup> World Harvest Mission brochure, *SONSHIP: a Phone Discipleship Course*.

massive rewrite by World Harvest staff member Neil Williams. Actually, the revisions are so major that the new course, *Gospel Transformation*, will replace the former. Gleaning from versions, and adapting the material as necessary, this curriculum will serve as the basis of this study.

The problem I observe is that most Christians appear to be smugly satisfied with their present level of sanctification, or are so defeated that they have no expectation of deeper holiness. Both are stagnant, and both fall far short of the glory of God. The purpose of this study was to address this with a small group of Christians and observe the changes that take place. These changes are not easily measured or even necessarily tangible in nature. Many observable behavioral changes will probably occur well after the completion of this course and thesis. For these reasons and others, this research has been conducted by a qualitative method.

To state it more concisely, the purpose of this project was to observe how individuals within a small group of Christians responded to a grace-intensive discipleship class.

### **Proposed Research Questions**

In order to grasp more fully the grace of God in the life of the believer, a larger view of our sin and a larger view of God's holiness are simultaneously required. The huge gulf between the two becomes more apparent as we understand that God demands that his people be like him in holiness, that they mirror his character. The primary research will focus on what happens when people absorb and begin to process these doctrines. This is the emphasis of the curriculum I am using from World Harvest

Mission. Its reason for developing the *Sonship* material was the concern that many missionaries had a deficient understanding of the gospel message. Obviously those who bring the good news must first comprehend it themselves. It is necessary, as Jack Miller was fond of saying, “to preach the gospel to yourself everyday.”<sup>12</sup> This will require a much broader understanding of the gospel message itself. The average evangelical understanding of the gospel’s content is: *God forgave your sins in Jesus, and if you accept this in faith, you can be saved.* The limitations of such a definition have already been discussed. The gospel is good news not only because of the assuredness of heavenly reward, but because of how it should impact us everyday. My study will work toward that end: that people will be able to preach to themselves the gospel message so that it gladdens their hearts. But most importantly, it will be necessary to ensure that the message can be well articulated.

Therefore, the primary research questions will seek to determine the grasp of the gospel message of grace in the lives of this particular group of believers. What is the gospel message, and why is it good news—now, as well as at “the hour I first believed?” What is the believer’s motivation for obedience to God’s law (assuming he is motivated to obey in the first place!)? Does he feel assured of God’s love and acceptance, or does he fear God’s rejection?

Once the basic concepts of God’s grace in the life of the believer are better understood, this study will examine some of the changes which begin to take place. I will be looking for expressions of deeper love for God and a greater sense of intimacy with him. I would expect prayer to be more greatly valued and more frequently practiced. Belief in one’s acceptance by God through Jesus Christ should result in the ability to free

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<sup>12</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), p. 8.

oneself from the common performance mentality (If I am good, God will love me more, etc.). It should enable one to forgive oneself, even as it drives each one to more constant faith-filled repentance. These attitudes should carry over into other relationships as well. Therefore I will look within my study group for the perceived ability to forgive others, and for a less critical spirit. Because our identity is in Christ, humility should characterize us. At the same time, because our identity is sure, believers should have a greater sense of boldness—to evangelize, to admit faults, and to confront lovingly a brother or sister who sins.<sup>13</sup> The research questions will investigate what changes take place in these areas.

These manifestations of a life that embraces God's grace more fully will likely be noticeable, if not measurable in a qualitative sense. I would be remiss, however, if I limited or encouraged the limitation of grace manifestation to just these self-centered or interpersonal traits and practices. As children of God, made in his image, and now renewed in that image as we are adopted as sons and daughters through grace, we will take on his commutable traits. At the very least, we will love what our heavenly Father loves. In the words of Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." I will investigate what changes begin to take place as the students realize the implications of their sonship in the imitation of God's character in our world.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 54.

### **Significance of the Study**

I believe that this deficient comprehension of God's grace to us in Jesus is an enormous problem. Failure to realize our identity in Christ, resulting from a superficial view of our justification and adoption, robs us of the joy of the Holy Spirit, and robs God of the glory he is due. Christians who so greatly underestimate God's grace to us in Christ are living as if their salvation depends upon them. They can believe that Christ died for their sins, but from that point on they must prove themselves worthy. And though many of us nod to the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we lean on our own strength. This is the view that I find implicitly encouraged in typical discipleship programs.<sup>14</sup> This is why I want to teach this course. Contrary to most other curricula I have seen, the emphasis in World Harvest's discipleship training is on grace rather than law. Both components are present, but the believer is constantly reminded of the truth of our justification by faith in Christ, so that a proper faith filled-response may result. This follows the common structural pattern of the indicative followed by the imperative. We are called to change our attitudes and our behavior based on what we know to be true.

My own initial exposure to the *Sonship* teaching aroused suspicion within me. I kept hearing about how accepted and unconditionally loved we are by our heavenly Father. It sounded like cheap grace teaching. As more of my friends and several acquaintances I respect took the course, I thought I should investigate it. What I saw was a very biblical and Reformed teaching on our status as adopted children, a teaching with which I had not sufficiently wrestled and had not sufficiently embraced. My wife and I

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter Two will address this in more detail.

then completed the *Sonship* discipleship course ourselves, and were strongly impacted.

As I have taught a number of the emphasized principles in formal and informal settings, I have witnessed an eager response from my listeners. I have every reason to expect that the group of people I will gather to teach for this project will grow tremendously in their faith as they discover the sweet liberation and, yes, the demands of grace.

My hope is that the group with which I work will embrace the concepts of the course with great enthusiasm. As the participants are impacted—and hopefully grasp—the implications of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ, visible changes should take place. Moreover, I don’t think it is too much to expect that the entire church will feel its impact in more joy, deeper relationships, heartfelt worship, and evangelism.

As a result of this study, I also expect to be able to make some adjustments and improvements in both course content and my own teaching methods in order to be more effective in discipleship. I have also promised to give feedback to the World Harvest staff in terms of clarity of doctrine and my experience in teaching it. Shortly after the completion of this study my plans are to join a team in Russia, where my responsibilities will be to train national church planters. Given the Anabaptist history and the limited availability of theological training there, these pastors will be a ripe audience for this material. This study will help me prepare for this work.

### **Definition of Terms**

Discipleship: Within the Christian context, the process by which a believer matures in his or her faith, being deliberately and usually systematically taught by a more mature believer.

Gospel: According to Jesus' own words at the beginning of his ministry, it is the nearness of the kingdom of God and an invitation to be its subjects (Mark 1:15). Defined more comprehensively, and as World Harvest material defines it, "the gospel is the good news about all that Jesus is and accomplished for us by His life, death and resurrection. As Tim Keller puts it, the gospel means, 'that you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet you can be more loved than you ever dared hope, *at the same time*, because Jesus Christ lived and died in your place.' ...In its broader sense, the gospel includes all the benefits and privileges Christ earned for us. It covers not only the forgiveness of sin but, for example, our being redeemed from the curse of the law, the rights of adoption, and the reception of the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

Grace: Used in the sense of salvation, God's favor shown to sinners who deserve precisely the opposite. In other words, grace is that unmerited favor of God which credits to those he has drawn to himself with the righteousness of his own Son Jesus Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> *Sonship* (Jenkintown, Pa.: World Harvest Mission, 1999). Appendix A-3. All references to *Sonship* will be from this edition unless specifically stated otherwise.

Sanctification: The process of being made holy, conformed to the image of Christ. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it, “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

Sonship: The spiritual state of being reckoned as a son or daughter of God, having been adopted through grace by faith in Jesus Christ. This term also used as the name of the discipleship program produced and taught by World Harvest Mission, as it is built on the same theological definition.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

My initial exposure to *Sonship*, World Harvest Mission, and Dr. Jack Miller was not in the context of a search for discipleship material. In fact, by the time I came across *Sonship*, I had virtually given up hope that I would find an existing program useful for such a purpose. I was simply given a book by a friend of mine after I had begun to pastor a small, old, and stagnant church. The title, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*,<sup>1</sup> seemed terrifically appropriate to my situation.

I would not exactly say that this book changed my life, but I did find it refreshingly different from many other books whose purported goals are to help one's church grow. I had already read my fill of those. But rather than teaching strategies and leadership skills, Miller wrote of humble yet bold reliance on the promises of God to build his Church. The answer was not to be found in programs or abilities, but in faith. Miller's surprisingly honest and winsome style made his book both credible and appealing. He wrote about his struggles and failures at least as much as he did his successes.<sup>2</sup> I was challenged to repent of my own sins and lack of faith (that being

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<sup>1</sup> C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> I don't think Miller would have approved of the word *success*. The word choice is mine.

perhaps my biggest sin) rather than blame the elders or the congregation for the lack of vitality in my church. I also appreciated that, like me, the author was a PCA minister.

It was a few years later that I actually heard of the program called *Sonship*, and what I heard was secondhand and almost entirely negative. If what I was hearing was true, *Sonship* was, at best, merely another “feel good” self-esteem movement, and at worst, a dangerous cult-like movement which majored on God’s unconditional love for his children while espousing antinomianism.

But these concerns were quickly allayed as I became personally acquainted with a couple of people who had taken the course. For one thing, I learned that it was a movement flourishing within the PCA church, the denomination in which I served as pastor at the time. I respected those I was meeting who espoused the program. I also soon realized that they were more concerned about their sins and took repentance far more seriously than I did. My heart was stirred by the power I sensed in their preaching of the good news of the gospel, and how its truth is just as relevant and necessary to the believer as to the unrepentant. I further discovered that the teachings, which at first glance may have appeared radical, were not foreign or novel at all. In fact, the theology was based on Luther, Calvin, and several of the Puritans. Additionally, material was drawn from some of the great contemporary Reformed thinkers, such as Francis Schaeffer, Richard Lovelace, and J. I. Packer.

I write this from the standpoint of a Reformed pastor in a conservative evangelical Presbyterian denomination.<sup>3</sup> I am also a *Sonship* alumnus, having completed the phone discipleship course offered by World Harvest Mission a few years ago. As I hope I will demonstrate, however, I am neither uncritical nor blindly accepting of the material

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<sup>3</sup> I transferred my credentials into the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1996.

published by World Harvest or by its founder Dr. C. John (Jack) Miller and his wife Rose Marie. There are some aspects of *Sonship* that concern me, and some of the criticisms leveled against the program and World Harvest Mission are valid. I will interact with these below. Nevertheless, I greatly value what World Harvest Mission is attempting to teach through *Sonship*, and have been pleased to draw from its work in helping myself and other people understand or rediscover the wonders of the gospel of grace.

### **A Family History—How *Sonship* Was Born and Raised**

The actual curriculum I wrote for this project is based on World Harvest Mission's *Discipling by Grace* course and its major revision called *Gospel Transformation*, which was still in progress at the time I taught the material (Fall 2000).<sup>4</sup> Since both of these courses are drawn from, or at least teach the same material as the original *Sonship* curriculum, I will, for the purpose of this section, discuss the *Sonship* course. My use hereafter of the word *Sonship* will denote material/concepts taken from the complete course.

In doing so, however, it would be unwise—perhaps impossible—to separate the course material from the other writings of Jack Miller and his wife, Rose Marie. Their shared style of writing and teaching is highly personal and anecdotal, even autobiographical, drawing extensively from their own life experiences to illustrate the

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to author Neil Williams, who generously provided me with chapters “in progress.”

principles taught.<sup>5</sup> Their transparent expression of their own doubts and struggles can be simultaneously startling and refreshing.

Much of the foundation of the *Sonship* program can be attributed to a time of personal renewal that Jack Miller experienced after a particularly dry period in his spiritual life. In 1970, lacking joy, vitality or perceptible fruit in his ministry, he abruptly and simultaneously resigned from his positions as professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and as pastor of his church.<sup>6</sup> He then spent the next several months immersed in the Scriptures, contemplating the promises God makes to his people. Apparently, as he looked back, this was a major turning point in his life:

As the weeks passed, my mind also began to be captured by the vastness of God's promises. I was awed by what the risen Lord had promised to me in my weakness, utterly silenced in my soul like an astronomer unexpectedly seeing a whole new galaxy when he was only searching for a single planet!...Until then, I had seen the promises of Scripture more as predictive prophecy that applied either to past events like the Lord's incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection, or to future happenings associated with His second coming. I did not see the promises as having a contemporary reference to me and the local church except in the vaguest possible way.<sup>7</sup>

The passage that seems to have struck him the most profoundly was the promise of the Holy Spirit flowing like rivers of living water in and through the believer's life (John 7:37-39).<sup>8</sup> Armed with restored confidence in the Holy Spirit's availability and power in the life of the Christian, Dr. Miller humbly withdrew his resignations, returned

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Adams makes the very same observation, though in a negative light, in his booklet *Biblical Sonship: An Evaluation of the Sonship Discipleship Course* (Woodruff, S.C.: Timeless Texts, 1999), p. 5. Steve Smallman, former Executive Director of World Harvest Mission responds to Adams's complaint that the Millers inappropriately personalize their teaching: "Sonship is highly anecdotal and experiential—and it is so by design. It was developed in a context of conservative Presbyterians claiming to be doctrinally pure, but whose lives and churches were sterile. The last thing they needed were more theology conferences. Jack Miller and his wife were willing to allow their own lives to be transparent as a witness that the theology actually worked—the Holy Spirit really could change sinners, and they were 'Exhibit A.'" Stephen E. Smallman, "A Response to *Biblical Sonship: An Evaluation of the Sonship Discipleship Course*," (unpublished paper available from World Harvest Mission, n.d.), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> See also Lk. 11; Acts 1:13-14; 2:1; 4:23-31; Phil. 1:19.

to both the seminary and his congregation, and began ministering with newfound boldness and freedom. Miller made no pretense of being strong and flawless, and claimed no special anointing upon himself. Nevertheless, he started acting on the assurance of God's promises to all his sons and daughters in Christ. He is brutally and self-deprecatingly honest as he writes of his timid and fearful heart while in a stretch of faith he finds himself loudly preaching in the open air of a New York City square, and at another time evangelizing a gang of Philadelphia area motorcycle thugs. Even then, he is amazed at the apparent conversions resulting from these episodes.<sup>9</sup>

The Millers write about many people who were changed radically upon embracing the gospel through their personal ministry. Jack even says that several homosexuals were transformed merely by reading a copy of Luther's preface to his commentary on Galatians that Miller gave them.<sup>10</sup> More radically, the Millers began putting their faith to work by taking into their home problem teenagers and young adults who had no place else to go. Rose Marie worked on their sense of responsibility by assigning them household chores and Jack worked on their souls by exposing them to the gospel's message. As Rose Marie puts it, "I gave them the law and Jack gave them the gospel."<sup>11</sup> Through constant dialogue and the example of the gospel being lived out day to day, most of them responded with faith.

It seems that Dr. Miller shared the gospel at virtually every opportunity. He had a winsome way of drawing skeptics and unbelievers into the discussion of spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Miller's humility is for me his most appealing attribute. Jay Adams is obviously very uncomfortable with this kind of self revelation. See Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Sonship*, p. 3-9 (The page numbering in the manual is organized by Lesson followed by relevant page number. 3-9 means Lesson 3, pg. 9).

<sup>11</sup> *Sonship*, p. 2-4.

matters.<sup>12</sup> He systematically challenged people to consider the state of their own hearts before God. He managed to get away with asking very probing and personal questions of people to whom he ministered in the churches he served or visited. Perhaps the two most jarring questions he asked were, “Have you ever *stopped* doing a single thing because you love Jesus?” and conversely, “Have you ever *started* doing a single thing because you love Jesus?”<sup>13</sup> As two of his daughters put it shortly after his death, “Dad’s faith was contagious. To be near him was to get a fresh infusion of faith—and to believe again that God is in the business of changing people.”<sup>14</sup>

Miller wrote and spoke of many conversions throughout his ministry. He gave one specific example of a seminary student who claims he had just been converted through his teaching. He writes of the same thing happening with an elder at one of his churches.<sup>15</sup> Another former student writes that when one would go to Dr. Miller for advice or counsel, he would generally ask if that one was sure he was a Christian.<sup>16</sup> I believe his point was not that coming to a professor for counsel betrayed unbelief, but rather that Miller never assumed anyone was a believer just because he or she was in a church or seminary. In at least one instance, Miller writes of “born again” church members who, as they embraced more deeply the message of salvation, experienced “something very like first-time conversion.”<sup>17</sup> Some of these reported experiences are

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<sup>12</sup> C. John Miller, *A Faith Worth Sharing* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> C. John Miller, *Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), pp. 129-30. Incidentally, the fact that Jack asked these questions so frequently should put to rest accusations that *Sonship* does not stress obedience (Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, pp. 38, 52).

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *A Faith Worth Sharing*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Sonship*, p. 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> Doug Hart, comment no. 96 in *Sonship: Bane or Blessing?*

[http://www.pcanews.com/editorial\\_opinion/monthly\\_umpired\\_debate](http://www.pcanews.com/editorial_opinion/monthly_umpired_debate). Visited 2/16/01.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, *Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless*, p. 43.

obviously conversions, whereas others may be renewals as the Holy Spirit breathes fresh life into what has become a stagnant heart. Miller does not always differentiate.

In fact, he reports that a revival took place at the seminary shortly after his own renewal experience. What makes this particularly interesting is that Dr. Jay Adams, who taught in the same department as Miller, claims to know of no such revival.<sup>18</sup> Assuming both men are truthful, either Adams had his head in the sand during this time, or the two men define the word *revival* very differently. The latter is more likely the case, as we see the words *revival*, *renewal*, and *conversion* used rather interchangeably throughout the literature.

We see, for example, this fluid terminology used by one of Miller's own disciples, a present *Sonship* lecturer and World Harvest missionary:

[Jack] would look for ministry and say to me, "Come alongside" and then when I was at the proper point he would give me to God and leave. And guess what happened? Revival. All of a sudden I needed Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

In 1999, Steve Smallman, Executive Director of World Harvest (immediate successor to Jack Miller), wrote in the organization's newsletter about a speaker he had recently heard who claimed to be converted every day. "I understood exactly what he meant, because it sounded so much like one of World Harvest's favorite admonitions—'Preach the gospel to yourself every day.'"<sup>20</sup>

In *Sonship* terminology *revival* seems to denote a fresh realization that Jesus is sufficient for every need or flaw. His grace covers our sin and declares us as righteous,

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<sup>18</sup> Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Josiah Bancroft in *Sonship*, p. 12-6.

<sup>20</sup> Smallman, "The Free Offer of the Gospel," *Harvester* 43 (spring 1999): 4. The phrase "Preach the gospel to yourself every day" will be discussed a bit later. I include the quote here because of the way they use the word *conversion*.

freeing us to move in ministry without fear. Consequently, by this definition revival ought to be a constant experience for the believer.

As a result of the striking responses and frequent conversions of people through their ministry, Jack and Rose Marie<sup>21</sup> began a Bible study in their home that soon developed into the first of several New Life Presbyterian churches. Rose Marie tagged along with her husband to various speaking engagements, and was even cornered into giving a few messages herself throughout the U. S., in Europe, and in Africa.

But it took much longer for Rose Marie to grasp the concept of grace for herself.<sup>22</sup> Many personal factors converged in her life to make the power of the gospel so apparent. She saw how she had been affected by and even inherited the rigid self-righteousness of her mother. She recognized her resentment toward the demands that pastoral ministry placed on Jack, and her insistence that she deserved more attention from him. She began to see her shortcomings as a mother and wife. Perhaps the most significant issue was the relationship both Millers had with their wayward daughter Barbara. All three came to terms with how they had contributed to the strain, how the Lord brought genuine conversion to Barbara as they trusted in Christ's work, and ultimately, how Jack and Rose Marie became more honest about their own failings as parents.<sup>23</sup> Rose Marie's

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<sup>21</sup> By referring to them by first name I do not mean to claim personal familiarity with the late Dr. Miller or his wife, nor do I intend disrespect. I do so for two reasons. First, it will be easier to distinguish between husband and wife this way, and secondly, this is how all the World Harvest Mission literature refers to them.

<sup>22</sup> Rose Marie Miller lays out her discovery and realization of grace in her book *From Fear to Freedom* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> C. John Miller and Barbara Miller Juliani, *Come Back, Barbara* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997).

eventual embracing of grace sounds like more of a conversion experience than just a renewal: “For years I heard the words of the gospel, but I didn’t hear the music.”<sup>24</sup>

Jack and Rose Marie thus become a ministry team, sharing the teaching between them. Out of their emphasis on the Christian’s status as a son or daughter of our heavenly Father—as opposed to orphan status—*Sonship* was born. Through Dr. Miller’s preaching and the couple’s *Sonship* training, the New Life church grew and then spun off others. The New Life churches were originally affiliated with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church but later moved into the Presbyterian Church in America, where they remain today.

World Harvest Mission was founded in 1983 as an outreach of the first three New Life churches which had been planted and grown during the nineteen-seventies. The mission formed to “foster renewal in the local church and to see this renewal lead to world missions as a natural byproduct.”<sup>25</sup> The organization trains and sends out missionaries around the world to spread the gospel of grace, while discipling leaders and interested members of domestic churches. *Sonship* is required training for several missions-sending organizations and denominational church-planting agencies as well.

*Sonship* is organized into a structured discipleship course consisting of lecture, written responses, and individual or couple counseling. Students can take the course in several different formats. The *Sonship Weekend* is offered frequently around the country, but is really an introductory seminar apparently designed to whet peoples’ appetites for the full course. *Sonship* is also offered over a week’s time with full lectures,

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<sup>24</sup> *Sonship*, p. 2-2. In *From Fear to Freedom* (p. 72) she admits she does not know whether her experience was a renewal or a conversion. We again see the fluidity between the ideas of personal renewal and conversion.

<sup>25</sup> From a World Harvest Mission brochure, “Audio and Video Resources.”

assignments, and optional counseling. Growing in popularity is *Sonship by Phone*, which is done by correspondence. After each lesson is heard (available in print plus cassette or videotape), the students send in their responses to numerous questions. Then they meet for an hour by phone with their staff counselor, who clarifies issues and challenges the students to apply what they are learning. With sixteen lessons, this usually takes eight or nine months to complete. This was the format my wife and I used.

Various staff members and a few guest “alumni” deliver the live lectures given at *Sonship* conferences. The recorded lectures have until very recently been primarily delivered by Jack, Rose Marie and their son Paul Miller. In the later revision of the *Sonship* manual (1999), several lectures have been replaced by those delivered by other non-related staff members. This has resulted in a broader spectrum of style and personal illustrations.

### **Identifying the Core Teachings in *Sonship***

So what does *Sonship* teach? Ironically, one of the best descriptions of *Sonship*’s teaching may well be found in Jay Adams’s acerbic critique of the program:

This teaching that appeals to Christians who are failing to live as they ought maintains that most of the church has been sadly in error by viewing the gospel merely as the way in which one is saved from the penalty of sin; instead, it ought to be viewed also as the fundamental dynamic for living the Christian life.

Moreover, it holds that most Christians find themselves living as orphans, although God, in union with Christ, has made them Sons. It claims that a person can change this sad state of affairs by continuing to preach the gospel to himself and by repenting and believing over and over again. It teaches that not only justification, but also sanctification, is by faith in the good news.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, Preface, p. v.

This description strikes me as fair and accurate, and frankly, nothing to be alarmed about. On the other hand, Adams's disapproval becomes immediately obvious in the next paragraph, as he sarcastically writes, "Certainly if it is true that God has raised up Sonship™ to 'return' the church to such teaching, we all ought to join up on the spot."<sup>27</sup>

Adams has succinctly identified four core teachings in *Sonship*, which I will use to flesh out the theological issues in the course. The first is the breadth and power of the gospel, seen as much more than the good news that sinners can be forgiven in Christ. The second is our tendency to act as orphans rather than the sons that we are. The third is that in order to live like true sons we must preach the gospel to ourselves everyday, practicing repentance constantly. And finally, that we are sanctified by faith in the good news.

Hopefully, by dealing immediately with the last of these four components, the others will fall into perspective. And so, I first examine the question of *sanctification by faith*.

### ***Sanctification—by Faith?***

Surprisingly, World Harvest Mission claims that its *Sonship* course is not so much about *sonship* or *adoption* as it is about *sanctification by faith*.<sup>28</sup> From my own interaction with the material, I believe that claim is somewhat retrospective, but

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. The tone of the entire book is unkind, to say the least. Even his use of the trademark symbol, which *Sonship* does not use, appears to be a criticism. In a note on p. 11 he mentions that "Sonship™ has trademarked the biblical term." It is not my intention to address all of his complaints and criticisms. Others have done so better than I could. World Harvest Mission has available on request two or three letters of response to his work, including one from Steve Smallman and another from Ed Welch, the latter being a former colleague of Jay Adams.

<sup>28</sup> Neil H. Williams, *The Theology of Sonship* (Jenkintown, Pa.: World Harvest Mission, 2002), pp. 7, 23.

nevertheless accurate. It is true that we find the term several times in the *Sonship* manual.<sup>29</sup> But I question whether founder Jack Miller would have called this the main theme of the course. The emphasis under Jack's teaching and leadership was in realizing the truth and benefits of our adoptions as sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ. Grasping this truth surely affects how we live as Christians—either as sons and daughters, or as those on the road to being called such. Yet, though this theme is repeated, the driving emphasis of the course material actually *is* our growth in Christ, which is, of course, the definition of sanctification. The term *sanctification by faith* is indeed found in the course material, but seems to take center stage in later efforts to explain and defend the doctrines being taught by *Sonship*.<sup>30</sup>

We evangelicals are well familiar with the phrase *justification by faith*, but the idea of being *sanctified by faith* naturally raises some questions. The primary question is, what is meant by it? Secondly, is such teaching biblical and orthodox? And finally, of lesser importance, but relevant within my own particular context, is it consistent with Reformed theology? Such questions do not actually originate with me, but have been raised by critics of *Sonship*. World Harvest Mission has been publicly accused of distorting, misunderstanding, and misrepresenting the doctrine of sanctification.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Sonship*, Lessons 8, 9, and 10.

<sup>30</sup> I refer to the already cited book by Neil Williams and articles and short unpublished papers written by Executive Director Steve Smallman. See, for example, Stephen E. Smallman, "Gospel Discipling—The Crying Need of the Hour" (Unpublished paper, available from World Harvest Mission), p. 4, footnote 4.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, p. 34. Also Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, "The Sonship Program for Revival: A Summary and Critique," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999): 234.

### *The Basics—What is Sanctification?*

Before unpacking the idea of *sanctification by faith*, it will be helpful to establish a simple baseline definition of sanctification. Because both World Harvest Mission (hence, *Sonship* material) and I subscribe to the Reformed doctrine on sanctification, I will not spend time evaluating or attempting to harmonize its nuances across the widespread branches of Christianity. All the same, it is worth noting that evangelicals do share much in common in their understanding of what sanctification means. In the book *Five Views on Sanctification*, the doctrine is presented by scholars from the Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Keswick, and Augustinian-Dispensational standpoints, and each is critiqued by all the others.<sup>32</sup> Though the differences should not be underestimated, there are several significant points of agreement:

First, all agree that the Bible teaches a sanctification that is past, present, and future. It is past because it begins in a position of separation already gained in Christ's completed work. It is present in that it describes a process of cultivating a holy life. And sanctification has a future culmination at the return of Christ, when the effects of sin will be fully removed. Second, all agree that the process of sanctification requires believers to strive to express God's love in their experience. They must devote themselves to the traditional Christian disciplines and daily make the hard choices against evil and for God's ways of righteousness. Finally, all agree that the Bible promises success in this process of struggling against personal sin, through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Problem—Clarifying the Roles of God and Man*

We quickly notice that although this synopsis includes the roles of both God and man, it stresses man's diligence more than God's work. From my own personal observations, this is how sanctification is practically taught in our churches and in popular Christian reading and discipleship material.

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<sup>32</sup> Melvin Dieter, et al. *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> Dieter, p. 7.

As an ordained Presbyterian minister, I subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith and accompanying catechisms as teaching accurate biblical truth. I therefore define, understand, and (hopefully) teach doctrine accordingly. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q35) defines sanctification as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness.” The term *work* denotes an ongoing process, as opposed to the discrete *act* of justification.

In agreement with the Westminster standards, Hodge and Berkhof describe sanctification as fundamentally a supernatural process, while simultaneously maintaining the necessary cooperative work of the believer himself. God is the author, who begins the work of sanctification at the time of the believer’s regeneration and most assuredly brings it to completion (Phil. 1:6). Sanctification is an ongoing process not completed in this life, but only at the believer’s death or shortly afterward.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Not a New Problem—A Review of Galatians***

The struggle to apply the correct balance of human and divine effort in sanctification is not at all new. The tendency for believers to misappropriate the truth of the gospel, that is, to live as if they are justified by works rather than by faith, is by no means a new phenomenon in the Church. Rather, it is as old as the gospel itself. As Paul

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<sup>34</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 534.

fiercely attacks this aberration in his letter to the Galatian church, and since *Sonship* relies heavily on Galatians for biblical support,<sup>35</sup> we would do well to begin there.

Traditionally, Galatians has been understood to be almost entirely a treatise on the doctrine of justification by faith, the monumental truth virtually rediscovered through the Protestant Reformation. In the preface to his commentary on Galatians, Luther practically apologizes for the verbosity of his work, while simultaneously defending its scope due to the importance of the doctrine expounded therein.<sup>36</sup>

Any commentary or study Bible I have ever read on this epistle points out immediately how Paul bypasses the usual introduction customary to that time and culture, and abruptly addresses the issue at hand. Unlike his letters to other churches—even those prompted by significant problems (cf. I Corinthians)—there is no expression of thankfulness to God for the recipients. His opening doxology is brief, and he has no words of praise or encouragement for them.

Paul begins to rebuke the Galatians as early as the sixth verse. His charge is that the church is abandoning the gospel for a false one, and in doing so, is abandoning God himself. So convinced is Paul that this gospel is a false one that in verse 8 he curses anyone, including himself, who should preach it or anything else other than the one true message. And as if emphasis is needed, he repeats the statement in the subsequent verse.

Here he identifies his major complaint and the occasion for his letter. Paul had preached the gospel to the Galatians clearly, and they had embraced it with joy. But after he had left, false teachers had risen and distorted the doctrine of justification by faith

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<sup>35</sup> The *Sonship* manual actually includes the full text of Galatians as an appendix, and many of the program's memory verses are assigned from the epistle.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians: Modern English Edition* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1998), p. 13.

alone. The Galatians were now being taught that Christians must also keep the Jewish law in order to be saved.

For the remainder of the first chapter and half of the next, Paul defends his apostolic authority and the corresponding authenticity of his message, which he has received clearly via divine inspiration. He is so confident of the absolute truth of his teaching that he is bold enough to accuse Peter publicly of “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (2:14).

The last phrase is telling. We have already read in the first chapter Paul’s accusation that the Galatians have moved from the true gospel to another. And now in the second chapter he records his rebuke of Peter for the same reason. Peter is not deliberately choosing to apostatize, but out of fear of men has essentially compromised what he knows to be the truth. He, as a Christian, is trying to live under the Jewish law. And by example, he is compelling others to do the same.

We typically associate the doctrine of justification by faith with conversion. When the sinner places his trust in Christ, the tremendous debt of his sins is forgiven for the sake of Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed in return. This is a discrete work in time. But Paul’s complaint is against the principles by which the Galatians (and Peter) are living out their post-conversion Christian walk. As we read, they are not living in a way consistent with the gospel. They have traded Christ’s righteousness, imputed at justification, for their own self-righteousness based on obedience. To put it another way, they are not basing their growth in holiness on the fact of their justification. Yet the faith by which we are saved is the same faith by which we must live.

This truth is especially expounded in the second and third chapters. Let us look particularly at 2:14-21. In verse 14 Paul writes that Peter and Barnabas were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel. Reverting to Jewish customs and law, and compelling others to do the same, is living contrary to the gospel. The chief error is not so much in the actual observance of Jewish law, as in the idea that in doing so one will be justified before God.

In fact, verses 17 and 18 tell us that as we place our faith in Christ for his righteousness credited to us, it becomes all the more obvious that we are not righteous in ourselves, nor can we be. Our need of Christ is due to our utter inability to achieve righteousness by our own effort, and as we draw near to Christ the contrast becomes more obvious. We cannot attempt to be justified both by Christ and by our observance of the law. In this sense, gospel and law are mutually exclusive.<sup>37</sup> This is strongly affirmed in verse 21 as well.

Verse 19 appears to mean that the law no longer rules over us as a dominating principle, and no longer condemns us for our inability to keep it perfectly.<sup>38</sup> It was this nonconformity to the law of God which made necessary the death of Jesus on our behalf. Literally, the law brought death. For believers, this death has already taken place in Christ's crucifixion, which is explicitly stated in verse 20.

Indeed verse 20 may well be the climax of the chapter and perhaps of the entire letter. In it Paul declares his (and our) union with Christ through faith in both his death and resurrection. The faith of which Paul speaks is not merely a discrete acceptance of

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<sup>37</sup> Luther, p. 90.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Galatians*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 89.

the Savior, but the power by which he lives. The Christian is not only saved by faith, but lives by faith.

A striking parallel passage to this verse can be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, specifically in 6:11: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Mysteriously we are united with Christ, signified and sealed in our baptism, and have therefore spiritually died and been resurrected with him.

Charles Hodge writes that as we reckon ourselves this way, the truth of it has the power to console and sanctify us.<sup>39</sup> Put another way, our union with Christ is the very source of our holiness.<sup>40</sup> In fact, "the only proper evidence that we are partakers of the benefits of the death and life of Christ, is our dying to sin, and living to God. The gospel, which teaches the only true method of justification, is the only system that can secure the sanctification of men."<sup>41</sup>

Douglas Moo sees Romans 6 as a typical Pauline argument, grounding the imperative in the indicative. Because in our union with Christ we have been made dead to sin and alive to God, we are now to appropriate and apply the truth of what God has done for us.<sup>42</sup> John Stott agrees:

Can born-again Christians live as though they were still in their sins? Well, yes, I suppose they could, at least for a while. It is not impossible. But let them remember who they are. Let them recall their baptism, the symbol of their new life of union with Christ, and they will want to live accordingly.<sup>43</sup>

So the basis for living and growing in holiness is in remembering what we already know. It is in knowing (v. 6) that our former self was crucified with Christ, in knowing

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1950), p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press 1991), pp. 397-98.

<sup>43</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 179.

(v. 3) that baptism into Christ is baptism into his death and resurrection, and in considering (v. 11) that through Christ we are dead to sin and alive to God.<sup>44</sup> Of course, biblical remembering is no mere intellectual exercise, nor is it fond reminiscing. It is keeping in mind what is true and then living accordingly.

Returning to Galatians, Charles Cousar writes in his commentary on verse 2:20:

More attention needs to be paid to the connection between justification and sanctification in Paul. Often the two have been neatly separated...Justification demands faith, sanctification demands obedience. Such a clean split, however, is not supported by Paul.<sup>45</sup>

Verse 21 is an extremely poignant argument against all forms of legalism, and one which I have used in my own practice of evangelism. In fact, I have often reminded believers of the same, warning them not to base their present righteousness on their current “good record.”<sup>46</sup> Those who do so are not looking to Christ (thus denying him his due glory) but to themselves alone for their acceptance before God. A common belief among Christians seems to be that Christ’s death has only benefited them by clearing their slate of past sins and simply giving them a fresh start. From that point on they are to do their best, knowing that forgiveness is possible for any sins they should commit. And though there is some truth to this idea, it omits any day-to-day reliance upon Christ for the power to obey and to change. Christ just becomes a high quality cleanser for the guilt of our souls, resetting our record back to zero.

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<sup>44</sup> Stott, p. 180. *Sonship* also includes the following quote from Robert Murray McCheyne: “For every look at your sin take ten looks at Christ.” *Sonship*, p. 3-17.

<sup>45</sup> Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 60. We will later revisit and treat in greater depth the relationship between justification and sanctification.

<sup>46</sup> Though I may have previously understood and have certainly been guilty of the same error, I am grateful to Richard Lovelace, who so well articulates the problem of basing our justification on our sanctification. Already cited, p. 101.

As I have already said, this was as much a problem in biblical times as it is among believers today. We understand that we are justified by grace through faith, but then somehow faith takes a secondary role in our sanctification. Contrary to the way in which the expression is used today, Paul refers to this error in 5:4: “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have *fallen away from grace*.”<sup>47</sup> In the deceitfulness of our hearts it is easier to believe that God justifies us by our keeping of the law. We know that no one would be justified by keeping the law, and of course, verse 21 tells us that were it possible, Christ’s death would be meaningless. The movement from trusting in Christ to trusting in ourselves is decidedly a downward plummet.

Though Chapter 2 argues doctrinally that we are to live as believers saved by faith alone, in Chapter 3 Paul resorts to an *ad hominem* argument. How foolish are the Galatians (and anyone else) to abandon the gospel for something less! It is so amazing that anyone would exchange the liberating message of salvation by grace through faith for an enslaving alternative (a salvation by works) that Paul rhetorically asks if they are under some kind of magical spell.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to notice that although the first two verses reflect back to the Galatians’ regeneration (v. 2, *receive the Spirit*), verses 3 through 5 obviously refer to their present efforts to establish righteousness before God. Surely this must be what is meant by Paul’s question in v. 3: “...are you *now* trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Though they were declared righteous by faith, they are seeking to live out and grow in their holiness by obedience to the law rather than by faith. As Leon Morris

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<sup>47</sup> The contemporary use I refer to is when one bemoans another who has fallen out of favor, saying, “He fell from grace.”

<sup>48</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 148.

comments, “No one convincingly denies that there is human effort in sanctification. But sanctification without faith is legalism and negates Christ.”<sup>49</sup>

Turning to Christ is not to be relegated to the time of one’s conversion, but ought to be the ongoing practice of the believer. Sanctification entails the constant heartbreaking awareness of our sin,<sup>50</sup> the necessary conviction of its full atonement in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as the source of power for its conquest. In his comments on verse 6, Luther continues to write about the believer’s current experience as one who has already turned to Christ, but must repeatedly do exactly the same again:

But how shall I be delivered from sin? Run to Christ, the physician, who heals them that are broken in heart and saves sinners. If you believe, you are righteous, because you give glory to God, that He is almighty, merciful, and true.<sup>51</sup>

He further writes:

Thus a Christian man abides in true humility, feeling sin in him effectually, and confessing himself to be worthy of wrath, the judgment of God, and everlasting death. Yet he continually turns to Christ, and in Him he lifts up himself against this feeling of God’s wrath and judgment, and believes that not only the remnants of sin are not imputed to him, but also that he is loved by the Father, not for his own sake, but for Christ’s sake, whom the Father loves.<sup>52</sup>

Verses 3:1-5 are key, as Steve Smallman says, to understanding the fuller meaning of Galatians. He defends what has apparently been labeled a misreading of Paul’s thoughts:

Briefly I have moved from viewing Galatians as primarily a polemic against false teachers, to reading it as a pastoral letter from a man whose heart was broken as he viewed what devastation was going on in the churches and personal lives of the people he had brought to faith in Christ....To put it somewhat differently, was Paul writing to the Galatians to defend a doctrine that Christ and his atonement

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<sup>49</sup> Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul’s Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> G. I. Williamson wrote, “The greater progress one makes in sanctification the more will he be distressed by the sin that yet is present with him (Rom. 7:24).” *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964), p. 115.

<sup>51</sup> Luther, p. 148.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

alone were sufficient for salvation as opposed to those who were teaching works were also needed? Or, was he writing to Christians who, having believed in Christ alone for salvation, were now going back to works, or Law, as the basis of their ongoing acceptance with God?

We would argue the latter.<sup>53</sup>

The traditional reading, which Smallman articulates as the first alternative, is that Paul is defending the doctrine of justification by faith. The second possibility, that to which he and World Harvest Mission subscribe, is that Paul is teaching the doctrine of *sanctification* by faith.

Though I have actually not yet defined the term *sanctification by faith*, fundamentally the idea should be obvious at this point. We are declared righteous at our justification, and out of the resulting union with Christ we are made holy as we tap into what he has done and continues to do for and in us by his Spirit through faith. I see no significant dichotomy between these readings of Galatians. Paul affirms the doctrine of justification by faith alone and spells out the implications for the believer's growth in holiness. The Galatian church is essentially confused about the means of their sanctification because they are confused about the grounds of their justification.

Such confusion is understandable. Mysteriously we remain saint and sinner, "holy and profane, an enemy of God, and yet a child of God."<sup>54</sup> As we behold ourselves, we see the law condemning us as sinful. But as we look to Christ, we are dead to the law and have no sin.<sup>55</sup> Having once looked to Christ as Savior, it is necessary to continue to focus upon him to perfect us (Heb. 12:2).

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen E. Smallman, "How Shall We Read Galatians?" in *Soul Food*, <http://www.whm.org/issues1.htm>. Visited 3/21/01.

<sup>54</sup> Luther, p. 148, commenting on 3:6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

Beginning with 3:26 and continuing through the fourth chapter, Paul contrasts the status of slavery versus sonship, that is, living under the law versus living under the freedom of Christ respectively. Steve Smallman says that verses 4:8-9 are also key to understanding the message of Galatians:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

The point, Smallman says, is that the hearers are believers, already justified by faith, but living as if their sanctification is dependent upon their ability to fulfill the works of the law. They are acting like slaves rather than like sons. They are not realizing that they are sons and daughters and consequently live in bondage and alienation. The joy that they once had when they heard the gospel of freedom has been lost to them (v. 15).<sup>56</sup> Believing in one's sonship, established at the time of justification, frees one from trying to establish a relationship that one already has with the heavenly Father.

By the time we reach the fifth chapter, Paul's argument is pretty well established, though he continues to rail against those who would teach subjection to the law. He urges the believers to stand firm and refuse the burden being put upon them by false teachers (5:1).

Once again, we see in the fourth verse the present nature of the problem of justification for the church. In other words, the Galatians are currently trying to establish a justification which is already theirs. By subjection to the law as a means of righteousness they are alienating themselves from Christ (cf. 2:21). Jesus is of no value to them unless they abandon all hope of self-made righteousness and receive his

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<sup>56</sup> This is actually the theme of Lesson 1 in *Sonship: What has happened to all your joy?*

righteousness imputed to them. Paul's concern is that their sanctification is based on a warped or even missing theology of justification. Christ has either justified them or he hasn't! Our good works do not merit God's favor, and our sin does not warrant his condemnation. Turning again to the comments from Luther:

I neither take from good works their praise nor commend evil works. For it is Christ alone who justifies me, both against my evil deeds and without my good deeds. If I have this persuasion of Christ, I lay hold of the true Christ. But if I think that He exacts the law and works of me to salvation, then He becomes unprofitable to me, and I am utterly separated from Him.<sup>57</sup>

Note also that Luther uses the word *justifies* in the present tense. Though a discrete act, the effects of Christ's justification are applied throughout the believer's life, covering all our sins as we are united with him. In fact, in verse 5 Paul writes of a future righteousness, which at first glance seems to contradict our understanding of the complete righteousness already imputed to our account. However, he must be referring to the completion of our sanctification to be realized at our awaited glorification (Phil. 1:6; I Thess. 5:24-25).<sup>58</sup>

The book of Galatians does support the teaching that our sanctification is based on the truth of our justification. Rather than attempting to produce a record of righteousness acceptable to God the Christian must be convinced that he or she already has Christ's righteousness attributed to him or her. Nevertheless the process of sanctification remains a mystery at this point, particularly with respect to its agency.

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<sup>57</sup> Luther, p. 326.

<sup>58</sup> F. F. Bruce comments on this verse that our present and secured justification by faith brings us the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1f; I Thess. 5:8), p.232. Cousar (p. 115) seems to find it somewhat surprising that Paul would suddenly switch to a future sense of righteousness. Though it may be a switch from the immediate context, it is most certainly not foreign to Paul's thought, as just representatively cited in Bruce's comments.

How are we sanctified? What does God do, and what does man do? For further clarification I turn back to the theologians.

***What the Reformed Theologians Have to Say***

According to Berkhof, God works in regenerate man that subjective quality of holiness which characterizes himself and which he requires of his people. Our holiness is an external relation established at regeneration, but is a dynamic process in terms of the inner subjective quality. The Holy Spirit imparts holiness to the Christian.<sup>59</sup> The believer can state simply, “I am a new person, but I still have a lot of growing to do.”<sup>60</sup> One might also say that we are in the process of becoming what we already are (or declared to be). Using Puritan terminology, Berkhof describes the process by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes this as twofold—mortification and quickening. God gradually works to remove the pollution and corruption within us, thereby crucifying (mortifying) the old man (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 5:24). At the same time we are being “quickened,” having our regenerated disposition strengthened, encouraged, and directed to live a holy life.<sup>61</sup>

Hodge likewise offers the following support for the supernatural nature of sanctification: (i) God is constantly referred to as the author of salvation (I Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20-21; Tit. 2:14; Eph. 5:25); (ii) these references are not general or common, but

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<sup>59</sup> Berkhof, p. 527-528. I cite Berkhof, but any number of others will concur exactly, for example Anthony Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, p. 77. See also Peter Toon, *Justification & Sanctification* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1983), p. 16. There he writes that though God requires righteousness of his people it is important to remember that this righteousness “is dependent upon and proceeds from his.”

<sup>60</sup> Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Berkhof, p. 532.

personal and specific; (iii) we are taught to pray for repentance, faith, and other graces; (iv) one's union to Christ is supernatural; (iv) all of salvation is by grace.<sup>62</sup>

Berkhof identifies the means God uses to accomplish the work of sanctification. The grace of sanctification is infused through the Word and the sacraments, and by providential guidance.<sup>63</sup> Through these means God delivers us more and more from the power of sin and enables us to do good works. These good works are the normal and necessary fruit of sanctification (Eph. 2:10), but are not to be seen as meritorious.<sup>64</sup>

Thus far the entire responsibility of sanctification seems to rest on God. But Berkhof identifies more ordinary means of sanctification as well: the constant exercise of faith, the study of God's word, prayer, and association with other believers.<sup>65</sup> These clearly fall within the human cooperative side of sanctification, which Berkhof and Hodge equally emphasize.

The human aspect is further evident by simple observation. It is obvious that sanctification is not a uniform process among different believers, and the fact is that some believers grow more in their holiness than do others, in both pace and result. The principal factor in the varying degree of believers' growth in holiness is most likely the extent to which he or she participates or cooperates in the work. Yet it is the extent and nature of the believer's participation which is so hard to grasp. Knowing that it is God's work, just how active or passive are we to be in the process?

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<sup>62</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:215.

<sup>63</sup> Berkhof, p. 536.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 543 and Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:244.

<sup>65</sup> Berkhof, p. 534.

Reformed theologians maintain that it is God who works sanctification in us, but that man works also. We are not to be at all passive in the process. Though we are to be entirely dependent upon the Holy Spirit, our activity is a necessary component in the work.

Hodge teaches human responsibility, reminding us that Scripture in numerous places (cf. Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 4:22-24) commands the people of God (that is, those who are regenerate) to:

resist their evil passions and propensities, to lay aside all malice, and wrath, and pride, and jealousy; and on the other, to cultivate all the graces of the Spirit, faith, love, hope, long-suffering, meekness, lowliness of mind, and brotherly kindness. At the same time they are reminded that it is God who worketh in them both to will and to do, and that therefore they are constantly to seek his aid and to depend upon his assistance.<sup>66</sup>

As John Murray puts it, we have an obligation to “recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God.”<sup>67</sup> Berkhof also asserts that we are most certainly responsible to participate in our growth in holiness. We are given warning in the Scriptures against evil and temptations (Rom. 12:9, 16, 17; I Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:16-23). We are constantly exhorted to live holy lives, and are instructed to use available means for moral and spiritual improvement of life (Mic. 6:8; Jn. 15:2,8,16; Rom. 8:12,13; 12:1,2,17; Gal. 6:7,8,15).<sup>68</sup>

Still, the apparent paradox remains. Is the work of sanctification really man’s or is it God’s? Is it a human-divine cooperative effort? Do we share equal responsibility? Does God simply provide the means, leaving it up to us to choose to respond?

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<sup>66</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:225-26.

<sup>67</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 145.

<sup>68</sup> Berkhof, p. 534.

The answer is not simple. According to Berkhof, although we participate we are not independent agents. It cannot be said that it is partly us and partly God. God does, however, effect the work in part through us as instruments. Murray writes that though we must act, it is vital for us to realize our complete dependence on the Holy Spirit.<sup>69</sup> He further warns us against the extremes of passivity—as if nothing is required of us—and of over-conscientiousness, as if our holiness depends upon our own human effort. When we are weak, then we are strong. We are both saved and are being saved by grace.<sup>70</sup>

As Hodge words it, “The cooperation of second cause is not excluded. Men work out their salvation.”<sup>71</sup> More simply, Murray writes, “God works in us and we also work. Because God works we work.”<sup>72</sup> According to Berkhof, any cooperation on our part is only in response to what the Spirit has enabled. We therefore can claim no credit for what we contribute to it instrumentally.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps this is what Michael Horton struggles to articulate, though he may lean too much toward what is often termed *Nike™ Christianity*: “Just do it. You do the work; but recognize that if the work is done, God has done it in and through you.”<sup>74</sup>

Joel Beeke offers a more helpful and practical description of how God effects sanctification in us while we also work:

How does the Spirit work holiness? First, he shows you your *need* for holiness through conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Secondly, he implants a *desire* for holiness. His saving work never leads to despair but always to sanctification in Christ. Thirdly, he provides *strength* to live a holy life. Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature (Gal. 5:16). Live by the Spirit—that is the key. And that means to live in obedience to and

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<sup>69</sup> Murray, p. 146.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:215.

<sup>72</sup> Murray, p. 149. Cf. Phil. 2:12-13.

<sup>73</sup> Berkhof, p. 535.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), p. 207.

dependence on the Spirit. Fourthly, through humble feeding on Scripture and the exercise of prayer, the Spirit establishes an *ongoing* realization that holiness remains essential for being worthy of God and his kingdom (I Thess. 2:12; Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; Phil. 1:27).<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps Francis Schaeffer is most helpful in concisely describing our role in sanctification as “active passivity.”<sup>76</sup>

### *What's Faith Got to Do With it?*

Within the Reformed perspective, however, we discover significant diversity among theologians as they explain sanctification. G. C. Berkouwer, for example, describes sanctification very differently from Berkhof, Hodge, and Murray, elevating God's role to an even higher level in the work while equally diminishing man's. Berkouwer taught that *sola fide* is as much at the heart of sanctification as it is of justification.<sup>77</sup> We no more contribute to our sanctification than we do our justification. Basically, we simply respond by faith to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

He claims that in the more conventional teaching of sanctification, faith is rather divorced from the process.<sup>78</sup> It is too often taught that once we are justified by faith, we then must take charge of our own growth in holiness. This is obviously a major reason Adams dislikes *Sonship*, as it contradicts this paradigm which he also shares.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Joel Beeke, *Holiness: God's Call to Sanctification* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), pp. 10-11.

<sup>76</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1979), p. 58.

<sup>77</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 33.

<sup>78</sup> Berkouwer, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> I could quote extensively from his volumes of preaching and “nouthetic” counseling. But most relevant might be a quick perusal of his booklet *Godliness Through Discipline* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1972).

All we need do to see the “practical” emphasis in sanctification teaching is to survey contemporary discipleship programs. Tim Keller comments on the Navigators’ *Design for Discipleship* course in an article advocating Puritan emphases in contemporary biblical counseling. He notes how only a few chapters deal with trials and conflict with sin. In contrast, Richard Baxter’s “design for discipleship” spends a lot of time on backsliding and the loss of assurance of salvation. He presents an inventory of great sins, including materialism and pride. He covers the benefits of affliction and offers instructions on how to face death. He treats in particular the troubles of the poor, rich, oppressed, and the professionals.<sup>80</sup>

Contrast this to the popular (or formerly popular) and heavily pragmatic Bill Gothard seminars, which are geared toward teaching young people how to achieve success through Christian disciplines of prayer, witnessing, and Scripture memorization.<sup>81</sup> In a perusal of a training manual used by Campus Crusade for Christ, we see two chapters on the assurance of salvation, one on the filling of the Holy Spirit, one on our identity in Christ, and the remaining eight cover the disciplines of reading and memorizing Scripture, prayer, witnessing, fellowship, spiritual warfare, time management, and vision.<sup>82</sup> Is it really training in the Christian disciplines and pragmatic steps for breaking habits and changing behavior that is most needed for growth in

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<sup>80</sup> Timothy J. Keller, “Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling,” *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 3 (1988): 21. His reference is to a subset of The Navigators’ 2:7 series, NavPress, 1973. Keller also mentions Owen’s extensive emphasis on the mortification of sin, which is generally treated lightly in contemporary discipleship programs.

<sup>81</sup> Bill Gothard, *Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts*. N.p., 1979, 1981. The manual is full of references to and promises of success, but a couple of examples can be found on pp. 6 and 168. We are told that “the success of our lives is entirely related to how much grace God gives us.” But in the next sentence he defines grace as “the desire and power to do God’s will.” On p. 135 he gives a testimony of one poor student whose academic performance goes from failing to straight A’s because he developed the discipline of memorizing Scripture.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Adsit, *Personal Disciple Making* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here’s Life Publications, 1988).

holiness? If we only teach these things without addressing the heart, all we do is produce Pharisees!

*The Ordo Salutis—Maybe Not So Neat and Tidy*

The typical error, Berkouwer says, is the (perhaps unintentional) relegation of faith to the time of justification, and then its disappearance as a crucial element in sanctification.<sup>83</sup> This is due, he believes, to the overly zealous insistence on the separation of justification and sanctification within the *ordo salutis*. He pointedly writes, “It is simply not true that sanctification merely succeeds justification.”<sup>84</sup>

Berkouwer is obviously attacking rigid systems of the *ordo salutis*, and is very likely thinking particularly of John Murray.<sup>85</sup> In his work, Murray explains each soteriological act of grace in its relative chronology and in its distinction from the others. Thus, his rendition of the *ordo* includes effectual calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. He maintains that each is “distinct, and not one of these can be defined in terms of the other. Each has its own distinct meaning, function, and purpose in the action and grace of God.”<sup>86</sup> But if Berkouwer is correct, such a structure is artificially neat and tidy, and promotes a very man-centered, and therefore self-defeating, life of holiness.

If Berkouwer is standing out on a limb on this issue, he is in good company. Anthony Hoekema, though he identified himself as more moderate than Berkouwer, also took issue with the *ordo salutis* as taught by Murray. Hoekema wrote that faith is not a

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<sup>83</sup> Berkouwer, p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>85</sup> See Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

distinct step in the way of salvation, but instead “must continue to be exercised throughout the believer’s life.”<sup>87</sup>

The popular Reformed teacher and author A. W. Pink also wrote of the primacy of faith which permeates every aspect of the believer’s salvation. He notes that Scripture teaches that faith is the common instrument through which we are saved and are being saved. We are saved by faith (Lk. 7:50), justified by faith (Rom. 5:1), live by faith (Gal 2:20), stand by faith (II Cor. 1:24), walk by faith (II Cor. 5:7), and obey by faith (Rom. 1:5). Christ dwells in our hearts by faith (Eph 3:17), we overcome the world by faith (I Jn. 5:4), and our heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9).<sup>88</sup>

To be fair to Murray, however, as he articulates the *ordo salutis* he admits to some less than concrete distinctions after all. Regarding adoption, for example, Murray describes the relationship between it and other acts of grace. As he explains adoption, he shows its relation to regeneration and to justification.<sup>89</sup> Adoption is both a legal act (based on justification) and a change of nature (based on regeneration and continued into sanctification).<sup>90</sup> And we can be certain that Murray would not mean to say that faith is a discrete act, leading to but stopping at the point of one’s justification. Indeed he writes that “faith is not only a momentary act but an abiding attitude of trust and confidence directed to the Savior.”<sup>91</sup> The perceived rigidity of Murray’s *ordo* can be attributed to his commendable efforts toward establishing the definition and chronology of each act of

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<sup>87</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Ross-Shire, GB: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), p. 174.

<sup>89</sup> Murray, p. 132. See also p. 170.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

grace as he draws from the Scriptures. While maintaining that each act of grace is distinct, he does not deny that they interrelate.

Murray also discusses several aspects of redemption which he considers vital in our salvation and Christian life, but does not list such as elements within the *ordo salutis*—namely, faith and repentance, perseverance, and our union with Christ. It is particularly our union with Christ which is relevant to this discussion. He considers this union absolutely central and basic to our Christian life, and too broad to consider as merely a step in the salvation process. Indeed, “when viewed according to Scripture, in its broader aspects it underlies every step of the application of redemption.”<sup>92</sup> In Christ we are predestined (Eph. 1:3, 4) and in Christ we have died, risen and been exalted (Rom. 6:2-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:3, 4).<sup>93</sup>

In its connection with faith, he writes, “The life of faith is one of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer.”<sup>94</sup> What Murray is saying, then, is that faith unites us to Christ, and this union with Christ permeates our whole salvation and Christian life. In this he is not so far from Berkouwer after all.

Berkhof is also stressing our union in Christ when he writes of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who works within us that mortification of sin and quickening of our new life in Jesus. Similarly, Hodge teaches that it is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, secured by our union with Christ, which directs our sanctification. He works to enlighten our minds, enabling us to see our sin for what it is, hate it, and consequently turn from it.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 169. Cf. Gal. 2:20; Rom. 6:11.

<sup>95</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:227.

Pink also emphasizes the primacy of our union with Christ through faith (I Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:25), which enables us to enjoy now what we have in Christ. Faith actually cleanses the soul (Acts 15:8-9) which has been defiled by unbelief, because Christ, who purifies, is the object of which we lay hold. Faith looks away from self to Christ, and is enabled to realize that his blood “cleansed us from all sin” (I Jn. 1:7). Further, faith appropriates God’s commandments while producing obedience (Jn. 17:17; Heb. 4:2).<sup>96</sup>

Faith lays hold of Christ as he is offered to sinners in the gospel, not only for our justification but also our sanctification. Faith, then, is *the instrument* of our sanctification. Faith is the eye which perceives the gracious provisions which God has made for his people. Faith is the hand which appropriates those provisions. Faith is the mouth which receives all the good that God has stored up for us in Christ.<sup>97</sup>

Justification and sanctification—not so easily separated. Some might overreact to the connection being drawn between justification and sanctification, and understandably so. The chief point of departure between Catholics and Protestants is in the precise definition of justification by faith. In Roman Catholic theology, justification and sanctification are essentially merged.<sup>98</sup> Jay Adams does not exactly accuse *Sonship* of slipping into Catholicism, but does say that its teachers confuse the relationship between the two acts of grace.<sup>99</sup> According to Adams, *Sonship* teaches that our sanctification is based on our justification, whereas it is actually based on our regeneration. But Adams is displaying an overly rigid delineation of the *ordo salutis*.

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<sup>96</sup> Pink, pp. 58, 177-181.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>98</sup> Berkhof, p. 529.

<sup>99</sup> Adams, pp. 34, 43.

Though Berkhof remains somewhat more structured than Hoekema and Berkouwer, like them he relates sanctification to the other stages in the *ordo salutis*. He does distinguish each act of grace clearly, but he still sees them as connected. For example, regeneration is the start of sanctification. Justification is its judicial basis. Faith, he writes, “is the mediate of instrumental cause of sanctification as well as of justification. Faith does not merit sanctification any more than it does justification, but unites us to Christ, the source of our new life.” Still, he offers a helpful distinction: while even the weakest faith mediates justification, the degree of sanctification is commensurate with the strength of the Christian’s faith and the persistence with which he apprehends Christ.<sup>100</sup>

Peter Toon seems to align more closely with Berkouwer on the issue, and offers a helpful perspective. Regarding justification and sanctification, he says we cannot merely speak in terms of sequence, as the relationship is much more subtle. Since justification is a forensic term and sanctification is a cultic metaphor, we are speaking in different contexts. Their meanings, therefore, “can be parallel without being identical.”<sup>101</sup>

J. I. Packer agrees that, though distinct, there is indeed a strong connection between justification and sanctification:

God’s free gift of *justification*, that is, pardon and acceptance here and now through Christ’s perfect obedience culminating in his substitutionary sin bearing for us on the cross, is the basis on which the entire *sanctifying* process rests. It is out of our union by the Spirit, through faith, with the Christ who died for us and whom first we trust for justification (Romans 3-5), that our subsequent life of holiness is lived (Romans 6-8). Holy people glory, not in their holiness, but in Christ’s cross; for the holiest saint is never more than a justified sinner and never sees himself in any other way [*italics mine*].<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Berkhof, p. 537.

<sup>101</sup> Toon, p. 41.

<sup>102</sup> J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), p. 105.

Francis Schaeffer says the same thing: “The basis [of sanctification] is the finished work of Christ, the instrument to lay hold of that which God means us to have at the moment is faith.”<sup>103</sup> Our sanctification is based on our justification, and both are activated by faith. Relating the two is not the same as confusing them.

This is a major theme in Richard Lovelace’s excellent work on the theology of revival. He decries the all too common “sanctification gap” prevalent in the Church, and sees it as being due to the inability to appropriate our justification.<sup>104</sup> When a person is not secure in his acceptance before God, he will either despair of all hope or do everything humanly possible to convince others and himself that he has sufficient holiness. More often than not, this betrays a very low view of God’s holiness and our own sin, as if we could somehow really meet God’s perfect standard on our own. Hope in any righteousness of our own is pointless, sinful, and contrary to the very heart of Christianity.

This gap is bridged by faith in Christ, the assurance of our justification. As Pink writes, faith is required because as the believer sees more of his sin, he will require assurance of Christ’s atonement made for him.<sup>105</sup> This is precisely what *Sonship* teaches and is in a large part what World Harvest Mission means by *sanctification by faith*.

### *Help from the Puritans*

Lest we think of this whole idea of a connection between justification and sanctification as novel to the last century, let us now turn to the Puritan era. World

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<sup>103</sup> Schaeffer, p. 78.

<sup>104</sup> Lovelace, p. 211.

<sup>105</sup> Pink, p. 187

Harvest Mission highly recommends Walter Marshall's work *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, which has only recently been returned to print.<sup>106</sup> I found Marshall enormously helpful in bringing into focus several aspects of sanctification by faith.

As a pastor, Marshall seems well qualified to address the subject and works to unfold it practically for his readers. We see in the book's introduction that he himself struggled to understand the extent of Christ's atonement and the workings of sanctification. Though he sought advice from his mentor, Thomas Goodwin, it is hard to say that he was afforded any comfort. Goodwin assured Marshall that his sin was greater than he even understood, for he had not believed in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins and for his *sanctification* [italics mine].<sup>107</sup>

What does it mean to believe in Christ for one's sanctification? At first glance one might assume that Marshall meant that we ought to trust that Christ will sanctify us, although it would have been more correct for him to name the Holy Spirit as the agent of our sanctification. However, as we read further, we see that Marshall taught that it is the believer's faith in Christ that works to sanctify. He argues his case in essentially two ways.

*1. Assurance Frees Us for Holiness.* The first way is more obvious than the second, and has recently been echoed by some contemporary writers which I will cite below.

Marshall taught that faith sanctifies us by providing us with the confidence that we are

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<sup>106</sup> Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. vi. John Owen wrote similarly: "Yea, as your great trouble is about the Father's love, so you can no way more trouble or burden him than by your unkindness in not believing of it." John Owen, "Communion With God", ed. William H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 21.

indeed justified by Christ's blood, and that through his death and resurrection we are empowered for holiness (cf. Phil. 3:10f).<sup>108</sup> The strength and will to live a holy life come from the assurance of our reconciliation to God, the surety of heaven, and the working of the Spirit to enable us.<sup>109</sup> Living by faith that he is no longer condemned in Christ, because Christ has fully satisfied the Father's wrath, the believer can now live the holy life that God requires.

2. *Union with Christ Works in Two Dimensions.* The second way Marshall articulates sanctification by faith is by focusing on the believer's union with Christ, which can further be divided into two streams of thought:

i. *Christ's Holiness is Transferred to Us.* The believer's union with Christ provides not only assurance, as mentioned above, but also strength to meet the requirements of the law, drawn from the only one who can (and did) fully obey—the Lord Jesus.<sup>110</sup> This union itself remains mysterious, but Marshall was teaching that our character is affected by the one to whom we are united. “By faith,” he writes, “we have actual enjoyment and possession of Christ himself, and not only of remission of sins, but of life, and so of holiness.”<sup>111</sup> He later writes that we ought to seek holiness and righteousness only by believing in Christ and walking in him by faith.<sup>112</sup>

ii. *We Are Transformed As We Behold His Glory.* As we believe in Christ and live in our union with him, we are more and more persuaded of his desirable excellence:

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 103, 110, 175.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

As we believe in Christ for salvation and happiness, the soul casts off everything which would put a distance between itself and Christ. The heart knows that trusting Christ creates a bent and inclination and ability for the practice of holiness. Faith brings forth love; it creates or evokes love for God.<sup>113</sup>

And again:

Having a full persuasion of the incomparable glorious excellency of Christ and of the way of salvation by him (Phil. 3:8), will allure and incline your wills and affections to choose and embrace Christ as the chief good and never to rest satisfied without the enjoyment of him; and to reject everything that stands in competition with him, or the enjoyment of him.<sup>114</sup>

In other words, as we know our Lord more, nothing less will satisfy us than God himself. And we will desire to be like him—and subsequently be changed—as we behold his glory (II Cor. 3:18).

So we see that Marshall did not rigidly divide justification and sanctification either. It is by confidence in our justification that we are able to move in our sanctification. And our union with Christ, which results from our justification, channels Christ's holiness to us throughout our lives as we live in him. Further, this union serves to sanctify us within the context of knowing and being satisfied in all that Christ is. As Joel Beeke writes in the introduction of the recent edition, "Marshall's book teaches us that sanctification cannot increase in our lives and churches without the Word-centered teaching of gracious justification by faith."<sup>115</sup>

John Owen also taught sanctification by faith. He instructs the believer to "[s]et faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror."<sup>116</sup> Of course, he is writing

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>116</sup> Owen, 6:79, quoted in Packer, p. 105.

about the Holy Spirit's work of mortification, but shows that faith is the instrument therein.<sup>117</sup>

Owen believed that our sanctification is connected to the gospel itself, writing that "holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls."<sup>118</sup> And rather to the point, he writes, "Our Lord Jesus affirms that men are sanctified by the faith that is in him" (Acts 26:18).<sup>119</sup>

Owen, Marshall and the others I have presented easily find their support in the earlier writings of John Calvin. Though we look in vain in the *Institutes* to find the exact phrase *sanctification by faith*, Calvin's teachings are consistent with the idea as I have articulated it thus far. As he discusses justification and sanctification, he does so outside the context of a defined *ordo salutis*. And though he clearly distinguishes sanctification from justification, he also sees that they are related to each other:

[Justification] is the main hinge on which religion turns...For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God."<sup>120</sup>

In the same vein he writes further:

Therefore, we must come to this remedy: that believers should be convinced that their only ground of hope for the inheritance of a Heavenly Kingdom lies in the fact that, being engrafted in the body of Christ, they are freely accounted righteous.<sup>121</sup>

What is this "grasping" and "being convinced" to which he refers, if not firmly believing? And what happens when we do believe these truths in our hearts? Returning

<sup>117</sup> See also Owen, Vol. 3, Book 4, Ch. 3, p. 414.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, Book 4, Ch. 1, p. 370.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, Book 4, Ch. 3, p. 413.

<sup>120</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.xi.1.

<sup>121</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xiii.5.

to our own century, Bryan Chapell sounds a lot like Marshall as he writes of the power of this kind of faith in our sanctification:

If we remember that God is the lifter of our heads (Ps. 3:3), then we will raise our eyes to see the affection in his own. When we see that his regard for us does not waver, then his grace will quicken our steps, strengthen our hearts, and delight our souls to carry on.<sup>122</sup>

And again:

When we truly perceive how great is the heart that pardons us, then our hearts begin to beat in harmony with that heart. Honoring our Lord becomes the joy of our lives, and love for him becomes the power that fuels that joy.<sup>123</sup>

The act of returning to and dwelling on one's justification serves as the power source for sanctification. The more we see of Christ, the more we see of our sin. The more we see of our sin, the more we understand our need for Christ and the more we grow in our understanding and appreciation of the magnitude of what he has done for us in the atonement.<sup>124</sup>

Sanctification by faith—not so novel after all. We are sanctified by faith. The staff of World Harvest Mission and the authors of *Sonship* did not invent the doctrine, nor is it an anomaly within orthodox Christianity or Reformed theology in particular, as Jay Adams admonishes.<sup>125</sup>

Berkouwer taught it. Hoekema taught the same,<sup>126</sup> even to the point of stating that such doctrine is as cardinal to the Reformation as justification by faith.<sup>127</sup> And

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<sup>122</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>124</sup> See, however, Van Dixhoorn, pp. 237–41. He expresses concern that *Sonship* does not teach a progressive sanctification, but instead presents a rather pessimistic view of mortification. See also Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, p. 38. I have to agree that the course disproportionately emphasizes our awareness and battle with sin at the expense of any victory over the flesh.

<sup>125</sup> In fact, I am puzzled why Adams seems not to have heard of the term. *Biblical Sonship*, p. v (preface).

<sup>126</sup> Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” p. 65. Also cf. Acts 26:18.

though Berkhof does not explicitly use the term *sanctification by faith*, he fundamentally aligns himself with Berkouwer on the issue. J. I. Packer teaches it, and so did John Calvin, John Owen, and Walter Marshall. And as we saw from Galatians (and Romans), Paul also taught it.

Again, what does it mean that we are sanctified by faith? Basically two things. First, faith unites us to Christ, which in itself transforms us, being a living, dynamic relationship. And the more we know Christ, the more everything that is not holy pales before him. Second, and by no means exclusive of the first meaning, the very act of believing (repenting of our unbelief) what has been done for us in Christ, serves to align our hearts and actions accordingly.

What *Sonship* is teaching is that our sanctification progresses only as we are certain of our justification, a truth to which we must daily (or perhaps more often) return. Our sinful tendency is to lay claim to our own righteousness, and defend it fiercely. Believing in the gospel is simply returning to that truth every time we stray, wrongly seeking and claiming myriad other bases for our justification, for our righteousness. We cannot grow in holiness apart from believing the good news of our justification. And when we do believe, we are able to grow into healthy, God-pleasing holiness.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>128</sup> This is a major concern for Jay Adams. He refuses to see how believing in our justification contributes to our sanctification. Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, pp. 39, 44. He is quite anxious that we should move on from milk to meat. He does not see that the meat will do us no good if we think our justification lies in becoming more sophisticated in our theology and in living obediently. And he wrongly sees constant repentance and rediscovery of the cross's power as milk.

***Sanctification, Faith & the Gospel—Making the Gospel More Central***

We are sanctified by faith—in the gospel. As Steve Smallman writes, “we need to recognize that the essential content of our discipleship is to be the gospel—taking people who have believed the gospel back into the gospel again and again.”<sup>129</sup> Jerry Bridges concurs. As Vice-President of the Navigators, an organization well known in the evangelical Church for its work in discipleship, he asks us:

What one word describes the message we most need to hear as believers? I get a lot of different answers to that question, but most of them can be summed up with one word, discipleship...But there is something more basic than discipleship, something that actually provides the necessary atmosphere in which discipleship can be practiced. The one word that describes what we must continue to hear is gospel.<sup>130</sup>

The common understanding of the term *gospel* is quite narrow when compared to the way it is used by the *Sonship* material. Most believers would correctly explain that the gospel is the good news that Jesus died as an acceptable sacrifice and penalty for the sin of all who place their faith in him. When understood this way, one needs to hear and receive the gospel only once.<sup>131</sup>

Yet Bridges is affirming what he learned firsthand from Miller, and which Smallman credibly asserts that Paul and the apostles taught as well:

The gospel is more than the announcement about the person and work of Christ, it is used by Paul and others to include all that comes to us when we believe the gospel. In the words of Galatians, it includes not only God sending his Son into our hearts that we might experience the privileges of sonship (Gal. 4:4-7). In

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<sup>129</sup> Stephen E. Smallman, “Gospel Discipling”, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994), pp. 20-21.

<sup>131</sup> This seems to be the way Adams himself limits the definition. He writes, “One of the chief difficulties that we encounter in *Sonship* is a failure to define the gospel. Indeed, because *Sonship* stretches it to cover nearly everything, it is given no definition at all.” *Biblical Sonship*, p. 44. Though he acknowledges that the good news does include the fact that the kingdom has come, he still thinks it more proper to limit it to the news that saves, namely Christ’s death for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection. With this narrow understanding, it is no wonder he cannot see the point in returning to this truth constantly.

Colossians 1, Paul talks about the “word of truth, the gospel” and seems to equate it with “God’s grace in all its truth” (Col. 1:5, 6)...All of this points to a need to understand the gospel as much more than rehearsing the facts of Christ’s death and resurrection—as wonderful as they are. Furthermore, teaching or preaching the gospel is more than inviting unbelievers to put their trust in Christ for salvation. The gospel is the word we should use for all that has been given us in Jesus Christ, which is why it is frequently called “the gospel of grace.”<sup>132</sup>

I have already shown that in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he is writing to believers who have abandoned the ongoing relevance of the gospel. But this is by no means the only place Paul writes this way. The third lesson in the *Discipling by Grace* curriculum points out that in the opening verses of his epistle to the Romans Paul expresses his desire to come to Rome in order to preach the gospel to them (Rom. 1:15). And yet in verse 7 it is clear that he is writing to a church. Why would Paul see the need to come preach the gospel to a church of believers? Obviously he knows that even believers need to hear the gospel again and again.

This is Smallman’s point as well, as he writes, “The posture of simply believing in Jesus as we learn of him in the gospel is as fundamental to our progress in the faith as it was to our initial receiving of it.”<sup>133</sup> Consistent with Galatians and Romans, this same idea is also encapsulated in Col. 2:6-7: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

### *Is Sonship Merely Keswick Revisited?*

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<sup>132</sup> Smallman, “Gospel Discipling”, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

This whole idea of sanctification by faith as taught by *Sonship* is often misunderstood, as we have seen. In fact *Sonship* has at least twice been explicitly been likened to the Keswick movement,<sup>134</sup> that pietistic wave from England which hit America by storm in the nineteenth century.<sup>135</sup> This is not surprising, for there are definitely some similarities.

First of all, *Sonship* is pietistic without apology, with a goal toward renewal (or personal revival), and growth in holiness. And like Keswick teaching, *Sonship* seeks to address the struggles Christians have, promising that life can be better:

As a Christian have you ever wondered why living the faith seems like an uphill battle? Do you feel guilty, beaten down by your failures, anxious, fearful?...In our heads we all know that the good news is supposed to be able to help us cope, but how is it that no matter how hard you work, your achievements don't seem to give you the peace you desire?<sup>136</sup>

Another similarity is the sharper emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit than on the role of man in our sanctification. Self effort toward holy living is decried by both *Sonship* and Keswick. Moreover, both sets of teaching seek to bring their participants to a deep conviction of sin and make them aware of their desperate need for Christ. And finally, and perhaps most significantly, both Keswick and *Sonship* teach that the chief obstacle in the way of our sanctification is unbelief. Each would affirm that the same faith which justifies also sanctifies, and that it is necessary to return to that basic truth again and again in order to grow in holiness.

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<sup>134</sup> Van Dixhoorn, p. 241-242. Terry Johnson, "Sonship: An Adequate Psychology of Christian Experience?" in *Sonship Theology: Blessing or Bane?* [http://www.pcanews.com/editorial\\_opinion/monthly\\_umpired\\_debate](http://www.pcanews.com/editorial_opinion/monthly_umpired_debate). Visited 2/16/01. He writes, "If it looks like a duck..." Adams simply refers to "higher life" movements (*Biblical Sonship*, p. 11) without specifically naming Keswick.

<sup>135</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 96ff.

<sup>136</sup> World Harvest Mission brochure, *SONSHIP: a Phone Discipleship Course*.

But similarities are not necessarily equivalents, and such is the case here. As we look more closely at these similarities between *Sonship* and Keswick teaching, we see that they are really not the same at all. While it is true that the *Sonship* brochure invites those who struggle with frustration and failure to take the course, it doesn't really promise that "alumni" live a higher or victorious life.<sup>137</sup> The lecturers and counselors/disciplers will be the first to admit that they continue to struggle themselves. This is actually a very appealing aspect of the course, knowing that, realistically, holiness takes a lifetime and usually comes along a very rocky path. Jack and Rose Marie began teaching *Sonship* by freely talking about their struggles and how the gospel applied to their lives in very specific ways.

And, although both teachings strive to bring great conviction of sin, Keswick's teaching on the nature of sin and its different categories (known and unknown, willful and unwillful) is foreign to *Sonship* (and to what I would consider mainstream Christianity). Keswick teaches that believers can and ought to achieve a state where they no longer willfully disobey God, or that they can achieve "uniform sustained victory over known sin."<sup>138</sup> This is so close to the Wesleyan teaching on perfectionism that I cannot distinguish them, and the error is just as dangerous.<sup>139</sup> It should be easy to see that we are always sinning, especially when we consider the command to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We never obey that perfectly and are therefore always sinning. If anything, *Sonship* is pessimistic about any victory over sin.

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<sup>137</sup> I will admit, however, that the brochure sounds more "higher life" than I think it should.

<sup>138</sup> Steven Barabas, quoted in J. Robertson McQuilkin, "The Keswick Perspective," *Five Views of Sanctification*, p. 153.

<sup>139</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 2:512. According to McQuilkin (p. 183) it is the official opinion of Keswick leaders that Warfield and J. I. Packer (in *Keep in Step With the Spirit*) have misunderstood this teaching.

Disciples are constantly reminded that they are more sinful than they can ever imagine. The call to a lifestyle of repentance is in direct contradiction to the idea of reaching a point of deliberate sinlessness.

The emphasis on dependence upon the Holy Spirit and the forsaking of our own effort is actually very different from Keswick teaching as well. Keswick teaches a constant dethroning of ourselves and re-enthroning Christ in our hearts until we reach a point of unconditional surrender,<sup>140</sup> whereas *Sonship* never promises such a finite point. Keswick's decrying of self effort is more related to attempts at holy living. For *Sonship*, the concern about self effort is more about our natural (and sinful) attempts to establish righteousness, namely, trying to *look* holy more than actually trying to *be* holy. *Sonship* teaches us to lean on the Lord to change us, admitting our absolute inability to be righteous by our own doing. There is little temptation in *Sonship* to claim that we have "arrived," because none of us does until our glorification at death or at the Lord's coming. Looking to the Lord to change us, being freed from the need to establish righteousness that we already have in Christ, is not the kind of "surrender" that Keswick teaches. *Sonship* does not teach anyone to "let go and let God."<sup>141</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant difference between the two teaching is, ironically, where they might seem to be the most similar. Both Keswick and *Sonship* seem to be teaching a sanctification that is by faith. If we are to grow in holiness we must constantly place our faith in Christ's work on our behalf. However, for Keswick, faith is a lofty and passive surrender accompanied by obedient living<sup>142</sup> with a nebulous goal of

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<sup>140</sup> Marsden, p. 77f. This sounds remarkably like material used by Campus Crusade for Christ, namely the throne of our hearts paradigm, the idea of the class of carnal Christians, and spiritual breathing.

<sup>141</sup> This motto is attributed to Keswick leader Charles Trumbull. Marsden, p. 98.

<sup>142</sup> McQuilkin, pp. 168-169.

“sinlessness.” In *Sonship* it is a genuine down to earth struggle that does not end until we see Christ. Indeed faith is at a lofty level (our mysterious union with Christ) but also at the practical level of living out of the assured righteous standing that is already ours.

### *A Lifestyle of Repentance*

Sanctification is a much more complicated and painful process than learning how to surrender properly or to breathe spiritually. Sin is not so easily eradicated in our lives, though thankfully one day it will be completed. This leads to the parallel teaching of “repentance as a lifestyle.” In keeping with the first of Luther’s ninety-five theses, *Sonship* teaches that we are to be constantly repenting. It strikes me as very odd that Adams finds this so objectionable. He actually writes, “If repentance becomes a lifestyle—something the Bible knows nothing about—it is no longer biblical repentance.”<sup>143</sup> Curiously, in the middle of his accusation that *Sonship* is actually another “higher life” movement, he criticizes the program’s constant urging of repentance. This seems to be the opposite of perfectionist teaching, as it acknowledges that sin is a constant problem, and that we are more sinful than we would dare to think.<sup>144</sup> Adams says, “Repentance, rather than spontaneous upon occasions when needed, seems almost to be ritualized into a technique for attaining the ends of *Sonship*.”<sup>145</sup> For repentance to be constant most certainly does not require that it become merely routine. It would seem

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<sup>143</sup> Adams, p.48.

<sup>144</sup> On the negative side, *Sonship* conveys a very pessimistic outlook on conquering sin. Though I concur with others that this is a weakness, the fact of its pessimism should in itself quickly distinguish *Sonship* from the Keswick movement.

<sup>145</sup> Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, p. 11, n. 2. Incidentally, this is not the only place in which Adams infers that *Sonship* is actually a cult. In the very next sentence he informs us that World Harvest Mission has copyrighted the biblical term, and from this point on uses the trademark symbol: *Sonship*™.

that a lifestyle of repentance is being equated with the simplistic discipline of “spiritual breathing,” as taught by Campus Crusade for Christ. Crusade’s disciples are taught to confess their sins and turn away from them (exhaling) as they take in the Spirit who is available to them at will (inhaling).<sup>146</sup>

This is nothing at all like *Sonship*’s teaching. In fact, I believe that *Sonship* teaches a more biblical and genuine repentance than I have ever come across before. *Sonship* teaches a repentance that is difficult, anything but superficial, and that is life-changing. Given that repentance is such a major component of *Sonship*, let us now investigate what *Sonship* does teach about repentance.

#### *Sanctification by Repentance?*

If the term *sanctification by faith* is novel to the reader, more surprising will be the term *sanctification by repentance*. Is this idea radical? Perhaps. Is it novel? In concept, no, though maybe in nomenclature. The idea, in short, is that we grow in our sanctification by constant repentance. In his defense of the theology underlying *Sonship*, Neil Williams says that sanctification by faith can be demonstrated by the practice of sanctification by repentance.<sup>147</sup>

The thrust of his argument rests on fundamental logic. Faith, as we know, is the “twin sister” of repentance. In Murray’s *ordo salutis*, for example, it is impossible to determine a chronology between them. Their occurrence is virtually simultaneous, or at least overlapping, because repentance takes place when one sees one’s sin confronted and

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<sup>146</sup> Al Broom and Lorraine Broom, *One-to-One Discipling*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Vista, Calif.: Multiplication Ministries, 1987), pp. 45-46. See also Campus Crusade’s “The Power Source,” the third of a four part series called *Your Life In Christ* (Austin: Here’s Life America, 1986).

<sup>147</sup> Williams, p. 14.

forgiven/atoned for by the Savior. On the other hand, one can only truly repent when one sees the need for it and the assurance of forgiveness through the Savior, in whom he now believes.

Thomas Watson opens his classic work on repentance with these words:

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.<sup>148</sup>

Therefore, since faith and repentance are so closely related, Williams reasons that if we can show that we are sanctified by constant repentance, we have also shown that we are sanctified by faith.<sup>149</sup> He offers three proofs that this is so. One is that repentance obviously requires humility, and Scripture teaches that God gives mercy to the humble who renounces his sin (Prov. 28:13; Is. 57:15). Secondly, repentance must produce fruit (Matt. 3:8; II Cor. 7:11), the evidence of sanctification. Thirdly, repentance is a means of grace, as God gives grace to those who humble themselves (Jas. 4:6, 10) and purifies the repentant (I John 1:9).

The Reformers taught the need for constant repentance in the life of the believer. Calvin wrote that “life is a race of repentance”<sup>150</sup> and the first of the ninety-five theses that launched Luther into notoriety stated, “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said, ‘repent,’ he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.”

*Sonship* obviously agrees, and takes this repentance very seriously. Although there is actually only one course lesson dedicated to this topic (three in *Gospel Transformation*), we repeatedly read and hear about the need for constant repentance.

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<sup>148</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>149</sup> Williams, p. 14.

<sup>150</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iii.9.

The disciplers/counselors are also trained to urge their disciples to repent as the sins of their heart are exposed. I know this personally from being on both sides of the teaching.

Dr. Miller decries the downplay of repentance in our society and in our churches in his book, *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*. We have forgotten how to repent, he says, and we undervalue the exercise. Repentance is commonly at the surface level, dealing with specific behavior but never addressing the root sin which drives those actions. Repentance, then, is often confused with a change of behavior, rather than a change of heart.<sup>151</sup>

We also have a tendency to confuse repentance with penance, which is just as much a problem for Protestants as it is for Roman Catholics. We all look for ways to act sorry for what we have done, and confuse our sorrowful behavior and actions with genuine repentance as we try to “make it up” to the one we have offended as genuine repentance. The only difference is that, for Catholics the penance is specifically prescribed by the priest in the confessional booth.

Miller reminds us of the connection between repentance and the gospel. The first recorded words of Jesus in the Gospel according to Mark are, “Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). And immediately before Jesus’ ascension he says, “...and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).<sup>152</sup>

In the same way that we first turned from our sins to the Savior, we must do so daily throughout the Christian life (Col. 2:6). From this idea, Miller taught that we are to

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<sup>151</sup> C. John Miller, *Repentance and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Man* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980), p. 57.

<sup>152</sup> See also Acts 2:38; 20:21; Is. 34:18; 51:17; Is. 57:15.

be converted daily.<sup>153</sup> This is in keeping with Luther (as already quoted) and Thomas Watson who wrote similarly: “Repentance is never out of season; it is of as frequent use as the artificer’s tool or the soldier’s weapon.”<sup>154</sup> Miller further writes that as the believer lives out this constant repentance, being filled with the Spirit, he is powerfully transformed. “Weak in himself, he is full of Christ. This is God’s normal pattern.”<sup>155</sup>

Pastor Rick Downs delivers a very thought-provoking lecture on repentance in the seventh lesson of the *Sonship* manual.<sup>156</sup> Most of what he teaches is actually what repentance is *not*. He warns us about confusing repentance with its fruit. This echoes the words of John the Baptist who, when rebuking the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him, exhorted them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). True repentance will show forth evidence. As Sinclair Ferguson so succinctly writes, “Repentance means a change of mind that leads to a change in lifestyle.”<sup>157</sup>

Downs also warns us about confusing fruit with behavioral change, the same point that Miller makes (see above). It is easy to believe we have repented simply because a habit seems to be broken. In the case of pornography, for example, we might proclaim victory—as the perpetrator or counselor—when the activity stops. We as pastors and counselors might even advise methods to make the indulgence in pornography difficult or inconvenient enough to prevent it altogether. And this is good. But the heart sin of lust may not be dealt with in the least.

Further, we must not confuse repentance with simply talking about it, as if the words alone will change anything. We can admire the humility and resolve, but such

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<sup>153</sup> Miller, *Repentance*, p. 64.

<sup>154</sup> Watson, p. 7.

<sup>155</sup> Miller, *Repentance*, p. 64.

<sup>156</sup> *Sonship*, Lesson 7.

<sup>157</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Grace of Repentance* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), p. 14.

repentance can also be inauthentic, made to sound pious in a twisted effort at self-righteousness. And another extremely common error we make is confusing repentance with groveling. Many of us have experienced this first or second hand in a relationship with someone who has a destructive habit or addiction. After awhile it is obvious that the abundant tears and promises are meaningless unless the heart is changed.

Much of our repentance, Downs says, consists of promising never to commit a specific sin again. But such a promise is fleshly, as we are relying on our own strength to keep our vow. Downs likens this to the legalist who believes he can keep the law and strives to do so, thereby making Christ meaningless and superfluous.<sup>158</sup> We need to despair of our own righteousness, past, present, and future, and depend entirely upon Christ.

I have to admit that though this lecture challenged me to pursue and identify more genuine repentance by showing me what repentance was *not*, I had difficulty in determining from the lecture what repentance actually *is*. Should I not determine to do better? And what would it mean to lean on God's strength entirely and not my own?

On the positive side, Downs does offer his hearers the six-step way of repentance as taught by Thomas Watson. In Watson's own words, "Repentance is a spiritual medicine made up of six special ingredients: (i) sight of sin; (ii) sorrowing for sin; (iii) confession of sin; (iv) shame for sin; (v) hatred for sin; (vi) turning from sin."<sup>159</sup>

Faith is an integral part of repentance, as we trust in our secured forgiveness and in the power of the Holy Spirit to change us. What's more, there is joy after the sorrow,

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<sup>158</sup> He refers to Luther's Commentary on Galatians 5, and I believe he means specifically 5:2 and perhaps also 2:21.

<sup>159</sup> Watson, p. 18. See also Ferguson's description of biblical repentance in *The Grace of Repentance*, pp. 18-21. Briefly, he delineates repentance as a new attitude toward sin, a new attitude toward self, and a new attitude toward God.

as we realize that we as God's adopted sons are participating in what he is doing in our lives.

Like Watson, *Sonship* sees faith and repentance as two sides of the same coin—not as part of the *ordo*, but as the central dynamic for the Christian life. The two are cyclical. We repent of our lack of faith, for thinking and living in a way out of accord with the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14). And as we believe, we see where we have sought in vain other sources of righteousness and other sources of joy. This leads us to further repentance. What Adams sees as terribly infantile<sup>160</sup> is what will actually sanctify us.

*Sonship* is simply calling us to the repeated realization of the truth of the gospel and a refocusing of our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who enables us to run with perseverance that race marked out for us (Heb. 12:2). And when we do so, the heart is certainly affected. *Sonship* calls this heart-change revival or renewal, and sometimes even calls it conversion. In *Sonship* terminology, it is proper to say that we can be converted every day. This experience is not the same as the frequent infilling of the Holy Spirit called for in Keswick theology. It is simply acknowledging that by nature we turn from God and need our hearts turned back continually. This is the same conviction that drives us to listen to a weekly sermon—or more. Rose Marie Miller puts it simply: “We need the gospel every day.”<sup>161</sup>

Far from producing elitist “higher life” believers, this teaching should incite humble brokenness in people, thereby glorifying Christ in their need for him and in his

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<sup>160</sup> Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>161</sup> *Sonship*, 2-1. In response to Adams's alarm at the “pietistic strain” in Jack Miller, Smallman writes, “Heaven forbid! A Calvinistic theological professor and pastor who is passionate about knowing Jesus!” Smallman, “A Response”, p. 4

gracious salvation.<sup>162</sup> A lifestyle of repentance glorifies God, as seen in the way *Sonship* defines the gospel: “You are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet you can be more loved than you ever dared hope, *at the same time*, because Jesus Christ lived and died in your place.”<sup>163</sup>

### *Sonship and the Doctrine of Adoption*

It might seem strange that I have delayed a discussion of adoption until this point. But as stated above, at its root, *Sonship* is not really about adoption. Rather, it is about sanctification by faith. Naturally that sounds odd, since even the name of the course is the term most closely associated with adoption. I think we can reconcile this paradox with the observation that *Sonship* does not really teach the doctrine of adoption as much as it assumes it and then applies it. We are either sons/daughters or we are orphans.

According to Jack Miller:

An orphan is someone who has in some way lost touch with the grace of God. In isolation from the promises, he has developed a small view of Christ and a small view of the gospel. A son is someone who is walking in faith and living in the promises. He has a large Christ and a large gospel.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> The chief critic in this regard is Jay Adams, with citations really too numerous to list. As an example, on p. 28 he very sarcastically calls *Sonship* “superior” (the quotes are his), says their goal is to “connect you to a special pipeline from God” and hear from him directly, “something that the rest of us peons cannot do.” I have already cited Terry Johnson and Chad Van Dixhoorn, who, though both a little kinder, explicitly label *Sonship* as Keswick. I think the problem lies in the emotional and experiential language used by the lecturers, especially Rose Marie. She several times writes about experiences of deep joy, followed by emptiness, and then joy again. And this does resemble the patterns of the experience of Keswick followers according to Marsden, p. 96. Pietistic streams are quickly associated with Keswick and other “higher life” movements. This is mostly unfounded, though those who seek abuses among “*Sonship* alumni” will find them. When people rediscover the gospel, or see it applied in new and powerful ways in their lives, they will most certainly believe that everyone else needs to have the same experience. And human nature can easily pervert this into spiritual elitism.

<sup>163</sup> *Sonship*, Appendix A-3.

<sup>164</sup> *Sonship*, p. 1-4.

The theme of sonship is also dominant in *Sonship*'s terminology because its instructors base most of their teaching on the book of Galatians, which I have already addressed. Before proceeding any further, however, I would like to discuss the term *orphan* as it is used by the Millers. *Sonship* teaches that the refusal or inability to believe the gospel results in and is manifested by one's thinking and acting like an orphan. Unable to grasp the truth that Jesus has made him a son,<sup>165</sup> the "believer" continues to seek out the status he unknowingly already has. This plays out in so many ways.

I have already reported some of the autobiographical material in which Rose Marie expresses her difficulty in grasping the truth of the gospel and the personal application of justification in her own life. It is she who seems to talk and write most about the orphan mentality in this context. This is likely due to a painful confrontation she had with her husband after a difficult ministry experience in Uganda. As she tearfully asked her husband why it had all been so difficult for her, he replied:

Rose Marie, you act like an orphan. You often live as though the Holy Spirit never came, could never help you live in impossible places, and do impossible things. You act as though there were no Father who loves you.<sup>166</sup>

Rose Marie saw this as a major turning point in her life, acknowledging that every word of it was true. She *was* acting like an orphan, while she instead knew that she was actually a child of the living God. She realized that she was living for everyone else's approval, but most of all trying to meet her own high standards. She was unable to rest in the knowledge that God accepted her and loved her completely for the sake of Jesus.

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<sup>165</sup> For several reasons I use the term *son* in connection with the believer's adoption. This is in no way meant to be sexist, but is consistent with both common translations of the Bible and the use of the term by theologians. The connotation of biblical sonship also includes the ancient cultural sense of being an heir with the rights and expectations of inheritance. Theologically, there is no distinction between genders regarding these privileges (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, in this context the word *son* includes females.

<sup>166</sup> Rose Marie Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*, p. 137.

Perhaps mostly out of Rose Marie's self-admitted status as a spiritual orphan, the term *orphan* became a keyword in the *Sonship* ministry.

A self-declared authority on the subject, Rose Marie describes the spiritual orphan as one who: (1) insists on being self-reliant, only viewing God's grace as a "boost"; (2) misunderstands faith as a system of working to establish a good record before God; (3) is content with external, noticeable, and measurable obedience; (4) is bound by the opinion of others as the real moral standard; (5) is stuck in an "I-am-a-victim" mode, thriving on blame shifting, gossiping, and self-defense; and (6) feels very alone.<sup>167</sup>

To sum up Rose Marie's characterization, the orphan is in constant search of a right relationship with God and a sense of significance without realizing that he or she already has it. Our concern in this work is not the true orphan, who has not become a child of God through regeneration, justification, and adoption. Rather, we are concerned with those who are children of the Father, united to Christ in faith, adopted as sons and daughters—yet unable to live out the implications of their adoption. This inability to live as a son rather than an orphan is manifested in the context of one's relationship to God and one's relationship to other people. By constantly emphasizing the believer's adoption, *Sonship* equips the disciple to grow in both spheres of relationships.

Ironically, the orphan tries to establish a relationship with God that he already has. He tries to earn or prove his worthiness of God's favor and acceptance which can never be merited by human effort. Curiously, the typical evangelical believer understands that salvation is by grace alone. But somehow the orphan forgets—or is

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

unable to grasp—how his salvation has been gained and secured, and acts like an outsider.<sup>168</sup>

*Sonship* begins by helping disciples see that our sinful tendency is to seek our justification before God, others, and ourselves in inappropriate and faithless ways. Not wanting to face the reality and implications of our corrupt nature, in sin we actually strive to earn God's favor by our works, and to minimize our own conception of our sinfulness by blaming others for dragging us down. The orphan cannot face the lack of personal righteousness that requires the imputation of a foreign righteousness from Christ. Jack Miller found Luther's distinction between active and passive righteousness (in the introduction to his Galatians commentary) to be extremely meaningful, and used it widely in his teachings. Indeed, sometimes when someone was exhibiting "orphan-like" thinking and behavior, Miller would simply hand that person a copy of Luther's work to read.

The orphan ever lives to establish and re-establish his goodness in the eyes of all. To do this, it is necessary to discover the "rules" in any given situation. In interpersonal relationships, the telltale signs of the orphan mentality are looking for credit for our own good deeds, defensiveness, comparing ourselves with others, and reputation fixation.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Jay Adams mocks the emphasis on adoption. Believing himself an authority, since he and his wife have adopted four children, he remarks how absurd it would be to remind his children daily or more often that they have been adopted. They know they have been adopted, etc. (*Biblical Sonship*, pp. 36-37). But if his children continued to act as if they were still orphans, we can be certain that Adams would use whatever means necessary to set the record straight. In the same section Adams accuses *Sonship* of neglecting the role of God's discipline of his children (pp. 37-38). Ironically, even though he is basically correct in pointing out this weakness, he quotes the Westminster Confession of Faith (XIII:5) to show how the Father's discipline leads to repentance, which he elsewhere complains is overemphasized in *Sonship*. He also unfairly caricatures *Sonship's* adoption teaching with a picture of an "indulgent Father Who spoils His children by failing to discipline them because he adopted them." What *Sonship* does teach is that God has already exhausted his wrath for sin upon Jesus, and therefore has no anger toward us. Perhaps it would be better to distinguish between God's just wrath for sin propitiated in the cross, and his anger at disobedient children. Scripture affirms both.

<sup>169</sup> *Sonship*, pp. 4-4 through 4-6.

*Sonship* does not by any means discourage good reputations, but instead warns against the obsessive pursuit of them. The true son knows who (and whose) he is, and is therefore not dependent upon the regard of others for a sense of worth or significance. To follow the Lord is to die to the world, and in many cases to hate one's own relatives. As Christ's disciples, we are to count it all blessing when the world speaks evil of us. At the same time, of course, we are told to live such good lives that the world cannot fault us for our morality. Both are true. *Sonship* merely reminds us that the only approval we really need is that from our heavenly Father. And that, we already have by faith in Jesus Christ.

### ***What Does Sonship Teach About the Law?***

#### *Are Sons Exempt?*

We are adopted as true sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Our sins are forgiven, and we are both declared to be holy and actually become holy out of our union with Christ. God delights over us with singing (Zeph. 3:17)! But does God's approval of us free us from any and all obligation to God's law? What exactly is the role of the law in the believer's life? Has the law fulfilled its purpose once the sinner puts his or her faith in Christ? Since we know that righteousness cannot be obtained by observing the law, do we deny Christ by working at obedience? Are the sons of God exempt (Mt. 17:26)?

We could easily read Luther this way. He taught that there are only two purposes for the law as opposed to Calvin's well known three uses. The first use is for the restraint

of evil, most appropriately executed by the civil magistrate. The second is to reveal to man his sinfulness and utter inability to obey, thereby deserving God's wrath. It serves to bring one to desperation and the realization of his need for the Savior.<sup>170</sup> By Luther's delineation, what use can the believer possibly have for the law? In fact, attempts at subjecting oneself fully to the law will likely lead to the pursuit of works righteousness, thus obviating the need for Christ at all.<sup>171</sup>

Following this line of thought, we might conclude that Luther espoused antinomianism. But it was he who coined the term antinomianism, and he railed against those who flaunted God's law.<sup>172</sup> Luther himself wrote:

Our faith in Christ *does not free us from works*, but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works. For faith redeems, corrects and preserves our consciences, so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting [ital. mine].<sup>173</sup>

Writing about the believer's sanctification, he further asserts that:

Christian holiness comes when the Holy Spirit gives us faith in Christ, making us new in soul, body, *works*, and manner of life, writing God's commandments not on tablets of stone, but on hearts of flesh (II Cor. 1:2).<sup>174</sup>

Luther did not disregard God's law, nor did he encourage believers to live in disobedience. We see that when he spoke of law he often used hyperbole. To be certain one knew that one's righteousness was in Christ alone, apart from any works. According to one author, "Law for Luther raises images of a theology of self-salvation and a devilish

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<sup>170</sup> Edward A. Dowey, "Law in Luther and Calvin," *Theology Today* 41 (July 1984): 149-150.

<sup>171</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 16. Luther did teach that we are free even from the moral law, but in light of his other teaching (see succeeding notes) he seems to be exaggerating the point to counter legalism.

<sup>172</sup> Brown, p. 71.

<sup>173</sup> Hugh T. Kerr, ed. *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), p. 103.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112. Italics mine. This also should bring to mind Jer. 31:31-34.

perversion of the divine promise.”<sup>175</sup> Luther’s own earlier experience of constant condemnation under the law is likely the reason he was unable to consider a third or positive use of the law.<sup>176</sup> His second use of the law is similar for unbelievers and believers alike. In the case of the latter, it should drive us away from any attempts to keep the law, presumably in an attempt to gain righteousness. As the law presents impossible standards, the believer rightly clings to his Savior, who perfectly obeyed it and in whom we also are reckoned perfect. This sense of the law’s second use is either the source or the manifestation of his great dichotomy between Law and Gospel. And again, it is not hard to see why one might detect an antinomian spirit in Lutheran theology.

*Sonship*’s teaching on Law and Gospel has changed somewhat from its earlier days, but it is easy to recognize Luther in the lectures. Jack Miller’s lecture on the topic has been replaced in the recent edition with one that seems to be more Calvinistic-Reformed than before. In the older lecture Miller claims to have only gotten a grasp on the subject late in life, and his love for Luther’s commentary on Galatians has been mentioned already. It is easy to recognize Lutheran thought throughout his talk, as he presents the law which brings curse as opposed to the gospel which brings life.<sup>177</sup> Rick Downs does the same in his lecture on repentance (Lesson 7). The most recent editions do include Calvin’s third use of the law, to which I will return below. Because of the Lutheran influence, especially in its earlier days, *Sonship* has surely left itself open for

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<sup>175</sup> Dowey, p. 153. I have already quoted Luther’s well known quip, “Be a sinner and sin mightily, but more mightily believe and rejoice in Christ.” From Mead, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, p. 407.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>177</sup> *Sonship*, Lesson 4, 1997 edition.

charges of antinomianism, though this charge is just as unfair to Sonship as it is to Luther.

To its “credit,” the strain of antinomianism is probably an attempt to exalt Christ so highly that he leaves us with no obligation at all except to place our faith in him.<sup>178</sup> A commonly quoted verse in defense is Rom. 6:14, which says, “You are not under law, but under grace.” But this is a selective reading, totally ignoring the context. The full verse says, “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” Romans 5 has just concluded with the teaching that the law was added that transgressions would increase (v. 20). Sin had reigned, but now grace must reign. Rom. 6:11, a very important verse teaching our union with Christ—and sanctification by faith—exhorts us not to allow sin to reign over us, but rather, Christ’s righteousness given through grace. The rest of Romans 6 warns us against antinomianism, urging us to live holy lives, no longer being enslaved to sin, but now as slaves to righteousness (v. 18). Note the consistency with Rom. 3:21: “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”<sup>179</sup> It is difficult to see antinomianism as a genuine option for the Christian, and despite the Lutheran Law/Gospel dichotomy, there is no serious leaning toward lawlessness in *Sonship*. No, sons are not exempt.

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<sup>178</sup> Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), p. 24. He also quotes there a Puritan’s observation of antinomians, similar but less tongue in cheek than my earlier quotation by Steve Brown (see first chapter). The genuine ones have been apparently a rare breed: “For all the noise of Antinomianism, I must declare, that I do not know...any one Antinomian minister or Christian in London, who is really such as their reproachers paint them out, such as Luther and Calvin wrote against.”

<sup>179</sup> I owe much of this line of thought to Ernest C. Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), pp. 118-32.

Jesus fulfills the law. Another attempt at defending antinomianism might be found in Matthew 5:17. Jesus says there that he has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, which one could take to mean that they no longer apply. Of course, to accept this meaning, one would have to ignore totally the immediate context, even the very preceding words. For Jesus says there that he has not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. And he says in the following verse, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Antinomians cannot with integrity find support here either.

What does it mean that Jesus fulfills the law? Thomas Schreiner writes that Jesus clarifies the central purpose of the law. His ministry fulfills the true intention of the law’s institution. The only way to understand the entire Old Testament is to see the one to whom it all pointed.<sup>180</sup> The context of Matthew 5:17 is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus sequentially expounds the meaning and application of Old Testament commands. Murder and adultery, for example, are now to be understood as sins of the heart, regardless of their fruition in external actions (vss. 21-30).<sup>181</sup>

I believe that a neglected interpretation of Matthew 5:17 is actually not so terribly far from what often becomes twisted into the antinomian error. Jesus did fulfill the law by keeping it perfectly. He shows in these verses how much harder and all-consuming God’s law is. Indeed it is so much so that anyone can easily see that he or she is a hopeless lawbreaker. We must despair of any and all Pharisaical righteousness. We have

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<sup>180</sup> See Schreiner, pp. 234ff.

<sup>181</sup> Willem VanGemenen writes that Jesus simplified the law by teaching the law of love. Even a more basic fulfillment of the Law was Jesus’ command, “Follow me.” Willem A. VanGemenen, “The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 39.

not kept the law by any means. But by faith, by the righteousness imputed to us, we have Jesus' perfect record of righteousness accounted to us.

As before, however, the fact that the penalty for sin is satisfactorily paid in Christ does not suddenly "liberate" one to engage in sin. How odd that any serious believer would think that God calls us to live lives unmarked by holiness! Now that the law is written on our newly regenerated hearts of flesh (Jer. 31:31-34), and now that we have the Holy Spirit by whose power we can obey, we have all the more reason to keep God's law.

Unfortunately, I don't think that this principle is stated explicitly enough in *Sonship*.

Law in the context of covenant. *Sonship* does not deliberately place itself within any branch of Christianity. I have already mentioned the Lutheran strain. The course's teaching on sanctification by faith is Reformed, as is the idea of assurance of salvation and eternal security. There are also pietistic leanings that seem Wesleyan, though the theology behind them is not.

All this said, however, I see *Sonship* and World Harvest Mission as identifying themselves most closely with the Reformed camp. Each of the three executive directors of World Harvest Mission have been Presbyterian (PCA) pastors. Quotations in the curriculum are mostly from Reformed theologians, including the Puritans, Francis Schaeffer, and J. I. Packer. Williams' book explaining *Sonship*'s theology rests entirely on Reformed theology. It seems fitting at this point then, to consider *Sonship*'s teachings

in relation to a more Reformed or covenantal view of Law and Gospel, even if only to point out what is lacking in the course's teaching.

Sons are obligated to obey God's law, not for the purpose of becoming sons, but because we *are* sons. Jesus' fulfillment of the law was not meant to terminate its place in the life of God's people, but rather to expand it, write it on their hearts, and take upon himself the curses and penalty for their unfaithfulness to it. Yet we too often hear of Christians who disregard God's law based on the false perception of a great divide between the Old and New Testaments. I have no intention of developing or even surveying the work that has been done in this area. I have already stated that I am writing from a Reformed perspective, and therefore subscribe to the idea of continuity between the testaments, both of which are to be read within a covenantal context. Therefore, the Old and New Covenants are both to be seen as one covenant of grace, administrated in two different dispensations. Simply put, God did not give the law as a means for salvation, and then give his Son as another means. Salvation was always by grace.

Reminiscent of the (hopefully dead) Lordship Salvation debate, Paul and Elizabeth Achtemeier write about the disjunction between genuine faith and antinomianism:

In every part of the Bible, such faith issues in obedience to the revealed will of God, because we cannot confess Yahweh as the Lord of our lives and, at the same time, ignore his gracious guiding of our lives. Persons of faith obey the law, not because it sets up their relationship with God and not because they become righteous through the law, but because such obedience affirms that Yahweh is, in truth, Lord of their life and therefore they take Yahweh's will for their lives seriously.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Paul Achtemeier and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Old Testament Roots of Our Faith* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 54.

But did the Hebrew people understand this? Or did they rather think that by keeping the law they could establish their righteousness before God? Though it might be difficult to determine how legalistic the Hebrews were in Old Testament times, it is pretty clear that in the first century legalism was the dominant teaching among the Jews.<sup>183</sup> The Achtemeiers assert that the Hebrews did not believe that their fellowship with Yahweh was dependent upon perfect covenant keeping. God had initiated the covenant and “he alone could abrogate it.”<sup>184</sup> I don’t think this view is very likely, considering Paul’s words in Romans 9:30-33. Apparently the Jews did regard the law as a means for their justification.

Nevertheless, the law was in fact given as part of the covenant of grace. The law did not justify, though obedience to it was most definitely required. Numerous authors point out the fact that the law is given in the context of God’s covenant. The most obvious support of this is in the preamble to the Decalogue itself. Before the first commandment, God says, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Ex. 20:1)” The Israelites are to obey the commandments based on who the Lord is and what he has done for them.<sup>185</sup>

As James D. G. Dunn writes:

...Deuteronomy provides classic expression. First, the law was given as part of the covenant the God of Israel made with his people: having chosen and rescued Israel from slavery, God gave the law to show how life should be lived within the covenant, what he required of members of his covenant people. And second, the

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<sup>183</sup> See Schreiner, esp. Chapter 4. He persuasively disputes E. P. Sanders’s work [*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)] which had argued that the first-century Jews were *not* legalistic.

<sup>184</sup> Achtemeier and Achtemeier, p. 49. It seems that they have been persuaded by E. P. Sanders (see previous note).

<sup>185</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 94. See also VanGemenen, p. 27. Moses is constantly reminding the Israelites of Yahweh’s covenant made freely with them (Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.1).

law was given to provide through its sacrificial system a means of atonement for sin.<sup>186</sup>

Regardless of what the Israelites understood or what teaching was dominant in first-century Palestine, the law was part of God's covenant, based on grace, and was designed to instruct the people how to live rightly as covenant members. The Achtemeiers see God's law as a gracious gift of guidance for those he loves.<sup>187</sup>

However, the law is much more than guidance alone. It is the particular code established for God's covenant people to set them apart as holy to himself.<sup>188</sup> In fact, the law is not holy merely because it is divinely spoken, but because it reflects the divine character to which we are to conform as those made in his image.<sup>189</sup>

O. Palmer Robertson notes that in the ancient covenant ritual recorded in Genesis 15 it is only Yahweh who passes between the pieces of the slain animals (v. 17). He actually subjects himself exclusively to the curses should the covenant be broken. And, it is ultimately he who does suffer the penalty as a covenant breaker in our stead—on the cross!<sup>190</sup>

Is the covenant therefore conditional? In Genesis 17 God commands Abraham to circumcise himself and every male member of his household. Anyone who is not circumcised will be cut off as a covenant breaker (v. 14). But circumcision is not so

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<sup>186</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), pp. 76-66.

<sup>187</sup> Achtemeier and Achtemeier, p. 52. This is an optimistic way to put it, and the composer of Psalm 119 certainly agrees. However, we cannot forget that with the law comes also a curse (Dt. 27:26).

<sup>188</sup> VanGemenen, p. 28.

<sup>189</sup> Owen, Vol. 3, Book 4, Ch. 1, p. 376. Also VanGemenen, p. 35. This characteristic of the law might be included under Luther's first purpose or use. The Law reflects God's holy character, which judges us as sinful in comparison, in addition to our inability to keep it. In other words, it is important to see God's law not as an arbitrary list of restrictions and requirements which are hard for humans to keep, but as reflecting who God is, and how we are by sinful nature so utterly unlike him.

<sup>190</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Covenants* (Suwanee, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 1987) p. 49.

much the condition as the sign of a covenant member.<sup>191</sup> In the opening verse God commands Abraham to “walk before him and be blameless.” A condition? But God has already declared him righteous in Gen. 15:6 based on his faith. The covenant is established, and the sign of the covenant is given. The requirement is obedience, but the only real condition or stipulation is faith.<sup>192</sup> As one writer puts it:

In a covenant of grace God alone works, promises, guarantees and provides in his sovereignty, while the man of faith submits himself to receive the unmerited favor. Repentance and faith are not contributions, but simply the essential conditions for the reception of what is wholly God’s in inception, operation and provision.<sup>193</sup>

Others have pointed out the grace orientation of the Old Covenant by the fact that there was a built-in provision for repentance and forgiveness.<sup>194</sup> Perfect obedience was called for, but from the start it was understood that it could not be met. God desired faithfulness, and he himself provided for the reality of his people’s sin. Ultimately, the provision was to be his own Son.

### *Sons Are Obligated to Obey*

Calvin’s Third Use of the Law. The primacy of obedience to God’s law carries through from the Old Testament to the New, though this theme is far more clearly articulated by Calvin than Luther. Calvin incorporated Luther’s first two uses of the law into his

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<sup>191</sup> Kaiser, p. 93. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, translated by the Rev. John King, M.A. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 451. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 155.

<sup>192</sup> VanGemeren points out that Abraham, the father of our faith, was a law keeper. He was justified by faith, but manifested righteousness in his life. Schreiner helpfully identifies the problem of the Judaizers in light of the covenants made with Moses and Abraham. They interpreted them backwards, interpreting the Abrahamic through the Mosaic, rather than in reverse as is both chronologically and theologically correct. See, p. 126.

<sup>193</sup> Ernest H. Trenchard. “Grace, Covenant and Law,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 29 (1957):134.

<sup>194</sup> Dunn, p. 77. Achtemeier and Achtemeier, p. 50.

theology,<sup>195</sup> but also writes of a third, even the principal use, as direction and admonishment to believers for holy living.<sup>196</sup>

God's commandments given in the New Testament are not given as a means to righteousness any more than those in the Old. We are commanded very specifically to live holy lives in light of the fact that we are now holy. Ridderbos does well to point out that the imperatives of Scripture are grounded in the indicatives.<sup>197</sup> We can easily see this, for example, by scanning through the books of Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. In the latter two letters especially, Paul almost evenly splits his theology of our identity in Christ with his practical exhortations to live accordingly. I hope I have shown that this is not a novel formula introduced in the New Testament, but was the same formula used in the Old Testament. As God has established his covenant, we must live like his covenant people, being holy as he is holy (Lev. 11:45; I Pt. 1:16). As John Owen put it, "God requires our holiness...it represents unto God the glory of his own image renewed in us."<sup>198</sup> VanGemeran writes, "The Law is 'God's instrument to bring the godly closer to himself.'"<sup>199</sup>

Can a genuine believer really disregard God's law? As Hodge writes in his commentary on Romans (7:12, 13):

Nothing is more inconsistent with true religion than self-complacency. Because the more holy we are, the clearer our views of the law, the deeper our sense of sin, and consequently, the greater must be our humility.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Calvin might agree with Luther on the first two uses in principle, but as Dowey puts it, "he does not 'sound' like him." Dowey, p. 152.

<sup>196</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.12.

<sup>197</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, translated by John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 254f.

<sup>198</sup> Owen, Vol. 3, Book 4, Ch. 1, p. 376.

<sup>199</sup> VanGemeran, p. 29.

<sup>200</sup> Hodge, *Romans*, p. 227.

At this point it ought to be pretty clear that obedience to the law is really not optional for the believer. Yes, we understand that Jesus has kept the law perfectly on our behalf, and that in him, we too have kept the law. Yes, we understand that in Christ Jesus there is now no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). All of our sins—past, present, and future—are fully paid for in the death of Christ, who became sin and died for sin on the cross, that we might become the righteousness of God (II Cor. 5:21). Yet, in Rom. 7:4 Paul tells us that we have died to the law through Jesus, and therefore belong to him.

Hodge writes in his commentary on this verse, “This deliverance from the law is not effected by setting the law aside, or by disregarding its demands, but by those demands being satisfied in the person of Christ.”<sup>201</sup> Paul tells us again in Galatians 2:19 that we have “died to the law, that we might live for God.” How must the believer respond to such thoughts? Certainly not by flaunting his freedom from the law’s demands! In fact, three chapters later, in 5:13 Paul warns us about abusing this freedom. How odd for anyone to think seriously that since Christ has delivered us from bondage and united us to himself we should now be “free” to live unholy lives.

Calvin’s third use of the law is not by any means dominant in *Sonship*, though recent revisions are incorporating the teaching into the lessons. In the lecture that replaces Miller’s previous one on Law and Gospel, for example, Dave Desforge at least nods to the goodness of the law by saying that “God uses it.”<sup>202</sup> And in the most recent *Sonship* manual we find in the Law and Gospel lesson a chart listing why the law is good. All three uses of the law are present, and Calvin’s third use is taught in these statements: It shows us how our faith should express itself, shows us what Jesus is like, reveals the

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>202</sup> *Sonship*, 1999 edition, p. 4-15.

character of God, brings sanity, wisdom and direction, is written on our hearts, and is part of love.<sup>203</sup>

Balancing Law and Gospel. As we speak of obligations to the law, however, we must be careful not to find ourselves adopting a legalistic mindset. As Michael Horton writes:

Many Christians have experienced the confusion of Law and Gospel in their diet, where the Gospel was free and unconditional when they became believers, but is now pushed into the background to make room for an almost exclusive emphasis on exhortations. Again, it is not that exhortations do not have their place, but they must never be confused with the Gospel and that Gospel of divine forgiveness is as important for sinful believers to hear as it is for unbelievers. Nor can we assume that believers ever progress beyond the stage where they need to hear the Gospel, as if the Good News ended at conversion. For as Calvin said, “We are all partly unbelievers throughout our lives.”<sup>204</sup>

So the call to obedience must be balanced with the promise of mercy and power in the gospel. While the law alone condemns and curses death, the gospel brings pardon, mercy, and victory. “Even after conversion, the believer is in desperate need of the gospel because he reads the commands, exhortations, threats and warnings of the Law and often wavers in his certain confidence because he does not see in himself this righteousness that is required.”<sup>205</sup>

Horton, depending on Calvin and the other Reformers, is exhorting the constant preaching of the gospel. Jack Miller’s quip that we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day is not at all novel. The preaching of the law is good and profitable, but it must never be allowed to shake believers from their confidence in Christ as their total

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<sup>203</sup> *Sonship*, 2002 edition, p. 63.

<sup>204</sup> Michael Horton, *The Law & the Gospel*, <http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.LawGospel.html>, p. 4. Visited 2/8/99.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. Horton is obviously strongly influenced by Calvin, as he quotes him extensively in this essay.

“righteousness, holiness and redemption” (I Cor. 1:30).<sup>206</sup> This is similar to how James Boice defines sanctification, namely “the process of coming increasingly to see how sinful we are so that we will depend constantly on Jesus Christ.”<sup>207</sup>

Maintaining the balance of Law and Gospel is no easy task in our daily lives. We pastors tell people that their good works do not gain righteousness, but are necessary to prove righteousness. Some say that in doing good works we *learn* righteous character; or to put it in other words, we are sanctified through obedience. And since Scripture teaches us that apart from holiness no one will see God (Heb. 2:14), and that we must make our election sure (II Pt. 1:10-11) by striving for godly character, we can easily revert back to the sense that we must do good works to secure our salvation.

Further, there are many other verses that exhort us to live in godly ways, with the threat of forfeiting our salvation if we do not. Near the end of his excellent work on how the law is fulfilled in Christ, Schreiner surprises us with the conviction that good works are necessary for eternal life.<sup>208</sup> As he develops the argument, what we end up with is the traditional reconciliation of Pauline theology with the book of James. As we have doubtless all heard, “We are saved through faith alone, but the faith which saves is never alone.” And as Schreiner himself puts it, “The works that are necessary for salvation, therefore, do not constitute an earning of salvation but are evidence of a salvation already given.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. See also Calvin on Romans 3:21 in *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, translated by the Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 136, in which he stresses the need to look to Christ continually for the confidence of our acceptance before God.

<sup>207</sup> James Boice, *Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 764.

<sup>208</sup> Schreiner, pp. 186ff.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

Obedience and good works are necessary, then, but do not contribute to our salvation. We do not need to earn God's pleasure because we already have it. But since we are now transformed creatures with the law written on our hearts, we will strive to live holy lives for different motives entirely. At least, apart from sin, that is what we will do. Our sin will continually drive us to think of our works as earning God's favor, or worse, putting him in our debt so that he must give us what we ask or so that he will spare us from life's tragedies.

Gratitude and Fruit. Many have written about our works being expressions of love and gratitude to God for what he has done for us, and I have already cited a few. As yet another writes:

It is only when we have despaired of our own efforts to save ourselves, that good works even become possible...So man turns to Christ and learns that for the sake of His (Christ's) work the sinner is graciously accounted righteous through faith in Christ's work. Now he no longer feels the weight of the law pressing down with its threats to any who don't perfectly keep its demands (see Galatians 3:10 & James 2:10). Now he is free to obey and does good works spontaneously out of love and gratitude.<sup>210</sup>

According to the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 64), antinomianism is impossible for the truly regenerate, and good works are the inevitable fruit of gratitude. Calvin called freedom an appendage of justification,<sup>211</sup> and that with this freedom we are now "capable of joyous obedience."<sup>212</sup> And as I have already said, this capability is due to the new heart given to us in regeneration, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31-34).

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<sup>210</sup> Rich Gilbert. *Sola Gratia & Sanctification*, <http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/gilbert.sanctification.html>, p.1. Visited 12/1/00.

<sup>211</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.2.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, III.xix.5. See also Hoekema, "The Reformed Perspective," p. 88.

This liberty of which we speak, however, is still guided by the law. As Berkouwer wrote, “There is no difference between Christian liberty and being under the law of Christ.”<sup>213</sup> This is basically Calvin’s teaching on the “third use of the law.” According to Calvin, law is the instrument by which the believer grows in faith and sanctification.<sup>214</sup> For the Christian, the law acts to remind us of and exhort us to what is required of us in holiness.<sup>215</sup> In short, the believer’s obedience to the law contributes to his sanctification.

### *Sons Are Empowered to Obey*

We understand that the law makes demands upon us that are impossible to keep. For the law could not empower us for obedience, and only condemned us for our sinful disobedience to it. In the New Covenant, however, this law is written on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). Upon regeneration we receive this new heart of flesh, and in sanctification the Holy Spirit begins to conform us to—or, rather, restores within us—the image of God. It is only through the Spirit that we can keep the law.<sup>216</sup> Once again, how odd to think that, as the Holy Spirit is working to transform us and empower us for obedience, showing disregard for the law could be an acceptable way to achieve the holy living to which we are called (Heb. 12:14)! (One must also wonder, if living under grace frees us from obligations to the law, exactly which commandments are disposable.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Berkouwer, p. 183.

<sup>214</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.14. See also VanGemenen, p. 33.

<sup>215</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.2. Cf. I Thess. 4:7; Eph. 1:4; I Thess. 4:3.

<sup>216</sup> Kevan, p. 66.

<sup>217</sup> I am assuming the traditional view, that only the moral law applies. I believe we are free to disregard the ceremonial law, as that had all pointed to Christ, and would now be a reversal or denial of what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection.

*Sons Obey Out of a Sense of Identity*

We can speak, then, of our obligation to obey and the necessary fruit of our regeneration. We can also speak about the power of the Holy Spirit, who changes us and empowers us to obey God's commandments. But as Gordon Fee so well states, "True righteousness is not so much obedience to behavioral regulations as it is living out of a new relationship with God—as his sons, conformed to the likeness of his Son."<sup>218</sup>

Good Parenting and Growing into the Father's Image. Well intentioned and diligent parents will exert great effort to guide the behavior of their children. Though there may be a natural desire to please on the part of the children (I have heard of this phenomenon!), often the principal motivation for obedience will be to avoid punishment. As the child matures he will, one hopes, begin to understand that, though the parent cannot always be present to supervise and that it may well be possible to get away with bad behavior on occasion, there are other reasons to obey than fear of consequences.

In the words of professor and pastor Sinclair Ferguson, "Like natural adoption, we have come from another family, and God needs to keep on saying to us: 'Since you belong to my family now I want to see you behaving like one of *my* children!'"<sup>219</sup> Ultimately, and this is especially true for Christian parents, our hope is that the behavior we have attempted to guide and mold will become a natural extension of who our children are, and a natural expression of who they have come to be in Christ.

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<sup>218</sup> Quoted in David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 144.

<sup>219</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Children of the Living God* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 41. Note the contrast to what Adams says about the silliness of such a reminder in his book, pp. 36-37.

### *Sanctification by Faith Includes Obedience*

*Sonship* has been criticized for being light on obedience training, and technically speaking, this is true.<sup>220</sup> In fact, in his defense of *Sonship*'s emphasis on believing the gospel, Steve Smallman points out that the Westminster Confession of Faith never mentions the word *obedience* in its section on sanctification.<sup>221</sup> I am not sure how helpful such an observation is, but I believe that what Smallman is stressing is that we ought not to define sanctification in terms of obedience. If we too closely associate sanctification and obedience, we might easily mistake wooden legalistic obedience with holiness. Further, his remarks seem to stem from the belief that holiness follows from faith, and *Sonship* rightly concentrates on right believing.

And what he doesn't say is that other discipleship programs with a heavy obedience component abound. There are plenty of books, tapes, and videocassette series available to teach believers how to live an obedient Christian life. *Sonship* was written from an entirely different perspective, one that believes that it is not information itself or pragmatic instruction that will help Christians already burdened with tendencies toward legalism.

Could it be that in order to emphasize a missing element of most discipleship programs, *Sonship* has swayed too far the other way? Has its emphasis on God's grace and faith in the gospel been stressed to the detriment of the living out of one's faith?

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<sup>220</sup> Adams decries the "avoidance of the biblical emphasis on obedience...so evident in the literature.", p. 52.

<sup>221</sup> Steve Smallman, "Sonship: The Law, the Spirit and Faith in Sanctification" in *Soul Food*, <http://www/whm.org.law.htm>, p. 2. Visited 3/21/01.

Does its constant warning against “trying harder” turn sanctification into laziness, passivism, or antinomianism?<sup>222</sup>

I don’t believe such criticism is fair, though I can understand one’s concern for such a lack of practical emphasis. *Sonship* is not designed to be so comprehensive. Perhaps the Millers simply believed that the commandments in Scripture are obvious and people do not need to be taught how to obey. They instead worked on what would bring us the power to obey.

World Harvest Mission has answered this criticism, in particular responding to Adams. *Sonship* hammers the idea of a lifestyle of repentance, which Adams ironically rejects. The repentance the Millers teach is anything but superficial, and it should be clear that disciples are taught to take sin very seriously.<sup>223</sup> Lesson 2 in *Sonship* assigns an exercise in tongue control, though the real goal is to show us that we are more sinful than we think we are. Disciples are directed to love much more deeply than is comfortable: we are to pursue others who have wronged us and confront sin in love when we see it. So, though the course is not specific in what we must do all the time, we are definitely taught that love takes work. We are also constantly reminded that our own heart is always more desperately sinful than we dared to believe. But the gospel is for people just like us.

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<sup>222</sup> Maybe enough said about this already, but this is an exact criticism which Adams makes.

<sup>223</sup> In fact, here is one criticism I think ought to be sustained. *Sonship*’s teaching of sanctification is not particularly optimistic. It would seem that we never make progress, but instead only see more of our sin. But even this possible error proves Adams wrong—*Sonship* is in no way teaching laxity in holiness.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

##### *Insights from the Literature Review*

In the previous chapter I sought to establish a solid foundation and theoretical framework for the course material I used in my project. Due to the nature of the subject, most of the literature centered on either the Bible or theology. This was necessary to show that the premises in the *Sonship* material are valid.

Although credible criticism has been raised against the concepts taught in *Sonship*, I hope that I have shown adequately that the ideas under attack are neither novel nor unorthodox. In particular, *sanctification by faith* is a valid Reformed doctrine that, if taught properly, best represents what Scripture teaches about the believer's growth in holiness.

##### *The Next Step*

The purpose of this project is to show how this doctrine works itself out in practical living. Specifically, it is important to ask how we can teach this truth in a way

that people will understand and benefit from it. I am concerned with the process people go through as they learn about sanctification by faith, as they rediscover or uncover anew the riches of God's grace in Christ. In fact, we know that knowledge of these riches is inexhaustible (Rom. 11:33).

In this chapter I will detail the methods I used to analyze the process through which believers learn and incorporate what they learn about the power of the gospel in their lives.

### **Design of the Study**

#### ***Choosing Quality Over Quantity***

##### *1. Defining Qualitative Research*

The goal of quantitative research is to test a particular hypothesis. Qualitative research, on the other hand, analyzes processes and behavior. In other words, if the goal is to determine *if* something works, one ought to engage in quantitative research methods. But if one seeks to analyze *how* something works, then qualitative research is the proper tool. By examining a particular process, and observing how people engage in and interpret their experience of that process, qualitative research can result in a theory or hypothesis that is ascertained inductively. In my case, development of a theory was not the goal. I am more concerned about methodology, desiring to improve upon my own teaching of the material.

## 2. *Why not Quantitative?*

As I first designed this project, my assumption was that I would conduct it quantitatively. Indeed, at the time I had not even heard of the qualitative approach. It seemed reasonable to follow the more familiar and traditional quantitative paradigm, that is, working to prove or disprove an hypothesis. This approach is neater, in that with discrete data one can determine success or failure (i.e., *Did it work?*). Assuming that the researcher is successful, it also contributes to a sense of achievement for him or her, which is always attractive.

The research for this particular project could have been designed quantitatively, employing “before and after” surveys in which both participants and researcher could numerically judge the progress made in their incorporation of their own sanctification by faith. In other words, I could have sought to prove or disprove that my work with a specific group of believers would serve to bring about measurable change in understanding and behavior. But would the results really be meaningful?

There are several reasons that quantitative research would have fallen short. Quantitative research requires objective data, but I am not confident of my own ability to design a purely objective means of evaluating the success of a project like this. Though I am familiar with the frequently used form of surveys in which the participant is asked to indicate the strength of agreement or disagreement by means of a discrete number, I have no expertise in this area, and am skeptical of its usefulness in any case.

For one thing, there is the strong tendency for participants themselves to skew the results, for at least two reasons. One comes from the desire to be able to claim their own

personal growth and improvement, particularly after a considerable investment of time and effort. The second reason is the strong desire to please the researcher or teacher—in this case, the same person. In my own circumstance this second reason is compounded by the fact that I had a pre-existing positive relationship with each of these people (I will expand on the relevance of this below.). Furthermore, I was their pastor, and to varying degrees, had already mentored each of them spiritually. They agreed to participate with the expectation that they would learn and grow. Therefore, even if change did not actually or noticeably occur, each would likely be predisposed toward claiming personal growth anyway.

Another negative factor in seeking a discrete result with such a project is my own determination that it be “successful.” Because I wanted to make a lasting impact on these people, because it was my final ministry focus in that church, because a doctoral dissertation is such an important milestone in a person’s life, and because of my own personal desire to be successful (particularly in major and public endeavors), I might have worked specifically toward objective and demonstrable results much like a school teacher does toward standardized tests. The real learning and heart change I desired to see might actually have suffered were I to emphasize, for example, the participants’ ability to parrot back to me what I want to hear.

In any case, conducting this research qualitatively gave me the freedom not to be as concerned about the results as much as the process itself.

### *3. Results Sought by Qualitative Research*

Another reason I did not approach this study using quantitative methods is that I had no theory to prove. As far as I am concerned, if there was a theory at all, it has long been proven. Sanctification is by faith, and people will grow in holiness as they believe the gospel with all their heart. I was simply using concepts and methods already in use by other *Sonship* teachers. I saw no need to ask if people change as a result of gospel-centered teaching. My whole ministry is based on this truth. My interest is in learning how to teach these truths more effectively. I am already convinced that they are true, and that the gospel “works.” I have devoted my life to helping people, including myself, understand this. I simply want to do it better.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Gap in Knowledge Base***

The obvious gap in this case is between the theology as expressed in words and its application. The literature review provides us with the foundational theory: we are sanctified by faith. But how do we explain that in a way that ordinary Christians will understand? What does it look like as people struggle to understand cognitively and begin to apply it to different areas of their lives?

Obviously this has been a struggle through the millennia. The Protestant Reformation restored and clearly defined the doctrine of justification by faith alone. As the literature review has shown, the believer’s struggle to embrace and progress in sanctification relates back to a faulty view of justification. Apparently what is needed is

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the study might not be purely qualitative, since I truly do want to critique the usefulness of the method and in some cases, the specific content. Qualitative research does not necessarily aim for those kinds of judgments.

a way to teach justification in an effective, biblically grounded way, so that believers will see how their status in Christ contributes to their sanctification. Further, we need to help people see its broad application in their lives. This includes the heart's attitude, and is played out in the believer's relationship with God and with others in and out of the Church.

### ***Research Questions***

Research questions in qualitative research are not formulated for “yes” or “no” answers. Rather, they are more along the line of “how.” The general research questions are (a) How did the class impact those who participated?, and (b) How did the participants process the concepts and life application of the teaching of sanctification by faith? Let me, however, list more specific questions that I will actually be asking. The list is not exhaustive, but will prove to be more helpful than the two general ones:

- i. What happens to the participants' understanding of exactly what the gospel means and how central it must be in our lives? As they reinvestigate the doctrine of justification by faith, are they able to see a daily relevance?
- ii. Does the class kindle or rekindle a sense of the Father's incredible love for them, expressed in the doctrine of adoption?

- iii. What happens as the participants are pressed to identify obstacles which prevent them from fully believing in their justification in the person and work of Christ?
- iv. From the evident growing confidence in the Father's acceptance of them through Christ, do the participants become more emboldened (and sensitized) to see sin in their lives—and are they moving toward a lifestyle of genuine repentance?
- v. Do the participants begin to understand and embrace the concept of sanctification by faith? That is to say, do they see that growth in holiness occurs as they trust in the person and work of Christ (as they believe the gospel)?
- vi. As they see their absolute dependence on the Savior, realizing they are so much more sinful than they dared to believe, but also that God is more gracious in Christ than they equally dared to believe, are the participants increasing in their burden and ability to forgive others even as they have been forgiven?
- vii. As participants learn to believe the gospel, what begins to happen in their relationships with the Lord and with other people?

### *Case Study (selection and use)*

#### *1. Case Study As a Method*

In order to observe how people process what it means to believe the gospel, the most logical approach is by case study. This model provided me the opportunity to study the individuals both as individuals and as a group through the written assignments and interviews. And of course, though a group setting does indeed provide a unique dynamic, it is still possible to observe each member of the group as an individual. According to one expert, it is better to select a group deliberately for this purpose rather than attempt a random sampling.<sup>2</sup> Using Merriam's standards and terms, my case study was purposeful and nonprobabilistic.<sup>3</sup>

#### *2. Case Selection*

Merriam further directs the researcher to select participants for a case study based on pre-determined criteria, specifically listing the necessary attributes for a meaningful study.<sup>4</sup> As for how many to include in the sample, Merriam admits that there are no easy answers.<sup>5</sup> I therefore used the standard optimum number for small group participation, which is usually between eight and twelve participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

### 3. *Criteria*

a.) Every participant had to be a mature Christian, giving evidence that he or she desired to grow in faith. This was based on my own personal judgment as their pastor, and then affirmed in the initial interview I conducted with each one. Another helpful indicator of their maturity was church involvement. Each person I invited was active in church ministry as a Sunday School teacher, officer (elder or deacon), or was serving in some other capacity (prayer ministry or missions committee). The criterion of maturity and a sincere desire for holiness was important because I wanted participants to be able to compare what they were learning in the class with they had already assumed to be true in their walk with Christ. In other words, I wanted them to see in what areas of their lives they were not living out the implications of the gospel that they earnestly professed. I also knew from experience that I should not assume that even the most mature members of our church could articulate a clear understanding of justification and sanctification, which would actually be the core of the course.

b.) I sought only limited variety in the group, since my goal was not to create a probabilistic sample. Nevertheless, by background, personality, and to some degree social class, variance was inevitable. I invited five married couples and one single woman. Almost all of them were thirty to forty years old (my own approximate age), with a couple of exceptions on both ends of the spectrum.

As it turned out, one of the wives was unable to attend due to a consistent scheduling conflict. This created somewhat of a dilemma for me, especially since I was not informed until close to the start date. I had to decide at this point whether or not to

withdraw my invitation to the husband as well, since this would certainly change the group's dynamic and meant that the experience would definitely be less effective for the husband without his wife's involvement. World Harvest Mission strongly recommends against spouses attending its *Sonship* conferences or course alone, presumably for the same reasons. Nevertheless, I thought it worth the irregularity, since I knew that the husband would still benefit from participation.

c.) And finally, I only chose participants whom I already knew. I wanted to work with church members with whom I had already had a positive relationship, and whom I had disciplined personally, or taught in some other small group setting. I wanted to know that they would be receptive to my teaching (that is, receptive but not passive). I realized that, knowing some of the issues with which they already struggled, I would be able to apply the teaching to them personally in the one-to-one interviews.

Convinced that the course would have long term benefits for all of the participants, I was also eager to impart to them what I deemed a parting gift as well. Because of my plans to leave the church for the mission field, I knew that my time and resources were limited. This was my final "investment." And I prayed and do pray that this experience continues to bear fruit among and through them. Since the church will remain my home church and be a major supporter of my missionary work (several within the group also support us personally), I knew further that our relationship would continue for the long term. And frankly, I knew that we would enjoy the class together.

I ended up with ten participants, each of whom I invited personally. I explained that the class would be used as a project for my doctoral dissertation, and described what would take place. I gave them a rough idea of their time commitment, and then asked them to think it over. I followed up the phone calls with a letter confirming all I had stated in my verbal invitation, and then either another phone call or face to face spontaneous meeting before or after a church service to confirm their interest.

### **Data Collection**

#### ***Sources***

The data for this research is in both written form and tape recordings. The participants all consented to the recording ahead of time. I used handouts for each lesson which included the class objective, discussion questions, and the assignment for the following week (see Appendix B). I also retained copies of the written assignments and the final evaluation or exit survey. Additionally, I recorded the interviews held with each participant (see below for more detail), and each class session as well.

I scheduled our class meetings for twelve consecutive Wednesday evenings beginning on September 6, 2000, though we ended up meeting an additional week by consensus in order to complete a particular discussion. I took advantage of our “Wednesday Night Live” schedule at the church in order to make some of the logistics easier for everyone. The evening begins with a cafeteria-style dinner followed by activities and meetings for all ages, including childcare for babies and toddlers. The

meeting time consists of ninety minutes. Therefore, each member of the group was able to come to the meeting unhurried, fed, and with convenient, quality childcare.

I interviewed each participant before the class began. Midway through the course I interviewed each one again. After the course had ended I selected four individuals to interview once again.

### *Interview Style*

As the trainer, I did not have the opportunity (i.e., freedom) simply to observe the group while we were meeting. This is the main reason I must rely on the tape recordings of the class discussions. Obviously, in the interviews I was able to glean much more specific information from each participant and pursue what I wished. What the present form of the data (tape recording) cannot provide, however, are the nonverbal cues which are now lost to me. Tape recording or not, though, as the group leader I was often too busy to observe all the available data, and simply have to work with less information than possible. A video camera would likely have been too much of an intrusion, especially since it would probably have required another person to operate it—a major distraction I did not even seriously consider.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are a powerful tool for the qualitative researcher. Though written assignments can be a great resource, interviews provide a needed balance. Written

assignments work well for people who like to think long before they answer questions, and they also provide a sense of freedom of expression, so that a person may answer without being immediately questioned or challenged. Further, some people simply process their thoughts better on paper. Nevertheless, interviews allow for better clarity, as the researcher can keep asking questions as necessary. Non-verbal clues are so much more obvious in this setting as well. And finally, just as some do better by writing out their answers, others do better verbally and spontaneously. Both oral and written responses are valuable, and even help the subject (the one being interviewed) understand what he or she has up to that point not expressed. In other words, the act of expressing it helps to formulate the idea.

All three series of interviews were somewhat structured, but the second and third series were progressively less so than the initial one. In the initial interview I asked everybody pretty much the same questions, only varying for clarification purposes. The goal of the first interview was to confirm my assumptions about each participant. These turned out to be largely true. But in the interviews I conducted halfway through the course, I did not adhere to the questions nearly as rigidly and used them only as a guide. I spent different amounts of time exploring topics which elicited the most response. I conducted the final interview with only four participants, and chose those who seemed to me to have been affected the most by the course. I made this judgment from the comprehensive data – previous interviews, class discussions, and assignments. I had fewer questions on my paper, but had no difficulty getting participants to expand upon their answers.

### *My Personal Grid/Bias*

I was far more than just a detached observer during the research. I planned the course, customized the curriculum, chose and invited the participants, conducted all interviews, and taught the class. I even led worship! The data itself is plentiful, but requires compilation and detailed interpretation. In the next chapter I will analyze this data inductively, doing my best to be sure that the participants' perspective is emphasized. This will admittedly be difficult since I cannot help but process it all through my own grid, which is certainly not unbiased.

I am writing this as a Reformed pastor and theologian. At the time I conducted the ministry project I was serving as associate pastor at Presbyterian Church of the Atonement (Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod), in Silver Spring, Maryland. As I have already said, I am firmly convinced that the theology taught in the *Sonship* material is correct, and since it is correct, it also works. Having been profoundly changed myself by hearing and wrestling through the concepts from *Sonship*, I felt compelled to teach others what I had learned. I had already been doing so through sermons, though as associate pastor I was preaching much too infrequently to have a consistent impact on the full congregation. It hardly seems necessary to explain my desire to see people respond to God's truth and to grow as a result of this truth. I also wanted to help apply the gospel truth in a different and very deliberate setting than I had done thus far. As I sought to find the right opportunity, the small group setting became the most obvious venue.

At the time of this writing, however, I am serving as a missionary in Moscow, Russia. My work here is to train national church planters, primarily from the Russian

Baptist Union churches. The contrast between my home denomination and the one with which I now work is remarkable. I will try to explain without giving a history lesson. The Protestant churches in Russia have never known a Reformation. Their theology is Anabaptist, and legalism prevails at the cost of any sense of assurance of salvation. Grace in this context is associated more with God's blessings to those who are worthy, which, in the Reformed understanding, is not grace at all. I write this to say that the concerns I had for the American church are dwarfed by the condition of the churches (Orthodox and Protestant) here who often seem not to understand the gospel at all.

### **Program Design**

#### ***Goals***

The two major goals for which this program was designed can be summarized simply as the intended benefit for both the students and for me.

For the students, my goal was to confront their paradigm for sanctification as they also began to see the implications and life applications for earnest and heartfelt belief in the gospel. Naturally this is a lengthy process (see limitations), and therefore the understanding and embracing of it could not have been measured. Again, this is why the study was qualitatively executed. The goal, then, was that the students start to grasp what it means to believe the gospel. I sought to provide a foundation upon which they could grow in their sanctification.

For myself the immediate goal was to investigate the process by which Christians grasp the power of faith's role in sanctification. I had already seen it at work in myself, had known others who testified to the experience, but I wanted to see it take root, develop and grow. I wanted to be able to describe what happens as people see their Savior more fully for who he is.

Because my long-term goal is to be able to teach this material more effectively and in different contexts, my short-term goal was also to see which aspects of the course that I designed and implemented helped and which did not. I wanted to see which concepts became clear and which remained unclear. In retrospect, I can see certain elements that may have needed correction, as they were challenged either by participants themselves or by critics of *Sonship*.

### ***Learning activities***

The learning activities took several different forms. There were thirteen planned class times, each lasting ninety minutes. The majority of this time together was spent in class discussion. I did not lecture, though there were times I needed to explain something or would direct participants to look up Scripture verses.

Every week the students had a written assignment in which they were to respond independently to some further questions. There were a couple of practical assignments as well, for which the report was given orally the following week. A weekly Scripture memory verse relevant to the topic being discussed was also assigned.

The students were instructed to keep a journal, preferably making entries every day. This was a completely private journal; I never asked about what they wrote. The purpose of the journals was to help them process their unresolved thoughts from class time, or to record what changes they could see in their lives, or what obstacles they saw to such changes.

Finally, the interviews can be considered learning activities, since they helped serve as reinforcements. As mentioned previously, the practice of trying to verbalize one's thoughts often helps one articulate them in the first place. These interviews were probing, and were designed to help the participants face some areas which the teaching was meant to confront.

### ***Learning Indicators***

The learning indicators were built into the activities as listed above. I was able to observe the process of learning from the class discussions and the written assignments. The interviews were also opportunities to see what the participants had been learning. Finally, there was the course exit survey which allowed the participants to summarize their learning experience, as well as to offer any constructive criticisms of the class.

### ***Overall Lesson Plan***

The full set of lesson plans can be found in Appendix B. These are precisely what the participants received each week in sequence at the beginning of our time together.

The topics or themes, some of which took more than one week, were as follows: (1) understanding our need for the gospel; (2) understanding the definition of justification; (3) implications of justification; (4) adoption; (5) contemporary expressions of idolatry (when God isn't enough); (6) repentance; (7) doctrine of sanctification; and (8) forgiveness.

We began each session with a brief time of worship, consisting of singing and prayer. I then opened up the class with the opportunity for participants to give any feedback or to seek clarification about the previous week's topic. If there were loose ends remaining, I did my best to tie them up.

I then handed out the evening's lesson and began leading the discussion by asking the questions in sequence. In most cases I had specific questions set aside for homework, but occasionally, when time ran out before we addressed certain questions I deemed important, I would assign these to be answered in written form for the following week.

Then we broke into smaller groups to recite the memory verse to each other. After this participants remained in their groups to pray, or occasionally one of us would lead the rest of us in a closing prayer.

### *Assessments*

Since the approach for this project was qualitative, assessment does not really hold a prominent place. The participants did not receive a grade, nor was there ever an expectation that I would give them feedback as to "how they did." At the same time, I was able to see who was gaining understanding and who seemed stuck in some old

patterns. This kind of information was useful in helping me see how I might make some changes whenever I should teach a similar course in the future. Therefore, if there is an assessment, it is more than likely self-directed. In the fifth chapter I will address the positive and negative aspects of the course's design and implementation, and suggest improvements for myself or anyone else who would embark on a similar endeavor.

Assessment was also self-directed for the students, if they chose to do so. I certainly did not encourage this, since assessment is itself one of the major issues of the course. It is usually far too important to us what others think about our performance (this would include other people, God, and even ourselves). If anything, the goal was to see that we are worse than we think we are so that we may also see that our Savior is greater than we realized as well. This is a basic theme of *Sonship*.

### **Limitations of the Study**

- A. Thirteen ninety-minute sessions are just not enough to cover what I wanted to cover. As it is, we extended from twelve to thirteen weeks—by the group's request! Most of our discussions felt abbreviated, and it was always a struggle to make sure we left adequate time for prayer.
- B. The literature review was actually completed after the course was taught. I could probably have done a better job of teaching if I had first completed the review. I

will discuss this more in chapters four and five. My scheduled departure for missionary service simply did not allow for the conventional way of doing this.<sup>6</sup>

- C. Since I taught the class, and even led the worship, I was unable to be a relaxed observer. I could not take notes during the discussions since I was leading them. Though I have tape recordings, they are of sound only. I thought video would be too difficult and distracting. However, as a result, I have no non-verbal cues to interpret. I could only note voice tones and pace of speech, and mark those who tend to dominate or not say much at all.
- D. So many of these issues must be seen in the long term to understand or substantiate change. I did not have that time. But I don't think any D. Min. project could really allow for the time necessary to see such changes.
- E. We must also consider basic human frailty as a limitation. The participants seemed to work hard to keep their commitments to the time required. Class attendance was rarely a problem for anyone, and then only for illness. There were times that the homework assignments seemed rushed, and the Scripture memory verses were often not a priority. And though I did not check people's journals, a few admitted they had been very lax in that area. Because of the power of keeping God's Word in our hearts and the spiritual reflection provided by journaling, I believe several of the group members could have benefited more than they did.

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<sup>6</sup> This was done with permission of the director of the program and my advisor.

- F. In group settings and even one-to-one, it is always difficult to be completely honest—even with ourselves. People’s natural self-protection was probably a hindrance, though I can’t necessarily point to instances in which I could detect a problem. A more skilled counselor could have helped bring more issues to the surface, and once there, known how to deal with them. It is very possible that my own limited ability to be transparent before the group members may have been a limitation. The preface to *Discipling by Grace* warns the teacher not to appear as a superhero, or as one who has mastered all these issues. Even with that in mind, I am sure I kept much to myself. Discretionary self-revelation helps others feel comfortable doing the same, especially because they see that their struggles are not really so unique.
- G. A ten-member group is not necessarily large, but it is always difficult to make sure that everyone has opportunity to contribute. Fortunately I did not notice any personality conflicts, though there were a couple of individuals who, true to their character, were quiet. I had to make a point of bringing them in, and did not always do so consistently or successfully.

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

Having laid the groundwork for this project—its motivation and purpose, supporting research material, and method—I now turn to its analysis. I need at this point to reiterate that this course was actually taught before most of the research represented in the literature review was conducted. The following analysis will bring several areas to light which had not been developed well or considered before the class took place. Chapter 5 seeks to address those discrepancies.

In qualitative research the major question is “What happened?” rather than the quantitative question, “Was it successful?” My remarks in the next chapter may at times seem to try to answer the latter, but the reader should not expect a definitive “yes” or “no” answer to such a question, nor should he expect statistics, percentages, and charts. This chapter serves to present in narrative form what occurred from the beginning to the conclusion of the course I called *Grace-Centered Discipleship*.

### *Curriculum*

The curriculum for this course was certainly dynamic in its composition. I decided to tailor it to fit into thirteen weeks, which closely matched our church's normal semester program schedule. Although I knew in advance the topics I wanted to cover, I planned each lesson by the week to make necessary adjustments. These adjustments were necessitated primarily by two things. One is that I was drawing from three sources: World Harvest Mission's soon-to-be-retired *Discipling by Grace* course, their *Gospel Transformation* course, which was in progress at the time, and my own modifications and contributions. Since I was receiving draft chapters of *Gospel Transformation* throughout the semester, I often waited to see what I might use from it. Secondly, and more importantly, I made adjustments each week based on the previous week's class. Sometimes it was necessary to repeat a question for which we didn't have adequate time, and at other times I posed a new question to clarify a previous area of difficulty. The weekly lesson sheets can be found in Appendix B.

The topics or curriculum for the course were as follows: our ongoing need for the gospel, justification by faith, adoption, enemies of the gospel (unbelief, idolatry), repentance, sanctification by faith<sup>1</sup>, and forgiveness. Almost every one of these topics required two consecutive weeks to complete. I should also note that we always began the

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<sup>1</sup> As I labored to prove in the literature review, *sanctification by faith* is the principal doctrine that *Sonship* teaches, as does this course. To list it as a separate unit in sequence might mislead one to think it was treated as only a segment, whereas all of the previous lessons had been building up the necessary foundational principles to support it. I should also note that the students would not likely summarize the course's teaching as *sanctification by faith*, but I would expect they would more likely say it was on daily believing the gospel. That is the same thing. My second major research question reflects this comprehensive treatment of the doctrine.

class with a brief review and opportunity for questions about the previous week's material.

When time was too short to get through all the planned discussion points, which occurred at virtually every class meeting, I either skipped questions altogether or assigned them for homework. The final two lessons, 12 and 13, are almost identical. I did this because the first couple of questions in the twelfth lesson prompted such a huge and lively discussion that we never got further. This will be reflected in the discussion of the sixth question below. Since I deemed the discussion to be valuable, I chose not to curtail it just to satisfy my own expectations of time and content. Additionally, World Harvest stresses the need for such flexibility in using its material. I had hoped to cover an additional topic, but my own schedule made it impossible to continue the course beyond the thirteenth week.

Therefore, the class lessons/worksheets do not represent accurately all that was covered. In some cases we had more extensive discussion than expected, and at times it was a bit tangential. Frequently our discussion included enough of the point to be pursued in a subsequent question that we would just summarize or even omit one altogether. The lesson plans would be significantly modified if I were to teach this course again. Further, the work sheets were not meant to be transferable or standardized. In retrospect, I could see that some of the questions were simply not worded well. Others depended on further verbal explanation, which I attempted to provide as needed.

### *Funneling the Data*

I have well over one hundred pages of transcript data from class discussions and interviews, and scores of pages of completed written homework assignments accompanied by my comments in response. How does one sift and funnel such volume into a manageable and useful form? My two primary research questions were purposely general. Once again I list them here:

- (a) How did the class impact those who participated?
- (b) How did these participants process the concepts and life application of the teaching of sanctification by faith?

It would have been theoretically possible to answer these questions based solely on the participants' own assessments, drawing from both written and oral comments. But I occasionally found great inconsistency between class discussions, homework assignments, and interviews. In one case in particular an individual seemed to be grasping and interacting with the material very well, but to my great disappointment, in the final interview he confessed his struggle with his ability to move from an intellectual understanding to a heartfelt one. In other words, he could talk about it, answer questions, and even offer great insights, but could apply very little to his own life. Since I will single him out numerous times in this analysis, I will refer to him as Sam (not his real name). If it were only the participants' final impression or assessment of what they had

learned that was vital, a detailed evaluation form might have been adequate. Instead I relied on all the available data.

Consequently, as I stated in the last chapter, it seemed to me more helpful to break down the two major research questions into seven basic categories and proceed to report observations and analyze the data accordingly. Further, I decided to categorize the ten students into three different groups corresponding to the level of response I had surmised by this point. Nevertheless, I will still at times discuss or even quote individual responses. Not only should this be more interesting and personal, but in doing so I will be able to guard against over-generalization. It is imprudent to categorize people so rigidly.

*Group A* consists of five individuals, two of whom are married to each other. Each member of this group indicated the desire to take this course because of previous experience under my teaching ministry and because of their expectation of personal benefit. Like a couple of those in Group C they told me that because I was scheduled to depart from the church in the following year, they were anxious to take advantage of this timely opportunity. It should be obvious that I enjoy a close relationship with them, though at varying depths. So I group them here because, though I believe they exerted some effort, from what I could observe none of them really made great strides in personal application. Naturally there were a couple of exceptions on a topic or two, as I will detail below. I should also note that perhaps three of them slacked off on assignments such as Scripture memory, journaling (actually almost everyone struggled with this discipline), and even missed homework assignments. Sam, the cerebral oriented-individual I mentioned above was in this group.

*Group B* is actually only one person, but he needs to be categorized separately. I will refer to him in this chapter as *B*. He is the man whose wife was unable to participate because of another ministry conflict. He was also one of the newest members of the church, and the one I knew the least. He had sporadically attended a men's Bible study group that I had led the previous year. *B* is an avid reader, and because his job allows him to, he listens daily to cassette tapes of sermons and teachings by a variety of well-known Christian leaders such as R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, and Hank Hanegraaff. I give this detail because I was at times apparently challenging what he had previously heard from one of these men, an uncomfortable position in which to be. Already feeling pretty well indoctrinated, he nevertheless accepted my invitation to participate. To be honest, the main reason I wanted him in the class was because I wanted to help "fix" things in his life. I perceived a lack of grace in his doctrine and in his relationship to his wife. I understand now why World Harvest strongly recommends that a couple attend *Sonship* together, since so much of the practical application is within the context of the marriage. This can easily be thrown off-balance when only one member of a couple attends. Additionally I missed the opportunity to counsel them as a couple.

This man was somewhat resistant to both content and method, though I thought I had already described it well enough in my initial invitation, follow-up letter, and the pre-class interview. His objection to content took shape in frequent objections or suspicious-sounding questions of clarification. As for the method, he let me know in the midway interview that he found the emphasis too heavily weighted on the subjective rather than just "seeing what the Bible teaches." Though he does credit some benefit via his final evaluation, he was what I might call "stuck but satisfied."

*Group C* has much in common with Group A, at least in terms of personal relationship with me. They are all women, three married (husbands in first group) and one single. These four are the ones who reported to me through homework assignments, interviews, and evaluations that they grew a lot through the process of the course. One of them wasn't sure whether or not to attribute the changes she was experiencing to the course or to a major personal crisis she had undergone immediately after the course ended. About six weeks after our final meeting, a much-loved woman in our congregation was sexually assaulted and murdered. As horrible as it was for all of us, it naturally affected the women in our church the most. For several reasons this tragedy prompted severe anxiety attacks in one of the women in this group. Turning to a professional Christian counselor, she began to face certain unresolved issues from her past and also found herself leaning more on her Savior for the present and future. Consequently, when our final interview took place, six weeks after the murder, she knew she had grown, but wasn't sure whether to credit the course or the crisis. I don't think it is necessary to distinguish.

Another woman in this group was very quiet during class time, and I had wondered whether or not she was understanding or even really interacting with the material. But the later homework assignments and the final evaluation made it clear that she had (at least in what she expressed) really wrestled with the teachings and was learning to apply them. There was definitely more perceivable depth as time went on. I think her reluctance to participate much in class stemmed from self-consciousness about her ability to express herself well verbally.

### *The Final Four*

I chose four individuals to interview after the class had ended in order to provide a backwards-looking perspective. My criterion was that they seemed to have learned new information and grasped it, already professing some change in certain areas of their life. However, I did not end up choosing the four “best students”—that is, what I call Group C—for a couple of reasons. I actually interviewed two from Group A and two from Group C. One reason is that it was only after these interviews that I was able to categorize them more accurately. The two men I chose from Group A gave me indication of more profound change in their lives than really was the case. One of them had expressed how deeply affected he was by the lesson on forgiveness. However, he was only starting to wrestle with it, and it was too early to tell where it would go. What most concerned me from the beginning was his own assessment of a low level of his intimacy and enjoyment of God, which remained largely unchanged. The other man, Sam, I have mentioned already. He could almost have taught the course, but knew that in too many ways the material remained for him at a philosophical-theoretical level. His head knew it was true, but his heart was still too stubborn to accept it. I did not realize the extent of this until the final interview.

These interviews were delayed until about two months after the completion of the course because of some I had to do some extensive traveling. Though the time lapse wasn't intended, I believe it ended up being beneficial. Ideally I would like to know how the participants' lives continued to change as they struggle with the grace-orientated teaching they received, but this project was never meant to be so long term. However,

the delay in interviewing them allowed their impressions to mature, and thus to be perhaps more indicative of what would bear long-term fruit.

### **Analysis:**

#### **How the Gospel of Grace Affects a Group of Believers**

This section is organized by the secondary research questions as laid out in the previous chapter. These questions closely parallel the order of the curriculum as well. The analysis consists of report and interpretation of the full data source and is therefore not strictly chronological. Under the same question there may be responses from pre-class interviews, various class discussions, homework assignments, final evaluation comments, and final interviews. I did my best to indicate the source so that the changes in views and growth would be more evident. And though I use the general group categories, where possible and necessary I single out individuals.

1. **What happens to the participants' understanding of exactly what the gospel means, and how central it must be in our lives? As they reinvestigate the doctrine of justification by faith, are they able to see a daily relevance?**

- a. **Original articulation of gospel**

I asked each participant in the pre-class interview to explain what they could recall about their understanding of the gospel at the time of their conversion. I did not seek details of “how they came to Christ.” I did this in part to confirm that, to the best that I could judge, they were genuine believers. But more than that, I also wanted to see how they verbally expressed their faith. What did they understand about the gospel and what aspect of it made them respond? I followed this up with the second of the diagnostic questions used by Evangelism Explosion: “If you were to stand before God right now and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’, what would you say?” Again, more than to verify their conversion, my purpose was to see how they articulated their trust and dependence on Christ their Savior. Most everyone expressed trust in Christ and his death for their worthiness, though one from each of Group A and Group C said the reason was because they had asked Jesus into their hearts. When pressed a little further, even then they had a certain sense of imputed righteousness. They just couldn’t articulate it. Another in Group A knew the “right” answer but still felt unworthy enough to say it with confidence. It might help to know that he came from a rigid Catholic upbringing, where assurance of salvation is considered sinful presumption. Feeling unworthy to claim grace, of course, is a contradiction. I neglected to ask him later if this had changed.

In the first class session I asked for a definition of the gospel. Two from Group A summed it up with the word “forgiveness.” This was close to what I expected to hear. This led me to ask the question, “When Jesus preached the gospel, and directed his disciples to do the same during his ministry, what exactly was the good news?” In other words, what was and is the substance of the gospel? Surely Jesus and the disciples were

teaching more than the need to invite Jesus into one's heart and have one's sins forgiven.

The gospel can be expressed that way, but it is much more.

And though there are plenty of passages to prove this point, I referred them to Mark 1:15, where Jesus' first recorded words of his public ministry are, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" One participant (Group C) was positively and pleasantly stunned as I explained that according to Jesus the gospel was actually about welcoming the kingdom of God, which had come through the person and work of Jesus. God's kingdom is here, and we are invited to participate as willing subjects. Because Jesus is the door through which we enter the kingdom, the good news most certainly does involve and require forgiveness accomplished by the shedding of his blood. But the emphasis is on the presence of God living among his people both now and in its later eschatological fulfillment.

#### **b. Understanding of justification**

When I asked participants in the second week of class to define justification, the consensus was "just as if I'd never sinned." Of course, this is exactly what I expected. Using II Cor. 5:21 as the base, I taught them how their answer really wasn't such good news. God requires not a "clean slate," but instead a record of righteousness. The good news is that imputation goes both ways. The imputation of our sin on Christ was familiar ground. However, although the idea that we believers have imputed to us the righteousness of Christ was familiar to them, it was not really part of their theology. This was also distressing to me, as I have talked about that almost every time I have had the opportunity to preach!

*B*, in the midway interview, did say that he was already familiar with this teaching, as he had heard it frequently at our church, in contrast to the Baptist church he had only recently left. How this doctrine makes an impact on him is still unclear at best.

Nevertheless, this very doctrine is pivotal for this course, as it is for *Sonship*. Because we have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, we have all the righteousness we will ever need. As a homework assignment the students were to construct a definition of justification written in the first person. All of them included both the aspects of forgiveness (imputation of our sin upon Christ) and righteousness (imputation of Christ's meritorious righteousness upon us). In *Sonship* this is referred to as the "Great Exchange." I was disappointed, however, that after all this discussion, several of them absolutely omitted any reference to faith, or if they did include it, made faith look to be a work meriting this salvation. I did my best to correct this.

### **c. Reputation and other bad sources of justification**

We discussed at great length how we all seek justification in ways that show that we are not convinced that it is enough to be counted righteous in God's eyes. Most of us are content to know that we are merely more righteous than most people we know and that people think well of us. Obviously there is nothing wrong with being more righteous than most, nor in being well thought of. These are good things. The sin lies in the measures to which we go to create and preserve these perceptions, even making our reputations a sort of idol.

I wanted them to see how we do not actually live as if all the justification we need is already established in Christ. We seek a sense of worth elsewhere, at least in part.

When I challenged them to think about the weight of their reputations, each of them could see one or more areas of their lives in which it mattered greatly how others regarded them, and how they actually found their worth in others' positive opinion of them. In fact, almost everyone in the class admitted to placing great importance on reputation in virtually every role they played. Some (particularly Group A) never really got beyond this, but the awareness of this sin is a good and necessary start.

One woman in Group C testified that for the last several years she had been gradually learning about her need to release her reputation as her source of self-worth, since her chronic illness left her too fatigued to fulfill many responsibilities. She was learning to be content with what God thought of her rather than everyone else. She says the class strengthened her in this truth.<sup>2</sup>

#### **d. Getting a grasp on the gospel**

By the time we got to the fourth class the participants had been hearing the truth of the believer's justification in Christ constantly. Therefore, as we looked at the first chapter of Romans together, it was easy for all of them to see why Paul states his desire to preach the gospel once again to those in Rome (v. 15). An often overlooked point here is that this letter is addressed to believers, and yet Paul longs to preach the gospel to them. With a meaning of the gospel expanded beyond "how to be saved," this was not so puzzling to the class. As one student (Group A) put it, "The gospel has implications for daily life. We need the constant reminder." B said, "As you started your relationship, so it must continue." And still a third (Group A) said that we cannot be passive about the

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<sup>2</sup> This could clearly become a problem or even heresy if one defends her sin by pleading that God loves her just the way she is, and therefore need not be concerned about sin. Definitively, *Sonship* does not teach this, and neither do I.

gospel. It is “something we should be cognitive of every minute.” Interestingly, these three participants are among those who had difficulty engaging with the material.

It was at this time that I began to stress the need to *preach the gospel to ourselves every day*, one of *Sonship*’s trademark expressions. Further, the class participants began to hear me quote *Sonship*’s renditions of the gospel definition. Jack Miller used to say, “Cheer up, you’re worse than you think.” The corollary is, “and the gospel (or God’s grace in Christ) is better news than you ever imagined.” To understand this and truly believe it is the crux of the *Sonship* course. The idea is to get people to see that their need for Jesus is bigger than they realized, and that his grace to them, namely God’s love for them in Christ is far greater than they ever could have hoped for. This truth is to be the operating dynamic and power of our lives as believers.

**e. Present value of Christ’s blood. In other words, what does it mean to you today—not at your death or at his coming, but right now—that Jesus died for you?**

I asked this question in the pre-class interview, but none of the participants quite knew how to answer. Nevertheless, I got some interesting responses. One said that Jesus’ death required her to have the Lord be of highest priority in her life, and that she must live obediently as he did. Another from Group A responded similarly that it motivates him to act in a way that honors God. These would be good answers except that both of these individuals expressed numerous times throughout the course their frustration in being unable to live up to God’s standard. They had no confidence that they were already pleasing to God and that their actions would not and could not

establish this acceptance. Yet this was precisely the point I was trying to make. I wanted the students to consider their positional righteousness in Christ. In other words, how much did they make of their justification? One woman (Group C) responded that Jesus' death gave her compassion for others and also the power to overcome sin. And another summed it up well by saying that the present value of the cross was the complete release from guilt or shame, the ability to repent and know certain forgiveness. In Christ's death and resurrection there is power against temptation. And finally, reflection on Jesus' suffering reminds her that she is called to partake in Christ's sufferings, which are not without purpose. Knowing this woman well, I was not surprised. She probably did not receive very much new in this course, but later testified that it helped solidify some things for her.

My goal in this course was to get people to understand the daily present application of the gospel in their lives. I wanted to see people move beyond the *WWJD?* paradigm for living to a confident and yet dependent stance in Christ.

**f. Is God angry with us when we sin?**

I asked the students if they thought God was angry with us when we sinned, to which they were all reluctant to respond affirmatively, but neither were they willing to deny it. This question was meant to make clear the doctrine of propitiation: God has been satisfied in the punishment of Jesus, and his wrath for sinners united to Christ is exhausted. *Sonship* teaches that if God's wrath is exhausted, then he can no longer be angry with the believer for his or her sin. We are either justified or we are not. If God is angry when we sin, then how could we avoid the necessary implication that he would

always be angry with us? Unfortunately this was exactly how most of the members of Group A related to God, living under his perpetual frown.

When they suggested modifying “angry” to “disappointed,” I reminded them that disappointment implies dashed hope or unmet expectations. In God’s omniscience and foresight, how could it be possible to disappoint him? We considered the warning in Eph. 4:30 that we must not grieve the Holy Spirit, and concluded that grieving might be a more correct way of expressing God’s reaction to our sins. Though we are forgiven, he does not ignore our current sins, and neither should we.

This whole discussion took place as we also looked at the doctrine of adoption (see below for greater detail), particularly that the Father takes delight in us (Zeph. 3:17). The difficulty is in trying to determine what exactly God’s response is when his people sin in pride and unbelief. We know that God’s wrath is exhausted on Christ for those who are united to him, that we are righteous, and that he delights in us. But how does the grief over our constant sin affect this? How can he be both delighted and grieved with us?

I tried to resolve this paradox by explaining that God has the capability of simultaneous emotion. He can be both delighted in us and grieved—and perhaps we *should* just say *angry*—at our sin. Ideally we, as those made in his image, can experience the same mixed emotions. But, at least for those of us in the class who were parents, we have never experienced a good manifestation of simultaneous anger and delight. What I hope I did make clear to the class was that there is a huge difference between the wrath God has against rebellious sinners who hate him, and the way he regards the unfaithfulness of his children whom he has chosen and covered in his love, and who do love him in return, although imperfectly.

The point was never to suggest that we need not be concerned about our sin, but rather quite the contrary. God is pleased with us because we are united to the Son whom he loves and who pleases him perfectly. His approval of us, however, does not “free” us to regard sin lightly. This discussion once again became relevant when we later talked about sin and repentance. Our love for God is most definitely not “never having to say you are sorry.” At the same time we need to affirm verses such as Rom. 8:1, which assures us that we no longer face condemnation and that we no longer need to fear the wrath of God against sinners if we remain in Christ. Our justification is not endangered by our struggle with sin.

Two of the men from Group A were particularly affected by this whole idea. Up to this point Sam never felt that grace could be fair, and that therefore, our justification makes no rational sense. But once he realized that the Father’s holy justice was fully satisfied in Christ’s atonement, he felt as if he had begun to make headway in accepting God’s grace.

There was a definite correlation between grasping (and enjoying) one’s justification in Christ—that is, possessing his righteousness—and feeling free of God’s constant disapproval. This discussion was very helpful to those in the class who had been living under a constant cloud of guilt (Group A). But it is hard to claim significant change in this area over such a short period of time.

**2. Does the class kindle or rekindle a sense of the Father's incredible love for them, expressed in the doctrine of adoption?**

We didn't actually spend a lot of time on the doctrine of adoption, which, as mentioned earlier, might seem ironic in a curriculum called *Sonship*. Adoption was treated as a benefit of our justification rather than taught as a discrete event or category in a systematic theology. Therefore, to believe in one's adoption is to first be convinced of one's justification.

When I asked how justification and adoption were related to each other, I was pleased with the two answers I received. One person said that justification was a legal action that we understand intellectually, whereas adoption is powerfully emotional. Interestingly, this came from Sam, who often had brilliant insights and seemed to be interacting very well with the material, but who in the final interview revealed that he could not deal with God at much of an emotional level at all (he didn't understand grace and didn't trust emotions). Another did say very simply that "in order to be adopted we must first be enabled by justification." That is about as systematic as we got.

All were familiar with the idea of being adopted as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, but hadn't really given much thought to its day-to-day implications. During one of the class sessions someone asked a woman about the adoption experience of her nephew, in which she had been very much involved. Most of us were well familiar with the event, and the baby had been publicly baptized in the church the previous year. As she spoke of the destitute situation in which they found the boy in a foreign orphanage, the class members were profoundly moved. He had had no clothes, no diapers, no

material possessions, and no hope whatsoever. This woman's sister and husband adopted him, brought him into their home and their family, gave him a new name and nationality, and clothed and fed him abundantly. He now has riches incomparable to his previous poverty, an inheritance, parents and an extended family, including the church, who all love him deeply.

Another remarked at the great cost of such an adoption in finances, energy, and time requirements. Just considering the extent to which this couple went to adopt this child whom we all knew helped our class to appreciate better what it cost our Father to adopt us, and how very loved we are. I could tell that even as this woman described her nephew's adoption experience she was comparing it to her own adoption by her heavenly Father, as were we all.

We talked about the implications of our adoption, namely our inheritance, the Father's provisions for his children, intimacy in relationship fueled by knowledge of the Father's delight in us, and also his perfect and necessary discipline (Heb. 12:5-11). These were not all easy. The idea of inheritance in heaven was already known and accepted, even if it remains intangible and not often enough a topic of meditation. As far as God's provision, there were a couple of snags. One man (Group A) who had become a husband and father within the last two years, currently felt tremendously blessed by his heavenly Father. He understood that these blessings did not necessarily correspond to God's pleasure in him, and might even be temporary. He admitted that they had helped him feel more like a loved son, and if they were removed, so might his own sense of being loved by God.

On the corresponding homework assignment I asked the students to identify ways in which they act like orphans rather than as adopted children of the heavenly Father. This same man replied that he acts like an orphan when he disobeys God. I did not affirm this answer at the time, since it impressed me as a performance orientation. He was actually quite correct, however, which made me later realize that *Sonship* seems to undervalue the element of obedience in the doctrine of adoption. I will return to this concern in the next chapter. Two others (again, Group A) wrote that they were not sure enough of the Father's delight in them to come to him boldly in prayer when they knew they had sinned, especially if the sin was a recurring one. I raised this question yet again in the classes on sin and repentance.

One woman (Group C), who generally seemed to enjoy her relationship with her heavenly Father, confessed in her homework that she sometimes feels that the Father withholds blessings from her. She mostly referred to her singleness, with diminishing prospects as she approached the age of forty. Her perception was not based on suspicion that God did not love her, but that he was giving her a tough path to follow as a strict coach-trainer. For her, God practices tough love.

The main idea I wanted to be understood about adoption is that the Father does truly delight in us. His election of us was an act of love, and his justification and adoption of us were not conditional and are not conditional now. The use of the word condition, though, may not have been clarified well enough. Because of who was in my class it was not so necessary to concern ourselves with antinomianism. In the literature review I hope I made clear that the conditions placed upon God's adopted children are the expected, even demanded behavior of a son or daughter. The obedience is not in

order to become a son, but because the believer already is one. And as sons and daughters we are not to live in fear that when we approach God he is going to be grumpy or refuse to speak with us because of some offense. Unrepentant sin will surely be an obstacle, and is potentially very dangerous to one's soul, but the repentant sinner need have no such fear.

Here is one response from a member of Group C which indicated that the concept was being understood: "He is always ready to receive me. Even if I come to praise Him, and arrogantly ignore sin in my life, He will accept my praise and use it to open my heart to His searching gaze, and bring me back into deeper relationship with Him."

### **3. What happens as the participants are pressed to identify obstacles which prevent them from fully believing in their justification in the person and work of Christ?**

After establishing the central dynamic of the gospel in our lives, namely, that the fact of our justification in Christ is something to which we need to return constantly, we were then ready to investigate the things in our lives that work against believing it. The *Sonship* material identifies these obstacles or distractions as idols.

The commonly accepted definition of idolatry is the worship of any other god but the one true God. But *Sonship* follows others in teaching that our search for significance makes an idol of whatever ultimately provides (or could potentially provide) us with this sense of worth. Timothy Keller defines an idol as anything we must have in addition to

Christ in order to find joy.<sup>3</sup> It is that object, or more often that ideal, which we believe promises us fulfillment, or a happy life. The way we deal with the loss or inability to achieve or own these “things” reveals that they are idols to us. For example, two, or perhaps all three, of the men in Group A struggle with anger. They see their expression of it as sin, but do not seem to see that what drives the anger is frustration over what they do not have in life. Specifically, one is often dealing with below-the-surface anger about the office politics which smear his reputation on the one hand and withhold recognition for his achievements on the other. His professional image or reputation is probably an idol. When I pointed this out in the midway interview he admitted the superficial basis of the anger, but wasn’t quite ready to see it as an idol.

I started the class discussion by having us read together Scripture passages which describe and condemn idolatry. We read the first two of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3-6) and the story of the people’s worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32). I then took samplings from Scripture which condemn the practice (Ezek. 14:1-8; Rom. 1:21-25). To show them that idolatry was more than literally bending the knee to an object, we read that greed is idolatry (Col. 3:5) and had an interesting discussion about why John attaches that one curious admonition at the end of his first letter, which initially seems out of place: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn. 5:21). By this time it was becoming obvious that idolatry was more than bowing down to items of wood or stone, or to a new car, computer, or big screen television set.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Understanding Your Heart*, unpublished handout material distributed to D. Min. class “Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World,” Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, January 1999, p. 1. Keller draws from Lloyd-Jones, Augustine, Stephen Charnock, Richard Keyes, David Powlison, and Tertullian in this booklet.

I then moved on to read several other passages in Ezekiel which not only liken idolatry to prostitution (Ezek. 16:15-19), but do so in shocking and uncomfortable sexual detail (Ezek. 16:23-31; 23:1-21). My purpose, which I assume was also God's purpose for inspiring these written words, was to show just how disgusting God regards the sin of idolatry against him to be.

I attempted to manifest the prominence idolatry has in our lives by examining the Ten Commandments. According to Keller, "We never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2."<sup>4</sup> I wanted them to see that idolatry is actually at the root of all our sin. We do what we do because our hearts tell us we must have something besides the Lord in order to be satisfied. Though this was a good idea and a potentially worthwhile exercise, it was difficult for the students in their homework assignment to uncover the idolatry underlying the different sins prohibited. In retrospect, the exercise required more explanation and examples, and might have been more effective as an in-class activity.

As I sought to help the participants identify the idols in their lives, I asked them to name their biggest fear or nightmare in life. This did not work very well, though, because the term *nightmare* prompted them to think of a tragedy such as the death of a spouse or child. And it is possible that those family members or the relationship with them could constitute idolatry. But, in retrospect, I can see that my question was poor. A better question would have been: What is it that, if you lost it or could never have it, would ruin your whole life? Only one person (Group A) responded that his nightmare

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3. In my homework exercise I modified this, since even the second commandment is actually based on the first.

would be the loss of his professional competency. In the interviews with him it was consistently clear that this truly was an idol for him.

In retrospect I think this lesson fell way short on clarity and helpfulness. Participants could understand hypothetically what an idol was, but they were not helped to identify them very well. For the men in Group A, they knew that their reputations were very important to them. They knew that many of their efforts to protect or publicize those reputations were sinful. But they did not see their reputations as detestable idols. This is especially hard because, of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be good at our jobs. There were other signs of comprehension, as a few people from Groups A and C identified self-sufficiency as a possible idol. *B* really didn't think he had any. Again, I think the question I used to help identify idols was the crux of the problem.

**4. From the evident growing confidence in the Father's acceptance of them through Christ, do the participants become more emboldened (and sensitized) to see sin in their lives—and are they moving toward a lifestyle of genuine repentance?**

All of the participants would quickly admit that they are sinners. But when pressed, which I did either in interviews or in homework, not all could identify sins with which they really struggled.

This was especially the case in Group A. Three of these (all men) live with a high sense of guilt before God. Two are from a Catholic background, one from a legalistic Baptist upbringing with very strict parents. Each of them has a hard time viewing God as

a warm loving Father. But when pressed to identify particular sins with which they constantly struggle, two could only name the sin of anger. One did say that he is aware of several sins of which he has repented so many times he no longer expects to conquer them. He hates to have his sins pointed out, though I have never met anyone who relishes it. He also said during the class that the more he does become aware of his sin, the easier it is to forgive others. That was encouraging to me, as this insight came earlier than our unit on forgiveness. The other two would also quickly admit they are sinners, but for both of them, the only sin they could really identify was impatience with co-workers. I did not really see this change from the beginning to the end of the course, though the resolve to see it change seemed to strengthen for them.

*B* would compare similarly to Group A. He said at one point that he could admit that he was a sinner, but he sure didn't like it when anyone else pointed out something specific. He told me in the midway interview about the expectations he placed on his wife, but could not tell me where he was sinning in how he related to her or in what he demanded from her. He did say that he was very confident of God's complete forgiveness whenever he did sin, and at one point said that if he erred between legalism and antinomianism, it was definitely on the latter. This was exactly the opposite of my initial impression of him.

Each of the members of Group C said that through the course they were becoming more and more aware of their sins and found it easier to confess them to the Lord in repentance and in earnest dependence upon him for help to change.

The teaching on repentance turned out to be much harder than I had anticipated. This session (Class 8) was the only one in which I used a taped lecture from the *Sonship*

course. Since the tape required most of our class time, I assigned some homework questions and we then discussed repentance together the following week.

In his talk, Rick Downs effectively tears down the facades of our frequently superficial or just plain false repentances. When I asked the students to identify how they fall into these same traps, or how they need to *repent of their repentances*, most of them were able to see the problem immediately. They saw that often repentance is merely used to ease one's conscience. Of course, since it is the conscience through which the Holy Spirit convicts us, we cannot ignore the benefit or drive behind easing one's conscience. But if that is one's principal concern, the repentance will likely fall short of being genuine.

Repentance is often wrongly equated with behavioral change. This error is difficult to detect—and therefore to explain—because by definition, repentance does require turning from our sin. Repentance does, then, require behavioral change—but behavioral change does not necessarily touch the heart at all. To concern ourselves with outer behavior and not the workings of the heart is to emulate the Pharisees whom Jesus frequently and severely admonished. We also discussed how sinful behavior is always the manifestation of a sinful heart. If we address the behavior only, the sin remains, either to be harbored in one's thought life or simply manifested in some other behavior. A good example which came up in class was the sin of gossip. Although we could implement effective plans to curb the tongue, these would target the outer behavior alone and not rid the heart of its filth. It would not be true repentance.

We then discussed the idea of digging deeper down to the root level, by the Spirit's guidance, to identify the sins of the heart which produce the rotten fruit in our

behavior. To use a common garden illustration, if we only clip off the plant above ground but do not destroy the roots, the plant merely sprouts up again, though perhaps in another place. For most of the class, this teaching was very helpful. *B* balked here and said that most sins are just based on not loving God enough, and the other motives would require us to have constant access to a Christian psychologist. But as I persisted I think he began to understand that all I was advocating was that we find the sin which lies underneath and feeds the actual manifestation. We don't usually have to dig too deeply to see it.

In their homework assignment I asked the participants to identify and discuss a sin or two over which they really struggled. They wrote about sins such as gossip, anger, and materialism. I did not explicitly ask them to identify the underlying sin, which was definitely an oversight. Nevertheless I was disappointed that the sins of gossip and anger, for example, were limited to their expression and not the sin of the heart. I made a poor assumption that the concept of root sins was more obvious than it really was to the students. The woman who confessed to the sin of materialism was from Group C. She did redefine the sin as discontent and self-centeredness, which is what I would have hoped to hear. I responded in writing that I would like her to explore why she is discontent, why she must have her house in a certain condition, etc. If this really is an ongoing battle, which I believe it is, then it is probably also an idol. But this never came up in our discussion of idolatry during class, in assignments, or even in the final interview when I specifically asked her about idols. I could see that she still didn't quite understand that her sin is misplaced trust, misplaced significance and justification. She is

seeking her worth in the things with which she surrounds herself and in how presentable her home is.

We discussed worldly sorrow vs. godly sorrow (II Cor. 7:10) at great length. A prime example contemporary to our time together was the scandal involving President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. As a class, we showed little restraint in our judgments of him. It was the consensus that he evidenced no repentance at all, but merely regret—and especially anger—that he had been caught. Much of our worldly sorrow is exactly like that. Additionally we engage in worldly sorrow when we simply wallow in self-pity or continue to punish ourselves for our shortcomings, thereby denying the Savior's role in our lives.

We talked about the concept of *repentance as a lifestyle*, but only used the term briefly. This idea comes from the first of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses, which asserts that this is what the Lord meant when he told us to repent, as opposed to the acts of penance which the Church taught and assigned to the penitent in the sacrament. I read the definition of repentance from the *Sonship* manual at the end of Class #9 in order to prepare the participants to write their own during the week. I then quoted it in full on the class sheet for Class #10 (See Appendix B). The definition stresses a change of heart and direction from self-reliance and idolatry and a turning toward God. The last sentence says that this "constant drifting away from God requires that we pray for and seek repentance as an ongoing lifestyle."<sup>5</sup>

*B* responded that repentance should be a very natural thing for us, such as eating or sleeping. This at first sounded good to me, but the problem is I couldn't see any wrestling with sin on his part. He actually didn't turn in the assignment in which I asked

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<sup>5</sup> *Sonship* Manual, A-6.

people to identify a sin of which they had grown weary of repenting. He also mentioned the joy which follows repentance, which I did affirm. In retrospect, a big problem with *B*'s description of lifestyle repentance is that he makes it sound as if it should be an easy thing. But true repentance is anything but easy.

In fact, we discussed the difficulty we all face when we find ourselves needing to repent multiple times for the same recurring sin. Several class members, especially from Group A, confessed that they often feel like hypocrites returning to God after repeated failure. I tried to help with this by explaining that the problem is that we feel that we have broken our promise to God that we would do better next time. But it is exactly that human resolve that is so much a problem in repentance.

The same people said that after awhile the recurring sin leads to a sense of despair that it will ever be conquered in this life. And if there is no hope for victory over it, there seems to be little point in repenting. It is just too discouraging. What often happens, I note from my own experience and especially as a pastor, is that we then minimize the sin in order to ease our guilt. We reason that God understands, or that he has made us this way and we can't change, that we have tried and can't do it, and so we will just rest on his grace, or that it's really not so bad after all.

The most difficult part of the lesson was trying to understand (and explain!) how to repent without erring on the side of human resolve to do better. *B* got very agitated here and wanted to know what was wrong with making resolutions. This was a little hard to discourage, since I am well aware that Jonathan Edwards (whom I do not make a habit of criticizing!), among others, did exactly that.

This is where the taped lecture really fell short. Downs did a wonderful job telling us what false repentance is, but never made clear how to know when we are repenting properly, and particularly in this aspect. How do we repent seriously while relying on Christ instead of ourselves to change? The resolve to do better can be Christless to the extent that we think we are more righteous than we are, believing we can correct this slip up. Instead we need to see that we are hopelessly unable to do anything in our own power. It is extremely hard to differentiate between resolving to do better on our own strength and coming broken before Christ in helplessness seeking him to change us.

In retrospect, I did not handle this lesson very well, or at least did not bring it to adequate closure. Several in the interviews expressed that it left them puzzled as to what true repentance was. They understood a lot of what false repentance looked like, but then wondered if they knew how to practice genuine repentance at all. I remember this exact confusion when I went through *Sonship*, and thought I corrected the balance by teaching Thomas Watson's six steps of repentance (which Downs does include in his lecture). On the positive side, I believe that most of the class saw the need to take sin and repentance very seriously. According to Group C, they did begin to see their sin more and therefore did repent more, not seeming troubled with the remaining ambiguity between human resolve and dependence on Christ. Unfortunately, Group A continued to struggle with this.

**5. Do the participants begin to understand and embrace the concept of sanctification by faith? That is to say, do they see that growth in holiness occurs as they trust in the person and work of Christ (as they believe the gospel)?**

I asked the class, “How do we become more holy?” From previous experience with my teaching and preaching, I am certain that everyone knew the aversion I have to formulaic answers such as *WWJD?* or simplistic solutions to success such as: Read more, study more, and pray more. It was amusing as they tried to answer my question knowing this about me. One of those from Group A, who several times throughout the course pointed to Jesus as our prime example, suggested that we work to emulate not Jesus’ actions, but his character. I reminded the class that though we are to become like Jesus (the goal of sanctification), it can never be accomplished by imitation alone.

I kept pressing until they started to get a little frustrated, which had not been my intention. A woman from Group C did respond that sanctification comes from our relationship with God, which was awfully close to the doctrine of sanctification by faith that I was working to present. I also used II Cor. 3:16-18 to teach that as we look to Christ we reflect his glory and are transformed. I then had them read Heb. 10:10 and 14 to show the clear connection between justification and sanctification. During discussion the same woman observed that justification makes our sanctification possible. A little later she said that our sanctification can come from looking back at our justification. I was impressed.

When I introduced the Cross Chart (see Appendix B), it really opened their eyes. In theory they all understood what it demonstrated and agreed that it did express reality. Several made good comments which indicated understanding to me. *B* said that he had read somewhere that “for every realization of our sinfulness there has to be equal or greater proclamation of the cross.” This is probably a paraphrase of McCheyne, who is credited with saying, “For every one look at your sin, take ten looks at Jesus.” One Group A individual summed it up beautifully by saying that we cannot progress well in our sanctification if we do not believe in our justification. I was amazed and pleased. We are sanctified, I summarized, by constantly returning to the truth of our justification. The more we understand that we are righteous in Christ, the more we will actually take on that reality. In other words, we will become what we already are declared to be.

The downside of the Cross Chart is that to some it suggests that our sin is increasing, which we discussed at length. Actually what it demonstrates is only the awareness of our sin, not the amount. When I asked in the accompanying assignment whether or not sinning decreases, most all said it did not. This, of course, was a difficult question, and frankly I wasn't as concerned about the “yes” or “no” as much as their reasoning. They understood that the increased cognizance and sensitivity to our sin makes it feel like we are sinning more than before. The sensation can be very discouraging, but ought not to lead to despair. Just as we see how much worse is our sin than we previously realized, so should we appreciate how wonderful is our Savior, how his atonement was so much greater than we realized. Understanding this reality is precisely what *Sonship* means by repeatedly preaching the gospel to ourselves. What *Sonship* does not deal with very well is the victory we ought to experience over certain

sins. Sam (Group A) said that if sin did not decrease, then sanctification is not taking place. He is correct.

I had them practice drawing this Cross Chart and then required them to present it to someone of their choosing, preferably a believer, as an assignment. The main purpose in this was to secure it in their own minds, which is best done by teaching it to others. I had them teach believers because I wanted them to be teaching this paradigm to someone already in the process of his or her own sanctification.

I concluded the lesson with a couple of practical examples of how sanctification by faith works itself out. If we believe that we really are justified then we will not seek our justification in the opinions of others or in our own reputations. We are free to serve Christ alone and not these other idols which rob God of the glory he is due. We look to him alone for our very identity. And in doing so we become like him. As we become more aware of our sin in the safety of knowing that our redemption is certain, we will more freely cast off our sin and flee to the welcoming Savior. Sin loses its appeal as we believe the Savior is all he has promised to be. This rings true with what Williams calls *sanctification by repentance*.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of sanctification by faith is the freedom we experience from the world's trappings. When our lives are bound to the Savior, when we are convinced of our assured citizenship, rich inheritance in heaven, and eternal fellowship with God unencumbered by sin, then earth really has nothing to desire and nothing to hold our affections.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, p. 14.

6. **As they see their absolute dependence on the Savior, realizing they are so much more sinful than they dared to believe, but also that God is more gracious in Christ than they equally dared to believe, are the participants increasing in their burden and ability to forgive others even as they have been forgiven?**

Forgiveness is neither an easy process nor an easy one to teach, as it turns out. This unit took us in a direction I just didn't expect. As a result we spent two class sessions on what I thought would require only one. And due to a pre-determined scheduling problem, I could not extend the course another week to include the additional topic I had planned.

In the morning of the day I was to teach this lesson I happened to read a "Miss Manners" column in the newspaper in which she was responding to a question on when it is necessary to forgive, and what it means to do so. I decided to use it as a springboard in class to see how proper etiquette squares with Christian practice. In her professional opinion, forgiveness is always and only in response to an apology.<sup>7</sup> When I read the column to the class, most responded quite emphatically that her advice was terrible.

We also read the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35) and Paul's exhortation to forgive one another in Eph. 4:32. It was easy to see that the forgiveness we have received from God obligates us to forgive those who seek forgiveness from us. Indeed, the admonishment to those who will not forgive is sobering.

When I asked what the connection was between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others, *B* responded that we are to be like God. This is actually not a bad

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Martin, "Miss Manners," *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2000.

answer. I received another answer from a member of Group A that I failed to probe. He said that if God forgives me then he can also forgive through me. He might be correct, but it sounded as if, in his understanding, the sin would be against God only and not also against himself personally. Once again the issue was more or less nailed by Sam, who answered that if we truly understand that we have been forgiven, though we are undeserving, then we really have no reason not to forgive others. And yet another from that group surprised me, as I have already mentioned, when he said that the awareness of his own sin has prompted and enabled him to forgive others more freely. I emphatically endorsed both of these answers.

The lesson took its unplanned detour when *B* asked why it wouldn't be righteous at times to withhold our forgiveness. He raised a point I was not prepared to discuss. His view was that forgiving someone who is unrepentant would essentially condone his or her behavior. He was the sole representative of this view and the rest of the class argued with him vehemently (though not unkindly). He raised a really good point and one I had never heard so well expressed before. Further, he insisted that withholding forgiveness did not necessitate nor permit unkindness or bitterness toward that person, but rather only limited the future depth of the relationship. For him forgiveness equals reconciliation.

It was *B* who pointed out that just a few verses earlier in the same chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us how to deal with an unrepentant brother who has wronged us. As we all know, if the brother refuses to repent, he can be excommunicated from the church. I had to agree that this does not seem like forgiveness. I found myself having to rethink my whole paradigm as I listened and tried to moderate this lively discussion.

Someone in Group A introduced another interesting twist by asking, in light of Matthew 18:15-20, what constitutes an offense. The passage in Matthew 18 does not deal with that, and we assume that the kind of offense Jesus had in mind is major and would be easily recognized as such by the elders of the church. But we all know that offenses are at times either trivial or from a distorted perspective. Scripture does not lay out casuistically how to deal with interpersonal relationships, and as we all know, they can get awfully messy.

As several people testified to the struggles they have and have had with forgiveness in their own lives, *B* pointed out that the principal incentive to forgive was being couched in terms of positive mental health. Again, he was right. Release of corroding bitterness is a wonderful benefit to forgiveness, and the desire to rid ourselves of it might even be the primary catalyst to bring us to the point of forgiveness, but that ought not to be the actual reason we should forgive.

Among the several that revealed their own ongoing struggles with forgiveness, there were two in which the person who had wronged them was now dead. Actual reconciliation is obviously impossible. For another two it was not a likely possibility because of the other party's unwillingness or lack of interest. Nevertheless, each of them saw the need to forgive the offender out of biblical obedience.

It seemed that we were raising more questions than getting answers. We never really resolved the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness. Virtually everyone but *B* believed that it was possible to forgive without reconciliation—again, because the offending party cannot or will not repent, or because the trust has been too badly damaged to continue as before. They did not feel that this contradicts forgiveness.

It does seem difficult, as *B* pointed out, to see how excommunication of an unrepentant sinner can coincide with forgiving him. The relationship is essentially terminated while the offender refuses to repent. It appears that the whole process is designed to bring the sinner to repentance so that forgiveness might be granted.

I was foolish enough at this point to complicate matters further by raising the question of marital infidelity. Must the innocent party forgive an unfaithful spouse if he or she repents? It would seem that forgiveness is mandatory. But does forgiveness require continuing the marriage covenant? Is divorce permitted only when the spouse is unrepentant?

Unfortunately I have to report that I left these difficult areas unresolved. I had never before considered that there might be exceptions to the rule to forgive. There is no doubt that God commands us in Scripture to forgive those who wrong us. We are to forgive our brothers and sisters because God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32; Matt. 18:35; Col. 3:13). Other references do not seem to be restricted to those in the Church, but do include (as did Matt. 18:35) a severe warning that God will withhold forgiveness from us if we do not forgive (Matt. 6:12, 14, 15; Mk. 11:25; Lk. 6:37). In other places it seems that the forgiveness specifically follows repentance (Lk. 17:3-4). Paul tells the Corinthians to forgive the man who has sinned, as his punishment had been adequate (II Cor. 2:7). And as Jesus charges the disciples with their apostolic ministry he gives them the authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness in his name (Jn. 20:23).

Needless to say, the class discussion was emotionally charged. It is good that this happened after we had been meeting weekly for eleven or twelve weeks. Though these people had not been absolute strangers to each other, and a few of them already had long-

term friendships, the group dynamics had sufficiently developed to the point where most could express themselves freely while disagreeing with one other constructively.

As I said, the questions were not well resolved and I have to take the blame for this. I saw no evidence that anyone else was swayed from previously held opinions about the need to forgive others regardless of their lack of repentance. My opinion became less strong as a result, however. It seems that there may be times when withholding forgiveness may be warranted, though it does not give license to sinful expression. The Scriptural warnings against an unforgiving heart, however, are enough to compel me to forgive those who wrong me and I would continue to teach the same.

I gave an assignment asking the students to think of someone they still needed to forgive, indicating who it was by false name if necessary. *B* could think of no one. But the previous week he had spoken about how his father had destroyed his family by neglect and a sinful lifestyle. It was clear that he had not forgiven him, but by *B*'s rule, since his father hadn't repented, he didn't need to forgive him. Indeed, for *B* it would be wrong to forgive since it would be as if to condone the wrong. I suggested to him that he needs to forgive his father anyway. In the final course evaluation *B* did write that he had been swayed toward the posture of forgiving more easily than before.

The transition between the passage on church discipline and the parable of the unmerciful steward is occasioned by Peter's question to Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matt. 18:21). We all understand that the answer—translated either seventy-seven or seventy times seven—is not a matter of accurate bookkeeping. We are to forgive as many times as we are sinned against.

There is another reality which we all know and which might be supported in Jesus' answer. I raised the point that often we find ourselves needing to forgive multiple times for the *same* offense as we discover that we are still falling short of full forgiveness. We decide to forgive, but the process is neither instantaneous nor discrete. We must actually repent of our bitterness and unforgiving hearts when it becomes obvious to us that the issue is still not resolved internally. And then we must either forgive again, or recommit to forgiving. There may not be a difference. Virtually everyone affirmed this wholeheartedly.

I certainly did not need to convince any of the class participants that it is difficult to forgive. I used the biblical idea of debt from the Lord's Prayer to show that when someone sins against us there really is an accounting discrepancy. They owe us. But we can choose in our sinful hearts to keep that debt outstanding and allow a barrier to exist in our relationship, or absorb/pay the debt ourselves. It is difficult for us to accept that loss, and this is where looking to the debt that Christ paid helps us tremendously.

One of the "final four" that I interviewed after the class was over was chosen because he expressed on several of the later assignments that he was really being struck by the material we were covering. In particular he was convicted by the unit on forgiveness, and he realized that he must finally forgive his ex-wife for how she had hurt him in leaving the marriage five years earlier (he had since remarried). As we spoke, it was clear that the anger was still there, which showed that the process was incomplete. As we had discussed in class, this would be one of those situations which would require continual reminding of the decision to forgive, or put another way, repeated forgiveness.

We forgive others because we are commanded to do so. For many, this is enough to know. But God commands us to forgive because in doing so we reflect God's character. He is a God who forgives those who turn to him. Further, we ourselves have been forgiven much. Not only are we obligated to forgive others as a result, our forgiving others shows that we realize that the debt we owed God, which was paid in Christ, was far greater than any debt owed us by another.

**7. As participants learn to believe the gospel, what begins to happen in their relationships with the Lord and with other people?**

This last question was not one I ever asked specifically during a class session, though I did ask it in my midway and final interviews. Given that Jesus summed up the Greatest Commandment in terms of loving God with all our being and loving our neighbor as ourselves, this question seems rather appropriate to ascertain whether or not the gospel is having impact. The goal of the course was certainly not just to give people a better sense of assurance of salvation or of being loved by God, but to let the truth of the gospel transform them.

There are a couple of hindrances to answering this last very important research question, hindrances which I anticipated before I engaged in the study. One is that I must rely on what the participants told me. I cannot really observe these relationships, and their answers may not reflect reality. Secondly, the changes in these relationships are only going to be reflected over time, a commodity which we did not have. Though this

was acknowledged as a limitation to this study, I still chose to investigate what developments the participants could notice in themselves during the time that we had.

**a. Relationship with their heavenly Father**

Those who said they saw an improvement in their private and corporate worship were those who already enjoyed their relationship with God. This reflects the entirety of Group C. Their own testimony to growth is largely what caused me to categorize them this way in the first place.

I ordinarily led worship in the Sunday morning services, including most prayers and all the singing of hymns and other songs. From that vantage point, it was possible to observe the participation of the congregation, and I had definitely noticed what appeared to be intense emotion during worship by one member of Group C and by *B*. I pointed that out to *B* in the midway interview, who then told me that as an emotional person it was natural for him to express his worship somewhat demonstratively. According to him, going through this discipleship course had no effect on his worship.

Two of the women in Group C, who said they had already had a good prayer life, told me that they were experiencing renewed joy in their private and corporate worship. One of the most enthusiastic about this course told me that she was not necessarily feeling more comfortable in coming to the Lord, but more joyful. The words in the hymns were becoming so much more meaningful and her worship was more alive.

I mentioned another woman in this group who had been seriously affected by the recent murder of one of our church members. She was not sure whether her increasing enjoyment of worship could be attributed to the class or to having recently had to lean

into God more than before. But as she saw her weakness she was learning about her Savior's strength.

Group A was not without any signs of life, I am happy to say. One of the women said that thinking of God as *Abba* had affected her prayer life and attitudes somewhat. She found it really amazing that God delights over us. Unfortunately, the real effect seemed to be minimal, because she continued to say that she still felt far away from God, and wasn't engaging in private worship or devotion very much. She professed to wanting more intimacy with God but not knowing how to go about it. I think a lot of this comes from her memory of the intensive discipleship she underwent as a teenager. She had spent each summer working at a beach hotel owned by fellow church members. The atmosphere was probably more like a small Christian camp, as the woman proprietor disciplined the girls every day between their work responsibilities and enjoying the beach. That was over twenty years ago, and it seems she still longed for the emotional and spiritual high that those summers provided.

Another Group A member said that he personally identified with the assigned memory passages, and had therefore begun meditating on Scripture more, and had begun to feel closer to the Lord in doing so. He is still enormously unsatisfied with his private devotional life, however.

Two of the other men in the group talked about wanting more intimacy with God, but genuinely felt stuck. One observed that he knew co-workers who would pray before an important meeting, whereas that would never occur to him. He also wished that he could say that as his thoughts would wander while driving or just daydreaming, that they

would turn toward the Lord. I admit this concerns me, though his profession of faith sure seems earnest.

Sam said that he wished he was more emotional, but then again, didn't trust emotions very much. He would like to enjoy a more intimate relationship with the Lord, but it seemed to remain on somewhat formal terms with him. He did say that through the course he had gained confidence to approach God even when he knows he hasn't been on the best of behavior. Considering that his only mentioned sin was impatience, this must be what he means. I did ask him if he had considered exploring with a professional counselor why he is so blocked emotionally, and I found that he was currently so engaged. There is hope.

#### **b. Relationships with others**

This was to be the content for the concluding lesson which ended up being pre-empted because we had to finish the previous one on forgiveness. Of course, forgiveness is very relational. I did manage to squeeze in some of the elements I had hoped to cover in that final lesson anyway.

When I asked the class why it is so difficult to forgive, one from Group A said that to forgive requires that we let go of the right to be angry. *B* mentioned that our sense of justice is offended. Others admitted that they often didn't want to "let someone off the hook" too easily. Someone from Group C, apparently assuming a big offense, said that we want to be assured in some way that "they won't hurt us again like that."

I brought up the point that one reason it is often hard to forgive, even when asked, is that we are not convinced of the sincerity or remorse behind the apology. Just as our

repentances to God are often superficial, so can be our apologies to one another. And those of us with children all know that “I’m sorry” is often said just to avoid punishment. The words themselves do not constitute an apology. In the second lesson (see Appendix B) I listed a set of excuses we sometimes use in order to defend ourselves in awkward moments. The point was to see how desperate we are to justify ourselves. But as we look at the list we see that these are sometimes passed off as apologies. One of them is “I am sorry, please forgive me,” which may sometimes translate to, “Let’s just get this over with as soon as possible.”

Everyone seemed to resonate with the injustice we feel when someone apologizes and we feel obligated to forgive, though we are not yet ready. And although sometimes the slowness to be ready is sinful—as in, “that person hasn’t suffered enough for wronging me”—often it is just that we sense the need for the extent of the hurt to be made clear. I cannot specifically support this biblically, but we all agreed that it makes it easier to forgive when the amount of the debt is made known. And though the other person’s understanding should not be a prerequisite to our forgiveness, it definitely helps us get beyond the hurt, builds a better understanding between the two parties, and lays a good path for a more constructive reconciliation.

*Sonship* emphasizes this whole idea of both providing and seeking more information regarding offenses in order to love better. I challenged the class to attempt to apply this in their relationships when someone criticizes them or lets them know of an offense. Rather than defending or explaining away their behavior (which may be perfectly reasonable), they should just listen and maybe ask for further clarifying information. Seeking to understand how we come across from the other person’s

viewpoint will not only aid the relationship (as we begin to understand each other better), but will also help shed light on our sin, which in turn will bring us to necessary repentance. All the married couples appreciated this advice, particularly the wives.

I was able to see this played out in a final interview I had with Sam (Group A). He knows that he has a problem with impatience, which is manifested at work against those whom he regards as less competent than himself. During our final interview he boasted about great progress in this area. In fact he reported an instance where he was able to sit and accept criticism for this very problem, whereas months earlier he would have brushed it off or refused to listen at all. I suppose this is progress, but what I failed to see—and what I failed to help him see was that the greater sin was his idolatry of competency, which made him so impatient with everyone else.

The flip side of receiving constructive criticism is offering it to others. We are generally so concerned about the teaching in Matt. 7:1-5 about judging others, and overly concerned about the speck in another's eye while ignoring the plank in our own, that we are reluctant ever to point out anyone else's sin. *Sonship* challenges us to love one another more deliberately, and this often involves confrontation. The course teaches that we are to help one another to see our sins (Gal. 6:1-5; Rom. 15:4; Col. 3:16), that we might grow in our relationship to one another and in the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

### c. **Relationship (or obligation) to society and to the world**

As we are transformed by the gospel and see ourselves as image-bearers of God in his kingdom, there are great implications for the way that we live in society and interact with the world. Unfortunately this was a grossly neglected area of my course, which I

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<sup>8</sup> *Gospel Transformation*, Unit 6, Lesson 35 (Jenkintown, Pa.: World Harvest Mission, 2001).

admit to my shame. This aspect was not at all represented by the *Sonship* material I used, and its lack only became obvious to me after the class had ended. Since the final four interviews took place while I was in the midst of research I did ask participants about their sense of responsibility to the world. I asked them if they had considered how the gospel directed them to work to transform culture. And more simply, I asked them if anything from the course had motivated them to evangelize unbelievers. Basically, their responses were all negative, which is quite telling. I will return to this theme in the next chapter.

### **Summary**

The goal of the course was that the participants grow from their realization of their righteousness in Christ, trusting in Jesus alone. The goal of this project was to observe how this happens.

As one would expect, such a course as this can leave as many impressions and degrees of impact as there are participants. My threefold categorization helped me to generalize at times, but nobody exhibited responses that were entirely consistent with my grouping of them—i.e., Group A (“stuck”) or Group C (receptive and responsive, strong impact). Even *B* stepped out of his own “box” several times. Periodically, as reported above, some concepts everyone seemed to accept and understand gladly. And in parallel fashion, some concepts remained a bit unclear or were not applied effectively.

But most of the time my observations showed that the Spirit had made some hearts ready and receptive while seeming not to do so with others. This was out of my

control. In the next and final chapter I will discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of the material and my method, namely those things that were within my control.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary of Study

##### *Purpose and motivation*

My interest in leading a small group through *Sonship* material predates this project by a couple of years. I cannot overstate the contribution it made to my own understanding of the gospel and of sanctification by faith. Although I had assurance of salvation I did not live convinced of the righteous standing I have in Christ, found little power for sanctification day to day, lived with constant disappointment in myself and others, had stopped repenting of my overly critical nature, and had very little joy. I should say right now that neither *Sonship*, nor any other program, can in itself solve all these problems. I still struggle with every one of them—but I have changed.

I think one of the most radical changes in me was the ability to admit my sins more openly without fear of how it might taint the image held of me (and which I worked hard to uphold) by my brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, admitting my sins and weaknesses before unbelievers has opened doors for evangelism. *Sonship* helped me see how much I need my Savior daily, what it means in my life today that Jesus died for my sins—not only securing me forgiveness and a place in heaven when I die, but also in the

present experience of living out the power of the gospel. My repentance is more consistent and more sincere than before, and so is my joy in Christ as he assures me of forgiveness and through his Spirit gives me power to change. As I believe the gospel, I am transformed; I am sanctified by faith. And I also have a long way to go.

As I worked through what I was learning in my own life, I also began to share it virtually every time I preached or taught. Indeed, I felt compelled to do so. As associate pastor my preaching opportunities were sadly limited, but I took advantage of those times to make sure I was preaching the gospel of grace and hope, as opposed to the thinly disguised legalism that characterized my earlier sermons. As time went on, I became more aware that the church was filled with people who experienced the same struggles I did, and in many cases far worse. So many in the congregation were stuck in a performance mode. So many lived with a sense of defeat over sins repented too frequently without any hope of victory. But what I noticed was that sermons were not enough to remedy the situation. Preaching alone did not seem to penetrate. That was sobering, and definitely a blow to my ego, as I thought I was making things so clear.

I really wanted to see our church be transformed by the gospel—not by Sonship, but by the gospel. I saw Sonship as a healthy expression of what the gospel teaches, which is why I wanted to use it. I decided to take people through the Sonship material a few at a time, hopefully to reproduce teachers who could help multiply its reach. The timing of my degree and my planned departure from the church in 2001 prompted me to put together a course for the fall of 2000. The problem was that, because I was making my transition as a missionary the following year, I would not have the opportunity to oversee ongoing development and training through Sonship. It became clear that my

project would be confined to those thirteen weeks. And so my goal became the study of what did happen as I took those ten people through the material. Although I genuinely desired their growth, I knew that the most significant outcome might conceivably turn out to be the impact this course would have on my own future teaching ministry.

As I have by now asserted several times, the core teaching of Sonship is the doctrine of sanctification by faith. I wanted, therefore, to see what happened as I taught it. How would a small group of believers be impacted by this doctrine, as the way they understand the gospel was stretched or maybe even revolutionized? How would they process the material in their minds and hearts, and begin to apply it in their lives? These were the primary research questions.

### ***Summary of Study Design***

There are basically three reasons why I did not simply use Sonship in its existing format. First, at the time I was technically not qualified to lead a group through the course, though I could have led an individual through the material under the supervision of a World Harvest mentor. Second, the Sonship course has sixteen lessons, which was more than I felt I could reasonably do within the time constraints. It would also have been necessary, according to World Harvest's guidelines, to meet with each person or couple between every lesson for counseling/application. I do not think I could have managed that schedule with my other pastoral duties. Third, I wanted to use my own format and style. Sonship consists of taped lectures with follow-up individual and small group questions. But I didn't want to facilitate, I wanted to teach. I learned of World

Harvest's Bible study format called *Discipling by Grace*. As I planned to use that material as a base, I discovered that World Harvest Mission was retiring that course and was currently writing a replacement called *Gospel Transformation*. The author, Neil Williams, agreed to send me his draft copies of each chapter as it was ready to use for this class. And so, drawing from *Sonship*, *Discipling by Grace*, *Gospel Transformation*, and my own contributions and modifications, I planned a thirteen-week course in small group format.

The members of the small group were all people with whom I had had previous positive ministry experience, and in whom I could see a willingness and hunger to learn. These were people close to my own age, mostly at the same point in life, and were either leaders or emerging leaders in the church. All of them were involved in some kind of teaching ministry themselves, so the hope of their being able to reproduce the teaching seemed possible.

The basic order and flow of the existing *Sonship* curriculum made good sense to me, though I did not select every lesson or specific theme. The course topics included: our ongoing need for the gospel, justification, adoption, spiritual idolatry, sanctification, repentance, and forgiveness. I designed weekly class study guides which were basically a stated goal followed by a number of discussion questions (see Appendix B). The students had a homework assignment every week, which consisted of a couple of questions for written response, a Scripture memory verse, and daily journaling. Besides written assignments, the participants were given three practical assignments as well. They took on the "Tongue Assignment," an invention of Rose Marie Miller. Between weeks two and three the students were instructed to curb their tongues from all negative,

critical, deceptive, and self-defending words. Instead, they were to practice speaking words of encouragement, gratitude, and honesty. The main purpose for this was to shock them into seeing how sinful they were, how they could not keep the law, and how they needed Christ more desperately than they probably realized. Two other assignments were to explain justification and sanctification (using the Cross Chart schematic) to someone of their choosing. I also interviewed each person before the class began, then halfway through, and then, at the end, interviewed four from the class who seemed to be grasping the material well. Additionally, the class members turned in final evaluations and comments.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Without revisiting in detail each of the secondary research questions detailed in the previous chapter, I have decided to discuss my findings with the six statements that follow.

#### **A. The participants saw that their understanding of the definition and scope of the gospel was deficient.**

As was clear from the pre-class interviews and the first couple of classes, the group members limited their definition of the gospel to forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The idea of their ongoing need to hear the gospel, or to “preach it to ourselves every day” made no sense at first. Throughout the class they

heard me use Sonship's definition of the gospel so many times that they were able to echo it for me in such a paraphrase as: "You are far more sinful than you think, but God's grace in Jesus Christ is far more wonderful than you realize." The gospel is not merely about praying a prayer to ask Jesus into one's heart, but is the living out of the reality of one's union with Christ. As I probed the students about the ways in which we seek to justify ourselves before others, they could see how little they relied on their justification through Christ's blood. Presenting this problem early on was vital to an understanding of sanctification. If we are not much convinced of our justification, we have little basis on which to be confident of the power for sanctification. The gospel has daily relevance.

**B. The doctrine of justification was inadequately understood, but when corrected, served as the basis for understanding virtually every other doctrine taught in class (especially adoption and sanctification).**

About half of the class members felt that their relationship with their heavenly Father was distant, and in a few cases, maybe not so secure. Only one person admitted that he sometimes worried about assurance of salvation. But several participants were so aware of their shortcomings (though I occasionally reminded them that they were worse than they thought!) that they reasoned that God was always frowning at them. One man expressed it well on behalf of many, saying that he could believe Christ forgave him and welcomed him with open arms, but behind Christ loomed an angry Father, reluctantly granting the forgiveness he was now obligated to bestow.

His view, which I believe is very common, reflects a deficient view of justification. My own experience tells me, and this group reinforced it, that only a minority of Christians understand that to them was imputed the righteousness of Jesus. Nothing I taught on this topic was brand new (and I know I had preached it many times), but the reality of it had never sunk in. The doctrine of propitiation was liberating to the ones I call Group A, as they had to face the idea that God's anger for their sin was already exhausted on Christ. I realize how that teaching can be abused and misunderstood, though I don't believe there was any such danger among those I was teaching. Having said all that, I don't see evidence that those who most needed to grasp this were able to absorb and rest in the truth of the Father's positive regard for them as righteous saints. They could affirm this truth, but continued to live under a vague cloud of guilt.

This inability to be convinced that we are actually righteous as a result of justification by faith is the same deficient understanding the Galatian church had. As I demonstrated in the literature review, the issue was not merely the question of how one is regenerated but of how one lives as a believer. Paul is angry that the Galatians believe that once one is justified he should now establish his righteousness by keeping the law. This is exactly what a large segment of today's church believes as well, and was clearly the case with several of my students. Seeing the work of Christ as only a past reality without present implications for living is not the gospel. As Christians live under the fear that they must meet unreachable expectations of perfection, they live in defeat and without joy. In other words, the gospel is the guarantee of our righteous stance before God, as well as the power for living day to day. It is both amazing and disconcerting how

hard it is to convince some people of this, as they consider it too good to be true. Yet it is what the Bible teaches us to believe

At the same time, it was delightful to see hearts respond with grateful confidence that their position before God was absolutely secure because Christ had fully paid the debt for their sins. There was no further amount still outstanding. And participants were willing to live with the paradox of not yet being what they are already declared to be.

**C. Adoption became more meaningful when justification was clearly understood.**

**It also reminded participants that their relationship with God was not only forensic, but also personal: God delighted in them.**

As we covered adoption it became very clear to me how unhelpful it would be to treat each step of the ordo salutis separately from all the others. Everyone in the class knew that they were adopted as sons of the heavenly Father. What was missing was the joy in knowing and experiencing this sonship. Adoption does sound like a legal term, though not as starkly so as justification. Once we had solidified the implications of our justification, it was easier to see that our Father could actually enjoy us without the constant obstacle of our sin. However, this was not accepted merely by presenting it in logical form. When I had someone read aloud Zeph. 3:17 most of the class was unfamiliar with it, and a few were positively stunned: How could God actually delight in us this way? Would he truly sing over us? Fortunately my class was firmly committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. If the Bible really says it, then it must be true.

The doctrine of adoption is very powerful. There is such a difference between legal acceptance of us (and again, some seemed to feel that God mechanically obligates himself to accept us if we accept Jesus), and the inclusion into a family. Adoption has its legal aspects, as we all understand in earthly terms. And it is useful to reflect on the legal implications, as it helps us believe the guarantees of our inheritance, for example. It also helps us to remember that our relationship is irrevocable. Several class members marveled at the idea that, had the prodigal son run away again, he would be accepted yet again upon return. We did question, however, whether the son could ever really run away after knowing how he was loved. But as we all know of our own constant unfaithfulness in spite of the fact that we are so loved, it gave us all confidence that the Father's forgiveness will never be exhausted whenever we run back to him in repentance.

Sonship repeatedly contrasts the dynamic of living like a son with that of living as an orphan. This distinction is helpful too. It was Jack Miller's wording that jolted his wife Rose Marie into seeing the truth when he told her that she was living as an orphan, without the possession and accompanying benefits of the Holy Spirit. The imagery of the contrast between orphan and son is powerful, and I don't think I availed myself of it as much as I should have. Those participants in Group A understood the doctrine, it seems, but continued to struggle with relating to God at an emotionally intimate level.

**D. Not all of our repentance is real repentance at all. The participants discovered that repentance is harder and more humbling than they thought. Furthermore, repentance should characterize our lifestyle.**

There was no need for me to convince anyone in the class of the need to repent constantly—at least not in the way they understood repentance. All of them knew that they were sinning every day. When presented with the law, they could see where they fell short. This was the purpose of the “Tongue Assignment,” given early on in the course. The idea there was to give them the law to show them their helplessness to keep it. Unfortunately, at least two in the class loved it as a practical means to address this problem in their lives. I tried to get them to see that theirs was a Pharisaical approach. It was not the law that was the problem, but the belief that they could keep it if they just kept working at it, and that if they did keep it they would be more pleasing to the Father. This is the Galatian problem all over again.

As I said, it was not necessary with this group to emphasize the need to obey the law. Nothing I taught encouraged them to be lax in obedience, and as far as I could tell, nothing I said was interpreted this way. One of the things that was difficult to teach was that repentance is necessary for far more than breaking the law—that is, if we limit our understanding of the law to regulating behavior. Again, this was the error of the Pharisees. The difficulty was trying to show the class that our behavior is driven by deeper sins from the heart. Repenting of the behavioral manifestation is necessary, but that only touches the surface. An example we used several times in the class was the sin of gossip. If we can get ourselves to stop talking about other people, we have not

necessarily addressed the sin. For one thing, those bad thoughts toward the other person or people are probably still festering in our hearts. But more than that, the sin of gossip is usually motivated by our own need to compare ourselves favorably to another or to many others. This betrays a lack of belief of our justification and adoption, which ought to provide us with all the sense of worth and significance we could ever need. Our problem is a lack of faith. Further, if we are judging ourselves by how we compare to others, then our standard is too low. Our heavenly Father demands perfection (Matt. 5:48). We are fellow sinners, all in great need of Christ who makes us righteous—declaring us to be so and transforming us through his Spirit to fulfill the reality. I am not confident that the participants were able to see that their sins were so much deeper and so much worse than they thought. They affirmed it, but I don't believe any of them ever fully understood the idea of "root" sins, or at least they could not identify their own.

The other aspect of repentance which was very difficult to understand and to teach was the way that we repent in the flesh. Often in the face of our sin we apologize profusely to God, berate ourselves, and promise him that we will do better the next time. The problem is that we believe that we can break ourselves of the sin without Christ. We don't mean to do that, and this is where it was hard to understand. The missing element is the great remorse as we see what sinners we are, coming broken to the Father in repentance, pleading for the strength that we simply do not have. Instead we proudly want to believe that if we just try harder, with just one more chance, we can do better.

I also gave the class the following insight to help them better understand. I have found pastorally that often people struggle with a sin in their lives that is so vile in their eyes that they cannot forgive themselves. Sometimes they can even believe that God

forgives them, but they cannot let themselves off so easily. What I believe is happening in these instances is that the person cannot come to terms with the fact that his or her heart really is vile enough to have committed that sin. It isn't just a fluke in an otherwise good heart. It is necessary to face the reality that we are capable of horrendous sins—and thank the Lord that we are spared from so many more. But it is also necessary to realize that God's grace through the Savior is more than adequate for even these sins.

#### **E. Sanctification by faith was embraced gratefully and enthusiastically.**

This was what I would consider the climax of the course, as we put all the previous concepts together to explain how we actually grow in holiness. The simple answer is that we are transformed as we believe the gospel, which means a couple of things.

One aspect is the reality of our union to Christ through faith. He is actively at work through his Spirit transforming us into his image. We are not passive in this process, but we only act in response to what God is doing. We begin to live in a way that shows that we believe, that shows a changed heart devoted to our Lord. Being certain of our justification and adoption, we no longer need to live in fear that God might reject us if we do not measure up. At the same time, because we are declared righteous, we are free to serve God out of a more pure desire to please him. And so, we are sanctified by faith. I actually did not stress this very much in the class, but I should have. We did look together at II Cor. 3:16-18, for example, which speaks of the mystery of being transformed into Christ's likeness even as we behold his glory. One of the women from

Group C pointed out the obvious fact that, as we spend time with the one we love and who is so wonderful, we will want to be like him. We will imitate him and ask him to make us like him. We trust him for all he promises to be for us, and learn that no one or nothing else will satisfy us. I too quickly, perhaps, shot down the comments made by a member of Group A every time he suggested that we grow holy by imitation of Christ. Provided this imitation is not separate from saving faith, and that we do not base our justification on the extent to which we imitate him well, he really is correct. Holiness is indeed manifested by obedience, but obedience does not in itself lead to holiness.

The other way we are sanctified by faith is in the growth we experience as we repent of unbelief and return to believing the gospel. Faith is the confidence that we are justified by Christ's blood and that his death and resurrection provide us with the power to live a holy life (Phil. 3:10). Because we are sure of our reconciliation, which was established at a terrible cost, we need not live in fear of condemnation. Through faith we are sure of heaven and sure of our possession of the Holy Spirit.

These are not easy concepts to teach, and it was therefore necessary to have spent as much time as we did establishing the doctrines of justification and adoption in order for participants to believe that we are being sanctified by virtue of our positional righteousness. In other words, our sanctification is secured and empowered by the fact that we are already declared righteous, and possess Christ's righteousness by virtue of our union to him through faith. Although we talked about both aspects of sanctification by faith, the Cross Chart illustrates the second. The chart shows that as we are willing to face our sin and repent of it, our understanding of the extent of our salvation will increase—that more grace has been given to us in Christ than we realized, because we

didn't know before how much we needed it. Simply put, the more we see of our sin, the more we see of our Savior. We are sanctified as we repent of our sins, coming broken to the only one who can heal us. We are sanctified by believing more in Christ.

**F. The participants understood that the power to love others comes from the realization of the way that we have been loved by God.**

Loving others as we have been loved, or because we have been loved, has broad applications. In our class, unfortunately, we mostly limited its application to the expression of love in forgiving those who wrong us.

The obligation to forgive those who wrong us did not take any convincing, except for the student I call *B*. For him forgiveness first required repentance. We did not explore every detail of his reasoning, but I did have to concede that there are places in Scripture, such as in the case of church discipline, where it does appear that forgiveness might be withheld for various reasons. I still regret that I was not better prepared to discuss that and bring it to a better conclusion.

Nevertheless, the participants already understood that forgiveness was necessary because God required it and because it reflected his own merciful character. We who are his children must forgive because God is a forgiving God. What was helpful to class members was to be reminded of the incongruity between their huge sins against God and the relatively small sins of others against them. As in the case of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-25), our inability or refusal to forgive others reveals an ungrateful heart with no appreciation of what grace has been given to us. At best this stubbornness is sin; at

worst this ingratitude may actually reflect an unregenerate heart. Those who have been forgiven much should find it easy to forgive others of so little. This was not a radical idea to the participants, but as they were coming more to terms with the reality of their own sin being so much worse than they had previously thought, the sharper perspective made it potentially easier to forgive others.

This led to the discussion of dealing more honestly with others, which was meant to be the final lesson for the course. The class wholeheartedly agreed that it is so much easier to forgive when we believe that the one who has offended us understands how much he or she hurt us. The purpose in this discussion was to show them the importance of honesty in our relationships so that we might love better. The element of honesty in forgiveness is more than just pragmatic or self-serving, though a better understanding does free us to forgive. It acknowledges that covering up our hurts allows resentment to build and fester. The missing element in this discussion was the benefit of confronting the offender with his or her sin. The purpose here is not only that the offender understand the extent of the hurt, but also that he or she might more fully repent before God. And of course, the relationship is then freed for reconciliation.

This confrontation goes both ways, which unfortunately was also barely mentioned at the end of the final class. If I remain open to being confronted by sins which my brothers and sisters observe in me, then they can help me in sanctification as I am brought to repentance. Sonship teaches us to resist our natural tendency toward self defense when confronted, but instead to elicit more information. Granted, the confrontation can be based on a misunderstanding. But belief in our justification, which assures us of God's favor, should protect us from the need to appear perfect or defend

ourselves before others. We know that we are worse sinners than we have yet recognized, and at the same time we know that we are considered more righteous and are more loved than we have yet realized.

### **Recommendations for Further Research and Practice**

#### ***Shortcomings in Project Design and Curriculum***

The expression “hindsight is 20/20” is certainly applicable to this project. I can see several flaws which, if corrected, would likely have produced better results. As I reflect on this I remind myself that this was a qualitative study, and that the impact of the process on the participants was never meant to be measured. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of doing this study was to improve the method and the potential long-term effects of such a program.

One major shortcoming was in the data collection, or at least in my interpretation of the data as I was collecting them. I found myself surprised at the end, which I regret. I have concluded by this point that the biggest problem here was in the design, believing that I had a good balance between oral (interviews and class discussions), written (homework assignments), and my own observations. The two men that I interviewed at the final stage had, through their written assignments indicated to me that more change, or at least more impact, was happening than was the reality. They are both thinkers and expressed themselves well on paper. A little probing in the final interview revealed that they were dealing with everything at an arm’s length intellectual level. One of them told

me he was “getting it, but now he just needed it to get him.” In contrast a woman I had assumed was not absorbing much due to her quietness in class surprised me when I assembled her homework assignments and saw a pattern of growth I had previously missed.

The best way to address the problem of misjudging response would have been to have more interviews/counseling sessions throughout the course. Although it would have been extremely difficult to schedule a meeting with each participant every week, I could at least have met with each of them a couple more times than I did. It would have required clearing more of my schedule from other pastoral duties during those months, which I did not believe to be possible at the time. Now I see how necessary it was. The face-to-face counseling sessions would likely have proved more valuable than the written material I have.

I had no difficulty getting the class to talk. In fact I usually had the opposite problem, and perhaps ten was too large a number of participants for my purposes. As in any small group there were a few dominant personalities, a few who spoke only occasionally, and everything in between. I needed to do a better job bringing the quiet ones into the discussions. As it turns out, one of the quietest ones in the class seems to have had one of the best experiences.

I was reluctant to curb most class discussions, which often prevented us from getting through all the planned material. There are a few different ways I could have addressed this, as almost everyone told me they felt frustrated that we always ran out of time. Several suggested that we should have met for two hours instead of the scheduled ninety minutes. I had scheduled our classes to coincide with the other Wednesday

evening programs at church, but we could have made other arrangements. As far as managing the discussions better, the main difficulty was in the last two class sessions on forgiveness, which I have already explained.

The journaling requirement for this class was largely ignored. I feel somewhat hypocritical having assigned it, since I have never myself kept the discipline. This is probably why I let it slide as well. Nevertheless, World Harvest asserts that journaling is an important component in aiding our meditations and prayers. Perhaps I could have suggested specific ideas for reflection. However, several class members remarked that just keeping up with the assignments I collected and memorizing the Scripture verses was a heavy load. There were two or three who also gave up trying to memorize the Scripture verses, which is too bad. I worked hard to assign relevant and devotional passages that would help to burn these truths into their hearts. I am not sure how I could have addressed the journaling and Scripture memory deficiencies differently.

### ***Shortcomings in Sonship Curriculum***

Some of the difficulties I experienced in attempting to teach this material effectively must be attributed in part to the *Sonship* curriculum on which I based my own. Perhaps I should again remind the reader that the biblical and theological study represented in the literature review was conducted almost entirely after the completion of the course. It therefore clarified and expanded some theology which is lacking in the *Sonship* material. There are definitely some aspects of the theology supporting *Sonship* that require attention and correction. It is not my purpose to offer a full critique of

*Sonship*, but rather, to interact briefly with some areas that raised issues during my teaching and in the analysis which followed. I divide these concerns into five areas, though they are not necessarily discrete or independent of one another.

### **A. Lutheran View of Law**

*Sonship*'s view and treatment of the law is really more Lutheran than Calvinistic. Law is barely ever presented as a good thing, and disciples are continually steered away from legalism and toward the freedom of the gospel. The "Tongue Assignment" is a good example, one which I used myself. Students are told to avoid all criticism, gossip, complaining, and other common sins of the tongue for one week. In short, they are told to obey the law strictly for a discrete period of time. But the purpose in the assignment is really to demonstrate Luther's second use of the law, in which he taught that the law is designed to show us our need for Christ and drive us toward him. After one week of this exercise it is quite clear that none of us can keep the law. We see that we are more desperately sinful than we already thought we were, and we see the need for the gospel. This is a good and effective exercise to reinforce this truth. But nothing is said in the assignment's context or anywhere else in the course about Calvin's third use of the law. This leads to the lack of emphasis on obedience which I also discuss below. Nothing is ever said that implies that it does not matter what we do, or that obedience to God's commands is optional for believers. But neither are we specifically reminded of our obligation and empowerment to obey. I suppose this is due to the Lutheran concern that too great an emphasis on obedience to the law might lead one to think he is being justified by his faithfulness in keeping it so well.

## **B. Lack of Covenantal Orientation**

I taught early on in the course that the gospel is Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God was at hand. God had come to be among his people as he had always promised. The common evangelical rendition of the gospel message is limited to the news of forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood. I say *limited* because forgiveness of sin is indeed the news of the gospel. But the gospel is so much more; it is the news that God has fulfilled his covenant in Christ. I taught this, but then never really returned to it. I won't blame World Harvest for my own deficiency here, but the truth is that *Sonship* does not represent a strong covenantal theology.

This is potentially a huge topic and might actually be a good focus for another dissertation in itself. I will, however, briefly point out a couple of instances in which a lack of clear covenant foundation in the curriculum caused me difficulty as a Reformed pastor.

The first is in the area of how adoption relates to sanctification, the very theme of *Sonship*. By definition sanctification is the process by which we are transformed and renewed into God's image. Being restored into the image of God as his sons most definitely requires us to be certain of that relationship. I applaud World Harvest Mission for its emphasis on adoption and its relationship to justification. If we do not believe that we are sons then we must not believe we are completely justified. By nature justification leads to adoption. *Sonship* teaches that we act like orphans when we seek justification from other sources and live under constant fear of God's rejection. In other words, we have a tendency to live as if we are not adopted, which reveals an inadequate understanding or weak conviction of our justification.

Having said all this, *Sonship* does not complete the picture of our adoption. The most blatant omission is the issue of covenant discipline. This became evident in the question I used from World Harvest material, “Is God angry with us when we sin?” The *Discipling by Grace* curriculum teaches that God is not angry with us because “the anger is removed from all who put their faith in His blood...When we sin God is not angry with us! Our sins are forgiven, past, present and future.”<sup>1</sup> I agree that it is important that students understand the doctrine of propitiation so that they can believe that Jesus’ death was enough to cover all their sins. Clearly this teaching is designed to combat the sense that so many believers have (as did several in my class) that God is always displeased—or angry—with them. After all, if God is angry with us for our sin, he truly would always be angry with us. It is easy to see how this teaching could be overemphasized to the point of antinomianism. Although I am certain this is not the intent, this teaching leaves itself open to that interpretation.

I attempted to clarify the issue with semantics, using the word *grief* rather than *anger*. The *Sonship* material does the same, albeit briefly. Students are told that God grieves when we sin just as an earthly father is hurt by his son’s rebellion. This statement is made to reassure the student that our sin does not change God’s love for us as sons.<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, the *Gospel Transformation* course includes an entire unit on the grieving of the Holy Spirit.

Clearly God’s wrath toward sinners is exhausted on Christ for those who trust in him. As for anger, it may just be a matter of definition. Grieving perhaps connotes passivity, as if God is sad when we sin but says or does nothing because we are already

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<sup>1</sup> *Discipling by Grace*, Lesson 1.4, pp. 2, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

forgiven. What is God's attitude when we sin? In retrospect I think it is appropriate to speak of anger in the best sense of "loving discipline." God corrects his own, and it is often painful. Heb. 12:5-11 makes it rather clear that God's discipline of his children is the surest sign that we are his children. *Sonship* offers no teaching on covenant discipline and leaves the students confused as to God's attitude toward our unfaithfulness to him.

Secondly, nothing in any of the *Sonship* material explicitly encourages obedience to God's commands. It is never suggested that such obedience is optional; it is just never talked about. The "Tongue Assignment," though it commands strict obedience to the curbing of the tongue, is actually given to demonstrate Luther's second use of the law. The goal is for us to see that we cannot obey perfectly, and our desperate need for Christ is made more obvious.

It seems that obedience is assumed in *Sonship*. The heavy emphasis on repentance reinforces this, as disciples are encouraged to live a lifestyle of repentance. We are encouraged to see our sin as greater than we had ever wanted to realize, and therefore to see that we need the Savior more than we had realized. I think it is fair to assume that this heightened awareness of sin and repentance is meant to call us to holy living. And holiness without obedience is meaningless. But *Sonship* does not say this explicitly.

Yet a covenantal view of our obligations as sons would demand such teaching. We obey God's commands not to be declared his children, but because we are his children. The covenant is not conditional, but neither is it without obligation. Much is made in *Sonship* of the mutual delight between us and our heavenly Father. The obedience expected of us is not drudgery, but is in itself a delight and brings delight. We

are renewed in this understanding of who we are, we want to please our Father, and by his Spirit we are more and more enabled to obey him. This teaching is lacking in the material.

Finally, the teaching in *Sonship* is not *kingdom of God* oriented. Again, the gospel is the good news that the kingdom of God has come. I truly appreciate Tim Keller's definition of the gospel, and have used it often and very effectively, but it really is very individualistic.<sup>3</sup> I happen to know that Keller is personally committed to mercy and compassion ministries both within the local church and in relation to the city and the world. These values are demonstrated in the ministry of and through the church he pastors, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.

*Sonship*, however, is virtually silent on the way that believers who are being transformed into the image of God are to reflect that image in their Father's world. The applications of the gospel are limited to our relationship to God and to others immediately around us. *Gospel Transformation* touches on this in chapters on fellowship, dying to self, evangelism, and missions. There is a brief teaching on our obligation to justice and mercy in its lesson on evangelism, but only in the form of a question:

Considering that Matthew [cf. Matt. 5:6, 20] is not speaking of imputed righteousness, but rather of justice and mercy, what are some of the issues we may need to become involved in when bringing grace to others? What are some of the areas that require our concern and involvement?<sup>4</sup>

The leader's guide gives a list of social issues as possible answers: oppression, poverty, marginalization and abuse of women, racism, injustice, persecution, AIDS, etc. I would consider it unreasonable to expect the *Sonship* curriculum to be exhaustive in its implications and applications of living out of the gospel. However, this brief reference to

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<sup>3</sup> See definition of terms in Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Gospel Transformation*, Unit 6, Lesson 32, Question 15.

the truth that the gospel is powerful enough to address every need, and should seek to transform society is insufficient to make much of an impression.<sup>5</sup> The lack of covenantal orientation is seen by a lack of kingdom orientation. The biggest concern of *Sonship* seems to be the individual's relationship to God. I will return to this concern below.

### C. Negative view of sanctification

*Sonship* emphasizes the lifelong battle with the flesh to the extent that it does not teach the doctrine of mortification. This is one of those places that makes the occasional comparison to Keswick theology a weak one. *Sonship* is far more pessimistic regarding victory over sin.

I cannot think of anything in the *Sonship* curriculum which contradicts mortification, rather it just is not taught. Instead we disciples are constantly taught that we will battle the flesh forever and increase in our awareness that we are even more sinful than we thought. This emphasis is meant to show us that if we are to save ourselves or even improve ourselves by our own effort we are doomed. The course is designed instead to show us our ongoing desperate need for the Savior. Indeed it should show us how much more we need him than we had dared to realize. *Sonship* neither teaches that we grow worse nor that we remain at the same sinful level. But because we are taught that we will continue to see more sin in our hearts than we knew was there, it might actually appear that *Sonship* denies mortification. I can understand the perception, since I have felt the tension in my own life and as I have taught the material. The experience parallels that which Paul records in Romans 7. Perhaps *Sonship's* inclusion of

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<sup>5</sup> This whole area of balancing piety and deed is treated very well in George Grant, *The Micah Mandate* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 1999). I must admit that I did not consider this concern myself as I designed my own course.

the doctrine of mortification would serve as an encouragement to struggling sinners. I must confess my own negligence here as well, as I merely nodded to the doctrine by asking on a homework assignment whether we become more or less sinful as we are sanctified. But we barely discussed it, and this is an omission I could easily correct.

#### **D. Confused Teaching on Repentance**

As a student I had so much appreciated the lecture delivered by Pastor Rick Downs from the *Sonship* course, that when the topic of repentance came up in my own course I decided to present the same lecture to my students. The reason I liked it was that Pastor Downs seems to know people very well and could think of all kinds of ways that we masquerade repentance, such as changing our behavior, merely talking about changing, and groveling.<sup>6</sup> He warns us against thinking that we are running to the Savior for his help as we repent, when in reality we are running the other way and believing in our own ability to change. And although this made sense, it was very difficult to get the students to understand what it looks like to depend on Christ to change us rather than on ourselves.

In effect, they were seeing what false repentance looked like, but could not get a grasp on how true repentance ought to appear. This is because Downs was rather specific in his delineation of false repentance, but only spoke of true repentance at a lofty level. Once again, I assume a Lutheran influence here (he quotes Luther several times), which more quickly warns people against attempting to use the law to justify themselves than it commands obedience to the law in Christ. Downs warns us against *doing* anything in repentance of our own strength, but rather, tells us to rely on Christ's. This is hard to

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<sup>6</sup> *Sonship*, 7-6 through 7-8.

grasp, and is rather distressingly close to a “let go and let God” position. In retrospect, I realize that I did not help the students see the brokenness that must characterize repentance. This is the element that is most often missing in repentance, and I believe is what Downs was attempting to explain. A lack of brokenness is what is most quickly dulled when the sin is deep-seated and chronic. I note with pleasure that *Gospel Transformation* spends three units dealing explicitly with repentance, and includes repentance in at least one other unit.

### **E. An Inward and Self-Centered Focus**

World Harvest Mission is a missions sending agency, though it is best known for its domestic renewal ministry. Their threefold vision for life and ministry is described as “testifying to the gospel of God’s grace to ourselves, to the Church, and to the world.”<sup>7</sup> Its renewal program is designed to strengthen individuals and the local church which “should lead to world missions as a natural byproduct.”<sup>8</sup> The operative word here is *should*. The stated assumption is that a renewed heart, one which delights in God, will naturally move toward evangelism and missions. It would be difficult to read the books that World Harvest Mission founder Jack Miller wrote and miss the obvious connection that he made in his own life.<sup>9</sup>

However, the connection is not so obvious and is clearly not automatic for many of the rest of us who work through the material. The outward focus is not at all

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<sup>7</sup> World Harvest Mission general brochure. This discussion could have been included in the above remarks on the lack of covenantal emphasis, but the subject of mercy and evangelism seemed broad enough to treat separately here.

<sup>8</sup> World Harvest Mission brochure, SONSHIP: A Phone Discipleship Course.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Miller’s *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, *Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless*, and *A Faith Worth Sharing*.

emphasized in *Sonship*, if it is taught at all. And, as I asked of the four final interviewees if the class had inspired an outward thrust for ministry, three of them had really not thought about it. The only one who considered any such outreaching ministry had already been thinking about it before the class. And why should any of the class participants consider how the gospel must be relevant beyond themselves and the local church? I had neglected to bring it up myself, as it was not in any of the curriculum from which I was drawing.

### ***In Defense of Using Sonship Material***

There are a number of flaws in *Sonship*, most of which I identified after I taught the course. I have always found that it is through teaching material that I see where my own deficiencies in understanding lie. It would have been possible to correct the theological shortcomings and skewed emphases I have just discussed in my own course design—had I seen them beforehand. But again, much of my research was conducted after the fact.

I have been pleased to see the results of the work of Neil Williams in correcting and clarifying much of the theology which supports *Sonship*. *Gospel Transformation*, for example, is a great improvement over the now obsolete *Discipling by Grace*, and I believe it is also better than the *Sonship* course because of its finer theological precision. Unfortunately, only limited portions of this new course were available to me at the time I designed and taught my own.

Knowing what I know now, I still believe *Sonship* to be a helpful tool, and intend to use World Harvest material again. I do not believe the aforementioned concerns are beyond my own correction, and I encourage World Harvest Mission to continue to correct and edit its curriculum. As I move to a conclusion, I would like to make some final positive observations about the method and content of *Sonship*.

*Sonship* is not and was never meant to be a comprehensive theology. It is a tool for renewal, and I believe, a very effective one. It boldly confronts legalism, complacency, and self-defeat with the good news of the gospel. It celebrates the Reformation truth of justification by grace through faith alone. *Sonship* heralds our adoption and reminds us of the Father's delight in his children. It powerfully raises our awareness of our sin and continually drives us to repentance. We are emboldened to face the frighteningly awesome depths of our sin in the assurance of the far greater magnitude represented in the person and work of our Savior Jesus Christ. In short, we learn to believe the gospel.

World Harvest is not attempting to replace the ministry of the local church, but is committed to helping and renewing it. *Sonship* is not meant to be a substitute for the church's ministry, and therefore need not be comprehensive in all it teaches. It may not teach obedience as we wish it would, but the church must do so. *Sonship* is most definitely pietistic, and majors on personal renewal. If it borrows this from Keswick theology, this does not mean it embraces the whole package. The same goes for the Lutheran stream we find. Our failure to keep the law should and must drive us to the Savior in absolute brokenness. Luther's second use of the law is powerful. But we need to balance Luther with a healthy dose of Calvin.

*Sonship* is effective in what it does because it has such a realistic view of man's sinful heart, and so beautifully and powerfully shows how Christ is our only remedy. It may be that *Sonship* has been so appealing because it emphasizes aspects lacking in much of the preaching, teaching, and discipleship ministries of our churches. Perhaps the extremes of *Sonship* will help spark a restoration of Christ-centered and grace-saturated ministry in the local church.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Courses such as *Sonship* or *Gospel Transformation* are not designed to provide anyone with all the tools he needs to be transformed into the very image of Christ, nor do they claim to do so. It should be obvious that I had no such expectation of my project either. These types of courses are all merely attempts at making the content and power of the gospel clear to believers by pointing out areas in our lives that show that we do not believe in its sufficiency. None of this material claims to complete the process. As our doctrine teaches us, sanctification will not be completed during our earthly life. It is a lifetime process, and in contrast, the course I taught took place only over thirteen weeks. The *Sonship* course is sixteen lessons and *Gospel Transformation* is thirty-six. These are very short seasons in one's life, and for many of us, there is already a lifetime's worth of very poor appreciation of the gospel to be corrected.

Is it possible to see great transformation in people over a relatively short period of time? Of course it is. I believe in miracles and I believe in the power of the gospel. But I also believe that all of us need to hear the gospel preached every single day, because our

hearts are so slow to believe. For most of us, we need the constant reminder and correction that the gospel brings.

I saw that believers do respond to the gospel's truth. Specifically in my class I saw a few individuals who claimed to experience changes in their lives as a result of our time together. On the other hand, I witnessed a few who never seemed to get beyond a performance/works orientation. I saw a few who seemed to be mostly unaffected by the truths of the gospel, though they enjoyed talking about them—and did so with great insights. And I saw still another, who because he could not appreciate the subjective side of the gospel's truth, basically resisted all instruction.

Looking back, there are specific issues of content I could have improved, for which I must only blame myself. The lesson on idolatry was not as well presented as it should have been. *Gospel Transformation* does an excellent job on this. I would not use the taped lecture on repentance, and would work harder to explain what true repentance really is. We all need to understand that our brokenness is required before we can grieve for our sin and allow the Spirit to change us. And the lesson on forgiveness was not unclear, yet I did let it get sidetracked on an issue we never resolved.

But if we are to see a stronger impact in people's lives as we minister the gospel to them, it requires time. We needed to spend more time together as a group in each session. But even then, each lesson ends and it is soon time to move on to another. These concepts require time to find roots and then begin to grow. I needed to spend more time with individuals or couples in the class, asking questions, counseling, and challenging them to believe. And to see lasting effects, we need to minister over time, which became impossible for me because of future ministry plans.

All this being said, I am no longer in a local church ministry setting, and might possibly never be again. The future application of what I have learned is hopefully to be implemented in church planter training in Russia and the former Soviet Union, where I now serve. I am part of the Alliance for Saturation Church Planting, whose goal is to plant enough churches throughout this part of the world so that every man, woman, and child has the opportunity to hear the gospel. The actual target number or ratio of churches to population is debated. The agency is rather pragmatic in its orientation, and promotes the training of church planters in very practical ministry, such as evangelism, prayer movements, and small group leadership.

The question which most concerns me currently, even in my short tenure here, is: *What kinds of churches will they be planting?* I don't refer to denomination or polity issues, and I certainly am not thinking of architecture. I am concerned about whether the gospel is the biblical gospel, a legitimate concern in a land where Protestant theological training has been non-existent for two generations, and where the western Reformation has never visited. The Protestants here are mostly Anabaptists. Legalism is rampant, grace is rarely taught or understood, and assurance of salvation is considered heresy for many church pastors.

My goal here is to do what I can to include a clear teaching on the gospel itself in the training that we do. I am not interested in bringing in another program—they have plenty of programs here. I like the concepts taught in *Sonship* because I believe they are an accurate and helpful representation of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The training material we currently use has been written by a team of consultants, including one or two from the World Harvest Mission staff. The problem I see with the current

curriculum is that the theology sections are briefly presented as just a portion of the whole practical-oriented course. There is little time to develop the themes and less time to personalize them.

In short, the current gospel teaching is barely scratching the surface here, and I know now more than ever that it takes time and lots of repetition to see how transforming it can be. These church planters need to have their own lives impacted by the gospel of grace before they can spread the good news to others. Most of them believe that turning to Christ only allows for the possibility of eventual salvation, but that one's faithful obedience is really the determining factor. I fear that the gospel here is not so very good news. I want to study very practically what happens as we teach the transforming power of the gospel to those whom God will use to start new churches all over Russia. The impact I long to see is nothing short of transforming a nation for Christ, through the planting of healthy, gospel-centered churches.

# Appendix A

## INVITATION LETTER

August 25, 2000

Dear *Grace-Centered Discipleship* Participant,

Thank you for your interest and willingness to take part in this project. As you know, I am working on my Doctor of Ministry degree through Covenant Theological Seminary. Your participation in this discipleship course will be the focus of my research for my dissertation. The goal of the course curriculum is to equip Christians with a better understanding of their position in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit so that they might enjoy a better relationship with God as their heavenly Father. The goal of the dissertation is to study the effect or impact this teaching has on those who participate.

In order to make this work we need to be clear on expectations:

1. Attendance: Please plan to attend each session unless it is truly impossible to do so. We will meet each Wednesday evening in the fall, beginning on September 6 and ending on November 29. Depending on people's holiday plans, we may or may not meet on November 22, the evening before Thanksgiving. Classes will begin at 6:45 and end at 8:15. It is important that we all try to be as prompt as possible, as there is so much to cover each week.
2. Assignments: There will be written assignments given each week, consisting usually of a question or two to which I will ask you to respond in written form. I will collect these, copy, and return them to you. You will also be asked to memorize Scripture verses that we will recite to each other during class. Additionally, I will require each of you to keep a daily journal of your thoughts, struggles, victories, etc., for the duration of the class. I will not ask to look at these, but do ask that you promise to be faithful in this discipline.
3. Prayer: I am asking each of you to recruit one or two people to pray for you earnestly throughout the course. These people can be neither fellow disciples (classmates) nor a spouse. We will say more about this at the first class meeting. I also ask that you commit to praying for me, the other participants, and of course, yourself! We will be fighting spiritual battles, and the Enemy will be at work. But the One we serve is greater, and responds to the prayers of his people.

4. Counseling: I will need to meet with each of you at least once, but hopefully twice during the course. For those of you who are couples, we may be able to meet together. The purpose of these sessions is to see how these truths are being applied in your life by the Holy Spirit's working. It is important that you try to be as honest and open as possible.
5. Tape Recorder: I must warn you that I will need to tape class sessions as well as counseling meetings. This is the only way I can analyze what takes place, which again, is the focus of my study. I realize this can be intimidating and potentially stifling, but I believe we can all forget the machine is on. (Aren't you glad I'm not using video?) All tapes will be for my ears only, and will be destroyed upon completion of the dissertation.

Enclosed you will find a form which is required by the seminary before we begin the course. Please fill out and return to me on or before our first meeting date.

Finally, let me thank you for your willingness to join me in this. I do expect the Lord to do some marvelous things as we hammer home these important truths. It should be a great experience of growth for all of us.

Growing in grace with you,

David

## **Appendix B**

### **GRACE-CENTERED DISCIPLESHIP PROGRAM FOR A SMALL GROUP**

#### **Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #1

September 6, 2000

Worship

Logistics:     Meet Nov. 22? We will decide next week  
                     Release form

**Tonight's Purpose:** To see more clearly our constant need for the gospel.

#### ***Discussion Questions***

1.     Give examples of biblical characters whose circumstances served as temptations to turn away from God. How did each respond to the temptation to forsake God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2.     What kinds of circumstances serve as such a temptation for us to forsake God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3.     What is the gospel?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4.     What are some obstacles we face in trying to believe it?

5. How can the difficult circumstances we face actually be beneficial to our grasping of the gospel?
6. Read Luke 10:25-29.
  - a. What does the passage tell you about the knowledge of God's law?
  - b. What are the limitations of the law?
  - c. What is the man's solution when faced with the law's demands?
  - d. What does Jesus do in response?
7. What does it mean to justify yourself?
8. In what ways do you think you do this?
9. Read Luke 16:14-15 and 18:10-14. What are some ways that the Pharisees justified themselves?
10. Why do we, like the Pharisees, do this?
11. Read Rev. 3:1-3. What do we read about the good deeds of this church? How does God regard these good deeds?

12. Why do we seek a good reputation?
13. What are some excuses we give when we are cornered, or when we have offended someone? (More self-justification!)
14. Why is a life of self-justification so dangerous and deceptive?

**Homework**

1. Think of a circumstance or situation in your life you wish you could change. Ask yourself: Can Jesus be my delight/satisfaction in the midst of this difficult situation? Can I get to know Jesus better in my situation, even if it doesn't change?
2. In what areas of your life are you seeking to establish a good reputation?

**Scripture Memory**

Rom. 1:16-17

**Journaling**

Prayer: Contact your prayer advocate(s); inform them how to pray. Pray for me and the others in class.

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #2

September 13, 2000

Worship

Logistics:     Meet Nov. 22?  
                  Release form

From Last Week:

*Comments, questions**I found the verse I was looking for: Prov. 30:7-9.**Reminder/encouragement about prayer and journaling**Homework***Tonight's Purpose: To begin to get a grasp on the definition of justification.*****Discussion Questions***

1.     Why do we worry so much about our reputations, or at least how certain people perceive us?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2.     Why is it so wrong to do this?  
       Examine the following passages: Matt. 21:31-32; Luke 15:30; Matt. 9:13.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3.     Is it hard to admit that you are a sinner...to God? ...to yourself? ...to others?  
       Which is the hardest?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4.     Ways we justify ourselves. Excuses. How to be right and look good:  
  
          I was only joking/kidding. (Didn't you get it?)  
          I am just weak.  
          I make mistakes. (Are YOU perfect?)  
          You misunderstood me. (I'm not as bad as you think.)...

(Continued)

I was just being honest.

I did not mean to do it.

It made me so angry.

I guess we have a personality/communication problem.

(You're ½ the problem.)

My family was like that.

(If you think I'm bad, you should have met my...)

I am having a bad day/week.

I am tired...and isn't it hot today?

I am sorry, please forgive me. (Let's just get this over with ASAP).

I am just upset. (Can't you see that I'm upset? The problem is that you are not compassionate.)

I am just saying what I feel.

I am sorry, but you...

That is just who I am.

(Or, I'm a sinner; I guess you'll just have to live with that.)

*How do you tend to justify yourself? What might be a better way to respond?*

5. What does justification mean? Take 3 minutes to write a theological definition of justification.
  
6. Let's read Rom. 3:21-26. What are the necessary elements of justification listed here?
  
7. Critique this definition of justification: JUST as IF I'D never sinned!

8. What is the basis of our justification?
9. How do we receive it?
10. First and Second Adam from Rom. 5:12-21. See chart.
11. How are we actually better off than Adam even before he sinned?
12. Read these Scripture verses: Is. 53:6; Rom. 4:6, 11. 22-24; II Cor. 5:21; Jas. 2:23; I Pt. 2:24.
13. Explanation of infusion vs. imputation.
14. Historical Explanations of Justification

***Heidelberg Catechism***

- Q. 20 Are all men saved through Christ just as all were lost in Adam?
- A. No. Only those are saved who by true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all his blessings.
- Q. 21 What is true faith?
- A. True faith...is also a deep-rooted assurance created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel that, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been granted salvation.

***Westminster Shorter Catechism***

- Q. What is justification?
- A. Justification is 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.

***Martin Luther***

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all he has becomes ours; rather he himself becomes ours.

***John Calvin***

...a man will be justified by faith when, exclude from righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous...

**Homework**

1. Write a personal definition of justification, using personal pronouns (I, me, my).

2. Tongue Assignment

For one week, do not:

- a. gossip (or spread a bad report) –
- b. complain
- c. criticize
- d. blameshift (or make excuses)
- e. defend yourself –
- f. boast –
- g. deceive others

Instead, do:

- a. witness regularly
- b. affirm others
- c. express gratitude and praise
- d. apologize quickly
- e. speak directly and honestly to people

**Scripture Memory**

II Cor. 5:21

Rom. 5:17

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #3

September 20, 2000

From Last Week:

*Comments, questions**Homework*

How did the Tongue Assignment go?

Personal definition of justification

**Tonight's Purpose: To solidify our understanding of justification by faith. To begin to see the implications of believing it!*****Discussion Questions***

1. Name one area or common situation in your life in which you typically seek to justify yourself.
2. Why is it so wrong to do this?
3. Read Rom. 5:12-21. Let's look at the "First and Second Adam" chart.
4. Explain the term imputation (vs. infusion). Passive vs. active righteousness. The GREAT EXCHANGE.
5. How are we actually better off than Adam was before the Fall?

## 6. Justification quiz!!!

Circle the letter (A or B) to indicate your choice:

- i.     A.     Justification is a single act of God for us.  
       B.     Justification is an ongoing work of God in us.
- ii.    A.     Justification means “to make righteous.”  
       B.     Justification means “to declare righteous.”
- iii.   A.     Justification has no human cooperation involved in it, but  
              sanctification requires our cooperation.  
       B.     Neither justification nor sanctification involves human cooperation.
- iv.    A.     Faith plus works = salvation (justification).  
       B.     Faith in Christ alone = salvation (justification) plus works.
- v.     A.     Imputation (crediting) means not counting us guilty of our own  
              sins *and* counting us righteous as Christ.  
       B.     Imputation means only counting us not guilty.
- vi.    A.     Faith alone justifies by uniting us to Christ.  
       B.     Faith alone with baptism justifies by uniting us to Christ.
- vii.   A.     Justification frees us from all responsibility to obey the law of  
              God.  
       B.     Justification is a pardon of sins, acceptance by God as a son or  
              daughter, and a setting free to obey God’s law by faith.

## 7. One more time: What is justification by faith? (using GREAT EXCHANGE idea)

8. Read Rom. 1:7-17. To whom does Paul want to preach the gospel (v. 7)?  
Surprised? Why do you think Paul says this?9. What do people usually mean when they say the pastor really preached the gospel  
this morning?

10. Is salvation a discrete event? What does it mean to live by faith (v. 17)? See also Col. 2:6.
11. Where in your life do you need to believe the gospel? In other words, where do you struggle with the issue of believing in an alien righteousness?
12. SO – what does protection or the desire to protect an area of your life reveal about your faith?
13. AND – why do we need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day? What would that look or sound like?

### Homework

1. Explain the GREAT EXCHANGE to someone. Ask them to explain it back to you.
2. Memorize question from the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60):

*How are you right with God?*

**Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need do is accept this gift of God with a believing heart.**

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #4

September 27, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*More on Tongue Assignment?**Teaching justification by faith—The Great Exchange**What did we learn from Rom. 1:7-17? How is Col. 2:6 related?*

**Tonight's Purpose: To understand more fully our justification by faith. How does sin in the life of the believer affect his or her relationship with God? To introduce the doctrine of adoption.**

***Discussion Questions***

1. Read Luke 15:11-31. What do you think this father would do if the son left home again...and again? Is there a point at which the father would stop welcoming him home?
2. How does that father's greeting of the son parallel the two main aspects of justification by faith?
3. Why is it so hard to believe we are forgiven? How does this affect our repentance?
4. Why do we usually stop going back to God after we repeatedly sin?  
  
Illustration of husband who battles with lust.

5. What does atonement mean? What does propitiation mean? How are they different? Read Rom. 3:25; I Jn. 2:2; 4:10.
6. What is the significance of Jesus quoting Psalm 22:1 from the cross?
7. Is God angry with you when you sin? How might you describe God's attitude toward sinners who profess faith in Christ?
8. What does Heb. 12:5-11 teach us about our relationship with God? See also Eph. 4:30.
9. How is the power of sin broken in the life of the believer? (Do you think the son would ever run away again?)
10. The problem is...we are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father who tend to live more like orphans. Comment on this.

**Homework**

1. Comment on the following quote by J.I. Packer: “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.”
2. In what ways do you think/live more like an orphan than a son or daughter of your heavenly Father?

**Scripture Memory**

Gal. 4:4-5

Rom. 8:14-15

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #5

October 4, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Teaching others justification by faith (Great Exchange)**Introductory questions on adoption**Homework*

**Tonight's Purpose:** To begin to understand the theological concept of adoption and its implications. Or, put another way, to understand and experience that our legal rights as sons and daughters lead to personal delight and loving others.

**Legal Right => Personal delight!**

***Discussion Questions***

1. Do you really believe that God loves you? Do you believe he actually enjoys you? See Zeph. 3:17. If so (or if you *could* believe this...) how would/should this affect you?
2. Read Gal. 4:1-7. What has Christ done for us?  
[v. 4: What does it mean that Christ was born under the law?]
3. How did Jesus redeem us? Explain justification by faith from these verses.
4. Read "Joy of Adoption" illustration. What are the results of adoption? Describe what our relationship with God *ought* to be, as his son or daughter.
5. On the other hand, what would it look like to be an orphan/slave?

6. What are you anxious about? What can frighten you? How does I Pt. 5:7 encourage you? How is living with fears living like an orphan/slave? Read “Joy of Adoption,” part 2.
7. How does/has our experience with our earthly father affect(ed) our view/understanding of our heavenly Father? Is this a help or hindrance? Is this a valid frame of reference?

Digging a little deeper...

8. Jesus taught us much about living with God as our Father:

John 6:38, 17:4, 5:19; 4:34 --

John 5:20; 15:9f --

John 16:32; 8:28 --

John 17:1; 5:22f --

9. What element is missing from above list? J.I. Packer says that “*royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline, under which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of Kings.*” Comments?
10. Westminster Confession, Chapter XII:

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have His name put upon them, received the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him, as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.

11. How does adoption relate to justification?  
  
Berkhof, et al.:  
  
Packer, Murray, et al.:
12. So, what are the implications of our adoption? Listen to Packer's closing thoughts on adoption from *Knowing God*, Chapter 19, p. 208.

### Homework

1. In light of a more in-depth understanding of adoption, how have you resisted or failed to incorporate this in your own life? Comment on any (or all) of the following:
  - a. Area where fear prevented or continues to prevent you from assurance of your sonship. (You act/ed more like an orphan or slave.)
  - b. You tried to resist God's sovereign control (mistrust).
  - c. Prayer life – intimacy, frequency, whole way of addressing God, etc.
2. Discuss an area of your life where you have been thus far acting more like an orphan than a son/daughter.

### Memory Work

Westminster Shorter Catechism Question:

*What is adoption?*

*Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.*

Zeph. 3:17

Gal. 4:6-7

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #6

October 11, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Homework**Question 9: Breaking the power of sin**Differing views of distinctness and prevalence of doctrine of adoption*

**Tonight's Purpose: To recognize idols in our lives, and to learn how to begin dismantling them (with heavy influence and shameless borrowing from Dr. Tim Keller).**

***Discussion Questions***

1. Read Exodus 20: 3-4. Review Ex. 32. According to these passages, what is an idol?
2. Read Ezekiel 14:1-8; Rom. 1:21-25. What element does this add to the definition?
3. Read Col. 3:5. How can this be idolatry?
4. Read I Jn. 5:21. What is so peculiar about this verse? What do you think he means by it?
5. See Ezekiel's language in 16:15f, 23f; 23:20. This should shock us! Why the graphic language?
6. Note the first of the Ten Commandments. How does it "show up" in all the other nine?

7. Some definitions of idols:

*An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that...is central in my life, anything that seems to me...essential ...An idol is anything that...holds such a controlling position in my life that...it moves and rouses and attracts so much of my time and attention, my energy and money.*

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Idolatry" in Life in God: Studies in I John.

*The virtues on which the mind preens itself as giving control over the body and its urges, and which aim at any other purpose or possession than God, are in point of fact vices rather than virtues.* Augustine, City of God, Chapter 19:25.

*"[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambition man of his honor...the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts...All men worship some golden calf...*

Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God.

8. How can we identify our idols? (Notice I didn't ask if you have any. You do!!!)

Reactions to circumstances:

**Anxiety**: What happens if any of my gods is threatened? For example, a health crisis. A threat to my reputation.

**Guilt**: How I feel when I don't measure up to certain standards. In what area is it important that you (and/or others) see yourself as competent? What happens when you mess up?

**Bitterness**: how I feel when something blocks my goal. My child's needs interrupt my plans. All my plans for retirement fall to pieces because of financial loss or health issue.

**Boredom/emptiness**: Anticipating death. I give up hope. If I can't have what I want, life is not worth living. Despair.

9. How can the following be idols:

a. Work

b. Family

c. Approval from others

10. Remedies

Doctor Laura:

Robert Schuller:

Jesus:

**Homework: Identify your idol(s):**

1. What is your greatest nightmare? What do you fear or worry about the most?  
What—if you failed or lost it—would cause you even to lose the desire to live?
2. How does the gospel correct you and give you hope to overcome?

**Scripture Memory**

Jonah 2:8

Phil. 3:7-9

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #7

October 18, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Memory verses**Questions?**Homework*

**Tonight's Purpose: To begin to see how we are our own worst enemies in believing the gospel.**

***Discussion Questions***

1. How are the following Scriptural accounts examples of idolatry?
  - a. Acts 5:1-11
  - b. I Samuel 15:10ff
  - c. Genesis 20
  - d. Mark 14:66-72; Gal. 2:11-14
2. Give three reasons why idolatry is wrong:
  - i.
  - ii.
  - iii.
3. How do we tend to redefine the God we choose to worship?
4. In what areas of your life do you find that you redefine God to your liking? This can be both NEGATIVE and POSITIVE!

5. Is there anything in your life, if you can be honest about it, that you love more than Jesus?
6. Comment on the following quotation: *The only thing I have against God is that I want his job!*
7. Are there areas in your life where you try to “be” God? (Listen to the list from *Gospel Transformation* manual, Lesson 7, p. 5.)
8. Comment on what Paul struggled with and obviously learned from Phil. 3:1-11.
9. Think of some common excuses you make, and tell us what is behind them.  
  
Example 1: You are late to Sunday School and have to interrupt the class to find your seat. You remark, “The pastor went overtime this morning. It’s his fault.”  
  
Example 2: You play phone tag with a friend or business contact. He, after several attempts, connects with you. You tell him, “I’ve been trying to call you.” The reality is, you tried once.
10. Other ways we try to earn our righteousness:  
  
Health righteousness:  
Language righteousness:  
Holiday righteousness:  
Entertainment righteousness:  
Finance righteousness:  
Theological righteousness:  
Political righteousness:

Kids righteousness:  
“My” righteousness:  
Anti-Pharisee righteousness:

### Homework

1. Comment on/interact with the following. I am interested to see what you believe happens as you face your own sin, whether it be clearly idolatry or not. In other words, what drives you away from Christ rather than toward him as you face sin in your life. Write a couple of paragraphs if you can.

“A Letter from Jesus Christ to the Soul that Really Loves Him,” by John of Landsberg, 1555.

*One thing I have to warn you of especially is your constant tendency to grow fainthearted under the weight of your faults and oversights and an inclination almost to despair when a sudden lack of confidence reduces your firm decisions to nothing. I know those moods when you sit there utterly alone, eaten up with unhappiness, in a pure state of grief. You don't move towards me but desperately imagine that everything you have ever done has been utterly lost and forgotten. This near-despair and self-pity are actually a form of pride. What you think was a state of security from which you've fallen was really trusting too much in your own strength and ability. Profound depression and perplexity of mind often follow a loss of hope, when what really ails you is that things simply haven't happened as you expected and wanted. In fact, I don't want you to rely on your own strength and abilities and plans, but to distrust them and to distrust yourself, and to trust me and no one and nothing else. As long as you rely on yourself you are bound to come to grief. You still have a most important lesson to learn: Your own strength will no more help you to stand upright than dropping yourself on a broken reed. You must not despair of me. You must hope and trust in me absolutely. My mercy is infinite...*”

2. Complete your answer to Question 4 from class.

### Scripture Memory

Gal. 1:10

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #8

October 25, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Memory verses**Questions/checkup**Homework***Tonight's Purpose: To begin to see the difference between false and true repentance.**

*Sonship* Tape on Repentance: Rev. Rick Downs, Senior Pastor of Redeemer PCA in Winston-Salem, NC.

Scripture passages: II Cor. 7:10; Mic. 6:6-8; Gal. 5:4

Some points he makes:

1. Repentance is not a change of behavior. Don't confuse repentance with its fruits!
2. Repentance is not just talking about change.
3. Repentance is not a life of misery and groveling.
4. Hindrances to repentance:
  - a. We often want God's *blessings* instead of *him*.
  - b. We want blessings because of external appearances rather than a broken heart.

**Homework**

1. What does it mean that we must often repent of our repentances? How can our repentance be sinful?
2. Explain the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow based on II Cor. 7:10 and its context.

3. In Gal. 5:4 Paul chides the Galatians for falling from grace. What does that phrase mean, and how does it compare to the way we often hear it used today?
4. How can repentance actually be joyful?

Scripture Memory

II Cor. 7:10

Gal. 2:21

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #9

November 1, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Memory Verses**Questions? More reactions to last week's lecture (Rick Downs on Repentance).**Homework***Tonight's Purpose: To begin to learn better and apply genuine repentance in our lives.*****Discussion Questions***

1. What is wrong with the people's repentance in Micah 6:6-8?  
  
Saul's in I Samuel 15?  
  
Judas' in Matthew 27:3-5?
2. Recall at least one instance when your "repentance" looked like one of the above examples.
3. What are some New Year's Resolutions you have made over the years? How well did you keep them? How have you felt when successful? How have you felt when you have failed?
4. What sin do both the success and failure share?

## 5. Typical Cycle:

- i. I resolve to...
- ii. I try hard...
- iii. It gets hard
- iv. I try harder.
- v. I fail.
- vi. I feel guilty and return to step i.

## 6. Evaluate the appropriateness of the following statement:

*I am a Christian, so I ought to do this.* How might you change it?

*I am a \_\_\_\_\_, so \_\_\_\_\_ !*

## 7. Gospel-Oriented Repentance:

- a. Own up to the sin. Don't rush in to "repentance."
- b. Reflect on the root sin. (Jas. 4:6)
- c. Confess your sin and the root sin. (I Jn. 1:8, 9)
- d. Disown it all! Preach the gospel!
- e. Ask the Spirit for help (Rom. 8:26)

## 8. What sin(s) have you grown weary of repenting of?

Practice preaching the gospel to yourself and others.

## 9. Why should repentance bring you joy (bittersweet?)

**Homework**

1. Write a brief definition of repentance.
2. Give a recent example of how you confused repentance with: (a) changing your behavior; (b) groveling; (c) beating yourself up; (d) self-pity; (e) offering a sacrifice; (f) making promises or resolutions; (g) brilliant observations or mere insight about yourself.

**Scripture Memory** (a challenge this week!)

Psalm 32

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class # 10

November 8, 2000

**Worship**

From Last Week:

*Memory verses—Can anyone do it?**Review/Questions**Homework*Definition of Repentance from *Sonship* manual (Key Concepts), as requested:

*Repentance should not be confused with its fruits, such as a change of behavior. Nor should it be confused with penances, such as trying to make up for what we've done in some way. Nor with promises, such as new commitments and resolutions. Nor with punishments, such as "beating ourselves up" in some way. Neither is repentance "worldly sorrow," or a self-pity which feels badly because of the sting of the consequences of what we've done. Rather, repentance is a change of heart resulting from the work of God through His Spirit. This change of heart constitutes a change in direction—from self-reliance and idolatry, a movement away from God to a turning to and looking toward God. Often, the breaking of our pride and independence that is involved is painful and unsettling, but it always leads to great joy as we are received by our Father, and participate in all that He has provided in the way of forgiveness and empowerment. Repentance, therefore, is not groveling, but rather returning homeward to a Father who longs to embrace us. Our constant drifting away from God requires that we pray for and seek repentance as an ongoing lifestyle.*

**Tonight's Purpose:** To begin to understand the doctrine of sanctification, and how it works itself out in our lives.

***Discussion Questions***

1. Is holiness an option for the believer? See Heb. 12:14.
2. How do we become more holy?
3. Read the following verses and adjust your answer as necessary: II Cor. 3:16-18; Heb. 10:10, 14.

4. Give a preliminary definition of sanctification.
5. How does sanctification relate to justification? Consider similarities, differences, and any relationship between the two.
6. Whose responsibility is sanctification? See Phil. 2:12-13; 1:6; I Thess. 5:23; II Thess. 2:16-17.
7. How does your need for Christ compare today to when you first became a Christian?
8. What role does Jesus play in your sanctification?
9. Cross Chart.
10. What are we unable to see before we are Christians?

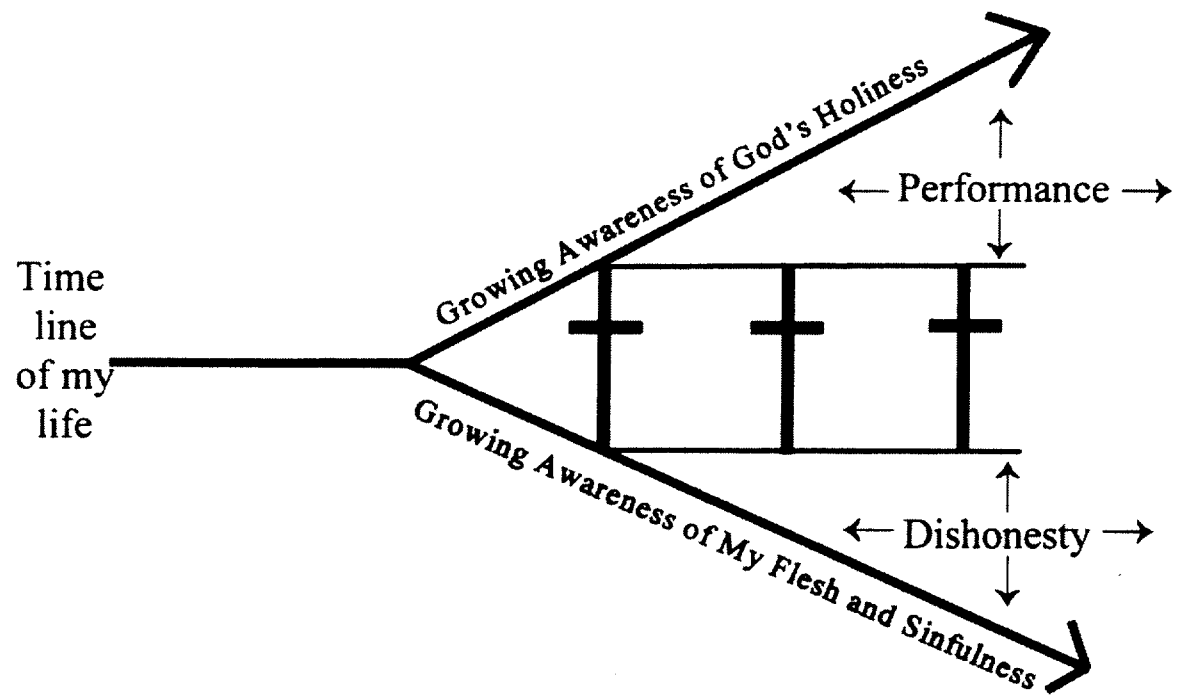
11. Read Luke 7:36-50. Apply this passage to the Cross Chart.

**Homework**

1. Why is it that we often see too small of a cross (too small a Savior), and how do we change that? Give an example of something in your own life where either you need to apply this or where you have experienced growth already by seeing more of your Savior in the midst of your sin.
2. Do we sin less as we mature in Christ?
3. Practice drawing the Cross Chart.

**Scripture Memory**

II Cor. 3:18



**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class # 11

November 15, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Memory verse**Review/Questions**Homework***Tonight's Purpose: To further our understanding of sanctification.*****Discussion Questions***

1. What is sanctification? Cross Chart practice.
2. And what, again, is justification?
3. Sanctification "quiz." The purpose of this is to help us distinguish between justification and sanctification.

In blank space next to each phrase, put "J" if it describes justification, and "S" if it describes sanctification:

- A. \_\_\_\_ by faith apart from works
  - B. \_\_\_\_ being declared legally righteous
  - C. \_\_\_\_ the acquittal and acceptance of an enemy
  - D. \_\_\_\_ once and for all at conversion
  - E. \_\_\_\_ ongoing growth; never complete in this life
  - F. \_\_\_\_ the maturing of a son
  - G. \_\_\_\_ a growing love from a growing faith
  - H. \_\_\_\_ no cooperation
  - I. \_\_\_\_ constant cooperation by faith
  - J. \_\_\_\_ continual inner cleansing and purification
  - K. \_\_\_\_ progressively being made to resemble Christ
4. In what ways are justification and sanctification similar? How are they different? After initial response, see Heb. 10:10, 14 (again).

5. Sometimes they really are confused. In *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace profoundly observes that many people rely on their sanctification for their justification. What do you think this means?

In another place he writes that “justification is the perfect righteousness of Christ reckoned to us, covering the imperfections in our lives like a robe of stainless holiness. Sanctification is the process of removing those imperfections as we are enabled more and more to put off the bondage of sin and put on new life in Christ.”

6. How does being sure of our justification, or at least reminding ourselves of it, affect our sanctification?
7. Where does faith come in? See II Cor. 12:8-10.
8. Why do we often feel WORSE as we grow to be more holy? Give two reasons.
9. Read Rom. 7:14 – 8:4. Explain Paul’s frustration. How does Christ save him from this conundrum?
10. Exercise: Helping one of us apply the gospel in a particular area.

**Homework**

1. Draw and explain the cross chart to someone and discuss his or her reaction.
2. In what situation have you been relying on your sanctification for your justification?

**Scripture Memory**

Gal. 2:20

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class # 12

November 29, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Memory verse**Review/Questions**A checkup question: What is the one thing that we should be doing to grow as Christians?**Homework***Tonight's Purpose: To begin to understand just how radical forgiveness can be!**Introduction—Story of Daniel by Max Lucado (printed in *Gospel Transformation*).***Discussion Questions***

1. Read Eph. 4:32 and Matt. 18:21-35. What lessons do we learn about forgiveness?
2. What do you think of the advice Miss Manners gives in her column? Are we to forgive even those who do not ask our forgiveness?
3. What does Matt. 18:15-17 say (if anything) about forgiveness?
4. What does false forgiveness look like? Give examples.
5. What steps are necessary for us to forgive?

6. Why is forgiveness often painful and risky?
7. Is it possible to forgive too quickly? How can “forgiveness” be a form of denial?
8. What is the risk if we do not forgive at all?
9. How many times are we to forgive someone? For the same offense? How about for a one-time offense?
10. Think of a time when someone who offended you by what you considered false accusation or unfair characterization? How did you react? How does the gospel inform you in such a situation?

### **Homework**

1. Think of someone who has wronged (or continues to wrong) you, someone whom you need to forgive. Name that person here (or put a false initial if necessary):  
Lord, I believe I need to forgive \_\_\_\_\_. How has this person offended you?
2. What conditions would you LIKE to place before this person before you can truly forgive? In other words, what does your heart want to require before you release him or her—what specifically would you desire that person to say or do?
3. How do you react to this person (or the memory of this person)?

4. To this point, how have you dealt with the issue of forgiveness of this person? Evaluate the appropriateness of the response in light of Scripture and today's lesson. Consider the following in your response: your own debt and Christ's forgiveness of it, your avoidance in facing the pain, your lack of love, your self-reliance (coping) and the short-circuiting of your need for Christ.
  
5. Describe your own sin in not forgiving this person. What do you need to do now?

**Scripture Memory**

Psalm 51:10-15

**Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Class #13

December 6, 2000

Worship

From Last Week:

*Review*

**Tonight's Purpose: To continue—to begin—to understand just how radical forgiveness can be!**

***Discussion Questions***

1. We understand that God's Word requires us to forgive someone who sins against us and repents (Right?!) But are we obligated to forgive the one who does not repent? (How many of you have forgiven Clinton?)
2. Are there times when the offender needs to suffer the consequences of his or her actions? In that case, such as marital infidelity, is it possible to forgive and yet still require them to leave?
3. Are we required to work toward reconciliation, if it is possible? See Matt. 5:23-24.
4. Why is it often hard to forgive? What might it cost?
5. Is forgiveness a one-time event or a process? Once you have forgiven someone, what happens to the hurt? If it still hurts, does that mean you haven't forgiven?

6. What happens to our relationship with God when we don't forgive others? Why?
7. What should you do when you sense that someone's apology has come too quickly, or is too superficial?
8. On the other side, is it possible to forgive too quickly? How can "forgiveness" be a form of denial?
9. Think of a time when someone offended you by what you considered false accusation or unfair characterization? How did you react? How does the gospel inform you in such a situation?
10. What would be a good motivation to confront someone when they are or have offended you? What about for issues which are not necessarily or not only affecting you? See Eph. 4:15.

**Homework** is almost exactly from last week's lesson. Please give it some good thought and return written answers to my box by December 17.

1. Think of someone who has wronged you or continues to do so, whom you need to forgive. Name that person here (or put a false initial if necessary). *Lord, I believe I need to forgive \_\_\_\_\_*. How has this person offended you?
2. How do you react to this person (or the memory of this person)?

3. What conditions would you LIKE to place before this person before you can truly forgive? In other words, what does your heart want to require before you release him or her—what specifically would you desire that person to say or do?
4. To this point, how have you dealt with the issue of forgiveness of this person? Evaluate the appropriateness of the response in light of Scripture and today's lesson. Consider the following in your response: your own debt and Christ's forgiveness of it, your avoidance in facing the pain, your lack of love, your self-reliance (coping) and the short-circuiting of your need for Christ.
5. Describe your own sin in not forgiving this person. What do you need to do now?

**Scripture Memory**

Psalm 51:10-15

**Meditation:** How would it be if the Lord really did forgive you EXACTLY as you forgive others? He, above all, certainly has right to be offended!

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