

JOHN PIPER ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE:

An examination of his controversial view of 'faith alone' in *Future Grace*

Mark W. Kariberg (Th.D., Westminster Theological Seminary)

The popularity of the writings of John Piper in both evangelical and Reformed communities attests to the timeliness and urgency of the author's call for a renewed awareness of God's sovereign grace, the mainstay of "practical, " biblical Christianity. There is no question that Piper's books embody some of the best devotional and experiential commentary on the Christian life in our day. This twentieth-century author conveys much of the spirit and ethos of the seventeenth-century Puritans. Piper demonstrates the uncommon blend of pastor and scholar. His theological pursuits are, therefore, both practical and academic: the scholarly questions are raised for their practical implications; and the practical concerns are subjected to scholarly investigation. There is a healthy mix of the two. (This serves to prove that the academic and the pastoral disciplines are not incompatible, as many Christians are prone to argue.)

The weightier question, however, is whether the author stands in the same theological tradition as English (and international) Calvinism. Clearly, Piper articulates many sound points of orthodox Reformed theology in new and refreshing ways. But does his doctrine of the Christian life rest securely upon the foundation of Jesus Christ as Saviour of—and Substitute for—sinners? Since his early years of preparation for the gospel ministry, Piper has been heavily influenced by the teachings of his revered professor and mentor, Daniel Fuller. Together, Fuller and Piper have developed a particular understanding of the Creator/creature relationship -- that is, the *covenantal* bond between the Father and his sons and daughters -- which serves as the foundation of their theological analysis of the Christian life. Piper remarks:

Daniel Fuller's vision of the Christian life as an "obedience of faith" is the garden in which the plants of my ponderings have grown. Almost three decades of dialogue on the issues in this book have left a deep imprint. If I tried to show it with footnotes, they would be on almost every page. His major work, *The Unity of the Bible* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), is explanatory background to most of what I write. [P. 7]

Like many other contemporary restatements of Protestant theology, the Fuller-Piper theology represents a major *revision* of traditional Protestant teaching. It is the purpose of this review to explore the nature and significance of this revision for biblical Christianity.

1. Theme and Variations

what does this mean?

Piper states as the major theme of his theology: "*God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*" (p. 386). Here and in his earlier book, *Desiring God*, Piper labels his theology of the spiritual life as "Christian hedonism." It is intended to be a reaffirmation (and adaptation) of the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It is also intended as a restatement of the theology of Jonathan Edwards, the second theological figure to whom Piper is most indebted. In his closing chapter, Piper attempts

to show that living by faith in future grace and Christian hedonism stand in faithful continuity with the thinking of Jonathan Edwards. I do not claim that Edwards would have chosen my way of bringing biblical truth to bear on the modern church. Nor do I assume it is the only or even the best way. But I do want to claim that it is biblical and that it is in the Reformed tradition of Jonathan Edwards, and that, if properly understood and applied, it leads to a God-centered life of joyful and sacrificial love. [Pp. 387-88]

Piper's claim of adherence to the teaching of Puritanism (English and American), however, must be contested.

Does IP use this phrase? → The new element in his understanding of the Christian life is what the author describes in this treatise as *the future orientation of justifying faith*. Genuine love and obedience find their motivation in God's promise of future grace, not in gratitude for God's past mercies. A characteristic of Piper's views. In this discussion Piper sets up a false dichotomy between gratitude for past blessings and confidence in future grace. The sharp distinction between these two plays a formative role in Piper's thinking. *It is the reason for writing this book.* (straw man)

Piper concedes that "gratitude is a beautiful and utterly indispensable Christian affection" (p. 11). And he recognizes that "Past grace is the foundation of life-transforming faith in future grace" (p. 18). "But," argues Piper, "you will search the Bible in vain for explicit connections between gratitude and obedience.... Gratitude was never designed as the primary motivation for radical Christian obedience" (p. 11). Contrary to the biblical witness, the author drives a wedge between "*living by faith in future grace*" and "living by gratitude for past grace" (p. 18). He asks: Does obedience out of gratitude for God's past goodness become payment of debt for God's former grace? The first chapter of the book is devoted to the question, "The Debtor's Ethics: Should We Try to Pay God Back?" According to Piper's understanding of the Scriptures, gratitude is itself an expression of *free grace*. "We easily forget that gratitude exists because sometimes things come to us '*gratis*' -- without price or payment" (p. 31). Simply put, "Gratitude corresponds to grace ('*gratis*')." What we find in Piper's writing is a theology of grace, from beginning to end. Is this understanding not the essence of Reformed teaching on the Christian life? On the surface, Piper's theology sounds good—until we uncover the theological presuppositions underlying his "Ponderings."

2. Critique: Is Piper's Theology a Theology of Grace?

... lack of Cov works critique

A Christian theology of grace requires a theology of divine justice and holiness. In terms of the traditional categories of dogmatics, interpretation of the doctrine of man is dependent upon the (prior) doctrine of God. Man knows himself, as John Calvin taught, only in relation to the triune God (the two doctrines are mutually interpretive). Theology begins and ends *with God*. From the standpoint of the Creator/creature distinction, is it proper to speak of the creature as being indebted to the Creator? Piper answers:

I don't deny that we are debtors to God [W]hen the Bible focuses on our being in debt to God it has reference to our sins that need to be forgiven, not our obedience that needs to be paid.

how about positive righteousness?

It would seem more appropriate to say that we are debtors to God's justice, not to his grace. That is, if we deal with him in payments of debt, he will deal with us in terms of justice: value for value (see Romans 4:4). We will not get very far in this transaction. That is why we plead for forgiveness of our debts instead of proposing a schedule of payments. To be more biblical, let us not say that grace *creates* debts: let us say that grace *pays* debts. [P. 46]

What more does Piper say about the justice of God? Nothing more in *Future Grace* or in his other writings bearing on this subject. But what more needs to be said in this regard? Most importantly, all God's works in creation and redemption are just and righteous. There is no tension or dialectic between love and justice in God himself, nor in his external works. No less in redemption than in creation. For a proper interpretation of the Christian life, it is essential to understand how the biblical doctrines of sin, atonement, and justification are inextricably tied to the doctrine of God's justice.

In "Introduction Two: For Theologians," Piper aligns his teaching with the confessional theology of the Protestant Reformation. Central to the subject of this book are the doctrines of justification and sanctification. "In its popular form, the classic Reformed, Protestant expression of faith's relation to sanctification goes like this: 'It is faith alone which justifies, but the faith which justifies is not alone.' That is, justifying faith is always accompanied by good works" (pp. 21-22). Echoing the confessional formulations, Piper regards good works to be "the *evidence of authentic faith*" (24, emphasis mine). Works are the outworking of true, saving faith. The Reformed creeds typically speak of the *merit* of Christ's substitutionary obedience imputed to believers through the sole instrumentality of faith. Regrettably, it is here that the Fuller-Piper revision parts company with historic Protestant orthodoxy by rejecting the concept of merit in connection with the legal requirement placed upon Adam in his time of probation under the original

Covenant of Works in Eden and upon Christ, the Second Adam, who in submission to the will of his Father was obligated as Adam's substitute to render full and perfect obedience to God's law.

Piper shows some understanding of the Reformed doctrine of the consequent absolute necessity of the atonement. He states:

God did not spare his own Son, because it was the only way he could spare us. The guilt of our transgressions, the punishment of our iniquities, the curse of our sin would have brought us inescapably to the destruction of hell. But God did not spare his own Son; he gave him up to be wounded for our transgression, and bruised for our iniquities and crucified for our sin. [P. 113]

But his formulation falls far short of Reformed (biblical) teaching. This doctrinal matter deserves our closest attention. In an extended endnote Piper indicates his misgivings concerning the Reformed doctrine of the Covenant of Works. He maintains that this doctrine posits a false antithesis between law and grace. (The classic Protestant contrast between the "Law" and the "Gospel" is thereby jettisoned.) The concept of "works" in the traditional doctrine, writes Piper, "implies a relationship with God that is more like an employer receiving earned wages than like a Son trusting a Father's generosity" (p. 413, n.4). According to Piper's interpretation of the biblical covenants, grace is like-wise "the basis of [God's] relationship with Adam and Eve before the fall." The author explains further: "I see Christ, the Second Adam, fulfilling this covenant of grace (not works) perfectly by trusting his Father's provision at every moment and obeying all his commandments by faith."

In his exegesis of Philippians 2:9, Piper mistakenly contends that God's bestowal of "the name which is above every name" upon Christ was an act of grace, not the granting of reward on the ground of *meritorious* achievement. He concludes:

This does not nullify the substitutionary work of Christ nor does it make his obedience any less the ground of our justification and the vindication of the Father's righteousness. Rather it says that the obedience that Adam failed to perform by faith, Christ has perfectly performed by faith. In this way Christ is indeed a perfect example to us how we should live and love by faith in future grace, even if grace for him was Fatherly beneficence without having to overcome sinful deficiency—except in the sense of the Father's overcoming Christ's taking our sin upon him.

That's terrible if true!

How are we to construe Piper's affirmation that Christ's obedience is "the [exclusive] ground of our justification and the vindication of the Father's righteousness," when, in his view, Christ is not obliged to satisfy the justice of God as the *legal* means of inheriting (i.e., earning) the reward promised by the Father?

The Fuller-Piper theology marks a clear departure from historic Protestant teaching. The crucial question posed by the new theology is this: how necessary or important is the Reformed and Protestant doctrine of meritorious reward for orthodox, biblical theology?

According to Piper, the perfect righteousness of Christ is *imputed* to believers by grace through faith. It alone is the ground of life and salvation. Yet, if Christ's obedience is not the meritorious ground of divine blessing, as Protestant orthodoxy maintains—if Christ does not satisfy the legal demand of God's first covenant with Adam -- how can one speak meaningfully of Christ's obedience (both active and passive) as the basis or ground of salvation? (The covenantal concepts of “ground” of justification and “meritorious reward” are inseparable.) The parallel drawn by the apostle Paul in Romans 5 makes clear that Christ's substitutionary obedience not only achieves the forgiveness of sins, but also the right to life eternal. Probation—either for the First Adam or the Second— is part and parcel of the Covenant of Works. According to God's eschatological design for humankind, confirmation in righteousness is granted after fulfilment of the conditions of the Covenant of Works. The expression used by Paul in his letter to the Romans, the “obedience of faith,” is descriptive of the obedience of all those who have been justified in Christ. It does not describe the nature of Adam's or Christ's obedience under the Covenant of Works, contrary to Piper's argument.

← See Ch 30 of Piper. He holds this.
how is that Piper's argument?

As we noted earlier, there is no law/gospel contrast in the Fuller-Piper theology. This omission has immediate consequences for one's interpretation of the relationship between justification and sanctification, faith and works, old and new covenants. We shall consider each in turn.

3. Piper's Challenge to the Protestant Reformation: No Law/Gospel Antithesis

The crucial text in Piper's understanding of justification is Galatians 5:6, which speaks of “faith working through love” (p. 25). The author complains that so little attention in the history of Christian theology (including the Reformed tradition) has been given to “the spiritual dynamics of *how* faith sanctifies” (p. 25). He comments:

I could be wrong about this, since I am not an expert in the history of doctrine. But my sense is that both historically and currently, the claim that justifying faith “*is it [sic] not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces*” is usually left dangling without any extended reflection on *why* this is the case, and *how* it works out in the spiritual dynamics of real Christian living. Such an extended reflection is what this book is meant to be. [P. 25]

Piper contends that the Protestant Reformation did not arrive at a fully biblical doctrine of justification by faith. (Of course, it is the ongoing task of Christian theologians not only to build upon the insights of the past, but also to reformulate or revise churchly doctrine when demanded by the teaching of Scripture. But the question here, however, is whether or not Piper is correct in thinking that the Protestant reformers missed something important in their understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.) Piper begins by stating that he has no desire to confound justification and sanctification. They are distinct

Justification is an act of God's reckoning, sanctification is an act of God's transforming. Thus the function of faith in regard to each is different. In regard to justification, faith is not the channel through which a power or a transformation flows to the soul of the believer, but rather faith is the occasion of God's forgiving and acquitting and reckoning as righteous. These justifying acts of God do not in themselves touch the soul of man. They are *extra nos*—outside ourselves. [P. 26]

The author views faith as "the instrumental cause" of good works (p. 22). That is to say, faith is the source of good works; good works inevitably flow out of true, justifying faith.

Thus it is proper to speak of the moral effectiveness of justifying faith not merely because it brings us into a right standing with God at the first moment of its exercise, but also because it is a persevering sort of faith, whose effectiveness resides also in its daily embrace of all that God is for us in Jesus [J]ustifying faith necessarily sanctifies. This book is an extended reflection on the biblical underpinnings and practical spiritual dynamics of the sanctifying power of justifying faith. (P. 27]

With respect to the so-called "Lordship controversy" in present-day evangelicalism, Piper's book is a powerful argument against those who would *separate* God's sanctifying and justifying acts from one another. Justification and sanctification are distinct, yet inseparable. What is the precise relation between these two? Were the Protestant reformers correct in seeing the former as the definitive, finished act of God at the beginning of the Christian life, and the latter as the progressive, ongoing work of the Spirit of holiness? (The distinction here is between *imputed* righteousness and *inwrought* righteousness.) In an end-note, Piper asserts that

justification is not an act that comes in varying degrees, but one that is a once-for-all and total reckoning of righteousness to us for Christ's sake. It is not mediated to us in varying measures as sanctification is. However, when it comes to sanctification, while faith is always the essential element in appropriating the power of transforming grace, there are other acts of the soul that the

Word of God prescribes as a means of experiencing the ongoing empowerment of sanctifying grace, though I would say that all of these 'means of grace' are exercised "from faith" (*ek pisteos*) and not "from works" (*ex ergon*), as Romans 9:32 says. Thus faith is the decisive human agency that connects with the sanctifying grace of God. [P. 402, n.1]

So far, so good. In fact, most of what Piper says here is excellent and can hardly be improved upon. Problems surface, however, in his understanding of the relation between faith and (good) works, including the subject of judgment according to works.

In his discussions of the nature of faith, Piper does not succeed in keeping the *evidential* or *demonstrative* aspect of justification ("faith working through love") distinct from the *constitutive* aspect (faith apprehending Christ apart from the works of the law). This point must not be missed, for the difference between Piper and the Protestant reformers is not insignificant. Piper begins cautiously:

I want to say a bit more than [Charles] Hodge does. I don't want to say merely that faith in promises produces, "confidence, joy and hope," but that *an essential element* in the faith itself is confidence and joy and hope. It is not false to say that faith *produces* these things. But that does not contradict the other truth: that confidence and joy and hope are part of the warp and woof of faith. [P. 205]

The classic Protestant formulation, as noted earlier by Piper, states that believers are justified by grace through the sole instrumentality of faith (*sola fide*). Faith alone—in distinction from all other saving graces—receives the righteousness of Christ imputed to all those who believe. Such faith, however, never stands alone. Justifying faith necessarily produces good works. What is the precise nature of justifying faith? Specifically, is faith (as the instrumental cause of justification) distinct from good works, as Piper acknowledged earlier in the book? Or is faith identical with the good works which flow from it, as Piper contradictorily argues in his subsequent discussion? Are faith and good works in some way *synonymous*? Piper rightly observes: "If we go wrong on the nature of faith, everything in the Christian life will go wrong" (p. 209).

seems an unfair leap by Karlberg
→ Neither "identical" or "synonymous" are synonymous w/ constitutive.

In contemporary theological debate, biblical scholars remain divided over their interpretation of Paul and James on justification. Recent challenges to the traditional understanding of the relationship between Paul's teaching and that of Judaism have added further fuel to the fire. The chief issue is this, when Paul affirms that justification is by *faith apart from the works of the law*, is he excluding the good works of regenerate believers, those acts of love and obedience which faith inevitably produces? Or is Paul excluding only those works which are performed *in order to merit God's saving favor*? In this debate the critical text is Leviticus 18:5. Does the apostle Paul see in this verse the principle of works in contrast to the principle of

faith (as the Protestant reformers uniformly taught)? Or is the principle enunciated in Leviticus 18:5 *identical* with the principle of faith underlying the Covenant of Grace? Does Paul lift Leviticus 18:5 out of its proper, covenantal context for rhetorical effect in his argument against the Judaizers, those who have perverted God's law into a religion of *legalism* (i.e., salvation by works)? Or does the principle of works legitimately operate within the restricted temporal sphere of the Israelite theocratic kingdom? (These questions arise again in connection with the issue of the relationship between the old and new covenants discussed below.) Returning to the immediate question: Does Paul exclude good works from God's definitive, once-for-all act in justifying sinners? For Piper, the answer is tied to the question whether salvation is conditional or unconditional. Piper states:

We must keep in mind that love relates to faith as evidence to origin. Love is the necessary evidence of faith. Faith apprehends and embraces the spiritual beauty and worth of all that God is for us in the promises of future grace. This spiritual awakening to the glory of God in the promises is the means by which God unites us to Christ and to the Spirit's flow of future grace. But this kind of faith inevitably "works through love" (Galatians 5:6), so that love confirms the authenticity of faith Thus love for others is a condition of future grace in the sense that it confirms that the primary condition, faith, is genuine. We could call love for others a secondary condition, that confirms the authenticity of the primary condition of faith. [P. 257]

Piper faults Calvin for not probing sufficiently into the nature of justifying faith in his commentary on Galatians 5:6. Such neglect "seems to continue into our own day" (p. 277). Again, we ask: What is missing in the Protestant orthodox formulation? In the opinion of Piper, the reformers failed to see that the *efficacy* of true, justifying faith is conditioned upon good works (i.e., faith persevering in good works to the end of the Christian life). The author states emphatically: "The promise of future grace is conditional. But it is not earned" (p. 237). "Faith alone is necessary for justification, but the purity that confirms faith's reality is also necessary for final salvation" (p. 333). Justification, according to Piper, includes both the initial act and its accompanying fruit, the evidential working of faith. This brings us to the matter of judgment according to works (or "final salvation").

Piper sees this future judgment as twofold: (1) "the public declaration of our differing rewards in the kingdom of God, according to our deeds"; and (2) "the public declaration of our salvation—our *entering* the kingdom—according to our deeds" (p. 364). Since there is no place for a doctrine of merit in the Fuller-Piper theology, gradations of reward in heaven are not earned by believers on the basis of (meritorious) works, any more than salvation itself. Such reward, nevertheless, is "according to works." (The traditional Protestant interpretation of judgment according to works is problematic. How can we say that degrees of reward in heaven are based on good works, yet unearned? Resolution of this theological dilemma necessitates

This sentence doesn't logically follow the previous statement.

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reformulation of the Reformed doctrine of rewards.) For Piper, salvation is based on *faith and works* because the works excluded from justification are the works of merit, not the works evidential of true, justifying faith. Piper comments:

Salvation is *owned* by faith. Salvation is *shown* by deeds. So when Paul says (in 2 Corinthians 5:10) that each "[will] be recompensed. . . according to what he has done," he not only means that our *rewards* will accord with our deeds, but, also our *salvation* will accord with our deeds. [P. 365]

What is lacking in Piper's presentation is a consistent and unambiguous affirmation that justification is God's declaratory act rendering the *final* verdict of justification (i.e., salvation) in the believer's present experience of regeneration and spiritual union with Christ. Those united to Christ are *already* saved (i.e., justified), although *not yet* glorified (transformed into the consummate image of Christ). Glorification coincides with judgment according to works. Corporately speaking, the New Man (the body of Christ) is declared/judged righteous according to works, but not on the ground of works. This teaching is what Piper's theology cannot accommodate, because Piper has no doctrine of the Covenant of Works and his system of doctrine makes no allowance for the classic Protestant law/gospel antithesis. The Fuller-Piper reformulation of Christian theology transforms the older dogmatic distinctions into something radically different. The *sola fide* formula is understood in vastly different ways. On the surface, the two schools of theology give appearance of saying the same thing. But that is so only on the surface.

It came down to
(1) Cove - works
(2) Law - gospel
distinction.
Are these 2 or 1?

According to Piper's theology of grace, what overshadows all God's covenants with humankind is (future) grace—the grace of God infused into the human heart, the channel for the reception of all future blessings derived from the goodness and love of God. For man, life in covenant with God is the appropriation of grace upon grace. Piper explains:

Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve experienced God's goodness not as a response to their demerit (since they didn't have any) but still without deserving God's goodness. You can't deserve to be created. You can't deserve, as a non-being, to be put into a lavish garden where all your needs are met by a loving Father. So even before they sinned, Adam and Eve lived on grace. And God's will for them was that they live by faith in future grace -- God's daily, fatherly care and provision. *This is important because it is customary among some theologians to give the erroneous impression that God wanted Adam and Eve to relate to him in terms of meritorious works rather than childlike faith.* [P. 76, italics mine)

By misstating the view of 'some theologians,' Piper caricatures the position he opposes. Two factors are to be noted by way of response: (1) the position he opposes is that which was held *unanimously among* the

Reformed orthodox; (2) the Fuller-Piper theology denies that Adam was placed on *probation* according to the stipulations of the covenant established by God with Adam at creation. The Scriptures teach that Adam was given a particular task to perform, namely, to guard the Edenic sanctuary, the site of God's theocratic presence, against the encroachments of Satan. On the basis of his meritorious accomplishment of that mission, Adam would have moved from an original state of mutability to one of immutability, from the state of unconfirmed righteousness to the state of confirmed righteousness. That would have been Adam's reward had he persisted in well-doing during the course of his probation. Christ has now secured that reward for God's elect. Whereas the first Adam failed to achieve the promised blessing for himself (and the entire human race in whose place Adam stood as federal representative), the Second Adam succeeded. Christ merited the reward covenanted by the Father from all eternity. This was the lesson to be drawn from the history of the ancient Israelite theocracy. According to the teaching of the apostle Paul in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, the Mosaic law was added to the Abrahamic promise, in order that Israel -- together with all human flesh -- might be consigned under sin, subject to the wrath of God. (Under the Mosaic economy, that state of death and condemnation was symbolically portrayed in Israelite history during the time of Babylonian captivity and exile.)

In Piper's theology, testamental discontinuity is obscured at the expense of continuity. There is, says Piper, only one covenant in the Bible, the Covenant of Grace. There is no place for "works" in the original covenant at creation, nor under the Mosaic economy. Rather, insists Piper, the obedience demanded by the Old Testament is "the obedience of faith" (p. 143). No probation, no works, no "Law" (in antithesis to "Gospel"). What, then, is the difference between old and new covenants, according to Piper?

The difference, says Piper, lies in the fuller manifestation of the Spirit's working in the new covenant era. It pertains to the measure of the Spirit's work before and after Pentecost. "The basic difference [between the old and new] is that in the old covenant the gracious enabling power to obey was not poured out as fully as it is since Jesus" (p. 158). Dispensationalism teaches that Pentecost marks the beginning of the regenerating work of the Spirit in the hearts of believers (such was lacking under the old economy of redemption). Piper, happily, does not resort to that popular explanation. Rather, he states:

My conclusion is that already in the Old Testament God meant for the law to be fulfilled by faith in future grace. This was possible for the true saints even before the outpouring of the new covenant promise, because God gave foretastes of his enabling power before the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the fuller measure of the Holy Spirit. [P. 154]

To be sure, what Calvin identified as the normative (or "third use") of the law is relevant to the spiritual life of the saints before as well as after Pentecost. However, alongside of the "normative" application of the

Mosaic law is the *typological* application/interpretation. On the one hand, the heavenly inheritance—life everlasting—is the gift of God's sovereign, electing grace. According to the grace of justification under old and new dispensations, true faith is productive of godly living. Good works are tokens of gratitude to God, what Paul calls the “spiritual worship” of the saints (Romans 12:1). On the other hand, temporal life and prosperity in the land of Canaan was contingent upon Israel's obedience to the Sinaitic covenant. With respect to the earthly inheritance, the governing principle was one of works, not faith (Leviticus 18:5). The ancient theocracy endured from the time of Sinai to the Cross. This was the period of Israel's national probation. That probation was terminated with Christ's fulfillment of the law and the satisfaction of divine justice.

Of course, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit “was reserved for the New Testament time” (148). But that anointing of the Spirit must be understood in terms of the redemptive-historical transition from shadow (the old covenant) to fulfillment (the new covenant). The fuller measure of the Spirit's working is *eschatological* in nature, not quantitative. The Spirit-temple, not the Solomonic temple, is God's true dwelling place in the midst of his people. And the establishment of the new covenant means more than the abrogation of certain cultic and ethnic distinctives within theocratic Israel. Piper argues:

The reason that parts of the Old Testament law are no longer binding on God's people is that there has been a great fulfillment in Christ; and the way God is pursuing his redemptive plan is very different now than it was in the Old Testament, when most of his focus was on the ethnic people of Israel. [P. 159]

What Piper needs to recognize is that the Mosaic covenant—as the legal instrument regulative of Israel's life in Canaan—had been terminated, not just in part, but in whole, with the coming of Christ. What chiefly resulted was the cessation of probation for the people of God and the abrogation of the works-inheritance principle operative within, what Geerhardus Vos has called, the symbolico-typical sphere of the Israelite theocracy. Piper is wrong when he says that “All the covenants of God are conditional covenants of grace—both the old covenant and the new Covenant” (P. 248). According to Romans 9:31-32, Israel failed to attain that righteousness which the law required. The law of Moses set forth the principle of works-inheritance, not faith-inheritance. The Gentiles, however, attained the righteousness of God through faith in Israel's Messiah.

4. Conclusion

Looking back to Jesus' ordeal at Calvary and the subsequent triumph of his resurrection from the dead, we can rejoice and find comfort in the certainty of our salvation in Jesus Christ. “Past grace” is not only a

stimulus for perseverance in grace and assured victory for the people of God; it is the *source* of our great salvation. Christ has secured for the elect our eternal rest on grounds of his meritorious work of redemption. Unlike the good angels who were confirmed in righteousness on the basis of their own strength and integrity, the redeemed of the Lord are clothed in the righteousness of Christ and will be resurrected to glory greater than that of the angels. The redeemed have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. What evangelical and Reformed Christians need today is not a revision of Protestant teaching on justification by faith, but a rediscovery of those truths which our Protestant and Reformed forefathers recovered in their day.

Piper says many things good and important in themselves about the Christian life. But when we bring all the strands together for a *coherent* doctrinal statement on justification, Piper's interpretation is found wanting. Not only does Piper lose the proper balance between gratitude for past grace and confidence in future grace as motivations for spiritual growth, he denies the meritorious accomplishment of Christ's work on behalf of the redeemed. Apart from that sure foundation for Christian living, all else is shifting ground. Piper's subtle, and not so subtle, challenge to evangelical theology is at the same time a renunciation of Protestant orthodox teaching. Piper attempts to find a place for the good works of the godly in God's declaration of (final) salvation on the Day of Judgment. *Future Grace*, though written for a popular audience, is actually difficult going. To read this work lightly, or to recommend it to others, might well prove to be perilous. May God preserve in our day the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. In the words of the hymn-writer Edward Mote (1834) may every believer declare:

*My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness*

*His oath, his covenant, his blood
support me in the whelming flood...*

*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.*

An abbreviated version of this review appears in *New Horizons*, Vol. 17, No. 5 (May 1996), pp. 23-24.

John Piper is considered by many in evangelical circles today to belong to a long line of orthodox Reformed theologians. Though much of his writing and teaching is undoubtedly 'Reformational' in its thinking and language, a number of Reformed evangelicals have recently voiced their concern about some of Piper's key teachings and assertions. The nature of his self-pronounced 'hedonistic theologian' tag, far from distancing himself from the current emphasis of many charismatic evangelicals on 'experimental experientialism' (almost always at the expense of doctrinal testing), seem strangely to parallel their view.

His belief that the Christian life is to pursue 'joy' as a chief goal of the Christian life also appears at odds with Scripture. Such an experience is nowhere taught in the Scriptures as 'a goal to be pursued', rather it is perceived as a by-product of Christian obedience. In addition his documented ambivalence towards the deeply controversial and divisive 'Toronto Blessings' experience has raised a few evangelical eyebrows.

Most of all, however, Piper's explanation in *Desiring God* and *Future Grace* of what, for him, justification by faith alone actually *means*, has led some to call into question his very credentials as a *Reformed* theologian. Here Mark Karlberg re-asserts that the Reformation doctrine of 'faith alone' is at the heart of the believer's understanding of what it means to be a Christian – and is never contingent upon the works of man, past, present *or future*.

Peter Glover, Series Editor

