

Knowing God; God at work through History (1)

Introduction

God has created us for a wonderful purpose, in that it is His desire and design to glorify Himself to us and through us. This purpose is realized in us and by us through revealing Himself to us that we might know Him personally, intimately, and powerfully. God delights in revealing Himself to His people; He takes pleasure in His people becoming knowledgeable of Him.

The Old Testament spoke of this life-long desire and endeavor to know God. The prophet Jeremiah disclosed the words of God: “Thus says the LORD:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
²⁴But let him who glories glory in this,
That he understands and knows Me,
That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment,
and righteousness in the earth.
For in these I delight,” says the LORD. (Jer. 9:23f)

Our Lord Jesus once declared that the very nature and essence of eternal life is to know God. We read our Lord’s words in His prayer to His Father in John 17:2 and 3:

“Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, ²as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. ³***And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.***’” (John 17:2f)

Of course to know God in this way is only possible for those who are true disciples of Jesus Christ, those who believe in Him as Lord and Savior.

It is by the knowledge of God through Christ that God transfers and imparts His blessings to His people. Peter wrote in the introduction to his first epistle:

²Grace and peace be multiplied to you ***in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord,*** ³as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, ***through the knowledge of Him*** who called us by glory and virtue, ⁴by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (1 Pet. 1:3f)

Knowing God is the means by which “grace and peace” may be multiplied to us. Indeed, all things that we need in order to live before God in this life is imparted to us through “the knowledge of Him.”

The Lord Jesus spoke of His close companionship with His disciples, whom He regards as His *friends*. We read in John 15:15 His words: “No longer do I call you servants, for ***the servant does not know what his master is doing***; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father ***I have made known to you.*** (John 15:15). What was it that characterized them so as to be His friends? It was through coming to know of Him and His will, to know what He was doing through His ministry in this fallen world. And so, it should be our desire and life-long effort to grow in our knowledge of God our Father and His Son, our Lord

Jesus Christ. We should long for and we should delight in becoming and being friends of God and of His Son. This friendship with Christ is not simply through knowing *who He is*, although this is foundational, but it is due to knowing what He, our Master, is *doing*. That brings us into the closest possible fellowship that His people may enjoy with Him.

Coming to know God in this enriching and rewarding personal relationship occurs within two arenas of spiritual education. The first is coming to know *what God is like*. This would be a study of, and meditation upon, His attributes. This involves how the Bible defines and describes for us who He is. But that is only one of two ways in which we come to know God relationally. The second aspect of our study of God is to learn and understand *what He is doing* in the history of the world. True knowledge of God lies in these two arenas: (1) what He is like, that is, *His attributes*, and (2) what He is doing in His world through history, which are *His actions and accomplishments*.

Now we know and affirm that God has revealed Himself to us through His inspired Word, the Holy Bible. The Bible is our complete canon (rule) that governs what we believe about God and how He would have us live in His world. The Bible is a closed canon, that is, it is a full, final, and complete record of His will that He has imparted to us. But God has also revealed Himself to His people through the unfolding events of history as His people have interpreted events and teachings by His Word. Because God has continually revealed Himself through history through understanding and applying His Word, it would do us well to consider how and in what ways He has instructed and developed His people. Through understanding better God's *actions and accomplishments in history*, we come to know Him better. We have already read of God declaring through Jeremiah this very truth. Again, we read:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
But let him who glories glory in this,
That he *understands* and *knows* Me,
*That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment,
and righteousness in the earth.*
For in these I delight,” says the LORD. (Jer. 9:23f)

God would have us understand and rejoice in knowing Him that He is the Lord of history, working to accomplish His purposes in *exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth*.

This morning I would have us consider the fact that God has revealed Himself more fully to His people through His works within history. I would like us to see that we stand as ones greatly privileged to be able to look back over the history of this world, and particularly this church age, and rejoice in knowing the things He has done and the degree that He has revealed Himself and His ways to us.

In order for us to understand and appreciate this matter, let us consider a portion of God's Word from Paul's epistle to the church at Rome--**Romans 5:12-21**. Here Paul compared and contrasted Adam with Jesus Christ. Paul declared that *Adam* had brought ruin and damnation to all the human race which had descended from him. But Paul also set forth *Jesus Christ*, who was typified by Adam, who brought salvation and restoration from sin to all of His race, that is, true believers in Jesus Christ. In addition, Paul contrasted the role of *the law of God* to reveal sin and actually result in the increase of sin, with *the grace of God* in Jesus Christ to bring them out of sin, so that they may live in righteousness unto eternal life. Here is **Romans 5:12-21**.

¹²Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned— ¹³(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. ¹⁵But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. ¹⁶And the gift is

not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. ¹⁷For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)

¹⁸Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.

¹⁹For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

²⁰Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, ²¹so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:12-21)

Now we affirm the inspiration and the infallibility of all of Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments. It is the sole source of all truth respecting what we believe about God and how He would have us live in His world. This conviction is absolute and we know nothing of compromise or taking exception to this foundational conviction. And yet we would affirm that the understanding of what the Scriptures teach has undergone modification and development through history. This is not only due to the passing of time that enables us to better understanding the truth of the Word of God itself as we read and study its pages, but we understand better the Word of God more fully when we consider what God has done through history since the days that the Holy Scriptures were first penned. And this is what we desire to emphasize before us today: that *though the Scriptures are full, complete, and final, our understanding of the Scriptures improves and deepens over the course of church history.*

This is not only true for individuals who learn and grow with the passing of time as the Lord teaches and trains them by escorting them through their life experiences. But this has been true of the collective people of God through history. For although God has given His people a complete and final canon (rule) in the Holy Scriptures, He has continued to work through history to reveal to His people more fully the truth and the implications of the Scriptures for their faith and practice. Through this church age great doctrines have been discovered and confirmed from the Scriptures that give expression to our understanding of the Word of God and the ways of God. God has most often done this by raising up godly men to confront error perpetrated by false teachers that had a corrupting influence on the people of God. These godly men were mighty in the Scriptures. They made known the truth of the Word of God in a way and form that the Lord used to correct His churches from their error, and to strengthen and establish His churches in truth. In doing so, the Lord has revealed Himself more fully and more richly to His people, and in this way He glorifies Himself to and through them.

To illustrate this we might liken the Bible to a spiritual map, by which the Lord has guided and directed His churches through history to their heavenly destination. By it the Lord has led His people through history to address and correct error, whereby He has developed and deepened the message of the Christian faith, as He has defeated and overcome all obstacles and opposers of the gospel. And so, the Scriptures, the Holy Bible, may be likened to the perfect and complete spiritual map that has directed our steps that we have already taken and that will continue to direct our course before us unto our promised end.

But it is important not only to have a have a good quality map, which we have in our Bibles, that may assist us in understanding from whence we came and to where we are going. But it is equally important to know how to read and interpret that map rightly. Those whom God has raised up in history, who were mature so as to assist and direct His people, were adept at employing the Word of God to conflict and confusion that arose before them. The writer to the Hebrews wrote of ones such as these:

¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, *those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.* (Heb. 5:12-14)

And yet, sadly, there are those who profess the Bible as the inerrant, authoritative Word of God, but may not be proficient at following the map rightly. Because of their ignorance of what God has taught others from the Word of God through history, they tend to fall into errors that the Lord corrected long before. They may piously claim that they are committed to read the Scriptures only, not other books that have *only* been written by men. But they do not realize how they have limited themselves in their ability to understand His Word because they do not read books, or give regard to what God has done in history. But even the Apostle Paul writing to Timothy shortly before his own execution gave this instruction: “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come-- and *the books*, especially the parchments (i.e. the Scriptures)” (2 Tim. 4:13). The truth of the matter is that God has raised up many godly, gifted men who, while interpreting and applying the Bible, have provided helpful and valuable matters for us to learn and understand. They have “by reason of use” employed the Scriptures to address issues and events that the churches have confronted through history. But because there are those who decry their value, who remain ignorant about matters of church history, they are incapable of recognizing and correcting error that may be presently plaguing them, that had been addressed and corrected by others before them. Because of this ignorance, they do not know how to address the problematic issues or errant persons they encounter.

Years ago my friend from California (Rick Bofinger) had visited us in our home in Germany and then he and I flew to the western region of modern Turkey (Izmir). We desired to travel on our own to see the ruins of the ancient cities wherein the seven churches of Asia Minor were located, that our Lord mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. I had taken a map with us, such as it was. It was a map of modern Turkey, but in the German language. We were able to decipher somewhat the German names for the modern cities, but we had to then make some rather bold ventures in discerning the ancient names of the cities from their modern names on the map. Thankfully we were able to locate all seven cities over the course of the week that we traveled, but our failure to know the modern day names for the ancient cities made it rather difficult for us. By way of application, we could say that there are many Christians who may read and affirm the Holy Scriptures, who are, nevertheless, rather limited in their right understanding of those Scriptures because they are unfamiliar with the formal doctrines that the Lord has revealed to His people through church history. In short, a knowledge of how our Lord has worked in history, knowing the major doctrines articulated in history--matters of historical theology--will better equip us to understand and better apply the Word of God in our own lives and better enable us to engage others at this time in history, in which the Lord has placed us and called us to make Him known. We may know our God better, by knowing of His works through history as His people have interpreted and applied the Scriptures to what was before them.

Now I would like us to consider this passage before us—Romans 5:12-21--in the way that our Lord has used it through history to reveal and declare His truth to His people. Let us first consider,

I. The doctrine of Original Sin proclaimed by the early Church Fathers

Well after the completed Bible as the Word of God, a discovery and declaration was made regarding one of its teachings that had before laid undiscovered and undeclared. This was the doctrine of original sin. The passage before us, Romans 5:12 through 21, played a significant role in the development of this Christians doctrine.

What is the doctrine of original sin? When we speak of man’s sinful nature, we are speaking of the doctrine of original sin. Here is the definition rendered in **The Westminster Confession of Faith**:

Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

The doctrine of original sin is not a direct reference to what Adam and Eve did; rather it speaks of the result of Adam's sin upon the human race. Because of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, we all are born into this world as sinners. God had originally created mankind in His image, perfect in holiness in his nature, being free from sin. But Adam transgressed the command of God and fell, resulting in him and his posterity becoming sinful in nature, subjects to Satan and servants of sin, incurring the wrath of God whereby they suffer misery and death forever, incapable of recovery unless the Lord Jesus sets them free. That is what we mean by original sin.

The doctrine of original sin, although clearly set forth in our passage, was first articulated in the 2nd c. AD by **Irenaeus** (AD 125-202). Irenaeus was born in Smyrna, who later served as the bishop of the church at Lyons in Gaul (France). He rose to refute the error of Gnosticism that had become a major heresy threatening Christendom in the second century. He wrote his work, entitled, *Against Heresies*, in which he first set forth this doctrine of original sin in its early formulation.

But it was **Augustine of Hippo** (354-430) in the 5th century that articulated the full development of this doctrine that has been espoused by Christians for the past 1,500 years. He argued the doctrine of original sin from this passage, Romans 5:12-21, as well as from 1 Corinthians 15:21f and Psalm 51:5. Augustine set forth this doctrine in his refutation of a heresy that is called Pelagianism, which was the teaching of its major promotor, **Pelagius**, (355-420). Pelagianism advocated a very positive (but unbiblical) opinion of human nature, claiming that people were essentially good and capable of making all spiritual choices for themselves. He taught that sinful men were saved from their sin through their own free will, not due to the grace of God operating in and upon them. Augustine set forth the doctrine of original sin as taught in the Scriptures in order to prove that every human being was hopeless, helpless, and hell-bound, unless God saved Him by His sovereign grace.

More specifically, what is the teaching of original sin? What were the results of Adam's sin on the human race? **First, Adam lost for humanity the original righteousness that it possessed.** God had created man and woman as glorious creatures, designed to live before God, to serve God, and to enjoy Him. Adam and Eve were the objects of God's delight and favor. They were the crown, the glory of His creation. They alone of all creatures were created in the image of God. This means that they could think thoughts after God. They were morally upright before God. They were given dominion or rule on God's behalf over all that He had created. Further, God had given them the capacity for eternal life, to ever live before Him. Adam and Eve were in a state of perfect peace and contentment. There were no failures to afflict their conscience. There were no trials to make their lives difficult or unpleasant. There were no troubles to unsettle their souls. Pure delight, undiminished joy, characterized their existence. Truth, goodness, beauty, the things of abundant life were theirs, without dilution or diminishment. But this original state of righteousness was lost to the human race when Adam sinned. Thereafter man's *mind* was darkened so as to result in ignorance. His *heart* was corrupted so that he no longer loved the things of God, but rather the things of sinful flesh. His *will* became subject to his darkened reasoning and corrupt heart. He became resistant, even defiant toward God and toward any that would assert rule over him that was contrary to his own inclinations. **Second**, when Adam sinned he was declared to be guilty and God imputed the *guilt* of his one sin to each and every one of the human race. You and I were standing there in Adam when God's sentence was pronounced. The condemnation was ours as much as it was his. **Third**, when Adam sinned his and our *nature* became corrupted. We became sinners by nature. That sinful nature is passed on by natural generation from father to children. We were born into this world as sinners. **Fourth**, we became *the servants of sin*. Sin was our master. Sin ruled over us. Our values, desires, and aspirations were controlled by our sinful nature. **Fifth**, in Adam's fall we were made subject to all the consequences of sin in this life—temporal punishments, sickness, and death. **Sixth**, from Adam's original sin have proceeded all actual transgressions (sins) that have ever been committed by man against God. And **seventh**, our relationship with God was broken; we were barred from His presence and the blessings that flow from Him. Adam and Eve's exclusion from the Garden of Eden shows the exclusion of fallen mankind from the blessing and presence of God. The curse of God came upon mankind.

In summary, we may state that we do not become sinners because we sin, we sin because we were born sinners. We came into this world as sinners—helpless, guilty, with a nature toward independence from

God and rebellion toward God. This is the doctrine of original sin. God must save sinners by His sovereign grace, otherwise they never would or could become saved from their sin.

This doctrine of original sin is very humbling to us. It is not that man has a minor weakness and needs some assistance, some propping up. It is not that man is merely ignorant and simply needs educated. The Scriptures teach that man is undone, lost, and spiritually dead. Moreover, the Word of God declares that he is ignorant and unwilling to come to God for the remedy for his sin. He is, as Paul described him, “without strength” (Rom. 5:6). He is incapable of changing his nature, his condition, or his direction. He is under the wrath of God, but most of the time he is ignorant that he is so. He presumes upon God’s love and mercy, viewing himself quite deserving of God’s favor either due to his perception of the value of things that he has done, or due to his thinking that he has done nothing to warrant God’s displeasure or punishment. But the Word of God makes it abundantly clear that there is not a thing that fallen man can do to change his condition or to gain acceptance with God. Something has to be done for him and in him, for he can do nothing for himself by himself.

This doctrine of original sin is biblical teaching. Romans 5:12-21 declares it quite clearly. But this doctrine was not derived or formulated from the Scriptures fully, until Augustine confronted and refuted Pelagius in the 5th century. God had opened His Word to His people, that they might understand it more clearly and fully.

Let us next consider...

II. The doctrines of the Protestant Reformers (early 16th c.)

Our passage of Romans 5:12-21 was not only central in the formation of the doctrine of original sin early in the Christian era, but it was also used in a significant way to argue the doctrines that the Protestant Reformers advocated and promoted. Of course Protestants were committed to expose and correct the error of Roman Catholicism that had dominated the western world for 1,000 years. The Bible had become a lost book for many centuries. Christian belief and practice had undergone decay, departing from the pattern set forth in Scripture for the churches. But when the Bible was recovered and translated from the dead Latin language into the language of the people, the errors of Rome became clear. The early reformers had all been Roman Catholic, and their initial efforts were to reform the “church”, not to separate from it. But as the Scriptures were read and understood as revealing the errors of Rome, the early Protestants also discovered the positive doctrines of the Scriptures that had hitherto been veiled to the Christian world. These are doctrines that Protestants have continued to proclaim to this day.

What were some of these doctrines of the early Protestant Reformers argued from our passage?¹ These included the following:

A. The doctrine of the *total depravity* of man

Total depravity heads the list of doctrines known as Calvinism. Total depravity is similar to the doctrine of original sin, but makes the matter more extensive. The doctrine of total depravity may be stated this way:

¹ Those who call themselves “reformed” commonly espouse the five “*solas*” of the Reformation and the five doctrines of grace, or the doctrines of Calvinism. These five principles are commonly identified by five Latin phrases, each containing the word “sola”, being translated in English as “alone” or “only.” They are as follows: (1) Sola *scriptura*, (2) Sola *fide*, (3) Sola *gratia*, (4) Solus *Christus*, (5) Soli *Deo Gloria*. These five expressions may be translated and explained as follows: The truth of God is known *by Scripture alone*, which teach justification before God is *through faith alone*, that the whole of salvation is *by God’s grace alone*, through Jesus *Christ alone*, and that the work of salvation is accomplished for the *glory of God alone*. But in addition to the five “*solas*”, Protestants have historically espoused *five doctrines of grace*, which are commonly referred to as the five doctrines of Calvinism. These five doctrines are the following: (1) the total depravity of man, (2) God’s unconditional election of the lost to be saved, (3) the definite (limited) atonement of Jesus’ death for His people, (4) the irresistible grace of God in His calling to salvation, and (5) the final perseverance of the true believers unto their full and final salvation.

Man was created originally in the image of God, perfect in holiness in His nature, being free from sin. But he transgressed the command of God and fell, resulting in him and his posterity becoming sinful in nature, subjects to Satan and servants of sin, incurring the wrath of God whereby they suffer misery and death forever, incapable of recovery unless the Lord Jesus sets them free.

Our passage of Romans 5:12-21 reinforces this doctrine. The Apostle Paul had set forth the condition of the human race as depraved and guilty due to Adam's sin. Fallen man could not bring remedy and recovery to Himself. God would have to intervene and save His people through Jesus Christ. We read this in verses 18 and 19 of Romans 5.

¹⁸Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.

¹⁹For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Total depravity is a doctrine that the Protestant reformers taught and proclaimed. And this is a doctrine that we embrace and proclaim today consistently without compromise, for it is the teaching of Holy Scripture. But it was first articulated in the form that we advocate today, in the early days of the Protestant Reformation, as godly men confronted and corrected the errant views of the Roman Catholic Church.

Another doctrine set forth in our passage that was declared by the early Reformers was...

B. The doctrine of *Solus Christus*, that salvation is by and through Jesus Christ alone.

This "*sola*" (which means "alone" or "only") was set forth as a corrective and repudiation of another major teaching of Roman Catholicism. Although some Roman Catholics would deny that this is so, Rome teaches that there are persons in addition to Christ and practices performed by them that bring salvation to sinners. Rome teaches that infants are born again through baptism (by sprinkling) performed by a priest of the church. They claim that (dead) saints contribute to bring salvation to those who venerate them, for those saints do now intercede for them and can help them to be saved based on the merit they attained in this world. Popes have claimed to be the source of salvation. The mass has been taught to be the means of salvation. The doctrine of *Solus Christus* is the biblical teaching that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. This principle declares that *knowledge* of God is attainable only through Jesus Christ alone, that a *relationship* with God may be obtained only through Jesus Christ alone, and that *salvation* from God's righteous judgment is through Jesus Christ alone, due to His life and His substitutionary death upon the cross of Calvary.

Solus Christus affirms that Jesus Christ is the only one who enables sinners to come before God forgiven and welcomed by the Father. Christ alone is the only Mediator between the human race and God the Father. It is not "the church" that provides access, nor a so-called priest or pope. Jesus Christ is the only one who is able to escort a sinner before God in a manner that the sinner will be accepted and welcomed. Scripture is clear about this truth. It is clear from Romans 5:12-21 that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. But it was the error of Catholicism that was addressed by the reformers through their use of the Scriptures alone, that God used to first articulate this biblical doctrine in the 16th century.

This passage of Romans 5:12-21 was also called upon to teach and reinforce the Protestant doctrines of salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And so, consider...

C. The doctrines of *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide*

Our passage of Romans 5:12 through 21 underscores the Protestant doctrines of salvation by God's grace alone (*Sola Gratia*) and the sinner's justification through faith in Christ alone (*Sola Fide*). Five times

Paul used the word, grace, in these verses. Verse 15 reads, “But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the *grace* of God and the gift by the *grace* of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.” And then in verse 17 we read, “For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of *grace* and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” And then verses 20 and 21 read, “Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, *grace* abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so *grace* might reign through righteousness.”

And similarly, this passage underscores that it is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone that sinners may be saved from their sin. Now granted, Paul did not use the word, “faith”, in this passage. But he did write of the free imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner. Here Paul wrote:

¹⁶And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but *the free gift* (which is the righteousness of Jesus Christ – Lars) which came from many offenses resulted in *justification*. ¹⁷For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of *the gift of righteousness* will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)

¹⁸Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act *the free gift* came to all men, resulting *in justification of life*. (Rom. 5:16-18)

In many other places in the New Testament we read that God uses the instrument of faith to impute the righteousness of Jesus Christ to sinners. And so, this passage was employed by the Reformers that set forth their Protestant doctrines, just as the early church Fathers had employed this passage to substantiate their doctrines.

But let us move onward through history. Our passage of Romans 5:12-21 was employed by the English Puritans to develop and promote their understanding covenant theology, which we continue to proclaim to this day. And so, let us consider...

III. The covenant theology of the English Puritans (17th c.)

We declare ourselves to be reformed in our conviction regarding biblical teaching. Now the word, reformed, may be understood both broadly and more narrowly. We prefer to hold to a more narrow understanding of what it means to be reformed. Some would say that they are reformed, but they are rather broad in that they are only affirming the five solas and the five doctrines of grace, which we identified above. They are reformed in their soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. However, their primary way of interpreting the Bible is through the lens of dispensationalism (which we will address next week, Lord willing). But in addition to us affirming the five solas and the five doctrines of grace, those of us who claim to be reformed also understand the Holy Scriptures to teach doctrines that are consistent with what is called covenant theology. And so, when we say that we are reformed, we are saying that we are historically Protestant (the five solas), that we are Calvinistic (the five doctrines of grace), and that we hold to covenant theology. In many quarters, to espouse reformed theology is the same as the claim to hold to covenant theology.

Although the teachings that are consistent with covenant theology may be traced throughout different periods of church history, it was in the 17th century that covenant theology became the theological center and organizing principle for understanding the Christian faith.² This was largely due to the influence of the English puritans. What they were addressing in their day was the nature of the church and sacraments imposed by both Rome and by the Church of England. In England the state church imposed its will and

² Whereas dispensationalists say that the Bible should be interpreted according to dispensations, those who hold to covenant theology interpret the Holy Scriptures according to the various covenants that are found in the Bible. Dispensationalists also teach that the Bible contains many covenants, but they do not view the covenants as the central principle by which the Bible may be understood and interpreted.

ways upon the populace. The puritans examined the Scriptures in their assessment of the current belief and practice of the established churches. They first became “puritans”, attempting to purify the Church of England that had recently become “Protestant.” But when they realized that reform would not be conducted by the established powers, they increasingly became “separatists”, separating from the Church of England. These puritan/separatists then became Presbyterians, Reformed Congregationalists and Baptists. It was among these reformed puritans that covenant theology was developed, which was determined to be the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Our own **Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689** sets forth the nature and need for covenant theology in an article devoted to the subject, which is one among the 32 total articles of the confession. Here is its initial statement of the article 7, “Of God’s Covenant”:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. (Luke 17:10; Job 35:7, 8) (Art. 6, par. 1)

In short, therefore, covenant theology came to be understood to be the interpretive framework for understanding the entire story of the Bible. It describes the manner in which God has dealt with people within history.

What may be said of covenant theology for our better understanding its major teachings? First, recognize that sometimes covenant theology is referred to as *federal theology* or *federalism*. Federalism emphasizes the biblical teaching that God has frequently dealt with people through a human representative or a federal head. Adam was the federal head of the human race. Jesus Christ is the federal head of the elect, those God chose to receive His salvation. The king of ancient Israel was the federal head of his nation. The way that he lived before God, resulted in the manner in which God dealt with the nation under his headship. Our passage of Romans 5:12-21 clearly sets forth this idea of federalism, or covenant theology.

Secondly, covenant theology, although acknowledging that the Bible records quite a number of covenants between God and mankind, emphasizes three major covenants that are given overarching attention. These include the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. What are these?

(1) The covenant of redemption. This covenant was formulated in eternity before creation in which the three Persons of the Holy Trinity covenanted together to save an elect people from sin unto eternal life (see Heb. 13:20f). It is not a covenant that God established with mankind. It is the covenant that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity established for the benefit of mankind, that is, with His elect whom He loved from eternity. This covenant was established before creation, before history began.

But once God had created the world and placed man and woman in His world, He purposed to relate with them according to one of two covenants that He would make with them within history. Christians have called these two covenants by various terms, but the two used most commonly are the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

(2) The covenant of works. When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, He established a relationship with them, a relationship based upon the terms of a covenant which He established with them. This first covenant has been commonly called “the covenant of works”, even though that expression itself is not found in Scripture. Nevertheless, the term, covenant of works, reflects the nature and terms of God’s dealings with His creatures. It was a covenant in which God promised Adam and Eve that *they would receive eternal life based upon their perfect compliance, or obedience, to His law*. We read in Genesis 2:16f,

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”

God had promised life to them for keeping His law; He promised death to them, if they were ever to break His law. Complete and perfect obedience to God's law was required of them. One transgression of His law meant their everlasting ruin and rejection by their Creator. Of course we know what happened. Adam and Eve broke God's law, and in doing so, they broke the covenant of works that God had established with them and the human race through them. Our confession of faith describes this covenant of works and our parents breaking it.

Although God created man upright and perfect, and gave him a righteous law, which had been unto life had he kept it, and threatened death upon the breach thereof, yet he did not long abide in this honour; Satan using the subtlety of the serpent to subdue Eve, then by her seducing Adam, who, without any compulsion, did willfully transgress the law of their creation, and the command given unto them, in eating the forbidden fruit, which God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

Our first parents, by this sin, fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and we in them whereby death came upon all: all becoming dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.

They being the root, and by God's appointment, standing in the room and stead of all mankind, the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation, being now conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal, and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free.³

When Adam and Eve broke the covenant of works, the covenant of works did not cease to have authority over the human race. Every person born into this world is born under the covenant of works that God had established with our first parents. As human beings, we are born into this world under the penalty of death for having violated the covenant of works. Our obligation to keep God's law abides. We were all born under the covenant of works, whereby God demands and holds us accountable to keep His law perfectly throughout our lives, even though we know that this is an impossible task, due to our sinful condition. The result is that the law of God condemns us in our sin.

Yet thankfully, God has made another covenant whereby we may be saved. This is commonly called...

(3) The covenant of grace

This covenant is also described succinctly in our confession of faith:

Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect; and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency.⁴

³ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Article 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, Article 7.

And so, God has purposed to save us from the guilt and condemnation of our obligation to keep the covenant of works, by bringing us to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace that He instituted through Jesus Christ. Where the first covenant of works constantly stirred up the presence and guilt of our sin, the covenant of grace speaks peace to us, in that it promises us forgiveness of our sin and therefore peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Under the covenant of works, which is binding upon the entire human race, they are required to keep God's law entirely and perfectly. One sin brings them condemnation. And Adam had committed that one sin on their behalf. The covenant of works has consigned to God's condemnation and damnation the entire human race.

But we praise God that though we were born into this world in this hopeless and helpless condition, God has purposed to save His people onto Himself through the covenant of grace.

Now again, the puritans knew, of course, that the Bible reveals a number of different covenants that God made with various individuals and peoples through history. These include the covenants that God made with Noah after the flood (cf. Gen. 9:9ff), with Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff; 15:18ff; 17:1-16), with Israel through Moses (Exo. 19:15f), with King David and His Son (2 Sam. 23:5), and the new covenant which the Lord Jesus established through His death (cf. Matt. 26:7f), which had been foretold by the prophets (cf. Jer. 31:31ff). But the English puritans understood that each of these divine covenants could be classified either as a covenant of works or a covenant of grace. ***This is the heart of what is to be reformed, to hold to and espouse covenant theology.***

Now this understanding and acceptance of covenant theology was developed and articulated by the English puritans of the 17th century. But what they had set forth was the teaching of Scripture in a manner that had not been previously seen or understood with clarity. Now please understand, it is not as though earlier Christians did not think in general about these matters. The essential nature of the covenants was taught and proclaimed by the early Protestant reformers (e.g. Luther, Calvin), but it was not set forth in the clarity of expression and comprehensive understanding until God revealed biblical truth to the puritans of the 17th century, both in England and in New England.

The point that we wish to emphasize today is that God is working in history to reveal Himself to His people. Our knowledge of how He is working in history, which is set forth in the completed canon of Holy Scripture, has grown and developed as He has led His people in their ongoing pilgrimage to their final enjoyment in Zion, the City of God. May He enable us to better understand the Scriptures themselves, and may He enable us to better understand how He has led His people to employ the Scriptures through the experience of His churches.

Next week, Lord willing, we will take this matter further by showing the early development of understanding of covenant theology by Reformed Baptists. Through the 17th century they increasingly distanced themselves from their paedobaptist brethren⁵ in their understanding of the covenants as taught in the Holy Scriptures. We will also attempt to show our distinctions as Reformed Baptists from our dispensationalist friends whose theology was dominant through the 20th century.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead,
that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,
make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing
in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20f)

⁵ Paedobaptists believe that the Scriptures teach that children of believing parents due to their natural birth are "covenant children." They therefore confer upon these infants and children the sign of baptism, which they believe is done through the mode of sprinkling.