

Focus on the Kingdom

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Keep It Simple

Number 1: “To us Christians there is one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:6).

Are you prepared to believe this? This is exactly: “Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10).

The majority of churches rejected this monotheism and said, “We believe in one God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” No Bible text, except the one obvious, blatant corruption in 1 John 5:7 (omitted from modern translations), says that the one God is Father, Son (“Word”) and Holy Spirit.

Jesus said in John 17:3 that “the Father is the only one who is true God.” Augustine, hailed (wrongly, we think) as a Christian superstar theologian, had to forge that text, altering the order of the words, changing the meaning, to make it say that the Father *and the Son* are the only true God.

The word “God” means the Father in the NT about 1300 times. The word “God” in the Bible never once means Father, Son and Spirit. The One God is defined as a singular divine Person, thousands of times, by singular personal pronouns: I, Me, My, Myself, Mine, Thou, Thee, Thy, Thine, Thyself, He, Him, His, Himself.

Leading Trinitarians have conceded the extreme illogicality of their doctrine. Cardinal J.H. Newman said that the closest we can come to articulating the Trinity is “to say that one thing is two things” (*Select Treatises of Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians*, 1895, p. 515).

Dr. Hey, lecturing at Cambridge on the Trinity said, “It might tend to promote moderation, and, in the end, agreement, if we were industriously on all occasions to represent our own Doctrine [of the Trinity] as wholly *unintelligible*” (*Lectures in Divinity*, Vol. 2, p. 253).

Dr. Martin Werner of Bern, Switzerland, rightly pronounced the Trinity to be contradictory:

“The Church found itself in a dilemma as soon as it tried to harmonize the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus and the Deity of the Father **with monotheism**. For according to **the NT witnesses**, in the teaching of Jesus relative to the monotheism of the OT and Judaism, there had been no element of change whatsoever. Mk 12:29ff. recorded the confirmation by Jesus himself, without any reservation, of the supreme monotheistic confession of faith of Israelite religion in its complete form...The means by which the Church sought to demonstrate the agreement of its dogma of the Deity of both Father and Son with monotheism, remained seriously uncertain and **contradictory**” (*Formation of Christian Dogma*, 1957, p. 241).

Trinitarians failed to believe the verse at the top, which defines the one God *as the Father* (1 Cor. 8:6). To support their confusion they then boldly said that Jesus is the “one Lord,” and so he must also be God! The breakdown of logic was simply the fact that Jesus is the one **lord Christ/Messiah** who is *not* the one Lord God (Ps. 110:1; Luke 2:11).

The Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels stated the simple fact: “To the men of the NT, God was the God of the OT, the Living God, **a Person**, loving, energizing, seeking the accomplishment of an everlasting purpose of mercy, the satisfaction of his own loving nature...The monotheism of the OT was never abstract, because the God of the OT was never a conception, or a substance [essence], but always a **Person**” (Vol. 1, p. 807).

Murray Harris, a Trinitarian, says:

“It does not seem illegitimate to pose a question such as this: To whom was the author of Hebrews referring when he said (1:1), ‘At many times and in various ways *God* spoke in the past to our forefathers through the prophets’? That it was not the Holy Spirit in any ultimate sense is evident from the fact that neither in the OT **nor in the NT is the Spirit called ‘God’ explicitly**. And, in spite of the fact that the LXX [Septuagint] equivalent of YHVH — *kurios* [Lord] — is regularly applied to Jesus in the NT so that it becomes less a title than a proper name, it is not possible that *o theos* [God] in Heb. 1:1 denotes Jesus Christ, for the same sentence (in Greek) contains ‘(the God who spoke...) in these last days has spoken to us in a Son.’ Since the author is emphasizing the continuity of the two phases of divine speech (‘God having spoken...later spoke’), **this reference to a Son shows that *o theos* [God] was understood to be ‘God the Father.’** [No one ever said ‘God the Son’!]”

“Similarly, the differentiation made between *o theos* [God] as the one who speaks in both eras [OT and NT] and ‘Son’ as his final means of speaking shows that in the author’s mind **it was not the Triune God of Christian theology who spoke to the forefathers by the prophets**. That is to say, for the author of Hebrews (as for all NT writers, one may suggest) ‘the God of our fathers,’ Yahweh, was no other than ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (compare Acts 2:30 and 2:33; 3:13 and 3:18; 3:25 and 3:26; note also 5:30).

“Such a conclusion is entirely consistent with the regular NT usage of *o theos* [God]. **It would be inappropriate for *Elohim* or *YHVH* ever to refer to the Trinity in the OT, when in the NT *theos* [God]**

regularly refers to the Father alone and apparently never to the Trinity.”¹

This is quite a concession! “God” in Scripture never means the Triune God!

The Church later, after Bible times, finally lost its mind by threatening with loss of salvation anyone who did not subscribe to the Triune definition of God. Lecturing on the Trinity at Oxford, Dr. Leonard Hodgson, the Regius professor, added some humor to a tragic situation. He wrote: “The Athanasian Creed is a very instructive document, for it shows that, when an attempt was made to state the Christian faith in terms of the metaphysic [philosophy] of the time, all that could be done was to set down a series of *contradictions* and say that you would be damned if you didn’t believe them [...]...The first impression produced on the mind by hearing this Christian doctrine of the Trinity is that it is quite incredible.”²

“The truth is that these creeds *violate* the Shema. For Jesus, the Shema was the core principle...How is it that if one does subscribe to Jesus’ creed, one can be considered a heretic by the established church? How is it that we have neglected/overruled/cancelled the greatest commandment of all? ‘The Lord our God is one Lord’ (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29).

“Professor Les Hardin said: ‘Those of us in the Christian faith have traditionally read this as a Trinitarian statement; we believe that God is three-fold — Father, Son and Spirit — and this verse keeps us from believing that there are three gods...In context, though, that doesn’t make very much sense, and this is the theological controversy over which barrels of printer ink have been spilt.’ (The wasted ink seems to pale by comparison to the blood of the many whose lives have been taken *because* they stood for God being one and *only* one, the Father.)

“Hardin is correct in questioning what sense is to be found in saying that God is three-fold. Brave souls through the centuries have had the courage to question this logic. Some lived to write about it...Are we saying that the Master Logician, the One from whom all intelligence emanates, actually validates an *unintelligible* theory about who He is? Really?”³

None of this confusion, including murder and mayhem and excommunication, would have been necessary if no. 1 above had been believed! “**To us there is one God, the Father**” (1 Cor. 8:6).

And none of this would have been necessary if churchgoers had listened to Jesus who declared that “the Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29). One Lord means one Person. God is one Person as no.1 above states. It should have been sufficient to settle all questions about who the one God is: “**To us there is one God, the Father.**”

Why not give your earnest attention to what Jesus, whom you claim to follow, defined as “the greatest of all the commands”? Jesus said, at the close of his teaching ministry: “The Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29).

This is exactly as quoted in the Greek translation (LXX) of the Old Testament and in the New Testament. “One Lord” means one Person, not more! (Ask your two-year-old!) To say that God is really “three Persons” violates the Scripture. The friendly Jewish scribe understood and endorsed the very words of Jesus: “You are right, teacher, that there is no one else besides **Him**” (= **one Person**, Mark 12:32). The Jewish scribe backed up his own definition of God, completely agreeing with Jesus, by adding Deuteronomy 4:35, 39: “No one except Him. There is no one else.”

The issue is this: Do you agree with Jesus, or is your loyalty to Jesus and your definition of God not clear to God and man? Christians must sound like Jesus and have the same mind as he (1 Cor 2:16). We all agree with the “Lord’s prayer.” But do we proclaim with equal conviction “the Lord’s creed,” his definition of God and our “pledge of allegiance” to God and His Messiah?

The statement of Paul that “for us [Christians] there is one God, the Father” (1 Cor. 8:6) simply repeats what is stated by Jesus and Scripture thousands of times, that God is a single “He, Him,” one single, gracious Father.

Jesus of course is the “one lord **Messiah/Christ**” hundreds of times; start with Luke 2:11. Jesus is “the **man** Messiah” of 1 Timothy 2:5, another of Paul’s credal statements.

Psalm 110:1 is the most quoted verse from the Old Testament in the New Testament. No wonder that Jesus, the master rabbi and teacher (John 13:13), went on immediately to ask his famous last question about the two lords in that Psalm 110:1. YHVH, the Lord God, is of course in that Psalm the *one* and only Lord God, addressing an oracle to the second lord, the Messiah, who is explicitly *not* God, but “my [human] lord,” not “my Lord.” (The capital letter on the second lord of Psalm 110:1 is misleading; see RSV, NET, NIV for the correction).✧

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¹ Murray Harris, *Jesus as God*, p. 47, footnote 112.

² *Christian Faith and Practice*, p. 78, 80.

³ Barbara Buzzard, “Praying Like Jesus: The Shema,” *Focus on the Kingdom*, August 2020.

Sin Nature: Did We Choose Sin or Did Sin Choose Us?

by Matt Sacra, New York

One doctrine many falsely read into Scripture from Gnosticism, Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church, and from many Protestants today is the teaching that mankind is incapable, from birth, of choosing good. Neither Christ nor any Apostle taught any doctrine suggesting that infants are born sinners with a sinful nature. None taught “total depravity” as if humans could not choose good until God first regenerated them. The entire reason any human being is worthy of blame or condemnation is precisely because he or she could have chosen good yet failed to make such a choice. Yet if humans are only capable of evil until God regenerates them, then where would the blame lie for their evil? Would it not be with the Creator who designed us to be incapable of good? Would it not be with the One who is responsible to “begin” our regeneration? May it never be so!

Jesus’ Preaching

From Jesus’ very first words as he preached the Gospel of the Kingdom in Galilee, we hear him lay the responsibility on mankind: “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The unbeliever or sinner must do something — he must change his mind and ways, orienting them toward the Kingdom to come. Jesus never preached: “Wait until God regenerates you; then you can repent.” No, repentance and belief precede regeneration. It is certainly true that the Father draws us to Jesus (John 6:44). This drawing is even something we must respond to. We are called or invited by God; then we make such a calling sure by obedience (see 2 Pet 1:10). Repentance, belief, and following this drawing are all good actions on our part which lead to our baptism and reception of the Spirit, so that we are born again (or “from above,” John 3:5-8).

It may be that Jesus’ question to Nicodemus in John 3:10, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” refers to Ezekiel 18:30-31. There God spoke through His prophet that He would judge them according to their ways (their choices), that they should repent, turn from transgressions, and get for themselves a new heart and new spirit. As we say today, “the ball is in your court.” The ball was in Israel’s court to change, and the ball is in mankind’s court today. God required action on their part, and He requires action on humanity’s part today. He will not believe or repent for anyone. People must choose to do so — their decision.

As Jesus’ Apostles rightly preached, it is after this repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus that believers will receive remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and “times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 2:38-39; 3:19). Notice the promise in Acts 2:39 is to the crowd at the time, their children, and

“all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” God’s call is not the remission of sin, nor the refreshing, nor the gift, nor the presence, nor the regeneration. Those come after the call and our response. The call is to respond to His Kingdom Gospel just as His Son and Jesus’ Apostles preached it. If mankind were completely incapable of any good choice, we would be “off the hook” for our past sins, and as some have wrongly concluded, we would be “waiting on God” to do something in us or for us first.

Backward Thinking

Rather than understanding Genesis 5:3, 6:3, and 8:21 as general indictments on how quickly mankind (from a young age) seeks self-gratification, many assume this means our Creator designed us so poorly that we are physically or spiritually made up of sin (due to Adam and Seth). If that were the case, it would have been key information for God to plainly mention in Genesis 3:16-19. God seems unaware of any inherited sin after the fall in Genesis 6:7 and 6:12. Some err, assuming Psalm 51:5 or 58:3 are literal rather than figurative, and they believe these coupled with Romans 5:12 and Ephesians 2:3, both taken out of context, “seal the deal” doctrinally. This is a false doctrine that teaches that God is in the business of making sinners.

It doesn’t stop there! This low view of humanity, and of our God, proceeds to change the human Jesus into something other than human. Instead of a human Jesus who “shared in the same flesh and blood” we have, who “in all things had to be made like his brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:14, 17), those espousing this inherited sin nature idea say Jesus’ flesh was different. Their Jesus had some “super-flesh” and could not really sympathize with our weaknesses as Hebrews 4:15 says. Most won’t dare say Jesus didn’t “come in the flesh” because they’ve seen the warning in 1 John 4:2-3, but their intent is the same — to deny that Jesus was really human like us. In fact, the NIV translates the Greek word *sarx* (flesh) simply fine for Jesus, but for others (see NIV Romans 7) the word *sarx* becomes “sinful nature.”

But wait — there’s more! They must explain how Jesus avoided this Gnostic error with theology. So here is how the sleight of hand works: Roman Catholics claim that Mary was always sinless, in order to conceive a human born free from this “inherited sin nature.” Protestants are not so bold; they will declare that the mystical “sin gene” passes on via sperm of a man, which Jesus missed by the virgin conception. Either way, voila! You have a Jesus who escapes being tainted with this filthy fabricated doctrine, separated from the rest of humanity. Its advocates have created a solution for a problem that doesn’t even exist!

Like Job’s friends (Job 15:14-16) who spoke incorrect things about God in their folly (Job 42:7-8), many Israelites in Jeremiah and Ezekiel’s day (Jer. 31:29,

Ezek. 18:2-4, 20) used a terrible proverb which God hated. It seems they took God's Exodus 34:7 punishing iniquity "to the third and fourth generations" too far. Some Pharisees and disciples may have done so when Christ defended the man born blind (John 9:1-3, 34). It was Gnostics and those under Manichaeism who brought it to Christianity, saying all matter was sinful, like flesh/bodies. Satan's agenda behind the heresy was to make us believe we are unable to obey like Jesus. What better excuse than, "Jesus didn't have the same sinful flesh the rest of you have. You all are born sinful, and have no choice but to sin."

Gnostics went further, saying that Jesus didn't have flesh, period (hence the warning in 1 John 4:2-3). Manichaeism (Augustine instructed it for over 8 years) even taught that married sexual intercourse was sinful because of desires, and because it produced another "sinner" or human soul "trapped" in a "sinful" body of flesh. Augustine confessed struggles with lust, so he borrowed inherited sin from the teachings of Mani/Manes, contradicting Scripture. It is from him that many reformers (like Calvin) taught a doctrine of the impossibility of consistent obedience to God, and the "Original Sin" doctrine (or "Total Depravity"). They made sin a natural, inevitable substance, disease, or condition we inherit instead of an unnatural, conscious violation of God's law. It is from the 4th century that the Church became infused with so many of these false teachings we see today.

Fixing the Error

We must diligently expose the error and teach truth to eradicate this! God made us in His image, even after the fall, as Scripture teaches: Exodus 4:11; Job 31:15; Psalm 33:15; 100:3; 139:13-14; James 3:9. God gave us our spirit as well: Ecclesiastes 12:7; Isaiah 42:5; 57:16; Jeremiah 38:16; Zechariah 12:1. Yet it was our choices as humans which corrupted our own ways. Jesus being "in the likeness of sinful flesh" in Romans 8:3 means Jesus never sinned like other flesh (or people) who did, not that his flesh was "like" ours minus a sin-gene. He did not have a "get-out-of-temptation-free" pass. He was and is living proof that any human being could have and should have chosen to avoid sin every day, just as he did. What a powerful human Messiah example for us!

Let us all do as Romans 13:14 instructs us — to "make no provision for the flesh." Some claim this false "sin nature" as an excuse for why youths sin, yet others use it as an excuse for sin post-conversion. A strong tendency may exist among humans to adhere to cultural or religious norms, family habits, personal weaknesses (not immediately seen as sinful), until one matures over time and faithful practice — proactively being a "doer of the word." Since I rejected this false sin nature doctrine many years ago, I've heard many claiming, "We can't obey God because of this body/sin nature," or "We cannot

avoid sinning until we have our new bodies" to make provision for the flesh. We are better than that. Let us all walk worthy of God who invites us into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:12)! ✧

Is God a Racist? A Sexist? A Homophobe? An Islamophobe?

by Terry Anderson, Minnesota

Yes, a resounding yes, if you believe what we are being taught today by our government (politicians), our schools, our media and entertainment. God does not have to answer to us, humanity, for anything He does or says or thinks. Yet, the keepers of the "fairness" doctrine (children and adults who act like children) don't think God is fair.

In Ezekiel 33:10-16 God explains His righteous and just approach to sin and repentance, but the people don't buy it, and respond to God by saying "the way of the Lord is not just" (v. 17, 20).

For centuries and millennia God has been judged by mankind and it is no different in the 21st century A.D. With today's looting, rioting and overall disregard for law and decency, if you were to try to explain God's plan to these "children of disobedience" they would turn on you in rage and fury.

So, is God a racist? He chose Abraham and promised him land and eternal redemption through his offspring. Jesus was descended from Abraham. Jesus was a Jew, an Israelite. That is the chosen physical race that God was working through in the Old Covenant. And even though God redeemed all people (races) through Jesus He will still use Israel in leadership in the Millennium. If by racist you mean showing partiality toward a particular race, then, in the eyes of those judging God, He is a racist.

How about sexist? There are many Scriptures that could set these "God judges" into apoplectic fits. Just try to mention Scriptures that refer to the roles of men and women and the paroxysms of rage will flow. We have all heard of attempts to make God a woman or maybe even a hermaphrodite (as mentioned in my final thoughts). Once you start down the road of denying the authenticity and authority of the Scriptures, anything goes. In the lawless state we find enveloping the country, indeed we will find ourselves increasingly bombarded with nonsensical ideas. God chose 12 men to be Apostles, not one woman. They will sit on twelve thrones judging Israel (Matt. 19:28). Yet God does not consider women of a lesser status, just that they have different responsibilities. What about Sarah, Abraham's wife, Deborah the prophetess and judge, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist? These were all wonderful examples and will undoubtedly have high positions in God's Kingdom.

God a homophobe? As they say up here in Scandinavian land, "you betcha." If you can read the Scriptures and fail to see the loathing God has for sexual

sins, then you are indeed blind. Romans 1 is an extraordinarily precise condemnation of all evil generations. As has been said, if God now accepts homosexuality because it is the “progressive, right thing to do,” then He owes an apology to Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as every generation since Adam.

Last but certainly not least: Is God an Islamophobe? I would say so. And He is also a Hinduphobe and Buddhaphobe. Phobia is a fear and God fears no one or thing. But in the eyes of the world it is a convenient label. There is only *one* name under heaven whereby we must be saved — Jesus, our Messiah (Acts 4:12)! Those who believe that there are “multiple paths to salvation” are sorely deceived and will one day understand it.

Does God hate these people? No, He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; He wants only that they would turn from their evil ways and turn to Him (Ezek. 33:11).

As we continue to see the rapid deterioration of our system of law and order, it is evident that those who participate and foment the lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3-8) not only live with a spirit of hatred toward authority and law enforcement, they also vehemently hate God and all He stands for. It reminds me of Revelation 16:8-11 where men were receiving the punishment from God, but still did not repent. They blasphemed and cursed the God of Heaven. The hatred is palpable.

Satan is the god of this world so you’d expect all this (2 Cor. 4:4). His fingerprints are all over the rebellion we see. It’s not rebellion against oppression, although they see it that way; it is rebellion against basic natural law — do to others as you would have others do to you — the summary of the law and the prophets (Matt. 7:12). Satan just loves chaos, confusion, destruction and death. And that is what we are getting from many of the groups we see nightly on the news. I would dare say most of these participants have an innate loathing for basic natural law and the God who supports those laws.

And in wrapping this whole sordid business up I’m going to reference an abomination that just came out of the National Church of Iceland. This church, supposedly Christian, is advertising the “Transgender Jesus, with breasts, dancing under a rainbow.” Satan has fun with this stuff because he knows how unbelievably gullible humans are.

Psalm 2:1-6 summarizes well God’s opinion of today’s lawlessness and anti-God, anti-Christian behavior: “Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed [Messiah], saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord mocks them. Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, ‘I have set My king [Jesus] on Zion, My holy hill.’”

There should be no hesitation these days in praying “Thy Kingdom come.” ✧

The Context of Romans 10:9-10, Confessing Jesus as Lord

by Kenneth LaPrade, Texas

With the importance of being dedicated to following Jesus’ teachings firmly in mind (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 7-9), we can intelligently approach Paul’s writings (and the overall context of the book of Romans) with confidence and bona fide integrity! Paul certainly esteemed highly the words of Jesus himself (Acts 20:35; 1 Tim. 6:3) as he tirelessly — for decades — was heralding the same Kingdom Gospel message (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:24-25; 28:23, 30-31) of which Jesus himself had been the primary speaker (Heb. 2:1-4). According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus had been the first to declare words focused on the great rescue regarding *our salvation*. (The writer of Hebrews, certainly, like Paul, understood that Jesus’ new covenant **words** are urgent for *us*; they are **not** the mere repetition of the Law’s “letter”; they are **not** the bygone relics of old covenant, Mosaic norms.)

The often misunderstood book of Romans gives some very detailed explanations about God’s massive rebuilding or reconfiguration project, including His all-wise dealings with both Jews and Gentiles in *carefully* forming a new covenant **family** — without ethnic distinctions or other dividing factors. The twice used phrase “the *obedience of faith*” communicates the solid idea that **faith** or faithfulness (by all people in the rescued, covenant family) is a clear matter of continual, loving **obedience**. The two uses of this phrase serve as sort of a set of bookends for the whole epistle of Romans (1:5 and 16:25-26).

On top of this overall, *bracketing* truth about “the obedience of faith” in the book of Romans, we should remember that contrasts in Paul’s writings between “works” (or *observances*) and “faith” — meaning proactive **faithfulness** (*not* mere mental assent) — should not be misunderstood through popular but misleading theologies. These make a false dichotomy between “works” as *doing stuff* in contrast with “faith” as *doing nothing* (except for enjoying an exuberant **moment** of mentally *accepting* what Jesus did for us through his death and resurrection). Without going into certain complexities concerning Paul’s dynamic challenges to the ongoing practices (or “works”) of old-covenant, outward observances (*observances* which are sometimes correctly referred to within the vocabulary of *covenantal nomism*), we can note that such Mosaic observances are now replaced by new-covenant identity markers — i.e. evident, obedient actions following Messiah’s non-divisive, newly revamped, spiritual standards.

We can simply peruse a couple of examples in Romans. Paul *never, ever* separated his “new,” doctrinal,

explanatory ideas from the Kingdom Gospel's emphasis on basic, ongoing, obedient responsibility toward Jesus' commands. Also, he never contradicted what James asserted in the context of declaring that "faith without works is dead" (according to James 2:14-26).

Even if we (beset with human weaknesses) do not technically **earn** our salvation by any sort of prior merit or by our previous behavior, our decision to pursue a *faithful, ongoing response* to God's gracious truth really **counts**, as we see in Matthew 7 and other passages. Despite the misleading, modern vocabulary of easy-go-lucky "grace" according to many current theological trends, the fact that we are commanded to change (or "repent") in a continuous way is **not** at all a denial of "salvation by grace." It is clearly **by grace** that we get to use our free will choice-making abilities to respond by repenting (*changing* and actively believing the Kingdom-Gospel message; Mark 1:14-15). Perhaps Romans chapter 6 gives us a concise, vivid display of what our initial Christian commitment, as well as our ongoing dedication to Jesus' lordship, *looks like* in practice. Instead of foolishly *misusing* the Messianic victory (as emphasized in chapter 5) and true **grace** as a twisted *license to sin*, deliberately, we should consider the full implications of our important choice to have been **baptized!** (ch. 6).

Baptism, or being dunked in water, had been very important to the Apostle Paul's personal experience (Acts 22:16), and his ministry to others when they initially responded to the Kingdom Gospel message (Acts 16:14-15 and verses 31-34). Even in a case when it was just as well that others carry out the actual baptisms (1 Cor. 1:13-17), the divisive situation at Corinth enabled Paul to gladly emphasize that he had not baptized anyone "in his [Paul's] name," in the sense of influencing them to be fixated on him (in an inappropriate way). Paul already knew that this physical dipping action in simple water (with a spiritual result) was a *bona fide*, unifying, new covenant identity marker, *erasing* — before God — ethnic and cultural separations, divisions in class status, and gender role distinctions (according to Gal. 3:27).

My reason for bringing up baptism here is not to go off on an irrelevant tangent, and it is not *only* to point out the nearness of Romans 6 to the context of Romans 10. I know that there are many folks still (in modern times) who blatantly *disregard* biblical baptism due to an exalted assumption regarding the use of Romans 10:9-10 as a formula for instant salvation. Some such people (of whom I was one, for over four decades) *downplay* baptism in water according to an old *dispensational* theory that "holy spirit baptism" *replaced* inferior "water baptism." Such a dismissive theory does not fit with either biblical word meanings (Greek terms for "washing," "dipping" or "bathing") or the consistent panorama of many Scriptural contexts.

So, in Romans 6, Paul elaborates on the spiritual meaning of initial, repentant baptism itself, which his

readers or listeners would have associated with their own individual decisions to have been splashed down in water (while pledging themselves with a good conscience to stay loyal: 1 Peter 3:21-22.) They fully understood that water itself had no magical cleansing power, but that active obedience was paramount to new covenant faithfulness.

Thus, according to Romans 6, when one reflects on having gone down under the water, he/she identifies himself/herself with Jesus' death and burial. The further described meaning of baptism in practice indicates the full recognition that one has been crucified with the Christ — having the old, defective nature *considered* to be put to death along with the Messiah's death, so that one is no longer in bondage as an active slave to sin. Correspondingly, by being identified in baptism with Jesus' resurrection (after his death and burial), one is practically enabled to live a new quality of life. One can then obey God, *starting* by thinking correctly in terms of identifying oneself with the risen Messiah (as described here in chapter 6), and then by yielding the thoughts and actions of his/her body parts — not to continued sinful habits, but to be actively doing what is right and honoring to God!

Even though this change of life direction (as associated with baptism) is challenging, it is very doable, according to Jesus, as well as according to Paul! God does not regard humans as so "totally depraved" (a wrong, Calvinistic assumption) that they *cannot* decide to respond and simply start obeying Him with true devotion! It is the essence of authentic grace to be perpetually enabled to keep doing what is lovingly commanded. **Holy spirit** (as talked about in Romans chapter 8 and other places) is given freely to those of us who truly repent — in order to encourage and empower us towards real **holy living**. If we make mistakes, or if we lack maturity, there are **gracious** provisions to help us get back on track and stay on track (such as: confessing our sins to God, without being in denial about them: 1 John 1:5 – 2:2, and also asking, without wavering, for God's generous wisdom: James 1:5-7).

Anyway, to put it simply, the essence of Romans 10:9-10 in its *real* context could **not be contradictory** to the prior Romans 6 overview concerning the ability *to calculate ourselves* (6:11) as being dead to sin, and alive to God through Jesus the Messiah. Also, Romans 10:9-10 **could not contradict** this Romans 6 context of urgent obedience with continued dedication to *stop* deliberate sinning, and, conversely, to proactively *yield* ourselves (the members of our bodies) to purposefully honor God (6:12-23) — *all* in light of our comprehending the true, contextual meaning of pledging ourselves to God through Messianic baptism.

Also, it is appropriate here to quickly consider a passage shortly after the Romans 10:9-10 verses, a short section which is well within the immediately close

context of the general unit of Romans, chapters 9, 10, and 11. These three chapters are a unified context which deal with God's overall, merciful foreknowledge and choices, and His specific wisdom in dealing with Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). Paul had been making the point throughout Romans in several ways (as one can see in chapters 2, 3, and 4) that God Himself has never been *unfair* to anyone (whether Jews or Gentiles) in any era, despite the fact that He needed (in His wise foresight) to provide a restorative New Covenant. God's chosen, Israelite people (who had enjoyed the benefits of knowledge and promises given to them) had collectively invalidated the old, Mosaic covenant, thus producing their collective state of dispersion and ongoing exile. God's wise ways of not giving up on a remnant of certain, dearly cherished people (Jews) who wanted to respond with humility, while simultaneously opening wide floodgates of mercy to other people (non-Jews), is an unfathomable, biblical marvel!

In Romans 11 (after addressing many heartfelt concerns with *Israel* from 9:1 to 11:12), Paul spoke directly to Gentiles who had begun to believe in and *obey* the Messiah; thus, they had been grafted into the metaphorical olive tree with Israel's Jewish roots supporting them. Here are a few practical reminders in Romans 11 for Gentiles, who had already believed, and had been undoubtedly *connected* to the olive tree:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you — a *wild* olive tree! — were grafted in among them, and came to share in the root of the olive with its rich sap, don't boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember this: it isn't you that supports the root, but the root that supports you. I know what you'll say next: ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’ That's all very well. They were broken off because of unbelief — but you stand firm by faith. Don't get big ideas about it; instead, be afraid. After all, if God didn't spare the natural branches, there's a strong possibility he won't spare you. Note carefully, then, that God is both kind and severe. He is severe to those who have fallen, but he is kind to you, provided you continue in his kindness — otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom. 11:17-22, *Kingdom New Testament*, N.T. Wright).

More details about this vivid picture of the need to stay *obedient* and *faithful* can be garnered from the surrounding context: 11:11-36. Despite the sloppy theories of some old school dispensationalists concerning Romans chapter 11, these “Gentiles” who could really get “cut off” were **not** unconverted ones; they were **not** merely folks thinking about eventually “getting saved.” No, they were truly already *connected to the olive tree* believers, who still needed to continue faithfully in God's kindness with a humble attitude — in order **not** to get cut off.

One might quickly recall Jesus' similar parable of the true vine and the branches in chapter 15 of John. Folks

must actively remain in the vine of Jesus (according to that plant analogy) by constantly remaining in the practice of the **words** he spoke — in order to keep bearing fruit: “If people don't remain in me, they are thrown out, like a branch, and they will wither. People collect the branches and put them on the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6).

Paul's olive tree illustration in Romans 11 is so exactly congruent with Jesus' analogy of the vine and branches in John 15! In both cases there are bold but kind reminders that it is essential to remain *connected* to the spiritual source provided by God. One can stay **connected** through continuous, faithful obedience to God's New Covenant words (starting with the teachings of Jesus himself) in practical living. There is no doubt that the whole thesis of Romans is built on the Kingdom of God Gospel taught by Jesus (Luke 4:43; Mark 1:14-15). Once again, it is obvious that Romans 10:9-10 *cannot contradict* the key behavioral **conditions** of responsible, ongoing faithfulness required — according to the olive tree illustration in Romans 11. ✧

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Comments

- “When I left the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, your YouTube channel has helped me a lot to get a better understanding of Scripture — especially about the identity of our Messiah, Jesus. I would like to have fellowship with believers.” — *Netherlands*

- “I have finished translating the lead article, ‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’ by Wiley Jones, in the October issue of *FotK*. What an amazing insight and what clarity! It prompted me to translate it into German.” — *Florida*

- “It is so good to find other people who read and understand the Scriptures the way I do. For years I felt like I was the only one who did not believe that Jesus was God, but rather that he was the Son of God. The Trinity never really made any sense to me. And then when I was in Bible college and I learned more about the idea of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, I was appalled! I felt that was blasphemy and it took away from the glory of God alone. To think that Jesus is God is to be in idolatry, and has kept me from having a right relationship with our Messiah. How sad. I wonder how many other people have had the same feelings as I have had?” — *Georgia*

- Sunday school: 1+1+1=1
Monday school: 1+1+1=3

— *Canada*