

# The Arminian

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## ASSURANCE or PRESUMPTION?

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Vic Reasoner

The first attempts to reconstruct the teachings of John Wesley occurred within a dozen years of his death. The first Wesleyan doctrine to come under attack was the direct witness of the Spirit. Between 1803-1805 Joseph Cook denied that John Wesley was an “almost Christian” prior to Aldersgate. He also rejected Wesley’s distinction between a servant and a son. Furthermore, he rejected Wesley’s interpretation of Romans 8:16 and declared that all who repent are justified, denying any difference between justifying faith and the witness of the Spirit. The only witness of the Spirit, according to Cook, was what the Bible declared in general and not what the Spirit may declare to an individual. He denied that a believer receives a direct assurance of his acceptance.

In 1806 the Methodist Conference expelled Joseph Cook on charges of heresy. Three years later Melville Horne broke with Methodism. Horne had suc-

ceeded John Fletcher as curate of Madeley in 1786. Prior to his break, Horne had declined to preach in Methodist pulpits for seventeen years and felt that they considered him to be an enemy. However, Horne asserted that he agreed with the Methodists on every point, including Christian perfection, but not on what constituted saving faith. He said he had grown up hearing the Wesleys preach, but had never accepted their definition of faith. Finally in 1809 he renounced Wesley’s view of saving faith, as stated in “The Almost Christian,” that saving faith is a sure trust and confidence in God. Horne also claimed Wesley abandoned this definition before his death. Horne felt the Methodist leaders had persuaded John Whitehead to eliminate any evidence of Wesley’s change of mind on this subject in his biography of Wesley published 1793-1796.

Horne denied any direct witness of the Spirit and called the doctrine “unscriptural, unnecessary, and dangerous.” Horne asserted that all who repent and believe are forgiven — even if they lack assurance. All that Horne required was a felt need of Christ and a willingness to receive Christ on his own terms.

But how can I know that God has accepted me? The Word of God promises assurance, but the Word cannot tell me that God has accepted me. According to the Word, that is the ministry of the Spirit. Horne admitted that he did not intend any reference to assurance in his definition. Yet if the penitent receives Christ, he can rationally and Scripturally *infer* his assurance. But saving faith always contains strong assurance. In Acts 17:31 and 2 Timothy 3:14 the Greek word for faith (*pistis*) is translated “assurance.”

John Fletcher observed, “But undoubtedly assurance is inseparably connected with the faith of the Christian dispensation.... Nobody therefore can truly believe, according to this dispensation, without being immediately conscious both of the forgiveness of

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sins, and of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” W. B. Pope declared that although there is a difference between faith and assurance, the same Spirit who brings faith to life gives the internal assurance that it is fulfilled in such swift succession that it is impossible to distinguish between faith and assurance. Nathaniel Burwash explained that “faith has in it divine assurance, and all assurance springs from God-given faith. Justifying faith is a personal divine assurance of the *provision* of salvation in Christ for me. The witness is personal divine assurance of the *possession* of that salvation by me.”

Horne conversed with Wesley about three years before his death, somewhere around 1789 and reported that Wesley had told him, “When fifty years ago, my Brother Charles and I, in the simplicity of our hearts,

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**Wesley was clear that the witness of the Spirit is given to those who are justified and those who are sanctified.**

told the good people of England, that unless they knew their sins forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel, Melville, they did not stone us. The Method-

ists, I hope, know better now; we preach assurance as we always did, as a common privilege of the Child of God; but we do not enforce it, under the *pain of damnation*, denounced on all who enjoy it not.”

Kenneth Collins, commenting on this often-quoted letter to Melville Horne, pointed out that Wesley maintained assurance is the *common* privilege of the sons and daughters of God. It is rare when assurance does not soon follow the new birth, even if it is initially mixed with doubt and fear. [*The Scripture Way of Salvation*, p. 236; *The Theology of John Wesley*, p. 136]. Yet Horne referred to this conversation as proof that Wesley had changed his position, even publishing part of it on the title page of his book.

In 1809, the same year that Horne published his attack, Edward Hare wrote a 38-page rebuttal in which he replied to Horne, “Do not imagine that we are to be bullied out of our opinions.” In 1810 Thomas Coke published a series of letters, running 382 pages, explaining justification by faith and the direct witness of the Spirit, vindicating these doctrines from misrepresentation and the erroneous conclusions of Melville Horne. Nor did Joseph Benson, editor of the *Methodist Magazine*, waste any time in publishing a rebuttal of Horne’s book. A two-part review appeared in the January and February 1810 issues of the *Methodist Magazine*.

This being the case, it is ironic that Laurence Wood used Horne to define the doctrine of Wesley and Fletcher. Horne claimed that Wesley had come to assume a distinction between justifying faith and the assurance of faith. Assurance is for mature believers. Pentecost made possible the full assurance of faith to those who previously had been justified by faith. Yet Wesley was clear that the witness of the Spirit is given to those who are justified *and* those who are sanctified. In *both* cases the assurance may not always be clear at first, neither is it always the same, sometimes it is stronger and sometimes fainter. But in general the testimony to entire sanctification is both as clear and as steady as the testimony to justification.

While Wood relies on this distinction to define Christian perfection [*The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism*, pp. 180-186], the issue under discussion is not Christian perfection, but the direct witness of the Spirit. Wood regularly confuses these two subjects, since the witness of the Spirit accompanies the baptism with the Spirit in the new birth and Wood equates both the baptism and witness of the Spirit with Christian perfection.

However, if Horne can be trusted to represent Wesley, Horne declared that Wesley “never considered the Christian dispensation as fully opened till the Day of Pentecost, when the Disciples received the Promise of the Father and were baptized with the Holy Ghost and the fire of divine Love. This Baptism brings the fullest assurance of faith. And this is what he means, emphatically by *saving Christian faith*; not intending to deny faith in Christ, as both saving and Christian.”

Wesley did not change his doctrine of Christian assurance at the end of his life as Horne asserted. The *Methodist Magazine* review stated, “We have the [boldness], however, to believe that Mr. Wesley never changed his opinion of the doctrine of Faith.” In 1740 Wesley wrote, “I never yet knew one soul thus saved without what you call ‘the faith of assurance’; I mean, a sure confidence that, by the merits of Christ, *he* was reconciled to the favor of God.”

As early as 1745, the minutes of the Methodist conference indicated there might be some exempt cases in which justifying faith may not always be accompanied by the witness of the Spirit. Wesley elaborated on these exemptions in a letter to Dr. Rutherford on 28 March 1768 as either “disorder of body or ignorance of the gospel promises.” In 1774

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Wesley edited his own Journal to say that prior to Aldersgate he had the faith of a servant, but not of a son. However, Wesley consistently maintained that explicit assurance of God's pardon is the common privilege of real Christians. This is the birthright of all true believers and Wesley preached, "Let none rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness... This is the privilege of all the children of God and without this we can never be assured that we are his children."

How else can we know that we are accepted by God? Richard Watson explained that pardon is subsequent to both repentance and faith so that neither can provide evidence of pardon. "This being true, the only way we can ever know whether our repentance and faith are accepted is to know the pardon actually following upon them and, since they cannot attest to the pardon themselves, there must be an attestation of a distinct, and higher authority, and the only attestation conceivable remaining is the direct witness of the Holy Spirit." Adam Clarke taught that those who were adopted could know it by no other means than by the Spirit of God. "Remove this from Christianity, and it is a *dead letter*." While dying in 1735, Samuel Wesley admonished his son, "The inward witness, son, the inward witness, that is the proof; the strongest proof of Christianity."

By the time of Phoebe Palmer, some thirty years after Cook and Horne, it was asserted that no confirmatory feeling was necessary. Yet early Methodism preached that true religion was heartfelt. Assurance must be felt to be truly known. While Palmer urged a leap of faith, Wesley required evidence. Yet Palmer taught that only "bare faith" was necessary. As Cook and Horne had attempted, Palmer also replaced the witness of the Spirit with the witness of the Word. According to historian David Bebbington, "A new era had dawned in holiness teaching."

The result is that today, according to George Barna's *State of the Church 2002*, more than 60% of American adults believe they are going to heaven because they repeated a salvation prayer. But less than 10% show the fruit of salvation. A. W. Tozer warned,

Among the evangelicals it is entirely possible to come into membership, to ooze in by osmosis, to leak through the cells of the church and never know what it means to be born of the Spirit and washed in the blood. A great deal that passes for the deeper life is nothing more or less than basic Christianity. There is nothing deeper about it, and it is where we should have been from the start. We should have been happy, joyous, victorious Christians walking in the Holy Spirit and not fulfilling the lusts of the flesh. Instead we have been chasing each other around the perpetual mountain.

What we need is what the old Methodists called a sound conversion. There is a difference between conversion and a sound conversion. People who have never been soundly converted do not have the Spirit to enlighten them. When they read the Sermon on the Mount or the teaching passages of the epistles that tell them how to live or the doctrinal passages that tell how they can live, they are unaffected. The Spirit who wrote them is not witnessing in their hearts because they have not been born of the Spirit. That often happens... People get into the church who are not converted at all. We are so tenderhearted, sentimental and eager that we get them on any grounds at all, if they just say the right words for us. But maybe some of these people have never been converted in the first place [*Ruin, Rot or Revival*, p.383].

As the *Methodist Magazine* review stated, "The receiving Christ' is one thing, but certainly it is not every thing essential to faith." The direct witness of the Spirit was the distinguishing mark of early Methodism. Today that assurance has been largely replaced by presumption.

*This article is edited from the forthcoming "Assurance or Presumption? Early Attempts to Reconstruct Methodist Doctrine: 1803-1809," Wesleyan Theological Journal 44:2 (Fall 2009).*

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# THOMAS COKE'S ARGUMENTS FOR THE NECESSITY OF THE DIRECT WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

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Thomas Coke declared, "Immediately when justification takes place...God sends forth the Spirit of His Son into the pardoned heart as the Spirit of adoption; and the evidence which this Spirit brings to our hearts that we are accepted through the Beloved is the only direct witness which we know, or for which we contend" [p. 324].

Coke argued that if a man can be in the favor of God and not know it, the following errors will arise. The absence of the direct witness of the Spirit

- leads to legalism
- in time stifles any conviction
- invalidates the testimony of conscience since God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit
- leads to a false peace while he walks in darkness
- leads to preposterous ideas of faith without evidence
- conceals the motives from which our actions flow
- raises the question of why a person could not also be a penitent without knowing it
- makes reformation and regeneration the same
- leaves perfect love with no witness
- brands the inward witness as fanaticism

If we assume the direct witness of the Spirit is not essential to salvation and if weak and ignorant Christians do not have the direct witness

- there will be little regard for seeking such non-essentials since they are born again based on the sincerity of their repentance
- a conviction of unworthiness will also keep them from seeking it

- it leaves us with no criteria by which to distinguish faith from presumption
- it will banish experiential religion
- it will tend to confirm backsliders in their state of apostasy
- it subjects lives to a state of perpetual warfare
- skepticism frequently results
- it sets a bad example for others
- it tends to bewilder understanding

If we assume the direct witness of the Spirit is not essential to salvation, it establishes a false foundation for reasoning

- because it teaches me to conclude that I am in the favor of God although I do not know that I am
- because faith may be possessed without discerned, making the knowledge of a fact precede the perception of it. Thus it directs me to believe the testimony of an evidence before I am satisfied of the existence of the evidence
- because it makes a testimony of faith necessary to our discernment of it
- because it blends repentance with regeneration. Thus I am saved because I have repented.

Edited from *A series of Letters addressed to the Methodist Connection, explaining the important doctrines of Justification by Faith, and the direct witness of the Spirit, as taught by the preachers of that body, and vindicating these doctrines from the misrepresentations and erroneous conclusion of the Rev. Melville Horne, minister of Christ Church, Macclesfield, in five letters, written by that gentleman* (London: the author, 1810), pp. 274-295.

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## THE ACTS OF THE SPIRIT, PART 3:

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Joseph D. McPherson

### FILLED AGAIN WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT: Acts 4:23-31

In Acts, chapter two, we are informed that on the day of Pentecost the fiery tongues and roaring as of a mighty wind brought together a large and astonished multitude. That gave Peter a vast audience for his first public proclamation of the Gospel and the con-

version of three thousand of his hearers. Apparently, some days had passed. The crowds that had attended Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost had now returned to their homes.

The city of Jerusalem had apparently quieted down. At the same time the apostles were kept busy instructing the believers and working signs. And then

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another notable miracle took place. This time, as we are informed in chapter three, it was the healing of the lame man who had long sat at the beautiful gate of the temple. He had long been a familiar sight to the inhabitants of the city. By his healing he was given strength in his limbs to not only stand but to leap and walk. This filled the people with “wonder and amazement.” In fact it set the city all astir once again. It drew another crowd to the temple grounds and Peter was afforded a second opportunity to preach to a huge audience. But to the amazed multitudes, Peter attributed the healing of this lame man to the power of the risen Christ. The outcome of this second sermon of Peter’s was that it brought an additional number of five thousand to the infant but growing church.

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***Though these disciples had received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, yet they were capable of receiving larger communications.***

The rulers, who had crucified Jesus, now became alarmed at the ever expanding report of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. They became increasingly uneasy at

the growing popularity of His name. So it was that they arrested Peter and John, put them in prison for a night, and the next day, endeavored to intimidate them by bringing them into their august assembly.

It was an assembly of the rulers, elders, scribes, as well as the high priest, and various others with big names and much authority. All were there who were most likely to impress these disciples with fear and to coerce them into submission. They ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus.

We can only imagine what it was like to have been personally present during those proceedings and to feel the overwhelming emotional force of that atmosphere. In such awesome surroundings we cannot help but be amazed at the boldness of Peter as we read the account of his response to these Jewish leaders of power and prominence.

This is the same Peter, mind you, who, a few weeks before, in the same city, and before some of the same people, had cowed at the sneer of a maiden and denied his Master. Now, in utter fearlessness, he defies the murderers of his Master. What had made the difference? We are informed earlier in this chapter that “when they [the rulers] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus”

(4:13). The truth is that they had not only been with Jesus, they had received that which He had promised them. They had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

So it was that after these rulers of the Jews had further “threatened them they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done” (4:21).

As soon as they were released, they did what would be most natural. “They went to their own company.” Professor P. C. Barker says that in this passage we are taught how “the Church should be a home of tenderest, most faithful sympathies, and of holy social [fellowship].” Dr. Charles Carter agrees and further stresses their having need of “the understanding and prayer support of the whole church of which they were but the advance representatives. There they shared their burdens and their victories in Christ.” He sees as most important the fact that this infant “church took seriously the situation and prayed in faith unitedly, intelligently, and effectively that ‘God would grant unto [His] servants to speak...[the] word with all boldness.’” “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together” (4:31). A Church Father of the fourth century by the name of John Chrysostom wrote that “This was the proof that they were heard and of [the Almighty’s] visitation.” A later Bible scholar, David Brown, is convinced that this was a “Glorious token of the commotion which the Gospel was to make and the overthrow of all opposing powers” [Jamieson-Faussett-Brown, *Commentary*]. It gave evidence of God’s powerful presence with an immediate answer to their prayer.

Far more important, however, than the shaking of the place where these disciples were assembled, was their being “filled with the Holy Ghost” (4:31) and the effect it had upon them. For we read that in consequence of their being filled, “they spake the word of God with boldness” (4:31). Some have stood in utter wonderment at this account. Were not these disciples previously filled with the Holy Spirit? Hadn’t they experienced the outpouring of the Holy Ghost some time before on the Day of Pentecost? Why do we read of them being filled *again* by the Holy Spirit?

Some in the holiness movement are of the opinion that whenever Luke writes of a filling of the Holy Spirit that he is necessarily referring to the work of entire sanctification. Such was the teaching of W. B. Godbey who looked upon this filling of the Spirit re-

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ferred to in Acts 4:31 as another Pentecost by which the converts of the first Pentecost were entirely sanctified. “This demonstrates,” writes Dr. Reasoner, “a growing rigidity within the holiness movement that always equated the giving of the Spirit with entire sanctification.” Adam Clarke provides a much better answer that is both scriptural and reasonable. He writes as follows:

Though these disciples had received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, yet they were capable of receiving larger communications; and what they had then received did not preclude the necessity of frequent supplies, on emergent occasions. Indeed, one communication of this Spirit always makes way and disposes for another. Neither apostle nor private Christian can subsist in the Divine life without frequent influences from on high. Had these disciples depended on their pentecostal grace, they might have sunk now under the terror and menaces of their combined and powerful foes. God gives grace for the *time being*, but no stock for *futurity* because he will keep all his followers *continually dependent* upon himself.

Dr. Robert Lyon clearly shows that “all believers [in this Holy Ghost dispensation] receive at conversion the Holy Spirit as promised—in His fullness. No bib-

lical basis exists,” continues Dr. Lyon, “for a distinction between receiving the Spirit and being baptized in, or filled with, the Spirit.” The term “baptism,” whether by water or the Spirit, is consistently found in Scripture to be referring to the initial event of conversion. In fact it was universally understood by the Church Fathers, reformers, and early Methodists that water baptism was symbolic of Spirit baptism and was never to be considered separately from conversion. “The dynamic of conversion to Jesus Christ,” writes Dr. Lyon, “is such that perfection in love [including entire sanctification] is the natural follow-up.”

Obviously, these praying believers referred to in Acts 4:31 had already experienced an initial baptism of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The need of their first “filling” was a spiritual entrance into the Church mystical or body of Christ. As St. Paul assures the Corinthians “*For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...and have been all made to drink into one Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:13).

Chrysostom, though writing many centuries before Adam Clarke, wrote with a similar persuasion, showing that this subsequent filling received by these disciples as recorded in Acts 4:31 “means that they were inflamed and the Gift burned within them so that *they spoke the word of God with boldness.*”

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## ROMANS 7: A Spiritual Examination

G. B. McClanahan

The following questions, drawn from Romans 7, are meant to reflect on the teachings of the current ideologies and teachings in the church today. Most importantly, they are ultimately intended for the examination of our spiritual well being.

1. Are you controlled by the sinful nature?

A sinner is under two laws: the law of sin and death and the law of God (Rom 7:25; 8:1). God is sovereign and all his creation is under his law. However, even though the sinner may believe in God and approve of God’s authority, the sinner is still a slave to another law, the law of sin and death.

Some today would like to argue that Paul is describing the life of a born again believer. However, when we look at the chapter we see clearly that the chapter depicts a man who sins compulsively; who is under the bondage of sin. He confesses, “I do evil” (v 19), “I am a slave of sin” (v 25), “I am sold under” (v 14).

Paul explains in the following chapter that “the mind of the sinful man” is death (8:6). Obviously he means that a person in this condition is spiritually dead.

Paul goes on to say that those controlled by this sinful nature cannot please God.

All sinners, like the one Paul is describing, remain under the law of sin and death until grace is given to break free from the bondage of that sin. Nowhere in Romans 7 is this enabling grace mentioned. This is because Paul is describing someone who has not had the experience of this liberating grace. The struggle the sinner is going through in this chapter is between conscience and will. It is the struggle between what we know we should do and what we want to do. Unless our sinful desires become a desire for righteousness through the grace of God, they will win out over our conscience. As sinners, we may approve of what is right, but eventually we will always find ourselves doing wrong.

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When grace takes place, we receive the Holy Spirit and are no longer under the control of the flesh. We now belong to Christ. The new birth sets us free from the law of sin and death, but does not set us free from the law of God. We are no longer slaves to sin, but we are obedient servants of righteousness (6:16-18). “We still have an obligation,” according to 8:12. We are now controlled by the Spirit (8:9) and we are enabled to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (8:4). We now have the power to quit sinning and live righteously.

## 2. Are you condemned by the law?

As we read on in Romans 7 we see that when we discover what law we are controlled by, we raise the issue of condemnation. The law functions like a spiritual scanning device. The law does not free us from our problem of sin, but it does locate it and makes us aware of it. We may not like what the law exposes, but the problem is not the law. The problem is us. The law is holy. The law exposes our lack of holiness. When we are living under the law of sin and death, we stand condemned by the law.

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### *Many who attend church have no spiritual life.*

Paul testified that he once thought he was alive. He prided himself on his self-righteousness. But when the law came to life, all his self-righteousness died (v 9). The law demonstrates our need for salvation, drives us to Christ who alone can save, and defines how a believer is to walk once he is saved.

One of the popular methods for relief of church members who are condemned by the law is to declare that grace has replaced law and the law has no power over us. Congregations receive this “feel good” message with open arms as it justifies a quick “repentance” prayer or no response at all as a solution to the conviction the law brings. Preachers are not encouraged to preach the proper law of God. No matter how much we preach this sugar coated interpretation of the law, we will still stand condemned by the Spirit of God and our own conscience.

Each generation must rediscover one of the primary biblical doctrines — justification by faith. Romans 7 is sandwiched between Romans 5:1 and 8:1. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Those who are born again have been freed from condemnation be-

cause they have been empowered to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. Yet many who profess the new birth live under condemnation because they have never accepted personal responsibility for breaking the law of God.

Many pray a sinner’s prayer which never even mentions sorrow for sin. In a matter of a few seconds they say the magic words and are told that they are now born again — even if they feel nothing. In fact they are counseled that they probably will not feel anything. This is because they are still subject to the law of sin and death.

Today lawless teachers assert that repentance does not involve a turning from sin and that faith does not include obedience. They insist that a sinner can trust in Christ and may never obey him as Lord. They say that since God changes people by grace, we can do nothing ourselves. We do not even stop sinning to get saved. This is false doctrine. The truth is that God’s grace not only convicts us of sin, but it also enables us to repent, believe, and live righteously.

Repentance is not popular with liberals who believe in the essential goodness of humanity. Instead they hold to social determinism and teach that we are not responsible for our acts. We are victims of dysfunctional families, an uncaring society or our naive minds. Some fundamentalists do not preach repentance because they fear it will lead to salvation by works.

Dispensationalists claim that when John the Baptist called for repentance it was meant only for the Jews. Lewis S. Chafer taught that surrender to lordship was a subsequent step and this resulted in a victorious life. This step, however, was optional. The implications are that a believer might, in fact, live a defeated Christian life and never surrender. Calvinists teach man is so sinful he cannot repent or believe, but must be born again first by irresistible grace and then he can repent afterwards.

Historic Calvinism teaches that the believer never rises above the struggles of Romans 7. Yet because he has surrendered to the lordship of Christ he will repent that he continually falls short. Thus, many in the church who profess salvation still live under condemnation.

## 3. Are you consumed by the spirit?

The third question raised in Romans 7 pertains to spiritual life. Paul testifies that he was once spiritually alive, but that sin deceived him. He thought he could live for the flesh and still enjoy spiritual life.

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However, we are not to let sin reign in our mortal body so that we obey its evil desires. We are not to offer ourselves to sin (6:11-12). Once sin was given freedom it became his master. Spiritual life died.

The Holy Spirit is only mentioned once in Romans 7. However, in the following chapter he is referred to 20 times and ego is not used at all. The theme of Chapter 7 is “not I, but sin.” The theme of chapter 8 is “not I, but Christ.” In chapter 7 the question raised is, “Who shall deliver me?” In chapter 8 it is, “Who shall separate me?”

Many who attend church have no spiritual life. They may frequent the place of worship because they were trained to do so by their parents. They may enjoy the social interaction. They may pride themselves in their religious works. Churches often depend on entertainment to draw a crowd. Pastors are expected to raise money, build buildings, manage, attract new members, entertain, engage in public relations, smooth ruffled feathers, counsel, and be an all around nice guy. But there is not much demand for a man of God who will give attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).

True Christians routinely express a hunger to hear God’s Word. I am reminded of my Spring Break trip to San Antonio, Texas, this past spring. Driving along the interstate we witnessed a megachurch that had a huge banner draped off of the roof along the side of the building. The banner read “30 Minute Worship.”

I am afraid this church was reflective of the current marketing tactic that is spreading to the Church worldwide. Churches like these target those who become easily bored with the faithful preaching of God’s Word. They capitalize on a shallow, watered down, feel-good teaching of the gospel that requires no commitment or life-change. There is no response when Jesus Christ is exalted as our Prophet, Priest, and King. Those who become bored with an hour of public worship definitely would not enjoy spending eternity in heaven. They eventually decide that church is dead and drop out or shop for a church like the one in the given example that will meet their needs. Actually they are dead. The preaching of the Word, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, corporate prayer, the Lord’s Supper, spiritual conversation, accountability, and giving our tithes and offerings are all means of spiritual grace for the children of God and they will not forsake such assemblies.

These questions can help us to digest some of the issues in our churches and in our lives in the current age. We need to first and foremost make sure that we are living free from the law of sin and death. We need to know that the Holy Spirit has enabled us to fulfill the law of righteousness. Once we know that we are in check with these self-examination questions, then we can seek to spread this truth to the churches of which we are a part.

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## IS CHRISTIANITY A *FORCE* or a *FARCE*?

A. J. Smith

In Romans 1:16 Paul says the Gospel is the power of God. Does the modern church exhibit this power in any marked degree? Is there a divine energy that exerts itself upon the sensibilities of the masses, which transforms their lives and alters their dispositions? We know there is not. Let us not point the finger of scorn at the world for avoiding the church and failing to darken its doors. What are we offering a perishing, hell-bound world? What is there in your church and in my church that arrests the attention of the man or woman on the street who is without God? Is there anything in our churches that draws the churchless multitudes, that warns them of an impending judgment?

We preachers are charged by the world with being mortally afraid of presenting God’s truth as it should be presented. We might as well be honest and own

up to it, that we have failed to preach the everlasting Gospel that is able to save a bleeding, dying world. Are we stating the truth of the Son of God anywhere near as it deserves to be stated? “You preachers,” said a theater manager to a pastor friend of mine in Salem, Oregon, a few years ago, “preach the truth as if it were fiction, and we present fiction as truth. That’s why your churches are almost empty and our show houses are filled to capacity.”

One of the most astounding news items in recent times is the confession by Stanley High as reported in *Time* magazine.

I don’t make any apology for putting the failure of the church on this personal level...I think that the first business of the church is to redeem me. And I don’t mean to redeem me in



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the merely social sense which convinces me that the Golden Rule ought to be my Confession of Faith. By redeeming me, I mean personal redemption — the process by which I'm spiritually shaken apart and spiritually put together again, and from which I — the personal I — emerge a totally different person...

Ever since my Sunday School days I've had it dinned into my ears that I'm a Child of God, that I'm made in His image. It seems to me that those who lay so much emphasis on my bearing such a resemblance to the Almighty are not only mistaken about me, they're also mistaken about history.

Man was made in the image of God in the first chapter of Genesis. He didn't stay that way very long. In fact, he only stayed that way until the third chapter of Genesis. Then he had what the theologians call a Fall. He's never been the same since — not on his own...The whole of the Bible and the whole of the ministry of Jesus, as I understand it, were designed not to persuade man how good he is on his own, but how evil he is on his own. And how good, by the process of redemption...he can become...

I, personally, need the church as I never needed it before. I happen to know that my fellow laymen need it as never before and are ready, at the slightest suggestion to acknowledge that need. But the church we need will have to have more of Dante and Dostoevsky in its message and less of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Eddy Guest; more of the Last Judgment and less of the Golden Rule. It will not only have a living God, but a Live Devil. Its Heaven will have a Hell for its alternative. Its objective — so far as I'm concerned — will not be my cultivation, but my re-birth. I might fail that kind of church. But that kind of church could

not fail me ["Remembering the Fall," *Time*, 18 August 1947].

To my way of thinking, Dr. High's confession and indictment of the church in failing to offer him what his heart yearned for, should arouse every preacher in the nation. We might as well own up to it, that we have, to an appalling degree, failed those without the pale of the church as well as those within.

If the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation; then I ask, "Why is it not operating?" Has God changed? Has the Gospel lost its power? No, a thousand times no. The cause does not lie there. The trouble is with us men in the pulpit. We are not preaching the Gospel in power. The power of the Holy Spirit is lacking in the average sermon.

The prediction of General William Booth, which he made shortly before he died, is being fulfilled before our very eyes. Upon being asked what he considered the greatest danger of the coming century would be, he answered: "Religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, and heaven without hell."

When Christianity alters men's lives; then it is a *force*. If it does not, it is a *farce*! Our Lord said, when speaking about His church, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Is that your church and mine? If God should permit the dissolution of the visible church, as He did the Old Testament church, would we have a just complaint to offer? Can we give a reason why He should not?

Let us pray for a return of primitive Christianity, for the precipitation of an apostolic revival that will prove to a perdition-bound world, and a spiritually paralyzed church, that the true Gospel of Christianity is a force, and not a farce or a mere form!

*Dr. Smith preached this message over radio in Greensboro, NC. Edited from an article in The People's Herald 10:3 (March 1948): 5-6.*

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## IS THE BEAR BACK?

Vic Reasoner

Like all who love freedom, I pray that world leaders will know how to respond to Russian aggression in their recent invasion of Georgia. However, I am aware that some are now claiming that this is somehow connected with the prophecy of Ezekiel 38-39. Because some pastors do not do their homework and tend to jump on the bandwagon of prophetic

speculation, I would like to issue this general word of caution.

1. It is poor exegesis to assert Ezekiel 38-39 has anything to do with Russia.

The Hebrew word *rosh* means "head" or "prince" and is thus translated more than six hundred times in

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the Old Testament. There is no basis to the claim that it is a reference to Russia in Ezekiel 38-39. The word "Russia" does not come from the Hebrew word *rosh*, but from a Scandinavian word, *Rus*, introduced into Ukraine in the Middle Ages — perhaps 1600 years after Ezekiel wrote. Marvin Pate and Daniel Hays stated that they know of no scholar in the Evangelical Theological Society who holds to the view that Ezekiel is referring to Russia [*Iraq - Babylon of the End Times?*, p. 140]. A classic work in this field is by Edwin Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier* (1982). The fact that Ralph H. Alexander surveys five different interpretations concerning this section of scripture should be a red flag of caution against dogmatism ["A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 17:2 (Summer 1974): 157-169].

Furthermore, "Meshech" is not "Moscow." The only similarity between this old Hebrew word and this modern spelling of an old Russian word is that they both begin with the letter "m." The Hebrew word for "hooks" in Ezekiel 38:4 is not a reference to Chechnya nor is Tubal a reference to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Based on this kind of pseudo-scholarship, we could just as easily argue that "Noel," an expression of joy used in Christmas carols is really a declaration that there is no God, since "el" in Hebrew is a reference to God.

2. It is poor theology to claim that current Russia aggression is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

If we connect Ezekiel 38-39 with the only other reference to Gog and Magog in Revelation 20:7-10, as is commonly done, this battle occurs at the *end* of the millennium. If you are premillennial, that would be at least a thousand years from now.

If you are amillennial or postmillennial, this battle may be interpreted either literally or symbolically, as a final battle of ideas and doctrine. But some would question how the Ezekiel passage is connected with the Revelation passage. And none would accept the premise that either passage is a reference to Russia.

Remember all amills are postmill with regard to the timing of the Lord's return and all postmills are amill with regard to the spiritual nature of the millennium. Both would reject a Jewish or chiliastic concept of a literal earthly Kingdom. A more specifically postmillennial understanding of Revelation 20:7-10 would say that there cannot be a general apostasy from the faith until there has been a general turning to Christ. Since we have not yet seen the Kingdom of God filling the whole earth, we cannot be at Revelation 20:7-10.

The reaction of some readers may be that theology tends to complicate things, but the real task of systematic theology is to interpret the Bible consistently. All of these hard questions need to be wrestled with before we make a sensational declaration which may or may not reflect biblical teaching. My primary concern is that if we tell our people that prophecy is being fulfilled right before our eyes and then it does not work

out as we had speculated, somehow the infallibility of Scripture is tarnished. When the old Soviet communistic empire began to fall in 1989, some opportunists began to rewrite their books. For example Hal Lindsey, who had declared that the Ezekiel passage described Russia in *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), had switched by 1994 to the view that the Ezekiel passage described the rise of Islamic power. In *Planet Earth - 2000 A. D.: Will Mankind Survive?* Lindsey declared that world domination "was never in the script for Russia." Will we now see a new spate of prophecy books which revert back to the previous Russian interpretation?

The ultimate authority for systematic theology is the Holy Scriptures. And all other doctrines of the Church are derived from the Scriptures. Therefore, we need to do a more credible job in our interpretation of the Scriptures. It is popular to link current events with the Bible in an attempt to demonstrate its relevance. But when we declare that the Bible teaches certain events or trends are going to happen and they don't, the average person is tempted to become an agnostic and write off the Church as irrelevant.

Everything the Bible declares is true. But the authority of the Bible has suffered as much from the hands of its friends as from its enemies. Let me close by giving a broader interpretation of what I am certain *is* taking place. This overview will be a consensus statement upon which premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists can agree.

Prior to the first advent of Christ, Daniel saw four world empires: a lion with wings (Babylon), a bear (the Medes and Persians), a leopard (Greece), and a nondescript beast (Rome). But in the days of that fourth kingdom, Rome, Daniel saw that the God of heaven would establish a kingdom that shall never be destroyed (Dan 2:44). That kingdom invaded this world with the coming of Christ. We may agree to disagree on the details or the chronology of events, but the most important thing which is happening in the world today is not American or Russia or Muslim dominance. The era of humanistic empires has past. The Kingdom of God has come, although it entered this world as small as a mustard seed. It is predestined to grow until it fills the whole earth. This kingdom agenda supercedes all nationalistic agendas. Believers are part of a kingdom which cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28).

Yes, we are concerned over the human suffering which results from Islamic extremism, from communistic aggression, and from Western materialism. But our message is not about Russian bears or even American eagles, although I love my country. We have a message of hope that is not linked to any agenda of man. Nor can it be thwarted by any conspiracy of man. Don't get sidetracked by speculation about political animals. Our message is not that the bear is back. Our message is that the King is coming! He comes often in judgment and revival. And ultimately he will come a second time to raise the dead and judge the world.

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## REVIEWS:

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**Frank S. Page, *Trouble With the TULIP*, 2nd ed. (Canton, Georgia: Riverstone Group Publishing, 2000, 2006). 80 pages. ISBN: 0-9706117-0-6**

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In this slim volume, Dr. Frank Page, recent past-president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of Taylors Baptist Church, Taylors, SC, courageously joins the ranks of those resisting the pernicious effects of a rising, newly-resurgent, full orbbed Calvinism. “TULIP” represents the five main pillars of Calvinism: T=total depravity, U=Unconditional Election, L=Limited Atonement, I=Irresistible Grace, and P=Perseverance of the Saints.

Noting with alarm the swift advance of five-point Calvinism within the American evangelical movement, the author sets about providing an easy-to-understand sketch of the history, personalities and biblical distinctions of the debate.

In what was to this reviewer a breath-takingly concise recapitulation, Page also traces the arguments for and against that view of God which claims that He is indifferent to the heart-cry of the lost and dismissive of the plight of the damned.

Page rightly warns of the sad consequence to the evangelistic efforts of any group that embraces its doctrines – a warning that has been woefully verified by three years decline in the number of conversions (baptisms) reported in his own group (p. 75) and references Wesley (p. 31) and Wynkoop (p. 74) in opposition to the more onerous errors of Calvinistic thinking.

The sad truth is that, even with minor quibbles regarding his understanding of lesser points of Arminian doctrine and our major conflict over the issue of unconditional eternal security, Page exhibits a better grasp of the history and doctrine of biblical Arminianism than many clergy within the Wesleyan-Arminian fold. In light of two recent articles: Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed,” *Christianity Today* 50:9 (Sept 2006): 32-38 and Ken Walker, “TULIP Blooming,” *Christianity Today* 52:2 (Feb 2008): 19, the warning of Page is needed and sound.

-Steven Stanley

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**Stephen Gibson, *The Sincerity of God* (Salem, OH: Allegheny, 2008). 103 pages.**

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The premise of Stephen Gibson is that God would not command what is impossible and he would not promise what is unattainable. He calls this concept “the promise hermeneutic.” This principle is in line with Richard Watson, who wrote that through the new covenant there is conveyed that grace which enables man to comply with the terms of it. It is in agreement with Robert Picirilli in his description of enabling grace or pre-regenerating grace. Picirilli saw this preliminary grace as essentially the same as the divine calling. While Calvinism insists that a dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection, yet we are commanded to repent and believe the Gospel. Picirilli argues that this preliminary grace simply means that the Spirit of God overcomes that inability by a direct work on the heart so that whatever is required, the Spirit makes possible.

According to John Wesley, the encouragement for a believer to go on unto perfection comes under four categories: promises, prayers, commands, and examples. In this book Gibson surveyed 120 commentaries on one such extended promise in 1 Thessalonians. The majority of the commentators surveyed either ignored the primary theme of sanctification in 1 Thessalonians or interpreted this passage in light of their theology.

While I was in seminary, Dr. Robert Thomas, professor of New Testament language and literature, compiled a 120-page exegetical digest of 1 Thessalonians which dealt with the lexical and syntactical issues in this book. This provided the basis for his commentary on 1 Thessalonians in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. In spite of all his analysis, the concept of entire sanctification never came up one time on his radar.

Gibson concluded, “The necessity they feel to juggle terms, dodge the point, and ignore the obvious comes from a sort of pessimism. Their emphasis of human depravity and inability actually translates into a divine inability. They simply cannot believe that God will make possible what He requires of a believer” [p. 84; see also p. 7].

In personal correspondence with me Gibson wrote that when he was in Ukraine he could not find any Wesleyan commentaries in Russian at all. That means that in a language that 300 million people read, there is no commentary with a Wesleyan interpretation of such scriptures as Romans 6-7, or 1 Thessalonians 5:23. “I would guess that the same is true of most of the languages of the world.” Therefore, we must publish or perish.

-Vic Reasoner

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**Kevin W. Mannoia and Don Thorsen, eds, *The Holiness Manifesto* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). 249 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6336-2**

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Kevin Mannoia, a bishop in the Free Methodist Church, is chairman of the ecumenical Wesleyan Holiness Study Project, which draws from the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. This group produced *The Holiness Manifesto* in Azusa, California in February 2006 after working for two years. It can be accessed online at [www.holinessandunity.org](http://www.holinessandunity.org). The document's creators are comfortable with a statement that never mentions secondness. Chris Bounds said of this attempt,

they were not able to offer any specifics as to what entire sanctification or holiness is, beyond the statement that "Holiness is Christ likeness." The Manifesto is indicative of the contemporary Wesleyan-Holiness tradition's inability to articulate clearly, succinctly, and persuasively her understanding of holiness [<http://cbounds.blogspot.com/2006/05/what-is-entire-sanctification.html>]

The first half of the document was written entirely by Mannoia, but was affirmed by the whole group. This manifesto is also reprinted as pages 18-21 of the full-length book, by the same title, which was published two years later.

While the purpose of the statement and the book is to promote holiness, there is no attempt made to prop up the old holiness movement or to create a new movement. Their goal is to promote holiness ecumenically, as a basis for uniting Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions.

The book contains a dozen essays which argue that the concept of holiness is relevant in the twenty-first century. There is concern expressed that "this next generation could in fact be the generation that abandons belief in sanctification" unless it can be adapted to a postmodern culture. Yet for this new generation, "doctrinal purity is second to the relational nature of faith in Christian community."

It is possible that these authors have tried too hard to make relevant the biblical teaching of holiness. One author asked, "How are disciples of Jesus to be God's holy people?" His answer was that "There is no precise holiness prescription affirmed universally by the Christian community." Another author wrote, "Jesus offers us little detail on the process and the steps that would lead a people to be truly holy." Rather the Jesus way "is tailor-made to each disciple's need."

If these spokesmen and women sound timid, they are trying to avoid the abuses and legalism of the past holiness movement. Certainly Mark Quanstrom's landmark study, *A Century of Holiness Theology*, demonstrated some needed reformation in the holiness movement. But his book also demonstrates a current ambiguity which has resulted.

The strongest part of *The Holiness Manifesto* is the three chapters which survey holiness in Scripture. Any contemporary statement of holiness must be biblically based. I appreciate the analysis of holiness as a process, a goal, and a possession.

However, some other contributors do not seem to add much value to the overall purpose of the book. I especially question the value of an extended section on Kierkegaard's existential understanding of sin. Nazarene theologians have all too often tried to legitimize the holiness message by connecting it with contemporary philosophical thought. In the process they have shifted from personalism to existentialism to process philosophy. But what sounds so contemporary to one generation tends to sound stilted and dated to the next generation. To revert back to Kierkegaard, who died in 1855, will not satisfy the postmodernism of the twenty-first century. Only a return to the biblical message of holiness can answer the quest for truth in this generation, as well as all other generations.

-Vic Reasoner

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