Revising the Gospel

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Contra Mundum, No. 10, Winter 1994

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The gospel is socially subversive. Herman Ridderbos rightly points out that the gospel brings civic righteousness—on which, we are consistently led to believe, orderly society depends for its existence—into radical judgment: “it is just the content of the gospel that opened Paul's eyes to the tremendous reality of the wrath of God. For as long as man stands on legalistic ground, he is in many respects still living in the hope that through his knowledge of the law and through the merit of the works of the law he may be able to escape the wrath of God (Rom. 2:3); the wrath of God is for him only a possibility. In the light of the advent of Christ and of the significance of his death and resurrection, however, the judgment of God on sin (Rom. 3:26), and along with that the impossibility of achieving righteousness for oneself outside Christ on the ground of one's own works of the law, have become completely clear.”¹ Paul insists that even “the insight of man into the hopelessness of his condition, into his 'being worthy of death' (cf. Rom. 1:32), in no respect whatever introduces change into his existence, but rather must be reckoned a part of this dying.”² Paul did not teach that the gospel is ultimately antinomian; far from it. But the gospel does reveal the utter worthlessness of those very virtues that we think must be encouraged in order to maintain a minimum of social stability. Conversely, if we encourage civic virtue, are we not leading sinners to gain the world while losing their own souls?

This is dynamite, or worse. No wonder, then, that the church has so frequently sought to defuse and tame its power. Temptations to domesticate the gospel were especially acute when society became recognizably Christian. It is all well and good to turn the world upside down while Nero or Caligula occupies the imperial throne; it is quite another thing to tear at the props after the capital has been transferred to Constantinople or Aachen. The same temptation becomes powerful in situations of cultural disintegration and social chaos, when Christians may fear that too radical a gospel will unleash antinomian, anti-social elements, further fraying the social fabric. An additional discouragement to the

² _Ibid._, 113.
gospel is provided in situations of theological pluralism. During the Reformation and after, contests over the interpretation of the gospel more often than not ended in blood. Given this potential for violence, it seemed only reasonable to mute theological differences and strive for common moral and social goals. Contemporary appeals to “virtue” and “family values”, as well as the easy ecumenism of many evangelicals, indicate that these dynamics are at work in the midst of our culture wars.

Historically, moralism has been the most common muffler of the radical gospel of grace and judgment. In a vague sense, moralism refers to any effort to inculcate Christian moral precepts apart from the proclamation of the gospel. On a political scale, civil religion is moralism writ large. Though C. FitzSimons Allison, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina, uses the term moralism in a more precise sense, to refer to the belief that good works constitute the formal cause or ground of justification, the effect of both types of moralism is similar: both blunt the sword edge of the word of God.

Allison's 1966 book, recently reprinted, traces the Anglican doctrine of justification from the classical formulations of Richard Hooker, John Davenant, James Ussher, John Donne, and Lancelot Andrewes through the divergent views of Jeremy Taylor, Henry Hammond, Herbert Thorndike, and George Bull, to the post-Restoration theology of Richard Baxter and the debates Baxter's work generated. According to Allison, Anglican theologians after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, “with powerful assistance from certain non-Anglicans—radically abridged the Anglican synthesis and prepared the way for a moralism that has afflicted English theology ever since and still afflicts it to-day, a moralism which is less than the full gospel” (p. x).

In tracing this history, Allison focuses on the treatment of the “formal cause of justification” in various writers, and inquires into the “characteristically modern notion that deliberate sin is invariably more pernicious than sin founded in ignorance or grounded in the unconscious” (p. xi). The significance of these developments to the history of Western thought and culture generally is considerably broadened by his quotation from Coleridge, suggesting that “Socinianism is as inevitable a deduction from [Jeremy] Taylor's scheme as Deism and Atheism are from Socinianism” (quoted on p. xi). Allison further claims that T.S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" is manifest in the gradual splintering of ethics from doctrine that is directly connected to the rise of moralism.

The classical Anglican synthesis was simply an explication of the Reformation doctrine of justification. The formal cause of justification—“that which makes justification what it is”—is the righteousness of Christ imputed to those who are in Christ. Hooker stated that “the righteousness wherein we must be found, if we will be justified, is not our own; therefore we cannot be justified by any inherent quality. Christ hath merited righteousness for as many as are found in him. In him God findeth us, if we be faithful; for by faith we are incorporated into him” (quoted p. 2). The Anglican writers agreed with their Roman Catholic opponents that infused righteousness was real, but they denied that it was the formal cause of justification. They also agreed on the necessity of good works, but insisted that they were necessary not as the ground but as the way of salvation. Justification is not a declaration that a sinner has made himself righteous; but justification
does inaugurate a process by which sinners become righteous.

Closely related to the question of the formal cause of justification was the question of whether sin remains in the justified sinner. Roman Catholic teaching, by insisting that infused righteousness was the formal cause of justification, was logically bound to conclude that original sin was completely erased by the infusion of righteousness. If any remnant of original sin remained, then the infused righteousness would not be sufficiently perfect to stand before God. One of the key Anglican arguments against Rome was accordingly that in fact sin does remain in the justified believer; inherent righteousness is mixed with many sins and, for that very reason, cannot justify. Romans 7 was then, as today, a theological crux.

William Forbes, bishop of Edinburgh, introduced a number of principles that were to play an important role in subsequent debates. Trying to steer a middle course between Rome and the Reformation, he argued that the formal cause of justification is both forgiveness and infusion. Infused righteousness is indeed imperfect, but, Forbes argued, God accepts it anyway. This is an early statement of what Allison calls the “covenant of leniency” or the “lowered market” view; according to this notion, under the new covenant, because of Christ's obedience, God reduces his requirements so that sinners are declared righteous without possessing, either by infusion or imputation, a perfect righteousness. Forbes also comes very close to saying that forgiveness of sins was conditional on the performance of good works.

A more decisive figure in Allison's account is Jeremy Taylor, author of the popular devotional works _Holy Living and Holy Dying_, which have retained their influence in the centuries since they were first written. Taylor was a major figure among what Allison calls “holy living” divines. Taylor's “pervasive argument [is] that God acts only when and after man has by his works of repentance fulfilled his part of the new covenant” (p. 65). Like Forbes, Taylor taught a form of the “covenant of leniency” doctrine; the new covenant is a covenant of works but not a severe one. God accepts our faith in lieu of works, so that “our faith and sincere endeavours are, through Christ, accepted instead of legal righteousness” (quoted on p. 66). Though God is lenient about the entrance requirements into the new covenant, He is rigorous with respect to post-baptismal sins. Once baptized, “if ever we fall into the contrary state ... God hath made no more covenant of restitution to us; there is no place left for any more repentance” (quoted on p. 69). Romans 7 is, for Taylor, emphatically a description of the unregenerate; only sins in ignorance, surprises, and non-deliberate sins are forgivable after baptism.

Despite Taylor's insistence on these points in his published treatises and sermons, Allison argues that Taylor's extant prayers betray a theological perspective much closer to that of classical Anglicanism. In one prayer, for example, “Taylor plainly construes Romans 7:19-25 as the sentiments of a regenerate sinner” (p. 83). In his prayers, Taylor also makes it clear that God acts first to save sinners. Allison finds the reason for the deep contradictions between Taylor's prayers and his treatises in his “ineluctable and overruling concern for obedience and holy living.” The gospel of free grace was “too dangerous a doctrine to preach and teach openly” (p. 89). Taylor himself divided the work of the ministry into two parts, threatening and comfort:
The first is useful for the greatest part of Christians who are led by the spirit of bondage, and fear to do evil, because of wrath to come; which grows out of love to themselves. The second is fit for the best Christians, who are led by the spirit of love; who endeavor to do righteousness... (quoted on p. 89).

As Allison summarizes, “Taylor's contrasting constructions of the Christian Gospel are occasioned, then, by his fear that gratuitous grace might be used as an excuse for moral chaos and antinomianism” (p. 90).

This fear, Allison concludes, also animated the works of Richard Baxter on justification. Baxter served as army chaplain under Cromwell, and his experience of the rough and tumble sects of the New Model Army forced him to study the issue of justification afresh. Baxter concluded that Christ purchased a covenant of leniency, under which faith is reckoned to us as righteousness, since “it is the performance of the Condition of the Justifying Covenant or Donation” (quoted on p. 156). Allison is scathing in his rejection of this doctrine. It replaced the “pernicious pretension” of justification by one's own good works with the “far more preposterous pretension” that the good work of faith merits justification. He bitterly concludes, “the imputation of our righteousness, not the imputation of Christ's righteousness, eventually became that by which we are justified” (p. 204).

Allison traces subsequent developments in a final chapter:

The divines who introduced this trend toward moralism postulated a freedom of will in sinners that was of Pelagian proportions. Their remedy for sin consisted largely of exhortations to lead a holy life. Moreover, the only vertible significance attached to the atonement was the moral example of Christ.... Starting from these assumptions that can only be characterized as Pelagian, soteriological thought, by an implacable logic, moved inexorably through an exemplarist atonement, to an adoptionist christology, to a Socinian deity, and finally from deism to atheism (p. 192).

To explain this astonishing abandonment of Reformation teaching, Allison sketches the political and cultural climate in which these Anglican writers lived and worked:

The shaking of the very foundations of established society in the mid-seventeenth century had a profound effect upon the theology produced in the midst of it. The concern about immorality and lawlessness, occasionally expressed under Charles I, grew into a spectre of antinomianism which cast a darker and darker shadow over nearly all the theology written well into Restoration times (p. 194).³

Allison's examination of the writings of “antinomian” theologians reveals that they were

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by and large simply stating the classical Anglican doctrine. What made their insistence on free grace seem subversive was the situation of social and political turmoil.

Allison's book is filled with long quotations from the principal authors that he examines. Some of these quotations might be taken somewhat more sympathetically than Allison understands them, and it is impossible for me to know if the context is fairly represented. But these difficulties are inherent in any work of this kind. All in all, Allison makes a good case for a marked shift in Anglican soteriology.

On several points, Allison's treatment is less than satisfying. First, he cites this passage from the anonymous tract, *The Whole Duty of Man*: “Baptism confers upon us a claim upon all the benefits that flow from Christ 'on condition we perform our part of the covenant.' This condition is clearly defined. 'Obedience to all God's commands is the condition required of us’” (p. 151). While this is an infelicitous statement in several ways, Allison condemns this author and Taylor for teaching that baptism's efficacy is “conditional” (cf. pp. 68, 91). It is not clear to me, first, that a conditional view of baptism's saving efficacy necessarily undermines the graciousness of justification. No one insisted more strongly than Paul that justification is apart from works, yet he warned that even those who are baptized into and drink of Christ may fall in the wilderness (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-13). Taylor's claim that “holy living” is “firm ground upon which we can cast the anchor of hope in the mercies of God through Jesus Christ” (quoted on p. 68) may have been intended simply to capture this important part of biblical teaching.

More generally, Allison's statements reveal the difficulty of speaking simply in terms of “conditional” and “unconditional” covenants. Were God's covenant absolutely unconditional, we'd all be universalists. What the Reformers insisted on was not an unconditional covenant, but that Christ fulfilled the conditions of the covenant, so that all who are in Him are accepted before His Father. For most covenant theologians, however, this claim has been made side-by-side with the claim that faithfulness, love, obedience, and holiness are required in order to be maintained in a living covenant relationship.⁴ Even Hooker, in the statement quoted above, employed the really unavoidable ‘if’.

Allison's discussion of the distinction between deliberate and unconscious sin is problematic.⁵ After the Restoration, he suggests, Anglican theologians adopted the Tridentine view that “compulsion, surprises, passion, inadvertent and unconscious

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⁴ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), p. 19: “Grace is bestowed and the relation established by sovereign divine administration. How then are we to construe the conditions of which we have spoken? The continued enjoyment of this grace and of the relation established is contingent upon the fulfillment of certain conditions. For apart from the fulfillment of those conditions the grace bestowed and the relation established are meaningless.” Breaking the covenant means “unfaithfulness to a relation constituted and to grace dispensed. By breaking the covenant what is broken is not the condition of bestowal but the condition of consummated fruition.”

⁵ This is intimately related to the failure of the Caroline theologians to recognize what Allison, somewhat confusingly, calls the “ontological nature of sin”; more clearly stated, they did not distinguish between sin as fallen man's condition and actual sins as concrete expressions of that state. Instead, they characteristically defined sin as action rather than as a condition. This view of sin led to a minimization of the sinfulness of unconscious sin. Moreover, imputation was increasingly understood in an external fashion, rather than as a change of condition (cf. pp. 202-3).
feelings or even actions are morally less culpable or not even sin at all” (p. 207). Given this assumption, Anglicans fell prey to a “pastoral myopia” that failed to see the spiritually destructive potential of unconscious sin. This view, moreover, puts “an unwholesome premium” on “ignorance, irresponsibility, and infantilism” (p. 207).

Allison's analysis has several problems. First, in discussing the harmful effects of unconscious sin, he quotes from Roman Catholic Jungian specialist Victor White, who speaks of the psyche's “unconscious breaches of its own laws and demands” (quoted on p. 206). However psychologically damaging they may be, it is a stretch to call such breaches “sin” (cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 14). Moreover, the distinction between deliberate and inadvertent sins, far from being a product of Tridentine or Anglican moralism, is a biblical distinction (cf. Lev. 4:2ff.; Nu. 15:27-31). Instead of putting a premium on irresponsibility, the distinction highlights the awful possibility that one can sin and anger God without being conscious of any transgression. Inadvertencies are treated as real sins, else they would not require sacrifice. It is, however, true that inadvertencies are treated more leniently than deliberate sins; Numbers 15 makes it clear that unintentional sins may be atoned by sacrifice, but anyone who sins with a high hand is cut off.  

Allison's book is a suitable cautionary tale during our time of uncertainty and social disintegration. By examining the temptation to dilute the gospel, it urges us not to be like our fathers. The gospel, I asserted at the beginning, is socially subversive. But this is really, like most sociological claims, at best a half-truth. In fact, what the gospel subverts are the fortresses raised up against the knowledge of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1-6); what it destroys are the socio-cultural chains and prisons that rebellious men construct for themselves and for their fellows. What seem to the natural mind to be the virtues that enable humane society to flourish are, in the light of the gospel, the cultural crystallization of human rebellion. Paradoxical as it may seem, the gospel, because it exposes the rotten foundations of the City of Man, is the only hope for true, that is to say, Christian, social order.

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