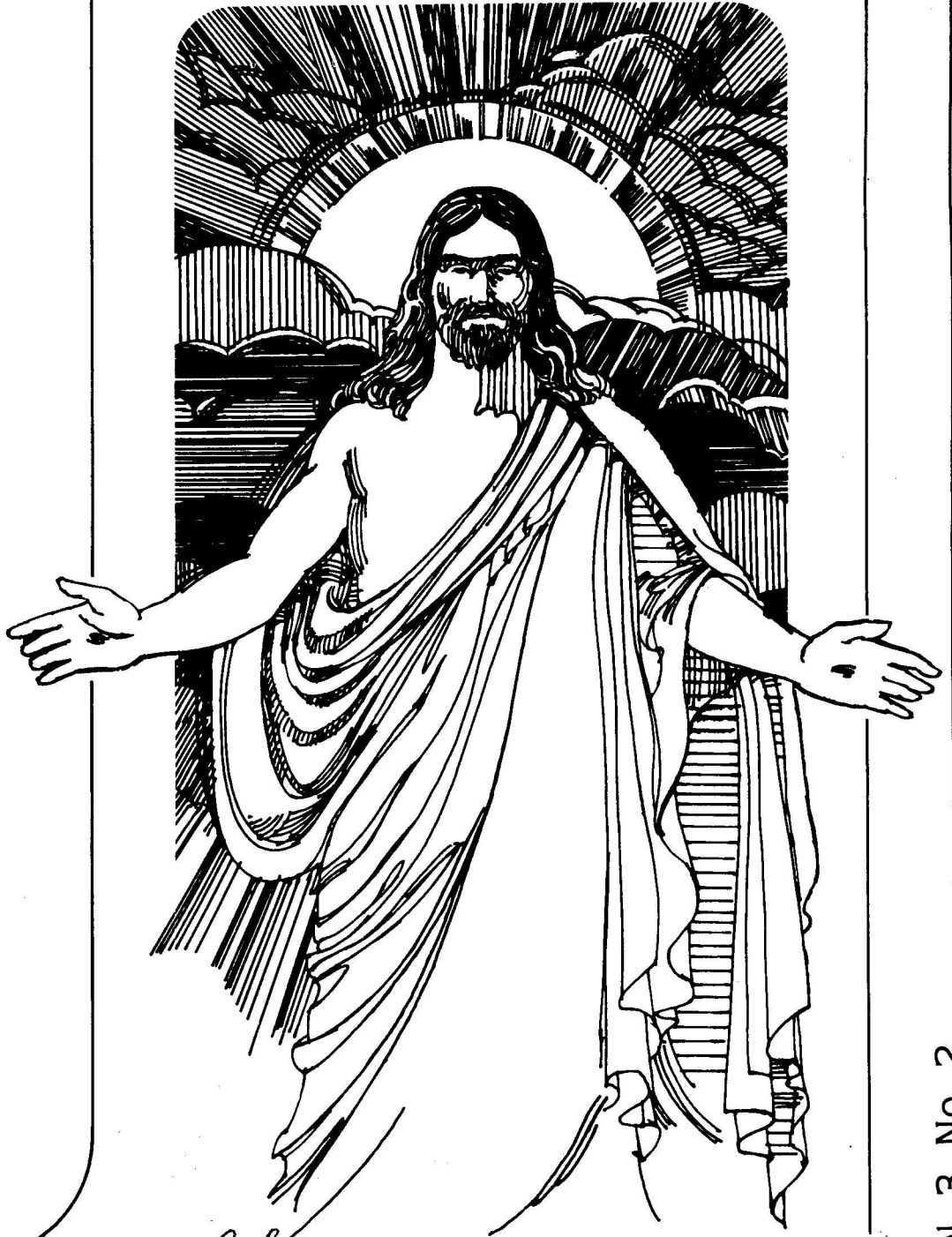


Good News Unlimited

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Solo Christo — Sola Scriptura — Sola Fide — Sola Gratia

Saved by Grace



Ephesians 2-8
Romans 3-19, 20
John 5-24

February, 1983

Vol. 3, No. 2

—statement of faith—

This magazine is dedicated to three principal reference points of the Christian faith:

1. **The centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ:** The gospel centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ in history. Its principal modes of expression are those of law and covenant. In Jesus Christ God's final verdict on man has been rendered, and therefore the gospel anticipates fully God's decision in the final judgment. It is the window through which all life and history is to be seen and understood.

2. **The authority, sufficiency, and clarity of the Bible:** The Bible is exclusively authoritative in all matters of faith and practice. While its writers reflect their respective contemporary world views, these do not compromise the integrity of their witness. While we admit that all Scripture does not enjoy uniform clarity, we affirm that the Bible is essentially clear in its central message — the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. **The priesthood of all believers:** The gospel, through the Scriptures, is the central means by which God expresses himself in the world, and constitutes the basis on which all Christian fellowship is built. We believe that true fellowship is best expressed and preserved in a congregational setting. The primary purpose of church government is the orderly preservation, teaching, and promotion of the gospel message on the sole authority of Scripture alone, and we affirm all forms of government that prove compatible with this objective.

Our support of these objectives is without antagonism or prejudicial exclusiveness toward any individual or group. We feel a kinship with all who have embraced the good news of the cross, regardless of human distinctions such as race, color, denominational ties or forms of church government.

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Perhaps there is nothing more comical than a person who totally overrates his or her abilities. Some people strive to give the impression that they are more skilled, superior, or devout than the average person. Their superiority becomes a means of power over others. And perhaps nothing is sadder than a person who totally underrates his or her abilities. To see a talented musician who insists she's not good enough to play, or a student who's paralyzed by fear of being less than perfect — these are tragic sights indeed.

Psychologists insist on the importance of one's self-concept. To succeed in life one must realize one's true self-worth. We find our niche in life when we recognize our strengths and our weaknesses, and are prepared to accept what we find. I sensed a great feeling of relief when, as a teenager, I finally admitted to myself that I could not play the piano and stopped the agony of practicing something that seemed doomed to failure. Conversely, to discover something we can do well gives a true sensation of elation.

So what we need in life is an accurate perception of reality. To know that I can't paint a picture, but that I can grow great tomatoes. And the same principle holds true in the religious realm. We must know what we are and what we are not in God's eyes.

As always, the answer is in the form of a paradox. We are sinful saints. Man who was created to be company for God himself, to ponder mysteries of the universe and walk in harmony with the whole created order, has wandered far from his potential. In this respect, we are all failures. But God has not left us undone, we are also to recognize that in Jesus Christ we have been incorporated into a divine family, that the gospel has brought to us the riches of God's grace.

These facts must affect our self-concept, if we are to maintain the psychological terminology. Though sinful, God values us. Though we have strayed from him, we are his. Though we have erred badly, he treats us as though we have succeeded in every way.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, "It is not the man who commends himself that is accepted, but the man whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor 10:18). A true religious self-concept recognizes one's strengths and weaknesses, is not dependent upon the applause it encourages from others, and understands that God's evaluation of one is what really counts. And that evaluation is one of commendation despite the realities of our sinfulness. Praise God that he commends us!

Calvin W. Edwards

Saved by Grace

A Sermon by Karl Barth

3

My dear brothers and sisters, I now read a passage from the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians (2:5): **By grace have you been saved.** This, I think, is brief enough for it to be remembered by all, for it to impress itself upon you, and, if it be God's will, to be understood.

A Message from the Bible

We are gathered here this Sunday morning to hear this Word: **By grace you have been saved!** Whatever else we do, praying and singing, is but an answer to this Word spoken to us by God himself. The prophets and apostles wrote a strange book, called the Bible, for the very purpose of testifying to this fact before mankind. The Bible alone contains this sentence. We do not read it in Kant or in Schopenhauer, or in any book of natural or secular history, and certainly not in any novel, but in the Bible alone. In order to hear this Word we need what is called the Church — the company of Christians, of human beings called and willing to listen together to the Bible and through it to the Word of God. This is the Word of God: **By grace you have been saved!**

To believe means to look to Jesus Christ and to God and to trust that there is the truth for us, for our lives, for the life of all men.

Someone once said to me: "I need not go to church. I need not read the Bible. I know already what the Church teaches and what the Bible says: 'Do what is right and fear no one!'" Let me say this at this point: If this were the message at stake, I would most certainly not have come here. My time is too precious and so is yours. To say that, neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus Christ, nor God are needed. Anybody is at liberty to say this to himself. By the same token this saying is void of any new, of any very special and exciting, message. It does not help anyone. I have never seen a smile on the face of a person reassuring himself with this kind of talk. As a rule, those who use it are a sad-looking lot, revealing all too easily that this word does not help them, does not comfort them, does not bring them joy.

Let us hear therefore what the Bible says and what we as Christians are called to hear together: **By grace you have been saved!** No man can say this to himself. Neither can he say it to someone else. This can only be said by God to each one of us. It takes Jesus Christ to make this saying true. It takes the apostles to communicate it. And our gathering here as Christians is needed to spread it among us. This is why it is truly news, and very special news, the most exciting news of all, the most helpful thing also, indeed the only helpful thing.



Addressed to Great Sinners

"By grace **you** have been saved!" How strange to have this message addressed to us! Who are we, anyway? Let me tell you quite frankly: we are all together great sinners. Please understand me: I include myself. I stand ready to confess being the greatest sinner among you all; yet you may then not exclude yourself from the group! Sinners are people who in the judgment of God, and perhaps of their own consciences, missed and lost their way, who are not just a little, but totally, guilty, hopelessly indebted and lost not only in time but in eternity. We are such sinners. And we are prisoners. Believe me, there is a captivity much worse than the captivity in this house. There are walls much thicker and doors much heavier than those closed upon you. All of us, the people without and you within, are prisoners of our own obstinacy, of our many greeds, of our various anxieties, of our mistrust, and, in the last analysis, of our unbelief.

We are all sufferers. Most of all, we suffer from ourselves. We each make life difficult for ourselves and in so doing for our fellowmen. We suffer from life's lack of meaning. We suffer in the shadow of death and of eternal judgment toward which we are moving. We spend our life in the midst of a whole world of sin and captivity and suffering.

Totally Saved

But now listen. Into the depth of our predicament the Word is spoken from on high: **By grace you have been saved!** To be saved does not just mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire. You have been saved! We are not told: you may be

**Through him, in him, we are saved.
Our sin has no longer any power over
us. Our prison door is open. Our
suffering has come to an end. This is a
great word indeed.**

saved sometimes, or a little bit. No, you **have been** saved, totally and for all times. You? Yes, we! Not just other people, more pious and better than we are, no, we, each one of us.

This is so because Jesus Christ is our brother and, through his life and death, has become our Savior who has wrought our salvation. He is the Word of God for us. And this Word is: **By grace you have been saved!**

You probably all know the legend of the rider who crossed the frozen Lake of Constance by night without knowing it. When he reached the opposite shore and was told whence he came, he broke down, horrified. This is the human situation when the sky opens and the earth is bright, when we may hear: **By grace you have been saved!** In such a moment we are like that terrified rider. When we hear this word we involuntarily look back, do we not, asking ourselves: Where have I been? Over an abyss, in mortal danger! What did I do? The most foolish thing I ever attempted! What

happened? I was doomed and miraculously escaped and now I am safe!

You ask: "Do we really live in such danger?" Yes, we live on the brink of death. But we have been saved. Look at our Savior and at our salvation! Look at Jesus Christ on the cross, accused, sentenced, and punished instead of us! Do you know for whose sake he is hanging there? For **our** sake — because of **our** sin — sharing **our** captivity — burdened with **our** suffering! He nails **our** life to the cross. This is how God had to deal with **us**. From this darkness he saved **us**. He who is not shattered after hearing this news may not yet have grasped the Word of God: **By grace you have been saved!**

**Grace and faith as I just described it
are the beginning of the true life of
freedom, of a carefree heart, of joy
deep within, of love of God and
neighbor, of great and assured hope!**

New Life

But more important than the fear of sudden death is the knowledge of life imparted to us: "By grace you have been **saved!**" Therefore, we have reached the shore, the Lake of Constance is behind us, we may breathe freely, even though we still are in the grip of panic, and rightly so. This panic is but an aftermath. By virtue of the good news the sky truly opens and the earth is bright. What a glorious relief to be told that there I was, in that darkness, over that abyss, on the brink of death, but that I am no longer. Through this folly I lived, but I cannot and will not do it again, never again. This happened, but it must not and it will not happen again. My sin, my captivity, my suffering are yesterday's reality, not today's. They are things of my past, not of the present nor of the future. I have **been saved!**

Is this really so, is this the truth? Look once again to Jesus Christ in his death upon the cross. Look and try to understand that what he did and suffered he did and suffered for you, for me, for us all. He carried our sin, our captivity, and our suffering, and did not carry it in vain. **He carried it away.** He acted as the captain of us all. He broke through the ranks of our enemies. He has already won the battle, our battle. All we have to do is to follow him, to be victorious with him. Through him, in him, we are saved. Our sin has no longer any power over us. Our prison door is open. Our suffering has come to an end. This is a great word indeed. The Word of God **is** indeed a great word. And we would deny him, we would deny the Lord Jesus Christ, were we to deny the greatness of this word: he sets us free. When he, the Son of God, sets us free, we are **truly** free.

By Grace

Because we are saved by no other than Jesus Christ, we are saved **by grace.** This means that we did not deserve to be saved. What we deserved would be quite

different. We cannot secure salvation for ourselves. Did you read in the newspapers the other day that man will soon be able to produce an artificial moon? But we cannot produce our salvation. No one can be proud of being saved. Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child. Consequently, we shall never possess salvation as our property.

We may only receive it as a gift over and over again, with hands outstretched, "**By grace** you have been saved!" This means constantly to look away from ourselves to God and to the man on the cross where this truth is revealed. This truth is ever anew to be

By grace you have been saved! — this is true, even though we may not believe it, may not accept it as valid for ourselves and unfortunately in so doing may forgo its benefits.

believed and to be grasped by faith. To believe means to look to Jesus Christ and to God and to trust that there is the truth for us, for our lives, for the life of all men.

Is it not a pity that we rebel against this very truth in the depth of our hearts? Indeed, we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace, and by grace alone. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of a child presented with many gifts. For we do not like at all to look away from ourselves. We would much prefer to withdraw into our own inner circle, not unlike the snail into its shell, and to be with ourselves. To put it bluntly: we do not like to believe. And yet grace and therefore faith as I just described it the beginning of the true life of freedom, of a care-free heart, of joy deep within, of love of God and neighbor, of great and assured hope! And yet grace and faith would make things so very simple in our lives!

The House Is in Order

Dear brothers and sisters, where do we stand now? One thing is certain: the bright day **has dawned**, the sun of God **does shine** into our dark lives, even though we may close our eyes to its radiance. His voice **does call** us from heaven, even though we may obstruct our ears. The bread of life **is offered** to us, even though we are inclined to clench our fists instead of opening our hands to take the bread and eat it. The door of our prison **is open**, even though, strangely enough, we prefer to remain within.

God has put the house in order, even though we like to mess it up all over again. **By grace you have been saved!** — this is true, even though we may not believe it, may not accept it as valid for ourselves and unfortunately in so doing may forgo its benefits. **Why** should we want to forgo the benefits? **Why** should we not want to believe? **Why** do we not go out through the open door? **Why** do we not open our clenched fists?

Why do we obstruct our ears? **Why** are we blindfolded? Honestly, **why?**

One remark in reply must suffice. All this is so because perhaps we failed to pray fervently enough for a change within ourselves, on our part. That God is God, not only almighty, but merciful and good, that he wills and does what is best for us, that Jesus Christ died for us to set us free, that by grace, in him, we have been saved — all this need **not** be a concern of our prayers. All these things are true apart from our own deeds and prayers. But to believe, to accept, to let it be true for us, to begin to live with this truth, to believe it not only with our minds and with our lips but also with our hearts and with all our lives, so that our fellowmen may sense it, and finally to let our total existence be immersed in the great divine truth, **by grace you have been saved**, this is to be the concern of our prayers.

No human being has ever prayed for this in vain. If anyone asks for this, the answer is already being given and faith begins. And because no one has ever asked for this in vain, no one may omit praying like a little child for the assurance that God's truth, this terrible, this glorious truth, is shining even today, a small, yet increasingly bright light. **By grace you have been saved.** Ask that you may believe this and it will be given you; seek this, and you will find it; knock on this door, and it will be opened to you.

This, my dear friends, is what I have been privileged and empowered to tell you of the good news as the Word of God today. Amen.

O Lord, our God! Thou seest and hearest us. Thou knowest each one of us far better than we know ourselves. Thou lovest us without our deserving it. Thou hast helped us and dost help us still, although we are ever again inclined to spoil thy work by wanting to help ourselves. Thou art the Judge, but thou art also the Savior of the poor and perplexed human race. For this we give thee thanks. For this we praise thee. We rejoice in the prospect of seeing with our own eyes on thy great day what we already now may believe if thou makest us free to do so.

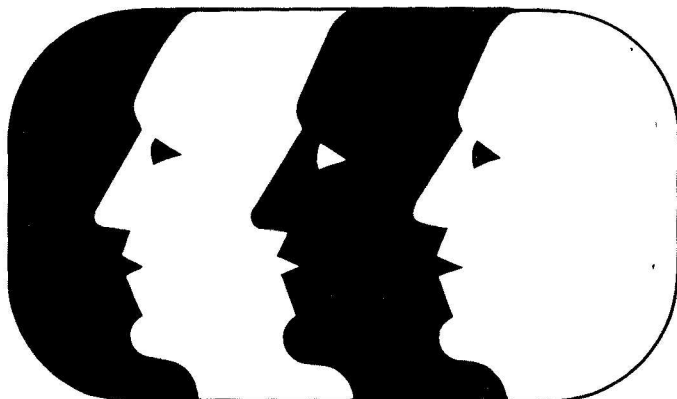
Make us free to believe! Give us the true, honest, and active faith in thee and in thy truth! Give it to many! Give it to all men! Give it to the peoples and their governments, to the rich and to the poor, to the healthy and to the sick, to the prisoners and to those who think they are free, to the old and to the young, to the joyful and to the sorrowful, to the heavy-laden and to the light-minded! There is no one who does not stand in need of faith, no one to whom the promise of faith is denied. Tell all our people, ourselves included, that thou art their merciful God and Father and ours! This we ask thee in the name of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to pray: "Our Father . . ."

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When Good Men Differ

Part I

Desmond Ford



John Milton, author of "Paradise Lost," was a theologian as well as an epic poet. He once affirmed that truth is like a virgin who has been cruelly hewed into innumerable pieces and scattered through the world and that, therefore, the search for truth in its wholeness is tedious and difficult.

Much of the problem in seeking theological truth, however, arises from a source Milton did not mention — our poor, depraved, weak human nature which seeks to defend itself from insecurity by refusing new concepts which challenge and disturb. Evidence for this can be found in many areas apart from religion. For example, we have the reminders given by Henry Rogers:

The heavens were as bright and the intellect of men as vigorous, three thousand years ago, as now. Yet a true astronomy is but of yesterday. Till within the last three hundred years, men in general, and philosophers among them, believed that the earth was stationary, and that the sun and stars revolved around it. Even when the Copernican theory was at last discovered, how slow were men to believe in it, and how tenacious of ancient error. Harvey's well-known saying, that "he could not get any man above forty to believe in the circulation of the blood," is instructive: it is a specimen of the difficulty with which even scientific truth breaks through the obstructions of ignorance and prejudice. (*The Superhuman Origin of the Bible*, p. 388)

One of the early classics on psychology was William James' *Talks to Teachers*. It is eminently readable and reflects a genius for expressing ideas in such a way that they come across as self-authenticating. On this problem of accepting new truth James has pertinent lines:

In all the apperceptive operations of the mind, a certain general law makes itself felt — the law of economy. In admitting a new body of experience, we instinctively seek to disturb as little as possible our pre-existing stock of ideas. We always try to name a new experience in some way which will assimilate it to what we already know. We hate anything absolutely new, anything without any name, and for which a new name must be forged. . . .

In later life this economical tendency to leave the old undisturbed leads to what we know as 'old foginess.' A new idea or a fact which would entail extensive rearrangement of the previous system of beliefs is always ignored or extruded from the mind in case it cannot be sophistically reinterpreted so as to

tally harmoniously with the system. We have all conducted discussions with middle-aged people, overpowered them with our reasons, forced them to admit our contention, and a week later found them back as secure and constant in their old opinion as if they had never conversed with us at all. We think them old fogies; but there are young fogies, too. Old foginess begins at a younger age than we think. I am almost afraid to say so, but I believe that in the majority of human beings it begins at about twenty-five. (pp. 159-161, see also pp. 165-167)

In another place James deals with the problem of prejudice which arises because of the particular camp to which we belong.

The self-same person, according to the line of thought he may be in, or to his emotional mood, will apperceive the same impression quite differently on different occasions. A medical or engineering expert retained on one side of a case will not apperceive the facts in the same way as if the other side had retained him. When people are at loggerheads about the interpretation of a fact, it usually shows that they have too few heads of classification to apperceive by; for, as a general thing, the fact of such a dispute is enough to show that neither one of their rival interpretations is a perfect fit. Both sides deal with the matter by approximation, squeezing it under the hand or least disturbing conception: whereas it would, nine times out of ten, be better to enlarge their stock of ideas. (Ibid., p. 163)

Note how James thus tries to save us from the natural error of thinking it is only "the other side" which makes this error. He continues by telling us that for most humans their stock of names and concepts is mostly acquired during adolescence and shortly thereafter. The sad result of this is that if one has not been exposed to any specific intellectual "ball-game" by about twenty-five years of age it is a thousand to one against our becoming ever adept in that new area. But, consolingly, James also says that if we have been in the habit of changing our minds and adding to our mental stock the odds are very much better.

More recently Leon Festinger has written *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* which builds upon the psychological truths earlier expressed by James.

He considers the question: "What happens when Belief A is confronted by contradictory Evidence B?" The result is strain, tension, anxiety, or what Festinger calls "cognitive dissonance." Groups will usually handle this cognitive dissonance in one of three ways. One, they will try to change the **information** by trying to increase the desirability of Belief A; diminish the significance of Evidence B or deny it altogether; or, stress the similarities between Belief A and Evidence B, even if there are outstanding dissimilarities. Two, they will try to change the **environment**, either externally by trying to gain more adherents to Belief A thus making the strain less intense; or internally by eliminating the person or persons who represent Evidence B. Three, they will try to change the **group** itself. Statements will be made that will substantiate Belief A; or if enough people can agree to it, Evidence B will be accepted and Belief A abandoned; or perhaps both will be put to one side and Position C will be accepted. (See Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, 1957.)

A particular group will not usually utilize all of these mechanisms for the reduction of cognitive dissonance, but it may use several of them. Many will recognize that several well-known and well-loved churches today exemplify Festinger's theory.

Festinger and colleagues have applied this theory to

the disappointed advent movement in New England during the mid-1840's. In the opening chapter of the work **When Prophecy Fails**, they discuss the psycho-mechanisms used by early Adventists to accommodate themselves to the fact that Christ did not return at the time that many had predicted.

The author points out that instead of accepting the disconfirmation and discarding the erroneous belief, groups will often try to proselytize more fervently for their cause. "If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct" (Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schaefer, **When Prophecy Fails**, p. 28, emphasis original).

A Christian will not conclude that church leaders who reject new truth are therefore as wicked and perverse as the Pharisees. Rather he will recognize that all human nature, including his own, is of one piece and sadly tarnished by the effects of the Fall.

Much of the religious past as well as the present is illuminated by these insights. We begin to understand why the Pope of Luther's day, instead of praising God for the new light on the simplicity of salvation shed by Luther's writings, could rather appeal to God to arise and overthrow the wild boar that had entered the church vineyard. Similarly, the Wesleys were regarded by their church as dangerous enthusiasts and the Episcopalian body rejected the reform which would have nourished and strengthened their own congregations as nothing else could. The Wesleyans also repeated the same mistake continually.

Those who longed to see the fulfillment of the Blessed Hope of Christ's return were expelled from American congregations of Methodists and others in the 1840's. And on the other side of the world the newly risen William Booth was ejected by the Wesleyan church he had served so energetically for years.

Never should it be thought that just one or two religious groups are prone to this type of blind folly — it has characterized all church movements however pure their beginnings and however pious and zealous their leaders. We do not present these facts to condemn any person or group but in order to warn all, including this writer and those who labor in harmony with him.

Gamaliel's counsel of "hands off" has never been acceptable to religious leaders. Even the Baptists of England passed a vote of censure against the mighty Spurgeon because he preached against the modernist apostasy within its ranks. Baptists, not atheists, hastened the death of Spurgeon according to his own testimony. Some years later the same Baptists raised a monument to the memory of the man they had "crucified." All of which demonstrates that neither

individuals nor groups learn readily from experience, for the identical English Baptist church had despised their own Carey a century before its antagonism to Spurgeon.

Jesus explained it all during the last teachings of his earthly life as he anticipated his own agony. Undoubtedly in this instance the guilt was infinitely greater, but the fatal tendency of religious persons in all ages is identical with that which he condemns here.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' . . . Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town. . . . O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Mt 23:29,30,34,37)

And how can we today personally profit by the testimony of psychology and church history? First — we should not be discouraged if human nature in our own day continues to act and react as it has in all previous centuries. A Christian will not conclude that church leaders who reject new truth are therefore as wicked and perverse as the Pharisees. Rather he will recognize that all human nature, including his own, is of one piece and sadly tarnished by the effects of the Fall. The words of Henry Rogers apply to the Christian church in general:

How often does God permit his most excellent gifts to be in some degree marred by the hands through which they are administered! How often does he allow the slips and weaknesses of the wisest and best to tarnish their worth or diminish their usefulness; not indeed to the frustration of the great objects for which they are equipped and sent into the world, or of the benefits they were destined to confer upon it; but so far as to evince that there is a baser element in even the most precious things of earth, of ignorance and infirmity even in the noblest forms of humanity. (**The Superhuman Origin of the Bible**, p. 420)

Second, we should guard against our own native reactions to new challenges and to the inevitable prejudice and antagonism which accompany the appearance of new truth (on both sides). All of us have many things to learn, and many to unlearn. And all of us, apart from continual dependence upon Christ, are exceedingly weak.

Third, we should see the importance of Augustine's advice for those involved in theological controversy. "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Perhaps he devised this motto after meditation upon our Lord's words in the same sermon quoted above, words warning against attending scrupulously to the minute matters of religion and neglecting the weightier matters of righteousness, mercy, and faith (see Mt 23:32).

There is yet another danger to be avoided by all Christians contending for "the faith once for all time delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and that we will address next month.

For the present our admonition is — be of good cheer though good men differ. Let us not be so proud as to expect all to agree with ourselves. Believe God is on his throne and that he does all things well, but according to his own timetable. Romans 8:28. □

Q. Please help me to answer the questions of a friend regarding Hebrews 6:4-6 and also 10:26-31. This person is troubled by the issue raised in these texts and fears that deliberate sins of the past prevent a reconciliation with God from ever taking place. Does sinning with your eyes open cut you off from forgiveness? When is it impossible to turn to Christ?

A. The writer of Hebrews is an artist who contrasts the dazzling radiance of Christ's accomplishments with terrifying shadows of dire warning. There is nothing subtle about his superb canvass. It is dramatic, forthright, glorious, frightening. Let me, therefore, assure you that your friend is not the first to be intimidated by this powerful masterpiece. But then I quickly add that this only happens when the proportion of light to shadow is not recognized. We must get the whole picture.

First then, we look at the light. The light is the foreground which expresses the fundamental purpose of the writer. And what is that purpose? It is to give all his readers an unshakable confidence in Christ's finished work. They can trust the astounding panorama Christ has given them of God. It is accurate, beautiful, unsurpassed (Heb 1:1,2). They can trust the effectiveness of his great sacrifice. No other will ever have to be made. Sin has been dealt with once, for all and forever (Heb 9,10). They can trust his incredible ability to give people rest (Heb 4). The soul which like tumbleweed has been somersaulted by the north wind across ceaseless expanses of desert can finally find rest against the steady wire fence. They can trust his enormous ability to save to the **utmost** any who will but come to God by him (Heb 7:25). All of these things are rock hard, Gibraltar truths.

Now what about those warnings? They are quite numerous (see 2:1-4; 3:7; 4:1;

6:6-8; 10:26-31,38,39; 12:15-17,25) and I do not question that they made the knees of the original readers knock. They are horrendous warnings that address a horrendous problem. Without pulling punches, the writer warns the Hebrews that if they proceed on their present course they will be irreversibly lost. No sacrifice would be available for their sin. It was clearly a think-twice-before-you-continue situation.

Now what was it they were about to do? Some interpreters have suggested that it did not matter what sin they were about to commit. What mattered was that whatever sin they were close to committing would be deliberate. The deliberateness then is the basic problem, not the crime itself. By extension, therefore, any Christian who sins with open eyes is irreversibly lost. Deliberate sin cannot be pardoned. But such an interpretation is not sustained by the warnings themselves and is, furthermore, contrary to the tenor of the rest of Scripture. Opinions to the contrary, it is the **what**, not the **how**, that is the burden of these admonitions.

So we ask again, what were these Hebrews close to doing? They were about to leave Christ altogether and return to Judaism. Incredibly, as they faced a choice between the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of animals they were about to opt for the beasts. This deliberate action would leave no effective sacrifice for their sins. Faced with a choice between Christ's finished work and the endless repetition of offerings in Judaism they were about to vote for the futile rehearsals. Thus in effect the Son of Man would be crucified afresh. In short, these people were about to deny the truth of an accomplished atonement and thereby turn their backs on Jesus.

But why would rejection of Christ's atonement put them into such a difficult corner? The answer to that is that with

Christ, God had given them his best, his final argument. If they rejected it what more would he have to say to them? What could possibly bring them to repentance again?

All of which brings us to the matter of the unpardonable sin. What is it not? It is not a mere deliberate sin. (Think of David and Bathsheba. Their sin was forgiven.) It is not simply habitual or repeated sin. (Think of Israel's indulgence in idolatry for hundreds of years. It was forgiven.) It is not suicide. (Remember Samson and the fact that Hebrews 11 lists him as a faith hero.) None of these is the unpardonable sin.

This sin is spelled out for us in Matthew 12:22-36. There it is clear that the unforgivable sin is purposely labelling the work of Christ as the work of the devil. In this way the human mind "psychs itself out." It tells itself that the solution is the problem, that the remedy is poison. In this way it cuts itself off from help. Convince yourself that Jesus is the devil and you will never come to him for anything. This is the unpardonable sin. And why is it so? The unpardonable sin is unpardonable simply because the sinner will never bring it to Christ to be pardoned.

What should you say to your friend? Tell her that she has misunderstood Hebrews. Tell her that God forgave derelicts and bigots like Manassen and Saul, and that she is an angel compared to them. Tell her that her very desire to have her sin pardoned makes it pardonable. Tell her that Jesus will not cast anyone who comes to him away. Tell her that her sin is ancient history because Jesus forgave it two thousand years ago.

—Smuts van Rooyen