
Auburn Pastors Conference 2002—Covenant Series

II. Covenant Thinking

by Steve Schlissel

There has been a great failing on our part as the church to remain steadfast. In the providence of God we have wandered from the categories and orientation of the Scripture. Nevertheless, that can all be used for good, and the fact that we have wandered shouldn't keep us from going back to the Bible and being renewed by it.

Our confessional history is dramatic in that it is a *historical* confession. When we confess the Apostles' Creed we do not confess abstract doctrines; rather, we are talking about our history. When the people of Judah had to come from exile to rebuild the second commonwealth, the chronicler (who wrote the account of Israel's history for the gathering exiles) gave a rehearsal of their history from the Creation up until that time when they had been banished. He was recapturing that sense, that mind, that they are the people of God. God created the world and they believed in God the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth.

In the wake of the Cross we confess Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, who was born of the virgin Mary. He was incarnated. We talk about His history. The greatest section of the Apostles' Creed is dedicated to the history of Jesus Christ in capsule statements. We talk about His resurrection, His ascension, His sending of the Holy Spirit. We talk about His work in the holy catholic church. We talk about our future orientation, as we are going to give an account to this Judge. Everything that we confess is historical in that sense. So, our doctrine is historical doctrine, and our history is a doctrinal history. We can't separate doctrine and history, thinking that the way to become a sound and faithful Christian is to latch on to propositions; our universal, undoubted Christian confession testifies against that orientation and notion. We are people of history. In fact, history belongs to us uniquely in a way that it does not belong to unbelievers; and yet, the Greek conceptions of time and space and word have somehow nudged their way in, like pushy New Yorkers who try to take over everything. We don't want that to happen. So, we southerners are going to tell these "New York Greeks" a thing or two.

Two Orientations: Hebraic and Greek

One way to characterize some of the differences between a biblical way of looking and seeing and what we have come to in our respective histories is that the Bible presents a *dynamic* view of things versus a *static* view. Bowman, a Scandinavian scholar, saw the difference between Hebrew and Greek thinking outlined in bold relief by two characteristic figures—the thinking Socrates and the praying Orthodox Jew. “When Socrates was seized by a problem, he remained immobile for an interminable period of time in deep thought; when Holy Scripture is read aloud in the synagogue, the Orthodox Jew moves his whole body ceaselessly in deep devotion and adoration.” The term for rhythmic rocking during the prayers, chanting, and the liturgical progress is known as *davoning*. “The Greek most acutely experiences the world and existence while he stands and reflects, but the Israelite reaches his zenith in ceaseless movement.”

Bowman’s contrasting figures are offered only for illustrative purposes. I am not advocating *davoning* as if that is demanded by the informed principle of worship. It is not. The illustration simply captures the contrasting ways of finding and viewing and living the self in relation to the world. “The Greek begins with a presupposition of intellectual independence and autonomy and ends with the world being subjected to autonomous interpretation.” So, here stands the Greek and there stands the world; then he wraps his mind around the world and pulls it in so that he can do some systematization in his head. In contrast, the Jew looking for his place in the world begins by looking at a world that he did not make and which operates by rules not of his fashioning. The Greek stands still and seeks to take in the world, while the Jew rocks as God’s world and Word take possession of him. The Greek seeks to take possession of the world; the Jew seeks to be taken possession of by the Word. These are radically different orientations. They both involve an individual subject and the world, but one seeks to own the world and the other seeks to be owned by the owner of the world, God.

Furthermore, the Jew does not seek to be taken possession of as an individual but rather as part of a people. *Peoplehood* versus *personhood* is another critical disjuncture between the Bible’s orientation and our modern orientation. Although Socrates would like to talk about his conclusions with other human beings, he came to them in isolation. For the Jew any conclusion of truth in isolation is impossible. It is wrong to think of self

apart from the group in the same way that it is wrong to think of a raindrop apart from rain. One is defined essentially and necessarily in terms of the other. The ideal in the Greek world is the lone hero, and Hercules is seen to be great because he served himself; however, the ideal among the Hebrews is David, and he is the greatest king because he served the covenant people. These two ways of looking at things are diametrically opposed. The God of Scripture does not say, “I will be your God and you will be my *person*,” but, rather, “I will be your God and you will be my *people*.”

Our ability to separate ourselves from the people of God and to use our abstract doctrines that we have floating in the air continues to kill us. We need to get away from such a view and return to an understanding that God deals with a people. Our glory is to be reckoned among the people of Israel, members of the living church of Jesus Christ.

Another problem in the modern church is *organic* versus *abstract* thinking. For the Greek the idea of *strawberriness* was preferred and treated as having more reality and value than strawberries themselves. Red, bumpy, juicy, luscious strawberries were merely carnal instances of strawberriness, which was the ideal. It was the *ness* of a thing that became the immovable, fixed object of faith, which a man had to latch on to, and when he found the *ness* he found the truth; but when the ideal came into history, it was flawed and no longer the truth.

We have made the same mistake with doctrines. Our doctrines have to be perfected in an abstract way and float above the cosmos. We believe our salvation is somehow linked or contingent upon reaching some ideal doctrines in some tenuous connection so that we become part of them up there. Should these doctrines come into history, then we think that they are flawed. Against this idealistic thinking we have the Incarnation. We have that terribly historical confession that I mentioned. The Bible presents in-your-face history, taking part in all the mess that goes with history. It is given to us in an uneven way, sometimes in ways that don't allow for the systematization that we wish we could have. Sometimes we think that we have the truth all worked out, but then God has one thing that won't neatly fit in our box. So, we say, “Well, we'll just lop it off. If it doesn't fit in our bed, we'll chop off the head or cut the feet or stretch it to make it fit.” We insist that God's revelation conform to our preconceived demands of what that revelation ought to be because we are Greek and not biblical in our orientation.

Biblical Text: Verses and Chapters

Another dimension to the problem of Greek influence on our faith can be viewed as the problem of verses. The uncritical and universal embrace of the technology of chapters and verses superimposed upon the Scripture has had, in my mind, a somewhat devastating effect on the church. No doubt I have to qualify this concern and say that divisions within the text have facilitated study, learning, and worship. They have enabled us to speak about a passage in the Bible that we can all turn to at the same time. They have enabled us to do expositions of texts so we can return to them easily. They have enabled us to make concordances that track the occurrences of words and phrases. They have facilitated learning but at a price.

In the same way, the technology of television can perform certain helpful functions for us. It can us take to places far away where we would not ever have been able to go and view things that we would not have witnessed otherwise; yet, TV makes demands on the way we think about the world. It demands that we restructure our vision of reality to conform to what the television says it is. Only the most skeptical and most cynical people can use the television and escape from that consequence. TV has given us much but at a very heavy price.

So also with the division of the Bible into verses. The church's unhesitating acceptance of the technology of verses is a serious problem. The problem is not that the verses exist (of course, we can use them to our profit) but that we have actually come to believe that God spoke and said *verse one* and *verse two*, and it was so. We then go back to the Bible and think of it in terms of those verses. This distorted view of reality is a profound one that we need to think through if we hope to recover a covenant consciousness.

In *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Neil Postman cites Lewis Mumford speaking about the clock. Mumford writes:

The clock has been the foremost machine in modern techniques, and at each period has remained in the lead. It marks a perfection toward which other machines aspire. The clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours but of synchronizing the actions of men. When the clock came into being, time keeping passed into time serving and time accounting and

time rationing. As this took place eternity ceased gradually to serve as the measure and focus of human actions.

We are so wrapped up in clocks in our culture that any alternative method of time keeping, if there is any, is simply inconceivable to us. There was a time when time was not measured by clock keeping and not everybody wore a wristwatch. People kept time by other means, which were not as reliable. If a storm came along, for example, reading a sun dial became a problem. “By its essential nature the clock disassociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences, the special world of science.” Mumford attributes to the clock a consciousness in Western civilization of a separate world of time in which seconds, minutes, and hours have an independent life. As a result of this view, people conform themselves to this independent life of time.

Mumford associated many benefits to our clock-centered consciousness. It made assembly lines and sophisticated machines possible. Around A.D. 1345 the division of hours into 60 minutes and the minutes into 60 seconds became common. This abstract framework of divided time became more and more the point of reference for both action and thought. In the midst of this reorientation, however, we lost the ability to think about any other way to measure time.

...There is relatively little foundation for this belief in common human experience. Throughout the year the days are of uneven duration, and not merely does the relation between day and night steadily change, but a slight journey from east to west alters astronomical time by a certain number of minutes. In terms of the human organism itself, mechanical time is more foreign. While human life has regularities of its own—the beat of the pulse, the breathing of the lungs—these change from hour to hour with mood and action, and in the longer span of days time is measured not by the calendar but by the events that occupy it. The shepherd measures from the time the yews lamb. The farmer measures back to the day of sowing or forward to the harvest. If growth has its own duration and regularities behind it, they are not simply matter and motion but the facts of development. In short, time is measured by history before the clock. Now the clock is its own animal, and history conforms to it. While mechanical time is strung out in a succession of mathematically isolated instances, organic time or what Bergson calls “duration” is cumulative in its effects. Though mechanical time can in a sense be speeded up or run backward like the hands of a clock or the images of a moving picture, organic time moves in only one direction through the cycle of birth, growth, development, decay, and death [and, in our mind,

resurrection] and that past that is already dead remains present in the future that has still to be born. (Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*)

Now we see this change in history with the invention of the clock and its acceptance by just about everyone in the West.

Shortly after the invention of the mechanical clock, the Bible text was divided into chapter and verses. These divisions were never part of the original texts, though there had been various attempts at divisions throughout the Bible's history. The modern chapter and verse divisions came about in a series of events from the thirteenth century forward. Cardinal Hugo had a system of division for the Bible. Numbered verses for Hebrew concordance were first worked out by Rabbi Isaac Nathan in the year 1440. A Dominican monk worked out further divisions for the New Testament. The current division in the New Testament was introduced by Robert Stephanus at Geneva in 1551. The first Bible using chapter and verse divisions was prepared by Stephanus and published as the Geneva Bible in 1560. Actually, the church has not been living a very long time with chapters and verses, and yet this several-hundred-year period has taken over our conception of the Bible as being composed of discreet little units called verses. So, we think that if we find a verse we have found the truth. Our Christian consciousness has been informed by this development.

When we read about alternate ways of experiencing time we translate these into our language of measurement. For example, a farmer tells us, "I am going to be here until the next harvest." When he says the next harvest, he means the next harvest, but we translate that statement into mid-October. We translate from the less familiar reference to whatever we think has fundamental reality. When a farmer says, "I will be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail," we think that two shakes of a lamb's tail means 1.1 seconds. We convert to the measure of time with which we are most comfortable and we think has value.

The versified church has now more or less lost the ability to translate back into a non-versified Bible. The verses have become so rigidly fixed in our minds that we can't go back and remove them and read the text as if they weren't there. This problem is reinforced by our preaching schedules. Rarely do we preach a whole book of the Bible in a single worship service. We tend to preach in the verses, as arbitrary and erroneous as

these divisions are. Minimally, of course, we have to work in paragraphs. In the traditional King James Bible each verse is its own paragraph, as if a complete, independent, self-sufficient unit. That is the way we find it in the old Gideon Bible in many hotel and motel rooms.

Dividing the text into verses has led to many problems. Perhaps one of the greatest problems is proof-texting. For example, I read two verses: “Even one of the Cretan’s own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true” (Titus 1:12-13). Clearly, Paul makes a comprehensive, categorical statement that all Cretans are liars. “I have a witness of not only myself and my experience,” Paul says, “but one of their own prophets says that the Cretans are bad news, and the Holy Spirit speaking through me now tells you that this is true.” So, here is a proposition, here are the verses, and here is the proof. That’s the end of the matter.

The only problem is that there are other verses in the Bible. In this very chapter Paul tells Titus, “The reason I left you in Crete is that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. An elder must be blameless.” How is Titus supposed to find a “blameless” lying creep? They are all stinking liars. One verse says that all Cretans are liars, but another tells Titus to find one who isn’t; yet, if all Cretans are liars, there are none that are not. So we have a problem. The problem is not as hard to resolve when we just lift the verse divisions from the page and say, Let’s hear what Paul is actually saying. Let’s give him the latitude that we give to one another in our speech. Let him speak like he’s from New York City—which he tends to do with extreme statements to make a point, just as the Lord Jesus Christ did when using hyperbole—rather than demand that he be taken so literally. We don’t know how to interpret anything, but we line up our verses to prove our points!

‘None Righteous’?

I want to move this problem into one particular manifestation of our difficulty, and that is in the question of righteousness. Is it true that there are *none* righteous? The Reformed confessions generally support such a view and generally use Romans 3 to prove it. The French Confession of Faith, fourth section, reads, “From this original corruption we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good and wholly

inclined to all evil.” The proof-text is Romans 3:10-12. The same confession at section 11 reads, “We believe that this evil is truly sin sufficient for the condemnation of the whole human race, even of little children in the mother’s womb, and God considers it as such.” The proof-text is Romans 3:9-13.

The Westminster Larger Catechism reads, “No man is able, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but does daily break them in thought, word, and deed” (Q. 149). At Question 25 it reads, “The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually...” How do the Westminster divines support these statements? Romans 3:10-19 allegedly proved these propositions. We start with these propositions and then go to our versified Bible and find the verses that we think prove our propositions. We pay little attention either to context, argument, or (maybe) contrary texts. We have our verses to prove what we want to believe.

The Westminster Confession at chapter 6, section 2, reads, “By this sin they fell from their original righteousness in communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.” The proof is Romans 3. Now, Romans 3 does not appear directly from heaven without mediation; rather, it appears as part of an argument that the Holy Spirit by Paul is making to a church in a particular historical circumstance. It appears in a section in which Paul is proving that the whole world is made up of sinners. Does that mean that each and every individual is what the confessions here say they are? Let’s examine this issue a bit.

In Romans 1 Paul has done a pretty good job of proving that the Gentiles are under sin. He says, “The wrath of God is revealed to all mankind.” Take a look at these guys. “They didn’t retain the knowledge of God. They became idolaters. They became homosexuals. They are filled with greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice.” The Jews at Rome who are listening to Paul speak about the Gentiles are saying to themselves, “Paul is not half as bad as we thought. He understands Gentiles.” So, Paul has to turn around and tell the Jews, “You are worse! You Jews think that merely possessing the law is the same thing as keeping it, but it’s not!” After a couple of what

we call “chapters” of argumentation, he concludes by saying that the Scriptures themselves address the Jews as if there were *sinner*s among their own kind. Paul says,

⁹ What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. ¹⁰

As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good, not even one.”

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

That description sounds universal, doesn't it? It sounds like it encompasses each and every person on the planet, and that is Paul's point—every person on the planet is as wicked as he could possibly be.

I must add this qualifier. I am not speaking against the doctrine of our original corruption in Adam and its spread throughout the whole human race, and I am not saying that by ourselves we can be so righteous intrinsically or extrinsically as to merit anything before God. What I am saying is that the way we use the Bible is illegal. We try to make it say things that fit what we believe must be the case in order for our system to hold together, but we don't allow the Bible to speak its own mind. We can see this problem manifested in the sermons that come from Romans 3. Your sweet, Christian grandmother becomes subject to theological abuse as she is told that her throat is an open grave and her tongue practices deceit and the poison of vipers is on her lips. Though she may sing psalms from the time she wakes up until she goes to sleep and devotes hours to prayer for her grandchildren, we are told that she is an evil, wicked witch who is entirely corrupt and no good. This sort of browbeating goes on Sunday after Sunday. Is that really Paul's point?

What does Paul intend to say in the book of Romans? “There is no one righteous,

not even one.” Where did he find that idea? He is quoting the Bible, isn’t he? Yes, Psalm 14; however, the very psalm in which these sweeping assertions are made we find a remarkable *contrary* proposition. The psalmist says that all have turned aside and together have become corrupt, there is no one who does good, not even one. “Will evildoers never learn? Those who devour my people as men eat bread and who not call upon the Lord? There they are, overwhelmed with dread; for God is present in the company of the righteous.” What? Where did “the righteous” come from? The psalmist just finished saying that there is none righteous, no not one, and the next thing we know there is a whole company of them. How could the writer have missed seeing them before?

Could it be that neither the psalmist nor the apostle missed seeing the righteous? Could it be that Paul’s citation of Psalm 14 had a rhetorical, polemical purpose? Could it be that Paul did not mean to imply that an absolute proposition exists in space somewhere claiming that there is none righteous, no not one? Could it be that there is some other point?

In Romans 3 Paul quotes a portion of Psalm 5. He wants to remind his readers of those whose throats are open graves and whose tongues practice deceit. Is this Paul’s summary judgment upon every human being on the planet? Hardly, at least not here, for further in Psalm 5 the psalmist draws a contrast between those who are wicked and those who take refuge in the Lord. “Let them sing forever for joy. Spread your protection over them that those who love your name may rejoice in you. For surely, O Lord, you bless the righteous.” The very psalm that Paul quoted to show that their throats are open graves includes a group of people that the psalmist calls “righteous.”

Does anybody think that Paul was so stupid that he didn’t know this whole psalm that he was quoting? Like most orthodox Jews he probably knew the Psalter by heart. It was not difficult for him to know the context. Psalm 140 is the same case. David asks to be delivered from wicked men because the poison of vipers is on their lips; yet, these wicked ones are very clearly contrasted in that psalm with the righteous who will praise God’s name and the upright who will live before Him.

Paul’s concluding citation at Romans 3:18 uses the words of Psalm 36:1, as he describes the evil men of whom he speaks: “There is no fear of God before their eyes”;

yet, verse 10 of the same psalm includes a plea to God: “O continue thy loving kindness unto them that know thee; and thy righteousness to the upright in heart.” If verse 1 described a universal condition, where did the “upright” of verse 10 come from? Is Paul saying something that he wanted us to put in our confessions as proof, or, rather, is he saying something that becomes evident in Romans 3:19: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”? In fact, here we find a key to explain Paul’s citations.

What is the key? The key is that the law was given to the Jews, and when God was speaking to the people here mentioned as being wicked, He was speaking to *wicked Jewish people*. If there can be wicked Jewish people, no one can be made right with God simply by being Jewish. That is the point Paul intended to prove, and it’s the point he has proved. If a person thinks that merely by possessing the Bible he is right with God, then he is mistaken. Look at what it says. It talks about the way Jews behave toward other Jews. Among Jews there are wicked ones and righteous ones, covenant-keeping Jews and covenant-breaking Jews. The mere fact that a man is Jewish does not vindicate him, does not allow him to pass from death to life, and does not guarantee him to inherit anything if he has broken covenant.

I am citing all of this so that we attain a discipline in our reading of the Bible that resists the temptation to believe an issue is settled because we have found one or two proof-texts. This discipline is demanded of those who speak about covenant in our day. I show you Romans 3. What do we do with it? We cannot fit what we do with it on a bumper sticker. I’m sorry. I know that is what you want, but “it ain’t gonna happen.” It is the same methodological problem that we have with Christians who go on talk shows. They offer themselves as those who are thrown to the lions of humanism to be destroyed, because the forum in which the discussion takes place requires sound-bite theology. And humanism is much better at sound-bite-ism than the Gospel.

We cannot find the slogans that sink as anchors into people’s minds and hearts like the humanists do, because our faith requires thought, reflection, consideration, knowledge of God, knowledge of history, knowledge of Christ, knowledge of covenant. As soon as a Christian says, “Let’s slow down and talk about this,” the moderator says,

“Let’s take a break now. We’ll be right back. Stay tuned!” When the show resumes, the humanist guy says, “I believe in love!” Everybody cheers. The implication, of course, is that Christians do not believe in love. As soon as the Christian says, “Why don’t we define love?” the other guy says, “Oh, you legalist!” We cannot win in such circumstances, nor can we win when we are going *verse* for *verse*. We have to go *meaning* for *meaning*, *context* for *context*. Eventually, we come to the whole Scripture and the whole covenant, and we learn to retool ourselves to the way God has given us a word, not the way it has been Hellenized down to our time.

The fact is (and I have verses to prove this!) that there are plenty of righteous men and women in the Bible. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered *righteous* for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? If God rescued Lot who was a *righteous* man distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men... Yes, Lot, a *righteous* man living among these wicked people, day after day tormented in his *righteous* soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard. (I want to hear a preacher from the Netherlands Reformed Church tell me that Lot was a *righteous* man.)

“Dear children do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous...” (1 John 3:7). There is none righteous, no, not one? The Bible says that there are thousands of them, hundreds of thousands of them, millions of them throughout history. “Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous” (1 John 3:12).

“You are witnesses and so is God,” Paul writes, “of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believe.” James tells us, “In the same way was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” Matthew tells us of Jesus’ words: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” The Hebrew Bible, which was not organized as ours, began with Genesis and ended with 2 Chronicles. By starting with the first martyr (Abel) and closing with the last martyr (Zechariah), Jesus was making the same statement as our way of saying “from Genesis to Revelation” (and it just so happens that it is A to Z).

From Abel to Zechariah, there were many *righteous* people.

“And you will again see the distinction,” Malachi tells us, “between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.” “Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies,” Ezekiel tells the false prophets, “when I have brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and save their lives...” Isaiah says, “Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds.”

People in the church today say that there is none righteous, but God says there are many righteous people. “The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him” (Prov. 20:7). “Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in him; let all the upright in heart praise him!” (ps. 64:10). “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon” (Ps. 92:12). “The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart.” (Ps. 125:3-4). There is none good, no, not one; yet, we saw in that same psalm that there are people who do good. “Those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel” (Ps. 125:5).

“Abraham approached God and said, Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in this city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in the city? Far be it from You to do such a thing.” Did God reply, “There is none righteous, no, not one”? No, that is not what He said. God was prevailed upon by Abraham when Abraham prayed, “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Not everyone responds to God’s revelation in the same way. Not everyone responds by saying no to God. There are many who by grace say yes to Him, and these are the righteous. “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.” When Abraham was ninety-nine years old God appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.” “To the faithful God shows himself faithful; to the blameless he shows himself blameless; to the pure he shows himself pure; but to the crooked he shows himself shrewd.” “You save the humble

but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low.” “In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil. Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job. There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright. A man who fears God and shuns evil.’” These verses are an embarrassment to those who would universalize the statements in Romans 3 and make them doctrines with an independent, theoretical existence in the heavens, but when these persons come down to earth they cannot apply such doctrines. When we come down to earth in real history we find, in fact, both the righteous and the wicked, believers and unbelievers, living together.

Solomon said, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father, David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart.” “Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully,” Hezekiah said, “and with whole-hearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” Have we taught our people that they can pray this way if they keep covenant with God? We have cut the legs off our own churches by berating our people and making the attainment and walking in righteousness a theoretical impossibility, whereas in the Scripture it is an everyday reality.

“Even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek. 14:14). That seems to presuppose that these three men had righteousness. “Although he did not remove the high places from Israel, Asa’s heart was fully committed to Jehovah all his life.” Asa wasn’t perfect, but he was perfected. Zecharias and Elizabeth were not perfect, but they were perfected as blameless in obeying the law. “Consider the blameless, O God. Observe the upright. There is a future for the man of peace. They are upright in the sight of God. Observing the Lord’s commands and regulations blamelessly.”

We have an application of a simple principle (Scripture must interpret Scripture), but Scripture cannot be reduced to a simple verse. No matter how many proof-texts are provided in the Westminster Confession, if we don’t look at the whole context we have distorted the use of the Word of God and made an illegal application of the Word of God to support what we presuppose must be the case.

The way to resolve our confusion is by the covenant. The covenant is God’s relationship that He has entered into with us in which our sins are forgiven—we are given

a new life and a new way to walk and told to stay in that path of righteousness and not depart from it. We are not to depend on our own righteousness for eternal salvation but to stay in the path of righteousness for the glory of God.

Paul does not argue or maintain that every single person on the planet is equally wicked. There are converts. To suggest otherwise is to say that God's Word has failed. To say that there are none righteous is to say that everyone is alike and there is no covenant, no antithesis, no efficacy in God's grace. Such a view is nearly blasphemous, for the whole work of God in this world is the bringing of a righteous people unto Himself and setting them off from the world of the wicked to be His and to act like it. He has done this throughout history. At the time of Noah it was slim pickings, but there was one righteous. In Sodom and Gomorrah there was one righteous, and Lot was saved out of it. At most times there have been more than one.

The effect of this particular twisting of the Scripture has been to distort the truth and to put a blemish upon the consciousness of the people of God. We need to get back to that place where we can speak to the covenant people of God and address them as the righteous of the Lord. They have a place in this world where they are to shine like stars in the night, as they hold forth the word of light. The gathered worshipers on a Sunday, the Lord's Day, are to be built up in what God has made them and called them to be; they are not to be berated, belittled, stained, doubted, and accused.

If we don't agree that we have to go back to our congregations and build them up, then we might as well cash it in now and forget reformation. If we cannot speak to the people of God like God speaks to the people of God, if we cannot speak to the people of God like Paul spoke to the people of God, then we have no right to be ministers of God. If we cannot speak to the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ as those in whom He lives and dwells and has being in this world as a living testimony, then woe be to us. If all we can do is berate, belittle, and harangue, then we are working at cross purposes with the living God and woe be to us.

Our people have heard the Gospel. They have believed it, and they are heirs of life. They stand separate from the world. They have a different calling. I've got plenty of verses for that, too!