

Strikingly, Paul's first argument against the notion that Abraham was justified by works is from the idea of boasting: "For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to *glory*; but not before God" (Rom. 4:2). This verse highlights the *ground* of boasting or glorying, that upon which the activity of boasting rests: man's "works"!

The apostle's argument presupposes man's innate sinful pride that is deeply rooted in us since the fall. Without God's grace, whatever our "achievements," we immediately become puffed up and boastful, in ourselves and to others. This applies to our "success" in any field or area: a good school grade, doing well at work, getting our houses nice and clean, or even winning at marbles or any game! Boasting especially results if we think we have made ourselves righteous in the sight of Almighty God!

As Reformed Christians, we easily understand this apostolic argument and we have used it ourselves in witnessing to unbelievers who reckon that they are righteous by their own will or works. "But then, you have earned your salvation," we say. "Surely, this is a proud doctrine, for anyone who could make it to heaven on the basis of his achievements, even in part, would be able to boast that he was there because of his own worth or efforts. He distinguished himself above others!"

Though the self-righteous do not like this argument—and do all they can to get out of it—it is a thoroughly biblical line of reasoning that is especially found in the writings of the apostle Paul. "Where is *boasting* then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith" (Rom. 3:27); "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should *glory* in his presence" (I Cor. 1:27-29); "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou *glory*, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Cor. 4:7); "For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may *glory* in your flesh. But God forbid that I should *glory*, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:13-14); "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should *boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9); "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have *no confidence* in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3).

Thus we return to Romans 4:2: "For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God." First, Abraham would have boasted, if he had made himself righteous by his own deeds. Second, God, however, would have been singularly unimpressed. Third, if this would have been the case with father Abraham, then no fallen human being can ever be justified by his or her works. All of this points us to righteousness in the obedient, crucified and risen Christ alone! *Rev. Stewart*

The Idea of the Organic in Scripture (10)

I received a letter that relates directly to our discussion of God's dealings with men organically. (1) First, it asks about the meaning of Romans 11:20: "Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear."

Rev. Herman Hoeksema's interpretation of this (and the entire section of Romans 9-11, which discusses the so-called "Israel-problem") is found in his commentary on Romans, *Righteous by Faith Alone*, which can be purchased from the CPRC Bookstore (£22, inc. P&P). It is worth every penny one spends to purchase it.

The text, so it is claimed, teaches the falling away of the saints. Thus it is not only man's choice which determines whether he is converted but also whether he remains saved or not. He may, once having been truly regenerated, change his mind and apostatize.

The text is found in the context of a metaphor, which describes Israel as a natural olive tree (Rom. 11:16-21). It is evident that here the whole nation of Israel is being considered organically. It follows the pattern of Psalm 80, for example.

The olive tree was cut down when the nation of Israel rejected Christ, although a stump and part of the tree remained. But here we have an interesting aspect of the metaphor. Let me refer to my own experience. There is, near the place we once lived, an orchard that grew many apples. I asked the farmer about the science of grafting, because it is a part of the figure in Romans 11:16-21 and it is used to describe faith in *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 7: "Are all men then, as they perished in Adam, saved by Christ? No, only those who are *grafted* into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith." His answer surprised me, for grafting now is used to start new trees. It goes like this. A branch, say, from a Macintosh apple is grafted into a branch of a tree that produces Red Delicious apples. Gradually the grafted branch produces branches of its own and the farmer cuts away branches from the old tree. After a while, the old tree is nearly gone, but the grafted branch, using the same root, becomes a tree in its own right.

This fits the figure perfectly. The nation of Israel was the olive tree mentioned in Romans 11. Throughout the Old Testament, branches from wild trees were grafted into the olive tree of Israel. But they never became part of a new tree because they became a part of the natural olive tree, the nation of Israel. The Gentiles became Jews. Thousands of them were thus saved. When the old olive tree was destroyed at the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, a new branch of Gentiles was planted, after having grown in the old tree for 2,000 years. But it was grafted into the root of the old tree. We know from other parts of Scripture that that root was Christ (Isa. 11:10; 53:2; Rom. 15:12; Rev. 5:5; 22:16).

Throughout the old dispensation, Israel carried Christ in its loins—as God said to

Adam after the fall in the Mother Promise, Genesis 3:15. The reason why Jehovah kept the nation of Israel, then Judah, even through its captivity, was that He was preserving the Messiah in the line of Adam to Mary to Christ.

In the new dispensation, the Gentiles become the new olive tree and they are gathered from all the nations of the earth. Thus the Jewish-Gentile olive tree is the “world.” God loves that world. Christ died for that world. It is the world of sovereign election. It is the world that is united to Christ by faith. It is the world that is Christ’s body and it shall receive its life from Him into all eternity.

Romans 11 makes another interesting point. Through the history of the gathering of the nations that are grafted into Christ, some branches are broken off. This happened too in the old dispensation. Jesus refers to it in John 15:2, 6. God saves in the line of generations—organically. But He does not save *all* the physical children of believers in every branch. Children leave the church, families leave the church. They are broken off the olive tree, for they depart from God’s ways. Churches are broken off. Nations are broken off. This is the apostasy that characterizes our times.

Romans 11 teaches that once a branch is broken off, it can never be engrafted again. It is gone forever. America and Europe have had the gospel and new branches were grafted into the new olive tree that was once the old olive tree with Christ at its root. But now God is turning His back on the US and the European nations, for they have forsaken His ways. Soon the time will come when God turns His back completely, for these countries are increasingly experiencing what Amos calls a famine of the word (8:11). God is turning to the Orient and is gathering His church among the nations in SE Asia and the Philippines. God, as He builds the temple of His elect, does not return to rebuild it when it goes to ruins. When a branch is broken off (pruned) and lies on the ground, that branch is not an individual but generations. They are not, later in the branch’s existence, re-grafted into the tree from which they had been cut.

There is one exception and that is Romans 11’s theological solution to the Jewish problem in the history of redemption. It remains a special privilege of the Jews that, although they have been cut off from the olive tree, individuals and their generations can be grafted into that olive tree once again. This is possible because they are being grafted into what was once their “natural” tree. They, as a nation, were cut off but the root remains. The root is the natural tree, that is, Christ is that root. They can be and they are grafted in for, throughout the last two millennia, Jews have been brought into their own olive tree. They, with the Gentile branches, become part of that universal world of sovereign election and, being grafted into a tree with new branches from every nation, they lose their national identity. A former Jew, united to Christ with the Gentiles, is no longer a Jew. He too is saved with his generations. I know many in our churches who were in their ancestry Jews. In our dispensation, there are Hungarian, Chinese, German, Irish, etc., believers. It is the *world*, the true world, that God loves and saves.

(2) The reader implies another question: Does not this explanation that I have given deny that man has any responsibility for being “broken off” the olive tree? The question

suggests that my explanation denies man’s responsibility and that, therefore, my explanation cannot be the correct one. Further, it is also implied that, in order to maintain man’s responsibility, man must have a free will to accept Christ or refuse Him.

I do not intend to enter into this question in detail. The question of the relation between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility goes way back to Augustine (354-430). It was at the heart of controversies in the Western Church through the Middle Ages and at the time of the Reformation. This is evident from Martin Luther’s battle with the humanist, Erasmus, on man’s will. It was also the fundamental issue at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) when the Arminians were utterly defeated by the Synod’s *Canons*. It remains the issue between the Arminians and the Reformed to this day. The questioner (speaking for another person) demonstrates with his implied question that to maintain the heresy of free will is to deny the great truth of God’s sovereignty. If he chooses to do that, that is his business, but he must admit that he is creating an idol, instead of the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Before he takes a position on a question that involves the very being and counsel of God, a man ought to do his homework and read the history of these controversies that bothered the church.

The truth of the matter is that Scripture teaches that God is sovereign in all He does and that man is responsible for his own sin (Acts 2:23; 4:25-28). Whether that defies rational explanation or not is not now my concern. What Scripture teaches is the truth before which we all must bow.

To understand how God works organically in all His absolute control of the lives of men and angels helps us to maintain His sovereignty, which alone makes our salvation possible. As an old uneducated farmer said to Hendrik De Cock in the 1834 controversy in the Netherlands, and before De Cock himself was converted to faith in a sovereign God, “Reverend, if I had to contribute even a sigh to my salvation, I would be hopelessly lost.”

God must and will receive all the glory; there is none that is left over for man. The Arminian shouts, “Man, man, man, man.” The Reformed proclaim, “God is God!” Let us also bow in worship before the throne of the One who does all things for His own name’s sake and so for the salvation of His beloved church. *Prof. Hanko*

Rev. Stewart (via phone link) will discuss regeneration on *Iron Sharpens Iron Radio* on Thursday, 14 May, from 4-6 PM (Eastern Time in the US) or 9-11 PM (UK time). Listen in live on-line (www.ironsharpensironradio.com).

The 2020 British Reformed Fellowship *Conference* has been rescheduled to 10-17 July, 2021, at Castlewellan Castle, N. Ireland, with the same theme, “Union With Christ,” and the same main speakers, Prof. D. Engelsma and Rev. A. Lanning (www.britishreformed.org).

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