

Plain Theology for Plain People

Charles Octavius Boothe

Introduction by Walter R. Strickland II



— *Introduction to Plain Theology for Plain People*

Walter R. Strickland II

Charles Octavius Boothe (1845–1924) was a reluctant teacher. To spare others his frustration with learning and teaching from books laced with dense theological rhetoric, Boothe wrote *Plain Theology for Plain People*.¹

Boothe wrote for the average sharecropper. He accommodated an unlearned audience that included pastors, teachers, and community leaders born into poverty with little access to education. While leaders and laity alike desperately needed biblical and theological truth, they had little time, energy, and resources to pursue education. “The doctrines of our holy religion need to be studied in order, according to some definite system,” he wrote, “but simplicity should prevail—simplicity of arrangement and simplicity of language.” Thus, Boothe set out to write a succinct and accessible theological handbook.²

WHO WAS CHARLES OCTAVIUS BOOTHE?

On June 13, 1845 Charles Octavius Boothe was born in Mobile County Alabama. He was the legal property of Nathaniel Howard.

As a slave he was treated relatively mildly. “I think I can say that [my master] and I really loved each other,” he wrote.³ Nevertheless, he was a frank critic of slavery. He indicted all white Americans for imposing barbarous

1. Edward R. Crowther, “Charles Octavius Boothe: An Alabama Apostle of ‘Uplift,’” *The Journal of Negro History* 78, no. 2 (1993), 113.

2. Charles Octavius Boothe, *Plain Theology for Plain People* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publishing Society, 1890), 11.

3. Charles Octavius Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders and Their Work* (Birmingham: Alabama Publishing Company, 1895), 10.

conditions upon his people.⁴ Proponents of slavery argued that God used the practice to bring blacks to salvation; in contrast, Boothe contended that the gospel spread to slaves *despite* chains and oppression. “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” (Gen 50:20 ESV). God takes no pleasure in the denial of his image; yet nothing prevents his will.⁵

Nearly four million slaves were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865. Still, blacks remained captive to social and economic norms that complicated daily life. Legislation did not eradicate four hundred years of white contempt. Former slaves had few skills, resources, and institutions to support themselves. Due to these economic challenges, sharecropping—freed slaves rented and tended part of a white farmer’s land in exchange for a variable percentage of its yield—became a common practice for blacks. They still lacked the means to be truly independent.

Racial uplift was Boothe’s consuming passion. Following the Civil War (1861–1865), he worked to improve the spiritual, social, and intellectual well-being of blacks in a society that denied their humanity before God and in its Constitution.⁶ Boothe focused on education because an educated black populace contradicted the notion among whites that blacks would regress into “savagery.”⁷

Boothe learned how to read at a young age. At the age of three he learned the alphabet from the lettering of a tin plate. His ability was nurtured by several teachers who boarded at the estate where he was enslaved.

As a teenager, Boothe worked as a clerk at a local law firm. He explored Scripture on a regular basis, because mid-nineteenth-century legal practice was rooted in biblical logic. As he became increasingly conversant with the Bible, his faith matured. From childhood he prayed and heard the Bible read, but Boothe said that “In 1865 ... I reached an experience of grace which so strengthened me as to fix me on the side of God’s people.”⁸ In March of 1866 he received baptism.

For Boothe the church must play a crucial role in racial uplift. He established and pastored two churches: First Colored Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was always a pillar in the Montgomery community, but in recent decades, it has become internationally renowned for its role in the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of its twentieth pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968). It has been renamed King Memorial Baptist Church.

In the years following Emancipation, the church became the epicenter of the black community. The church was the sole institution that African Americans controlled, and it was central to the black community—not only as a spiritual outpost, but also as a social hub and political nerve center. Often the most educated people in the black community were pastors who had the rhetorical skill necessary to advocate for their congregants. Moreover, full-time ministers at large churches were uniquely situated to advocate for racial justice. They were financially independent from whites, so they could represent blacks on social issues without fear of lost wages—though they could suffer other forms of retaliation like church burning, physical violence, and intimidation.

Ordained ministers like Boothe played a significant role in elevating literacy rates among black Southerners from 10 percent in 1860 to nearly 43 percent in 1890.⁹ Boothe promoted literacy so former slaves could read the Bible and break free of the oppressive interpretive practices that made the Christian faith a tool to subjugate blacks during slavery. By reading the Bible for themselves blacks could escape manipulative interpretations that were used to foster docility in slaves and make obedience to their masters synonymous with obedience to God.

He engaged society based on the biblical premise that all people are granted equal dignity as divine image bearers. Boothe’s theological convictions compelled him to be vocal concerning immigration.¹⁰ In 1901 he joined

4. Crowther, “An Alabama Apostle of ‘Uplift,’” 111.

5. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 20.

6. Crowther, “An Alabama Apostle of ‘Uplift,’” 112. See U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.

7. William Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 123.

8. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 10.

9. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 96.

10. Crowther, “An Alabama Apostle of ‘Uplift,’” 114.

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) to oppose Alabama’s legal disenfranchisement of blacks.¹¹

Boothe established institutions vital for blacks to flourish beyond slavery’s chains. He taught for the Freedmen’s Bureau, which supported black education and provided emancipated slaves food, shelter, medical care, and legal assistance. As a member of the Colored Baptist Missionary Convention, Boothe facilitated literacy programs and theological training for black preachers and laypeople. In 1878 he and other convention leaders founded Selma University; he served as its second president (1901–1902). Boothe also served as the editor of *The Baptist Pioneer*, which helped underwrite Selma University.

In his life and ministry Boothe emphasized interracial cooperation—even though he ministered during the onset of Jim Crow Segregation and at the height of lynching terror—perhaps in part because as a boy Boothe had had positive interactions with whites. At a Baptist church near his home, whites and blacks worshiped together, served each other, and washed each other’s feet. Whites and blacks alike sought out his grandmother, a respected woman of prayer, for comfort during times of sorrow.¹² So he cooperated with those willing to support black social advancement and combat racial oppression despite their race. Boothe worked collaboratively with white Baptist groups like the Alabama Baptist Convention (of the Southern Baptist Convention), the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, and philanthropists to obtain funding for training ministers and for the operating expenses of Selma University.¹³

After decades of pastoral ministry, educational innovation, and public engagement, Boothe doubted the effectiveness of his efforts for racial reconciliation in the South. The pace of change was slow. In 1910—just before the Great Migration (1915–1930), when 1.6 million blacks moved from the rural South to Midwestern and Southern cities—Boothe moved to Detroit, where he died in 1924. Little is known of his time in Detroit—not even the precise date of his death.

11. See Booker T. Washington, “Petition to the Members of the Alabama Constitutional Convention,” in *Booker T. Washington Papers Volume 6: 1901–2*, ed. Barbara S. Kraft (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1977), 129–33.

12. Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, 9.

13. Crowther, “Charles Octavius Boothe.”

WHY REVIVE PLAIN THEOLOGY FOR PLAIN PEOPLE?

Plain Theology for Plain People *destroys reductionist stereotypes of black faith*. Many are unfamiliar with the African American theological heritage because of its limited corpus. Black Christianity is largely an oral tradition, and its written resources have been obscured by racial bias. Today, as in Boothe’s time, many tend to caricature black Christian faith as merely “religious feeling and fervor.”¹⁴

Plain Theology for Plain People *shows black evangelicals that they belong in the broad evangelical tradition*. Many thoughtful black Christians—often educated in evangelical universities and seminaries—have an enduring sense of homelessness in the evangelical tradition. Their ancestors are seldom, if ever, included as contributors to Evangelicalism. Boothe offers a window into an underexplored vista of theological expression. Black evangelicals have equal claim to the evangelical tradition—even though evangelicals have historically muted their voice.

Plain Theology for Plain People *requires evangelicals to engage non-white theological voices*. Because evangelical biblical and theological studies have excluded the voices of racial minorities, evangelical theology is shaped by the concerns of the dominant culture. Unfortunately, white evangelicals only hear minority evangelicals’ theology if it echoes white evangelical voices.

Unity in Christ demands an openness to collaboration and to mutual sharpening in the theological task. Evangelicals often presume that the task of theology is merely to comprehend God. But the goal of theology is wisdom—a lived demonstration of knowing God. God, not context, has ultimate authority, and yet wisdom demands understanding the context in which Christians live and God works.

Christians need Christians from different cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts to develop wisdom. Boothe grappled with God’s relation to late-nineteenth-century black life—including economic disenfranchisement, lynching terror, and legal segregation. Chronological and cultural distance allows readers today to see how Boothe embodied divine wisdom

14. W. E. B. DuBois, “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 197.

in his context. As a result, believers are encouraged by God's actions in the past: the Lord God is faithful in every circumstance.

Plain Theology for Plain People *exemplifies how the Bible informs Christian doctrine*. Systematic theologians continually fight the temptation to conform Scripture to a theological system (be it Reformed Theology, Liberation Theology, or Neo-Orthodox Theology). While every theological paradigm ought to be based on Scripture, not every verse fits neatly into a system. With his audience in mind, Boothe reinforces the sufficiency of Scripture by giving an organized account of how Scripture informs Christian doctrine. Through his biblical centrality Boothe circumvents the theological skirmishes of the academy. Like Boothe, theologians today must make the lofty ideas of theology plain to common Christians.

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To the memory of the late devoted Rev.

Harry Woodsmall, of Indiana.

A consecrated Christian gentleman; a faithful teacher of the word of God; a self-sacrificing friend of the Lord's poor; a man whose life was a living illustration of the divine life of the Bible; a man, the memory of whose labors for the colored people of the South must be as unfading as the eternities to come, and as lasting as the immortality of the souls who wear his impress, is this little book lovingly dedicated by the author.

"I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ... Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17:15, 16; 20).

There was a work for them to do, a work to be done amidst suffering and toil and danger. He knew it all from his own personal experience. He knew also what they needed to nerve them for the work and suffering and various trials before them. Hence, when he met his own on the mountain in Galilee, he first pointed them to the lofty position to which he was about to be raised:

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18).

Then the command that they were to obey was given. It was with special relation to his church and to the daily and hourly necessities and emergencies of its members, that all things were put beneath the feet of Jesus Christ, their elder brother, and that he was given to be Head over all things. Dr. J. A. Smith² says: "The purpose of the exaltation is here made known. It is in the interest of human redemption that all this is done. In this it is provided that there shall be no possibility of opposition or hostility in any quarter with ability to mar in any way the perfection of the plan, or hinder or delay its execution." Under the supreme authority of him who is "the way and the truth and the life," every purpose embraced in the plan of redemption that Infinite Wisdom devised shall be carried on to its fullest completion; and every interest of his church, even of the weakest of its members, shall be carefully guarded, and every event of their lives made to work together for their good. How wise and how gracious the plan of God's redemption, and how complete the array of means for carrying it on until that promised day, when out of heaven a great voice shall be heard saying:

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:3, 4).

2. "Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians" (1:22), American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia.

CHAPTER

5

Gifts Flowing from the Grace of God

In order that we may understand the aboundings of the grace of God, there are several subjects that need to be carefully examined; these may be fitly grouped together in this chapter.

(1) ELECTION

This subject will lead us back far beyond the coming of the beloved Son of God into the world; beyond the deliverance of the children of Israel from the bondage in Egypt; beyond the early date when the gracious promises of God were made to Abraham, the father of the faithful; beyond the wonderful events that are described in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis; beyond that "beginning" in which God created the heavens and the earth. We shall find it necessary to turn to statements made in the volume of divine truth concerning the earliest recorded purposes of God. Among these we find mention of a doctrine that has awakened a great deal of hostile feeling in unrenewed hearts.

By election we understand God's choice of individuals of the sinful race of man to become possessors of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a wonderful thought that, before the foundation of the world, God made such a purpose, and that through all the ages of this world that purpose has been steadily carried out. Let us proceed to notice what God has taught us on this subject in his holy word:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should

be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will. To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved: in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him: in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also *trusted*, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:3-12).

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely *give* us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? *It is* God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? *It is* Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature,

shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28-39).

The Lord himself has taught us what shall transpire on that happy day when the gracious purpose of God, formed so long before, shall be fully accomplished.

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth *his* sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:31-34).

These few passages present a fair view of the truth on this important subject. We see the purpose of God dating far back before the foundation of this world, before there had yet risen on it the sun and the moon by whose aid our days and months and years are measured. They tell us of God's purpose, choice, election, and predestination long before the creation of any one of those who were thus to be brought to the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. If we ask why they were chosen and others were left, we find that no answer to the question has been given by him who alone can explain his reasons. It becomes us, then, to rest content with what it has seemed good to him to reveal. We, with all the light that has been thrown on the character of God in these days, when the true light shineth, ought certainly to feel as did Abraham when he said: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Let us therefore bow reverently before him, saying: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." Of this one thing we may be perfectly sure, that God's election gives no encouragement whatever for any one to continue in sin. The elect, God did "predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son," to the image of him who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of his person. These words, as also the following words of Paul, are decisive on this point:

"But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14).

Salvation, as that word is used in the Scriptures, is always salvation from sin; the predestination of God always means his sovereign purpose that they shall be conformed to the image of his Son.

(2) REGENERATION

When the Lord was conversing with Nicodemus, he made to him a statement that startled him, as it has startled many men since.

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:38).

From this brief passage we learn what is also distinctly taught elsewhere in different form—that the sinner cannot by any means work out a salvation for himself. In the emphatic words of the apostle to the Ephesians, he says:

“And you hath he quickened [that is, *made alive*] who were dead in trespasses and sins. But God who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, hath quickened us [that is, *made us alive*] together with Christ (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness toward us, through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:1, 4-7).

The sinner can no more make himself alive from his death in trespasses and sins than could Lazarus raise himself to life when lying in his tomb, his body hastening to decay. Many a sinner who has thought he could work out a salvation for himself has found all his hope of helping himself vanish when confronted with the words of the Lord: “Ye must be born again.”

We learn from these passages of Scripture that it is God, and God only, who quickens those who are spiritually dead, and makes them alive together with Christ. But Jesus does not answer all the questions that may be asked as to how this is done. His language to Nicodemus seems to be meant as a

rebuke to him and to all others who may ask how spiritual life is given. He likens the process to the blowing of the wind, in regard to which they cannot tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth, and says: “So is every one that is born of the Spirit.” We should have thought it strange if Mary and Martha, or the centurion of Capernaum, or the widow of Nain, had troubled Jesus with questions as to how he had brought their dead back to life again. It was enough to know that their loved ones lived once more, but it was by no means necessary to know how he had raised them to life again. They knew them to be alive, and that was enough. So those who are raised from spiritual death and made partakers of spiritual life, should not spend any moments of that new life in asking useless questions, but rather busy themselves with devout thanks for the gift, and in earnest efforts to make the most of their life for the glory of the gracious Giver. It will be well to notice and bear in mind that this new birth is the first step toward the fulfillment of God’s gracious purpose in regard to those whom he had chosen before the foundation of the world.

(3) REPENTANCE

By this is meant a true godly sorrow for sin; that is, a sorrow which arises from the understanding that sin, in its worst forms, is an act of disobedience or of positive enmity to God, who demands our best obedience, and who is worthy to be loved by all men with all their heart and soul and might and mind and strength. But Paul says:

“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7).

David, after his fearful crimes against Uriah and his wife, was brought to real godly sorrow, for he said:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in thy sight” (Psalm 51:14).

He did not mean to say that he had committed no crime against his faithful soldier and his wife; but his sense of the majesty and glory of God, and of the obedience that was due to him, was so great that, for the time being, he was overwhelmed with shame and sorrow on that account, and appears scarcely able to think of anything else.

It will be seen that there is in a sinner's repentance toward God a new view, and a true view, of the character of God and what is due to him, and also a new view, and a true view, of himself and of the folly and wickedness of his own wrong thoughts of God, of his neglect of him, his disobedience and his enmity to him. This is a complete change of mind in regard to God, and in regard to what his own feelings and conduct toward God ought to have been. A great change has taken place when one can say: "What God says of himself and of his just claims, and of me and of my opposition to these claims, is all true." One who can say this cannot help feeling deep sorrow and a real desire to make a change, which means a real desire to lead a new life, in which God's will shall rule and his will shall be submitted to the will of God. All this means confession, honest confession of sin, which is simply saying about his former life, his thoughts and feelings and actions toward God, exactly what God says about them. This is what is meant by John when he writes:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

(4) FAITH—FAITH IN GOD, FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

It was a want of faith in God that led to the first departure of man from him, and to the long and fearful separation between the Fount of Blessing and those who always need the blessings which can only come from that Fount. In order that there may be a return to God, men need to have their faith in him restored. The Apostle Paul says:

"Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:13, 14).

This teaches us that to be saved there must be a preaching, a hearing, a believing, and a calling on the name of God; that is, the truth about God must be proclaimed, be heard, and be believed. As we have seen, the truth about God, preached, heard, and believed, led to repentance.

So, in regard to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, there must be the same process, the proclaiming of the truth about him and his work that has been taught in the Bible, the hearing of that truth, the believing of it, in order to the calling on the Lord. God does not ask sinners, when they feel their need of cleansing and salvation, to bow themselves to the ground and call on some

being of whom they have never heard. But he has prepared the anxious sinner's way by bearing clear and full testimony to his own love in sending his Son, to the character of his well-beloved Son, to the work that his Son undertook and finished, to his willingness and his ability to save to the uttermost whosoever calleth on the name of the Lord. What, then, is meant by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? It is a belief of all that God has taught and caused to be proclaimed to men concerning the Saviour and the salvation that his love has provided; and an earnest, honest calling on the Lord. That earnest and honest calling on the Lord means that all dependence on any thing else than what Christ Jesus has done is utterly renounced, and that in Christ is all his desire, all his trust, all his hope. In confession of his sin, the sinner sets to his seal that what God has said of his guilt and his lost condition is true. In his exercise of faith in Jesus Christ, he in like manner sets to his seal that all which God has promised—a full and final salvation from the guilt, the defilement, and the power of sin—is fully, unalterably true. How truly it may be said that one exercising such a faith no longer walks in darkness, but that to him the words of John may be justly applied:

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

(5) JUSTIFICATION

This subject deals with the momentous question, "How shall a man be just with God?" Those who are not "just with God" can have no share in the mansions that Christ is to prepare for his followers in heaven, or part in the glory that will crown them there. Hence the importance of a correct answer to the question. We must seek such an answer in the pages of the Sacred Scriptures. It is from these alone that we learn that it is possible for a sinner ever to stand justified before God, the Infinitely Holy One; and the only reliable statement as to how a sinner can be just with God must come from God himself. Let us gather together some of those passages which give us the mind of God on this subject.

In the first place, we are told that there are things "from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39); also things that "the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh" (Romans 8:3). It is in vain, therefore, to look for justification by the law of Moses. The law can,

and does, condemn the transgressor; and that is all that it can do. There are some who may vainly imagine that they can present some good works that may have some part in their justification. But let us see what the word of God says to such:

“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:27, 28).

“And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Romans 11:6).

From these passages we learn that it is impossible for a sinner, even if he has transgressed the law only once, to bring any of his supposed good works before God, and hope to secure justification because of them. Even under earthly governments, one murder or one theft makes him a transgressor; and his transgression calls for his condemnation, and no number of good deeds will induce the jury and the court to justify him. This is especially true under the government of God; for even one sin shows that the sinner's heart is not right in the sight of God. If, then, all of the sinner's works are shut out, we must ask what way of justification the word of God makes known to us.

“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38, 39).

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:1-4).

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24).

“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God *which is by faith of Jesus Christ* unto all and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:19-28).

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1, 2).

It would seem that special care had been taken in order that no one might mistake the richness and fullness of the grace of God in providing for the justification of those that trust in Jesus Christ. Hence we copy more largely the words of surprising grace:

“For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which received abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. Therefore, as by the offence of one *judgment came* upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift came* upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:17-21).

It must be further noticed that this grace, this glorious gift, comes to men through Jesus Christ, and through no other channel:

"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:20, 21).

In these passages, and in others that are found in the Scriptures, it appears that justification is the act of God. This is stated distinctly in Romans 8:33, whether we take the translation of the Common Version as correct, "It is God that justifieth," or whether we accept that of the margin of the Revised Version as preferable, "Shall God that justifieth?" Both of them admit that to justify belongs to God, and that when he justifies there is no possibility of condemnation from any other source. The ground of justification is found in the work, the whole of the work, of the Son of God, whom God "gave that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." What a ground the Father hath given us for the fullest belief in Christ! What reason for devout thankfulness the redeemed have! What a motive to induce them to live, not unto themselves, but unto him who has brought to them a salvation so helpful and so glorious!

(6) SANCTIFICATION

The subjects that we have been considering in this chapter are all directly connected with the salvation for sinners by the grace of God. That salvation, in order to be complete, must include everything that is necessary to deliver the sinner from the condemnation and punishment that properly follow sin; from that defilement of the heart and conscience which sin causes; and thus to restore the sinner to the image and favor of God, the Infinitely Holy One. Unless all this is brought about, there can be no salvation. A mere forgiveness of all past sins, with no regeneration, repentance, faith in God and in his beloved Son, putting off the old man and putting on the new man, would be no real salvation, and could bring no real enduring blessing. If any sinner should be ready to satisfy himself with such a salvation, any one who had really heard Christ, and been taught by him, would be very ready to inform him as to what is demanded by the Scriptures:

"As the truth is in Jesus, that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be

renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:21-24).

The prayer of Jesus just before he went out to the Garden of Gethsemane, shows his tender solicitude for those disciples who were with him, and for all others down to the end of the world.

"They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17:16-20).

It will be noticed that the Lord prays to the Father "Sanctify them," that "they might be sanctified through the truth."

The apostle had learned the truth as it is in Jesus, and he says to the disciples in the church at Thessalonica:

"But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14).

"Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

In view of the fact that without sanctification, or holiness, there is no salvation, the exhortations that abound in the Sacred Scriptures are worthy of earnest heed. The earnestness also with which the Lord prayed for the sanctification of his people should stir in the heart of each one an earnest resolve to watch against the approaches of sin, to resist the tempter, and to make unceasing prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit. Not unnecessarily were the injunction and warning given:

"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:14, 15).

"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live

soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:11-14).

(7) THE PRESERVATION OF THE SAINTS

This subject is often called "The Perseverance of the Saints." The word "preservation," however, seems preferable, because it draws the attention directly to God, who is the Preserver of his people. The word "perseverance," on the other hand, points to the course of the believer, which is the direct result of the preserving power and grace of God. The doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints" can only be proved by bringing out those passages from the Scriptures which teach God's distinct purpose in regard to his own "preservation of the saints."

The all-important thing is then to get clear views of God's own gracious and unalterable purpose. We have already considered this purpose of God, by which he chose certain persons to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The subject now before us is the carrying out of that purpose. The Apostle Paul gives us information on that subject:

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30).

Here is the purpose and the successive steps by which it is carried out; they are chosen, called, justified, glorified:

"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:2-5).

"Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:3-9).

These passages all point to the same truth, the confirming to the end of those who are "called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord," so that they "may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Lord's sheep, whom the Father gave to him, he represents as being in his hands and in the hands of the Father, and gives the strongest assurance of their perfect safety there:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one" (John 10:27-30).

In his effort to comfort his disciples, on the evening before his crucifixion, Jesus spoke to them words that come down through the ages, cheering his people in all generations:

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:1-3).

The object of God's electing grace will not be fully attained until those that the Father has given to the Son have been gathered into the bright mansions that have been prepared for them. Those that are the objects of God's preserving care can never fail to reach the desired end; for through the means which that loving care provides, they patiently persevere until they inherit the kingdom, and enter the royal mansions prepared for them in heaven. Hence, in the midst of the trials of life, and when passing through the valley of the shadow of death, they may sing joyfully, in the words of the poet Gambold:

"And when I'm to die,
'Receive me,' I'll cry;
For Jesus has loved me, I cannot say why.
"But this I do find,
We two are so joined
He'll not live in glory and leave me behind."

— CHAPTER

6

How Christians Should Live and Labor

We have been considering what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for men while he dwelt on earth; we have also inquired what he has been doing, what he is now doing, and what he will continue to do for his followers until they are led up to heaven to be forever with him. We now come to ask what his people are to do day by day so long as they live in this world.

There are some things that ought to be clearly understood by each one of them, old and young, men and women. Let us try to learn from the Bible what it says about their daily life and their daily works. The Bible is given to us to teach us how to make the most of the short lives that we are to spend in this world.

"What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost *which* is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own! For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

This passage tells us that the believer in Christ is not his own. Most of the followers of Christ have known and felt this to be true; but it ought never to be forgotten. They have often sung the words of that familiar hymn, beginning with the words:

"Alas! and did my Saviour bleed?

And did my Sovereign die?

Would he devote that sacred head

For such a worm as I?"

The last words of the hymn are generally sung with very deep feeling: