

“Reformed”
Is Not Enough

Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant*
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Foreword

On June 22, 2002, Covenant Presbytery of the RPCUS declared that certain teachings at a pastors' conference presented by Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, John Barach and, as the Victorians would have put it, the present writer, involved a "fundamental denial of the essence of the Christian Gospel in the denial of justification by faith alone." Consequently, the four of us were declared to be heretics.

This book project was already well underway when all of this happened, and so it cannot be understood as a full-orbed response to the charges. At the same time, given the nature of the subject this book addresses, the material here *can* be considered as part of the provocation and something of a response. The basic theme of this book is what brought about the charges in the first place, and in more than a few passages, I have written responsively with the charges in mind.

The charges assumed (which is incidentally not the same thing as proving) that the positions taken by the speakers were "contrary to the Bible and the Westminster Standards." As a result, in the following pages, there is a closer interaction with the teaching of the Westminster Confession than would otherwise have happened. This was not done in order to "get around" anything in the historic Reformed faith, but rather the reverse. It is our conviction that certain epistemological developments since the Enlightenment have caused many *modern* conservative

Calvinists to read their confessions in a spirit alien to that which produced them. As a result, we were taken to task for denying our confessional heritage at just those places where we were in fact upholding it. This of course does not make us right—as the Westminster theologians themselves told us, and as Steve Schlissel continues to tell us in a loud voice. Something can be “confessional” and wrong. But we are like the obedient boy in the parable—we say the confession *could* be wrong, but then we affirm the confession. Our opponents say the confession is as right as it gets—biblical Christianity in “its purest human expression”—and then proceed to merrily disregard what the confession actually teaches in this area.

What we always want in all “controversies of religion” is a plain and honest resort to Scripture primarily. But when we do this, we are still mindful of our confessional riches and we love that heritage. Given this, it is a bit much to be charged with abandoning our inheritance when those making the charge abandoned the standards long enough ago to give it the color of “a historic position.”

No single issue in this collective charge against us is very complicated, but, taken all together, things can become significantly tangled. This is because this was a heresy trial on the cheap—it was a veritable broadside of charges with no apparent need to contact us to get any clarification, no need to document the charges with quotations, no need to distinguish four men with different emphases, and so forth. Simple issues when collectively heaped can still make a big mess.

At the same time, this published response seeks to *name* this imbroglgio appropriately. Apart from the specific charges, what exactly is going on here? What worldviews are colliding? This might seem like a nonsensical question to some—“what do you mean *worldviews*?” Both sides of this dispute hold to some variation of postmillennial, Calvinistic, presbyterian, Van Tillian, theonomic, and Reformed thought, with additional areas of

agreement standing off to the side. I bet none of us voted for Clinton. How could there possibly be enough *material* left over for a fracas?

The answer is found in a contrast we have used many times—medieval versus modern. We believe ourselves to be in the process of recovering what our fathers taught from the Reformation down to the Enlightenment—that is, a Reformed and medieval mindset. We believe our opponents to be sincere and honest Christians, but men who have erroneously made a bad truce with modernity and who have accommodated their theology to the abstract dictates of the Enlightenment. This is why we have been laid on the Procrustean bed of a particular understanding of systematic theology and have had our heretical feet cut off. The irony in this case is that the standards used to judge us were written with the mindset we are returning to and which are drastically misunderstood by the mindset we are rejecting. There will be more on this in the chapters to come.

So the dispute is not imaginary—there are real and important differences between us. We do not believe the differences to constitute heresy—any of the men who have taken this action against us would be welcome to worship at any of our churches and commune with us in the Lord’s Supper there. Nevertheless, the differences are real and deep, and the parties that differ ought to be properly named. If it were up to me, building on the acronym TR (“Truly Reformed”), I would suggest that this is a debate between the Enlightenment TRs (ETRs) and the Historic Reformed. But agreement with this naming will have to wait for further proof.

The basic content of this book appeared originally in a series of sermons preached at Christ Church in Moscow. One of the chapters appeared originally in *The Hammer*, a publication of Community Christian Ministries, while another chapter appeared in *Table Talk*. The rest was written for the occasion.

Douglas Wilson
Christ Church
2002

Part I

Introduction & Bona Fides

1

Judas Was a Christian?

The Church today is in dire need of reformation. This is not said with any denominational exclusivity—the Reformed churches today need reformation as much as anyone else. I say this as one who embraces the richness of the Reformed faith, as will become apparent enough later. But at the same time, *because* of this Reformational commitment, it is still necessary to say that to be Reformed is not enough. We must certainly live up to what we have already attained, but together with this we must not be allowed to assume that the last significant attainment was in the middle of the seventeenth century. *Semper reformanda* is not something we should all chant together right up until someone actually tries it.

One of the great reformational needs in the Church today is the need for us to understand the objectivity of the covenant, and so that is the thrust of this book. Because this covenant is our life, we are called to understand it, embody it, and love the members of it. Not surprisingly, in order to do this, we will have to clear away a good bit of theological debris, which is what I am seeking to do here.

As we undertake the task, one caution should be mentioned at the outset: it is important for us to grasp *all* the issues that will be raised, and this means waiting patiently for some assembly of them later. On a subject of this complexity, the last thing we need is a rush to judgment, which can only result in

misunderstanding and confusion. Considerable confusion has already occurred in some quarters, and we need to study the Bible, the theological issues, and our own hearts carefully so that we do not fall into this trap.

With that said, we may get right into it. The first question we must consider is this: what is a “Christian” when we use the word in the New Testament sense? Considered from one angle, this question is one of the most important questions a man can ask himself. Tied in with it are all the related questions about God, man, sin, salvation, and revelation. Additionally connected are all the great questions concerning a man’s destiny after his course in this life is over.

Given the importance of the question, many may be surprised to learn that the Scriptures say very little about the word *Christian*, which occurs in only three places. And in none of these places is the word being used in the way we tend to use it. Our application of the word is certainly a legitimate one, which should be defended and continued, but only if we understand what we are doing.

The first usage in the Bible is a simple reference to what the followers of Christ came to be called—by outsiders. The Scripture tells us that the word *Christian* first came to be applied to the church at Antioch, which consisted of the followers of Christ in that city. “And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). In this passage, the word is used in the same way other nouns are used—to distinguish one thing from another. Just as we indicate the differences between tables and airplanes by giving them different names, so the pagans of Antioch decided to distinguish the Christians from the Jews and from the many other religious groups that swirled around the empire of that time. No statement was being made about the great questions mentioned above as they might

have applied to an individual member of that church. The word was used as a simple noun, as a newspaper writer might have used it.

The second instance is also found in the book of Acts. The apostle Paul was giving an account of himself in front of Festus and Agrippa. As was evident to his judges, his learning was considerable and his presentation of the gospel was serious and affecting. That Festus was stirred can be seen in his outburst, and that Agrippa was unsettled can be seen in his application of the truths of the gospel to himself.

And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds. (Acts 26:24–29)

In this instance, the context is the presentation of the gospel to those who had not heard or believed it. The apostle wanted them to consider these things, and since the charge had been given to him (along with the other apostles) to preach the gospel to every creature, this is clearly a plea to those in darkness to enter into true light. And obviously, Paul is inviting them to genuine faith, saving belief, and not simply to membership in a new religious club. But even here there is no distinction made between a false profession of Christ and a true profession of Christ. A true profession is assumed, but the contrast is between pagan unbelief and Christian belief. Spurious Christianity as opposed to the real thing is not under discussion.

The third and last application of the name *Christian* comes from within the body of Christ, and it shows that the name has stuck. The apostle Peter, when writing to a body of believers, tells them that they should not suffer as evildoers. They have left that way of life behind. If any of them stumble into sin and suffer its consequences, then of course they should be ashamed of themselves.

If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? (1 Pet. 4:14–17)

In the first part of this passage, Peter says that they are happy if they are “reproached for the name of Christ.” He then says a moment later that if any man “suffer as a Christian,” he should not be ashamed. It is difficult to miss the parallel. To be a Christian is to bear the name of Christ. If someone receives the world's hatred because he bears the name of a hated Christ, then there is no shame in it. Again, the judgment is being made from a distance—a persecutor hates Christ and attacks anyone associated with him.

These are the three places where the Bible indicates what the word *Christian* means. In two places, pagan unbelievers are applying the name to believers. In the third, an invitation is given to Christians to be in a certain frame of mind when persecutors come after them for being Christian. In all three places, the word is used by pagans. In Antioch, the pagans call the Christians by this name. In Paul's hearing, Agrippa speaks it in his summary of what he thinks Paul was trying to do to him. In the

passage from Peter, an apostle imputes a hatred of the name of Christ, and this use of the word *Christian*, to pagan persecutors.

And this means we have no distinctively Christian handling of the word *Christian*. We have no direct teaching on what to make of statements like, “I grew up in the church but I became a Christian when I prayed a prayer something like this...” Here “becoming a Christian” means passing from one spiritual state to another, from darkness to light. It refers to conversion as an internal reality, but the Bible does not apply the word *Christian* to this or describe the process as that of becoming a Christian.

This of course does not mean that the subject is closed or that there is no such thing as genuine heart conversion. But it does mean that the remainder of the discussion, if it is to go beyond these three passages, is a matter of systematic and biblical theology and not a question of exegesis. Fortunately, we can still learn a great deal. But we have to be very careful as we undertake the task. The phrase “becoming a Christian” is strongly entrenched in our evangelical traditions and is an essential part of evangelical “systematics.” Invariably, it is used to refer to the moment of regeneration.

Now such a moment is important to the teaching of Scripture as a whole, and, for each person, it is crucial to be able to answer the question of individual regeneration. The reason we have to address this is that in our culture many have grown up in the church: they were baptized in infancy or when they were ten in a Baptist church, they sang in the choir and went through catechism class, and they are not Buddhists. They have been Christians their whole lives. But if, like Nicodemus, they are not born again, what must they become? Does it make sense for them to “become a Christian?” There is *something* which they must become—spiritually alive. But how does the Bible describe this kind of change?

To answer the question, we have to look at some analogies from the Old Testament. There we see that someone could be

outside the covenant entirely—a worshiper of Baal. A second category would be someone within the covenant people of Israel, who did not serve the God of Israel in truth. His service of God was externally formal and correct, but his heart was far from God. And lastly, there were true Israelites in whom there was no guile. Paul writes of this distinction at the end of the second chapter of Romans.

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. (Rom. 2:28–29)

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant, but Paul points out that the mere possession of the external sign was not sufficient to guarantee a genuine spiritual reality. We can reapply these truths this way: “For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly; neither is that baptism, which is outward and external. But he is a Christian who is one inwardly; and baptism is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Paul’s statement is blunt—he is *not* a Christian who has only the externals. But we see in his next breath that Paul’s statement was hyperbolic. Jews who had circumcision only were not Jews at all in one sense, but they were of course Jews in another. Lest anyone be tempted to think that this made external membership in the covenant a big nothing, Paul hastens to add that such membership was actually quite important.

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it

is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. (Rom. 3:1–4)

In other words, the religious world is filled with infidels at heart—people who were baptized in their childhood, but who do not believe any of the Christian faith now. Does this mean that their baptism—their “circumcision”—meant nothing? Not at all, Paul says. Every covenant member in the world could be lying about God through their lives, lives which contradict the religious signs which may have been applied to them at various points in their lives. Let God be true, Paul says, and every man a liar. That is all right—the truth remains firm.

The language can be pretty strong at times, as it ought to be. Those who carry Christian “marks” about with them, when they know nothing of the power of God in regeneration, are guilty of a very great sin. “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; cf. 3:9). In short, we can say that God knows those who call themselves Christians and who take upon themselves the marks of discipleship. Their lips are close to God, but their hearts are far from Him. Such are Christians covenantally, but their lives betray that covenant. This does not make God false—it would take more liars among men than we could come up with to accomplish that—but it does show that the word *Christian* can be used in two senses.

A Christian, in one sense, is anyone who has been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit by an authorized representative of the Christian church. Does this mean that anyone so baptized is a Christian in the other sense—one who is born of the Spirit of God? Not at all. Again, we can take an illustration from the Jews. It is not “as though the Word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). To apply Paul’s distinction here, they are not all the

Christian church who are *of* the Christian church. There are those who are covenantally of the Church, but who are not individually regenerate. And if someone dies apart from that regeneration which brings us out of our native condition of spiritual death, such a person is lost eternally. In other words, Christians in the first sense alone are condemned to hell. As Jesus put it, “You *must* be born again.”

External badges of Christian obligations do not get someone “halfway there.” They are not “better than nothing.” They are far, far worse than nothing. It would be better to have never formed any kind of attachment to Christ at all than to form a false one. And this is why Sodom got off easier than Capernaum (Mt. 11:24).

This means that if someone has been a Christian his whole life, but then comes into the new life that Christ presented to Nicodemus, we can say that he has become a Christian inwardly. He has now been baptized inwardly. He has become a Christian in truth. And if we know what we are saying, and we qualify it as Paul did, we might even say that he has become a Christian. However this would be comparable to a man who was married for ten years but was regularly unfaithful, who finally had a real change of heart. After ten years, he might say, as might his wife, that on the day he repented he finally became a husband. And he did—he finally knows what it is all about. But we need to remember that covenantally he was a husband all along, and had all the obligations of marriage.

And this means that many Christians need to become Christian all the way through. The applications move in two directions and forbid two grievous errors. Of course, these two errors (when committed) play off each other, which is why we must hold fast to the Scriptures. The first error is that of individualistic pietism, assuming that invisible saints are the only saints, or, rather, that invisible saintliness is the only kind. Advocates of the “ethereal Church” need to learn that, according to

the Bible, a Christian is one who would be identified as such by a Muslim. Membership in the Christian faith is objective—it can be photographed and fingerprinted.

The opposing error is that of straight hypocrisy. This is the idea that mere covenant membership can replace covenant faithfulness as the one thing needful. The lips draw near while the heart is far removed from God. But such snakes within the covenant have the worst lot of all.