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Salvation

We have already discussed in chapter 7 the difficulty with taking as a completely accurate description a model of salvation that says (either explicitly or implicitly) that Jesus fools God, or even persuades God, into saving people who really don't deserve it but have said the magic words.

It is now worthwhile examining another model of salvation, that provided by the Council of Trent.¹ The section on justification is rather short: the English translation comes to less than 27 pages.

The first “chapter” (*caput*) is entitled Of the Inability of Nature and Law to Justify Men, and discusses the inability of mankind to become righteous by his own will, even with the help of the law. Chapter 2 discusses Christ's death for our sins. Chapter 3 discusses who are justified (only those who are “born again”).

¹For a complete text in the original Latin and an English translation, see Schroeder HJ: *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1941.

Chapter 4 discusses the necessity of at least a desire for baptism, and preferably baptism itself. Chapter 5 states that the beginning of justification must proceed from God. We can accept it when God gives it, but we cannot choose to be just without the grace of God (*gratio Dei*). Chapter 6 notes that faith is received, presumably from God. All the steps to justification (faith, turning from sin and to God, repentance, and the resolve to be baptized) are received from God, and our part is only not to reject the gift. Chapter 7 discusses justification, which includes sanctification as well as what Protestants would usually call justification. This also is the work of God. The latter point is reinforced by chapter 8, which also states that we are justified by faith.²

Chapter 9 then states that no one can be certain of salvation, and decries the view that the assurance of salvation is necessary for salvation. Chapter 10 discusses the increase of justification (which, remember, includes sanctification), apparently stating that it is by faith cooperating with good works (*cooperante fide bonis operitas*). Chapter 11 states that it is necessary for one who has become justified to keep the commandments, and also possible to do so. It decries the teaching that even our best works after conversion merit eternal punishment. Chapter 12 condemns the doctrine of predestination. Chapter 13 states that one must persevere in good works if one wishes to be saved. Chapter 14 discusses penance. It says that those who have forfeited the received grace of justification (*accepta justificationis gratia*) can be justified again, but the repentance required for this forgiveness is very different (*multa aliam*) from that of baptism, for it also involves confession and absolution, as well as penance, or temporal punishment. Chapter 15 says that mortal sins may cause one to be cut off from grace (presumably damned), even if one still believes the truth. Finally, chapter 16 says that final salvation is both a result of God's grace and of our own good works. One should not trust or glory in oneself, but rather the Lord. One should not even judge oneself. But God will judge every man according to his works. Then follow condemnations of various positions which the Council presumed to be in error.

To synthesize, according to the Council of Trent, and therefore official Catholic doctrine, we are not naturally able to choose rightly, or to save ourselves, although (canon 7) apparently we can sometimes choose a less sinful course. Then God's grace at

²Since sanctification is included in justification in this scheme, we presumably are also sanctified by faith.

some point draws us, and if we choose not to resist it, we will be given a new nature, or be born again. We then wish to be baptized and will be baptized if possible. The faith by which we are saved is a gift, like the grace of God. When God saves us, He not only declares us righteous but gives us righteousness, so that His declaration is not a fraud.

Since at this point God has given us his righteousness, we are then able to keep from sinning.³ Thus if one sins after justification (or conversion), one has somehow lost the grace originally given, even if one still believes in the doctrines of Christianity (which the Council apparently identifies with faith in chapter 15 and canon 28). Therefore, if one has sinned, one is obligated not only to repent but to confess to the priest and to do penance (if not in this life, then in purgatory). However, if one does not sin in a situation where one could, it is credited to one's account—one merits an increase of grace (*mereri augmentum gratiae*).

On the other hand, except in a special case such as the Virgin Mary, which is given by God, it is held that one cannot avoid all sins, so repentance will be usual among Christians. Because one cannot be sure of one's own ability to stand, one can not be sure that one is in grace, that is, saved. One would be told explicitly by the Council that one should not claim to be eternally saved (canons 15, 16).

At this point, some of my Protestant friends are starting to squirm. They have always thought of themselves as anti-Catholic, and yet except for penance, purgatory, and the storehouse of merit, their belief comes remarkably close to the Catholic position.

Yet more of my Protestant friends will squirm when they realize that a superficial difference between their position and the Catholic position obscures a fundamental similarity. For it does not really matter whether sanctification (the living, or perhaps the ability to live, a holy life) is one aspect of justification or simply always accompanies justification, as long as the two are inseparable, and we understand the intended meaning of a given Biblical writer whose usage of the words (as opposed to the concepts) may not always conform to ours.⁴ So the insistence that

³Sin is not explicitly defined here, but is apparently related to the commandments of God (*Dei praecepta* or *mandatorum dei*), which includes the ten commandments (*decem praecepta*).

⁴In fact Biblical Greek does not distinguish between righteousness and justification, using the one word *dikaïosunē*, which has been translated both ways in English.

justification is concerned with how God looks at us and does not include sanctification, or His changing us, will not serve to fundamentally differentiate one from the Catholic position unless one is prepared to say that some people can be justified without being sanctified. Few Protestants would take that step, and for those who would, Catholic arguments about the parable of the sheep and the goats, and Bonhoeffer's objections to "cheap grace apply with full force.

But if there is that little difference between the Catholic position and most Protestant positions on righteousness by faith, then why all the fuss? It can't be over the abuse of indulgences, because the Church recognized and attempted to correct these. It could be partly over authority, and the Church's insistence that it is always right, but that would not be a significant issue unless the reformers felt that the Church had made some major errors. It could be that the reformers felt that the doctrines of the storehouse of merit, penance, and purgatory were wrong and inherently invited abuse (and there is a great deal of truth to that—Luther's 95 theses were sparked by such abuse), but the reformers constantly pointed to the doctrine of justification by faith as the crux of the argument. One might even blame it on the personalities of the reformers, but that fails to explain why so many believed them. We are missing something somewhere. So let us go back over the doctrine, paying attention to alternative models.

First, almost all the traditional theologians are in agreement that before God changes the course of a life (I would say "touches a life", but according to chapter 2 God does that all the time), there is nothing that anyone can do to merit salvation. This is certainly in accord with Paul's theology as given in Romans. To put it another way, we all start out under the power of sin. I take this to be "original sin". Usually this sin is not closely defined, as I attempted to do in the previous chapter. That is, it is not clear whether "original sin" is an addiction or merely the propensity to make mistakes. It is hard for it meaningfully to be called rebellion, as rebellion usually implies a choice, and what is specifically denied here is a choice (in addition, it is hard to understand how infants, to which the doctrine is intended to apply, can meaningfully be said to have rebelled).

It is sometimes argued that we are naturally good and that we become corrupted by our environment. Who does not look at a baby (some babies, anyway) and think how sweet and innocent it looks? But that feeling is not necessarily to be trusted. One could say the same of a lion cub. One may then argue that the lion it will grow to

be is a necessary part of nature's balance. But that does not make it the ideal, or fit for a deathless world, where "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isa. 65:25, apparently an echo of Eden where, according to Gen. 1:30, "to every beast of the earth. . . I have given every green plant for food.")⁵ It is difficult to make a strong enough argument from appearances to override the Biblical data.

Perhaps of more concern is the argument that it isn't fair to damn people for something that is not under their control. The basis for the argument sounds plausible. But first, it assumes that God will not provide these people a way to be saved (which is mostly untrue, as we will see), and second, we are not talking about whether these people should be damned to eternal torment, but rather whether they should be saved. There may be some who are neither saved nor damned in this sense (we will discuss this more in the next chapter). The theory that we are discussing suggests that people, without God's special attention, can be fairly compared to rabid dogs. They are not responsible for their behavior, but still cannot be allowed in society and must be destroyed.

One might argue that "most of the people I know do not resemble rabid dogs at all. They are nice, hard-working, and honest, and this includes atheists." This argument misses two points. First, it is possible at this point (we will discuss it more thoroughly later) that some atheists are safe for God to save, and if so, one cannot use them without qualification as examples of people with their "original sin" intact. Second, remember that some rabid dogs do not resemble "rabid dogs" either. Early on in the disease, there may not be any perceptible change. The dogs may be cute and friendly. But with time, the condition will become worse, and the dogs must be destroyed. Just so, those who are fatally infected with the sin "virus" may seem to be functioning pretty well also. But given enough time (and we are talking about eternity here), they may develop horribly twisted characters, and it may be obvious that they must go.

If the doctrine of original sin is correct, then we do need to be saved from the results of that sin, which are first addiction, and then death. Traditional Catholics and Protestants agree, following Paul in Romans among other Biblical passages, that we can-

⁵ This is one reason why a natural theology can be misleading, and it is important to establish whether the Biblical record is reliable and if so to use it. Some theologians try to establish a theology which is true no matter what the scientific or historical facts are (kind of a lowest common denominator theology). Those theologians wind up not being able to say much that is meaningful, or trying to ignore the Biblical record, or both.

not do this of ourselves. We need help from outside ourselves. And both agree again that God takes the initiative in attempting to save us. He at least gives us the choice.⁶ John says that “the true light . . . enlightens every man” (John 1:9). In one model, God gives us all, at least at one point, freedom of choice in this matter. In the other (the Calvinist model) we have no actual choice. God simply decides for us.

I have trouble with the Calvinist model. It leads either to universalism, which Jesus did not teach, or to one’s believing that God is grossly arbitrary. It is ethically much easier to believe that people are arbitrary. The Calvinist model also denies to man the power of choice, which seems intuitively to be present. And its predictions are either falsified or indistinguishable from the predictions of a limited free choice model, and therefore for practical purposes can be ignored. Note that Calvinists still preach as if they were trying to persuade people to accept the Gospel.⁷

Again, traditional theologians agree, following Paul, that God’s grace is given without our having earned it. If we ignore the Calvinist option, then we are, at the point of grace, given a choice as to whether we will accept it or reject it. The acceptance of grace is experienced as a choice of faith, which is itself a gift of God. We then are counted righteous by God.

There are multiple models of exactly how God does this. They divide roughly into three categories. Some models say that when God counts us righteous, this action has nothing to do with whether we are in fact righteous. These models seem to lead naturally to libertinism. Do what you want to; God has already saved you, they say. Historically, libertinism has been one outgrowth of this position. And this position seems to run afoul of Jesus’ teaching, which has specifics on actions. Jesus said bluntly that “evil

⁶ Some would argue that He does even more than that. He actually makes the choice for us. This view is discussed shortly.

⁷ This argument is parallel to the best argument I know against solipsism, the belief that all one experiences is a product of one’s own imagination. You cannot “mathematically” prove that this book and its writer are not figments of your imagination, along with everyone you meet. But the predictions of that theory are either wrong or completely parasitic on the theory that the universe is real and separate from you, and therefore the theory can be ignored.

There are a number of texts which mention some form of predestination. Some of these fit easily into a determinist theoretical framework. But they mandate it only if one ignores Romans 8:29 which suggests that foreknowledge precedes predestination, or if one insists that divine foreknowledge precludes human freedom. We discussed the latter concept in chapter 6.

thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, [and] slander. . . . defile a man; . . .“ (Matt. 15:19) And when He was telling the final parable about His second coming, where the sheep and the goats were separated (Matt. 25:31-46), the separation was not done on the basis of their belief system but rather on specific actions. This fits with Matt. 7:21 where Jesus said, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Righteous actions have something to do with salvation.

The next collection of models is somewhat heterogeneous. It says that God gives us perfection at the same time we are (legally) accounted righteous. This collection can be divided into two groups, the models saying that we achieve absolute perfection permanently, and the ones who say that we have it only for a limited time.

The theory of permanent perfection is theoretically the most attractive. It would (if true) make our choice final and keep us from ever sinning after conversion (see 1 John 3:6,9;5:18). But real life does not happen that way most if not all of the time, and the theory runs directly afoul of 1 John 1:8; “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (see also v.10;2:1) Permanent perfection is apparently not what God offers us at conversion.

Then what about temporary perfection? It would explain the aforementioned texts in 1 John. It also does not require God to save those who are committing sin. But it would seem to deny the possibility of growth, which is implied in several Scriptural passages (e. g. Heb. 5:11-14). And experientially, many people accept Jesus as Lord of their lives before they are aware of the full implications of that decision, and while they continue to do things that are not the best. As long as one defines sin as harmful actions, it would appear that sinlessness is unusual even in converted Christians. This would not speak well of the power of God to save, if one will always have temporary perfection when one is saved. I am particularly troubled by the on again, off again quality of salvation in this theory, dependent not upon the choice of the individual, but on circumstances beyond his/her control.

In fact, even the Catholic position will not go this far. Some sins will not disqualify one from heaven; they will simply require purging before one can go to heaven (therefore purgatory). Some Catholic theologians will insist that although purgatory involves suffering, it is with eagerness to be rid of sin that the soul endures, giving purgatory an almost pleasurable quality which is

much different from Hell. That concept is not that much different from the variation in rewards that many Protestants teach.

So it would seem that some kind of less absolute relation between sin and salvation is more likely to be correct. To simply say that saved people commit less sin is not very helpful. Do they commit 50% less sin? Does it require time to reduce the sin level? Is sanctification the work of a lifetime, as has sometimes been said? In that case how long does a life have to be? What about the thief on the cross, who was saved with approximately 3 hours to go?⁸ This approach does not seem very satisfactory.

Perhaps God stops us from doing particularly “bad” sins. This reminds us of the Catholic distinction between mortal sin and venial sin. But then, which sins are mortal and which sins are venial? Is there a minimum requirement for salvation, perhaps keeping the 10 commandments? Does God not really care about the other sins? Somehow this approach is not satisfactory either, at least without some adjustment.

One Catholic way of modifying this position is to say that disobeying *any* command of God (or the Church, which is thought of as coming from God) can become a mortal sin, but only if one understands fully (or fully enough) its implications, including its direct opposition to God, and one is free to choose without undue duress (there is always some pressure or one would not choose the action), and one chooses to do it anyway. This would seem to rule out any action as in itself sufficient to be a mortal sin, but to allow any action to be the basis for a mortal sin. Bringing in our previous discussion of sin, a mortal sin would be a sin of selfishness and rebellion. Harmful acts, and even sins of addiction, would be venial sins, as long as we truly did not know them to be against God’s will and/or were not able to avoid them (perhaps because we did not know they were avoidable).

This position is very attractive. It predicts no deliberate sin while one is in Christ, and therefore can accommodate a kind of perfection, as seems to be indicated by the texts in 1 John 3 noted above. At the same time it allows for other kinds of sin, as apparently demanded by 1 John 1 and 2 and indicated by Romans 7. And while making

⁸ His legs were broken in all probability not so that he wouldn’t be able to run away, but so that he couldn’t support his weight and would asphyxiate sooner.

allowance for human weakness, it does not allow us to deliberately take advantage of God's forgiveness to cloak cherished sin.⁹

So far I have not diverged significantly from Catholic theology. However, I am not a Catholic. I do have trouble with the Catholic doctrines of penance, the storehouse of merit, the lack

⁹This model appears to deny the doctrine known as "once saved, always saved." If that doctrine is taken to mean that God knows the end from the beginning and knows who will be finally saved, then I have no trouble with the doctrine, and the doctrine is compatible with the model. In fact, it would seem to be required by the considerations of chapter 6.

But if the doctrine states that a true conversion experience guarantees that one will be saved in the end, then I have a great deal more trouble with it. From a theoretical point of view, Paul seems to have worried that that after he had preached to others he would have become "disqualified" (*adokimos*—1 Cor 9:27). The Greek word is used in other contexts (Rom 1:28; 2 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:16; Heb 6:8) to designate people who are lost, and the burden of proof is on those who would assert a different meaning here. Hebrews speaks of "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come," who then "commit apostasy" (6:4-6), and again, "if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which shall consume the adversaries." (10:26-7)

From an experimental point of view, traditional Christian doctrine says that the Devil was once an archangel, and therefore "saved". One cannot insist on only one choice per lifetime, or else one guarantees Adam a place in hell (whatever and whenever that is), which seems unlikely, especially in view of the hope that seems to have been given him in Gen. 3. And the Corinthian church was advised to put a fellow believer who was sleeping with his father's wife out of the church, "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Cor 6:5), which implies that if they did not do so his "spirit" might be lost. Admittedly one cannot prove that he had been converted, but he had certainly confessed Christ. And remember, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam 10:11-2) There seem to be Biblical characters who were saved once and lost later.

From a phenomenological point of view, there are those who claim a conversion experience who later deny the validity of that experience and act accordingly. Either they are "saved" anyway (a conclusion which I find grotesque), which seems to go against the bulk of the Biblical material (see specifically the discussion of this problem in Eze 18:21-32), or else they are not "saved" now. In that case either their conversions were genuine, in which case "once saved, always saved" is dead, or their conversions were not genuine. Then either one can find a difference between their conversions and those of people who persevere in their commitment, or else from a practical point of view one has conceded the point that "conversions" which look and apparently feel genuine do not guarantee salvation.

One can always explain away any evidence contrary to "once saved, always saved", but the explanations seem strained to me, and reduce the theory to

of assurance of salvation, and the definition of faith.

I am not sure that the process of forgiveness is fundamentally different after the conversion experience than before. It is true that one usually has more awareness of the consequences afterwards than before. But this would seem to be more a matter of degree than of kind. Repentance is acknowledged to be the same. Restitution is also to be encouraged at conversion, judging from the experience of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10, esp. v. 8), and is not always physically possible for sin after conversion.

This leaves confession and penance as the major difference in the Catholic system between forgiveness of sins before conversion and after conversion. I have little problem with confession as long as it is not adhered to mechanically, and I sense at least in the language of the Council of Trent some flexibility on this matter¹⁰ (it also seems that confession may be helpful for sins before conversion). But I have trouble with the concept that the Church can always prescribe the exactly proper temporal punishment for a sin. In practice this can mean that a corrupt priest who bought his office from a corrupt bishop makes the pronouncement. This is not just a theoretical case. In some parts of history the corruption is generally acknowledged (even by Catholics) to have extended to the Pope.¹¹

The only defense of such a system is that God somehow honors the dictates of these people. This is based on the "keys to the kingdom" concept (Matt 16:13-20, esp. v. 19; see also Matt 18:18; John 20:23). My problems with this approach are threefold. First, I accept that it is reasonably probable that Jesus is speaking to Peter in Matthew 16. However, if one insists on a literal and permanent interpretation of this passage then it seems difficult not to take literally the immediately following passage (vs. 21-23), where Jesus apparently calls Peter "Satan". The literalistic interpretation would thus make Satan the head of the church. But without a literalistic interpretation the doctrine of Petrine su-

where it commits to no testable predictions. I am sympathetic to the aim of providing a sense of security in one's salvation, but think there is probably a better way of doing so.

¹⁰ This flexibility may not always be translated to the popular level, but one should not hold the best Catholic theology responsible for this without further evidence, any more than one would, without further evidence, hold the best Protestant theology responsible for all abuses and erroneous concepts that may have crept into Protestantism.

¹¹ See, for example, Chamberlin ER: *The Bad Popes*. New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1969.

premacny, and the keys to the kingdom, cannot be sustained (see also 1 Cor 1:12 where the Petrine party seems to be no better than the party of Paul or Apollos, and what seems to be needed is the “party” of Christ).

Second, there is no indication in the text that there is to be a succession, let alone that this succession is a mechanical (as opposed to a spiritual) one. Whatever authority Peter had could not be passed down without either a spiritual person to accept it (which we have seen is not the case), or a purely formal action. There is even some evidence that such a succession was not developed until the second century.¹² So belief in infallibility of the Pope rests on very shaky evidence.¹³

The storehouse of merit seems to be directly contradicted by Jesus. In the Parable of the Laborers (Matt 20:1-16) Jesus seems to indicate that the final reward is not significantly increased (except for the pleasure of working for the Master and the security in the interim) for those with longer service. In Luke 17:7-10 (a parable commonly avoided) Jesus seems to indicate that we can not pile up extra “merit”; we can only do our duty. Jesus can

¹²Strand KH: “Church organization in first-century Rome: A new look at the basic data.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1991;29:139-60, and Strand KH: “Governance in the first-century Christian church in Rome: Was it collegial?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1992;30:59-75.

¹³The infallibility of the Church seems to fly in the face of empirical evidence. We have already noted the fact that corruption has reached the top of the hierarchy. One can attempt to avoid the obvious implications of this fact by insisting that infallibility only applies to church doctrines, or perhaps to the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*. But that very concession would undercut the doctrine of penance, and therefore scuttle the claim of at least a priest administering absolution to infallibility, and would probably ruin the claim to infallibility of Church councils like that of Trent. In addition, there are inconsistencies between the teaching of the New Testament church and that of the later church, such as the Sabbath (see Bacchiocchi S: *From Sabbath to Sunday*. Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), and inconsistencies between the Church which excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople (which was believed to have eternal consequences for him and his followers), and the Church which is now apparently accepting them as fellow Christians. The Church’s suppression of the second commandment on a popular level (See, for example, Geiermann P: *The Convert’s Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1952, pp. 48-9; Chrysostom J: *Manual of Christian Doctrine*. Philadelphia: J. J. McVey, 1920, pp. 233-49; and [No author given]: *Catechism of Christian Doctrine*. Milwaukee, WI: Diederich-Schaefer Co., 1885, pp. 25-27) is also of some concern. The doctrine of transubstantiation smacks quite literally of hocus pocus. However, my most important concern will be detailed in the next chapter.

conceivably have extra “merit”, but it would seem overly proud for any of us to claim such, let alone to be able to transfer it to someone else, as the theology of indulgences would require.¹⁴

The possibility of an assurance of salvation would seem to be taught by several Biblical passages, among them 1 John 5:13. I do not see it as a requirement of salvation, for in 1 John 3:20 we read that “whenever our hearts condemn us, . . . God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” This presumably means that someone who temporarily loses the assurance of salvation may still be saved. Nor is the assurance of salvation a guarantee of salvation: “. . . let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” (1 Cor 10:12) But it does seem that God wants us, after we are saved, to worry less about our own salvation (and perhaps more about that of others, His glory, and the truth). I agree that if pushed one cannot know for certain about one’s salvation. But one cannot know for certain in that sense about anything. One simply should know enough to where one stops worrying all the time. In that sense the Council of Trent did a disservice to the average Christian.

Finally, the Council seems to define faith as belief in the cardinal doctrines of the Church, what is sometimes called the Faith, the kinds of things which might be listed in the Apostles’ Creed, for example. James (2:19) properly ridicules this kind of belief: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” I would prefer the definition that faith is belief in God’s goodness (as Jesus revealed it) sufficient to attempt action based on that belief. This kind of faith will not need the constant threat of eternal torment, or even the loss of eternal bliss, to keep it in line. It will naturally want to do as much of the will of God as it can see. Thus the entire structure of external rewards and punishments is not necessary to keep this faith in line, and is sometimes even declined (see Ex 33:32; Rom 9:3). It is only as we try to guarantee the creation of a Christian community or nation that we fall into the trap of trying to scare or bribe people into heaven, and perhaps that attempt should not have been made in the first place (see John 18:36, Matt. 26:52-4). The

¹⁴Some will wonder why the abuses of indulgences (or for that matter the Church’s historic restriction of access to the Bible, or its persecution of various dissenters) is not featured more prominently here. The reason is because we are obligated, when dealing with a theological position, to take the best possible construction. Thus, if the Church later condemned abuses of indulgences, we have no business making these abuses part of (the newer) Church theology unless we can clearly show that they are still a natural outgrowth of that Church theology.

impulse is understandable but not necessarily correct.

My opting for faith as primary for salvation would seem to put me on the Protestant side of the Reformation. However, the Catholic side could easily say, “What about texts like ‘Work out your salvation with fear and trembling;’ (Phil 2:12) ‘faith apart from works is dead’ (James 2:26—see the whole passage, vs. 14-26); ‘the Son of Man..., will repay every man for what he has done’ (Matt 16:27); and ‘by your words [a kind of work in this setting] you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned’ (Matt 12:37)?”

Perhaps most striking, there is the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). Jesus seems to indicate that it is not our doctrinal purity, or even our faith as defined above, that will form the basis of the final judgment, but rather our helpfulness to our fellow humans. God seems to be using works (and not even “religious” works) as the criterion of salvation.

And theoretically, unless we are willing to completely divorce faith and works, we are inevitably forced to admit the possibility that works, when in their proper context (which only God knows completely now), are perfect indicators of faith. That means that works can be used to judge faith, and God is within His rights to do so. Thus one can both be justified by faith and by works (as indicated by James 2:21-26, esp. v. 24). But that brings us to two practical points where the Reformers were fundamentally more correct than the Church. First, Jesus indicated that when one is intending to change behavior, it is not helpful to aim at the behavior first. One should first change the fundamental attitude. Over and over He indicated that the change must come from within (see Matt 23:25-8; Luke 11:31-41; Matt 15:11,17-20; Mark 7:17-23; Matt 12:33-5; John 3:3,5). A primary focus on the outside (works, even the works which Christ is doing in us) would thus go against Jesus’ advice. It would be better to focus instead on inward qualities like faith and love (and perhaps even better to focus on God Himself, the object of our faith). Strictly speaking, this may not be anti-Catholic, but it is not the emphasis that comes through in the Council’s pronouncements.

Second, focusing on works is likely to be deceptive. The very parable used to prove that works are the criterion used in the judgment bears this out. The “sheep” are surprised when good works are attributed to them, and the “goats” are similarly surprised when their omission of good works is pointed out to them. They may or may not be surprised at which side they are on, but the sheep did not expect to get there because of their works. Some

of the sheep must have read the parable ahead of time, and still they are surprised. The easiest way to account for their surprise is to say that they were not thinking of whether they were doing something good when they did it, but rather thinking of the other person's need.

In any case, one may temporarily control behavior with threats and promises, but if one wishes to effect the inner change necessary for salvation from sin one will emphasize faith over works. If we wish for an indicator of our spiritual condition (including our salvation), we are better off asking about our faith than about our works. If our works seem to indicate a problem, we should spend more time inquiring about our faith than our works. For this reason, whatever the faults of their models, the Reformers were closer to the truth of the matter than the rest of the Church at their time.

The situation is a little bit like someone trying to hit a baseball. The one thing any coach will tell you is "keep your eye on the ball". In order to hit the ball with the bat, you do not look at the bat, even though it is what hits the ball. You do not look at the pitcher, the other fielders, your feet, the outfield where you want it to go, or anywhere else. You do not close your eyes. Changing your stance may be a good idea, but you had better not look at your stance, or you will never hit the ball except by accident. Just so, focusing on what God is doing inside of us, or what we think He should do inside us, or the mess we have inside us, is not helpful, except as it drives us to look at God in Himself. We need to focus on what God is like in Himself, and what He has done for us.

But that puts a great deal of weight on one's faith, and means that we are well advised to determine to the best of our ability what that faith is. First, it would help to note what that faith is not. We have already seen that it is not mere mental assent to doctrinal positions.

Another model of faith is that it involves absolute certainty about something. This model usually starts by quoting James 1:6-8: "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord." But is it really true that one without 100% faith is automatically disqualified from receiving anything from the Lord? What about Peter who had "little faith" (*oligopistos*; Matt 14:31) but was able to walk on water? What about the father of the demoniac in

Mark 9 who cried out (v. 24), “I believe; help my unbelief!”? What about Martha, who believed in Jesus (John 11:27), but not that He was going to raise the dead (v. 39)? Of course, it maybe claimed that all these people finally came to wholehearted belief, but that claim seems strained at least for the father of the demoniac. So the preferred model of faith should not require total belief. Belief enough to involve commitment to appropriate action should be enough.

Is commitment to action necessary? Some would dispute this. They would say that the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43—the parallels of Matt 27:44 and Mark 15:32 do not mention his conversion) did not do any great work. And if one were to have asked him, I am sure that he would not have claimed to do any work. But consider that words are also actions, and that in an environment in which he could only expect to receive abuse for his words, he rebuked his fellow thief for his mocking Jesus, then confessed Him to be the coming King. That certainly should qualify for some kind of work.

We now turn to the object of faith. Faith is not an attribute that can stand by itself (unless it is faith in faith, in which we get into an infinite regress). Faith must be in something else. This means that to strengthen faith we must concentrate, not on the faith, but on the object of our faith. But what is the object of our faith?

The evangelical Christian would immediately answer, “Faith must be in Jesus Christ.” For the Bible says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . .” (Acts 16:31), and, “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) It is tempting to stop there, and say that our belief must be that Jesus was the Messiah, and properly addressed as God (or perhaps is Lord of our lives). Certainly any model of salvation must agree with Peter and Paul in these situations, or do a good job of explaining why it does not.

But this model is not a complete model. For it implies that nobody who lived before Jesus should have been saved, which is contradicted by the New Testament accounts of the transfiguration where Moses and Elijah obviously came from heaven (and that before Jesus was crucified). There is also the New Testament opinion of Abraham as the father of the faithful. And it seems highly unlikely that the first 2/3+ of Earth’s history was totally devoid of persons whom God could save.

Nor can we get out of our difficulties by adopting dispensationalism. For this would leave out of the Kingdom those

faithful Jews (in Berea, for example—see Acts 17:10-2) who died in the AD 30-50 range and never heard of the name of Jesus, and presumably continued to send their yearly offerings for the Temple sacrifices. No, the dividing line cannot be time; if it exists it must be knowledge. In that case, those who grew up devoid of knowledge of who the Messiah was in the 20th century should not be held accountable for that knowledge when they did not possess it.

How much knowledge is necessary? Was it necessary to know that a Savior was coming? If one reads the Old Testament one gets hints that a Savior was coming, and that there was some correlation between the sacrificial system and this Savior, but the hints have to be ferreted out, and perhaps most importantly, the messages of the prophets do not make the point explicitly and continuously, which means that they were not aimed at the vital goal of saving souls, if the knowledge of a coming Savior is vital to salvation. If God gave the prophets their messages (and I believe He did), then He gave them the appropriate ones, and it is easier to say that the doctrine of a Savior, while important, is not the one indispensable subject of faith.

The only time that Jesus is recorded as using the verb *dikaioō* (to justify) to indicate that someone was justified, other than Matt. 12:37 cited above, is in Luke 18:13-14, where a man prayed simply, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Jesus said that this man was justified, in spite of the fact that he did not mention Jesus’ name, or even a coming Messiah.

In fact, there are passages (including Ps 19:3-4, Acts 17:27, and Rom 2:14-5) which suggest that even Gentiles without direct knowledge of the Jewish law (or pagans in our time) have access to saving faith. Most obviously, John 1:9 says that Jesus is the Light “that lights every man”,¹⁵ presumably including those who do not know Him by either name or office. Thus the fundamental object of faith must be something that God can present to every person with an adequate intelligence, knowledge base, and lack of total societal coercion. One possibility is that the fundamental issue is whether one believes that the organizing power of the universe (*i.e.* God) has our best interests at heart (*i.e.* loves us). This would lead us to follow His will and love each other. With more of a knowledge base we could rapidly bring the one

¹⁵ It does not really matter whether Jesus was “coming into the world” or whether He lights every person “coming into the world”. Jesus still lights every person (*anthrōpos*, the generic for mankind).

God of the Judeo-Christian heritage into the picture, then Jesus, then the rest of our theology (or at least someone's theology). If the fundamental attitude does not change, these additions would appear to be natural extensions of that attitude.

This concept can require integrity of a person. If one knows about the life of Jesus, one may be forced to recognize in Him the Messiah. One may not be able to keep one's integrity without confessing that "there is no other name . . . , by which **we** must be saved"; for us there may be "salvation in no one else." (Acts 4:12). One may be able to say to someone else that if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that God is just like Jesus in His attitude then you shall be saved. Thus this view reduces to the traditional one under the appropriate circumstances.

This view has profound implications for missions. For even in non-Christian lands there are some who are "saved" (it is of interest that missionaries have sometimes observed that "the best pagans make the best Christians", which is disappointing on the theory that they are "saving" people in mission service, but which is expected under the more general model of faith presented above). Thus a minister who brings Christianity to a group does not necessarily give them a chance for salvation. They already have that. He or she may give them another chance, or possibly even a better chance. But so does anyone who presents them with information on the ability and willingness of God to help them, and information on how to serve their fellow humans better (for example, a teacher who gives them an education in God's truth and encourages them to share it, or a health worker who teaches them God's principles of health and encourages them to use their newfound strength to bless others, and especially an Alcoholics Anonymous counselor who encourages their reliance on a "higher power" and their restitution to their family and friends). But some of what preaching Christianity does is to take people who are already saved and release them from the fear and confusion they were living under. Here it is precisely paralleled by the physician who makes people feel better physically, or the teacher who partially satisfies their intellectual thirst. This means that a legitimate goal of missions is to make people feel good.

Does this mean that one does not need to repent before one is saved? Perhaps theoretically. One may construct a situation where a person commits his/her life to God and is immediately killed before he/she realizes the implications of this commitment for his/her former way of life and repents. But in practice it does not take very long to discover that if God is good, He wants us to

be good also, and that we cannot do that on our own, and that we need to repent. In any case, the question is totally irrelevant to you and me, who realize that we have imperfections and that we need to get rid of them if we are to live lives of integrity. We need to repent whether anyone else does or not. We need the new birth that Jesus spoke of in John 3. And come to think of it, it is even possible that God will keep anyone alive who commits to Him until that person realizes, however vaguely, that he/she needs to repent.

This position can take the hypocrisy out of the missionary who feeds or heals people so that they will listen to the Gospel, which is "the only really important thing." No, feeding and healing people is good in and of itself. It can be engaged in for its own sake. Does that mean the end of missions? Only if one's theology cannot stand on its own two feet and must rely on Hell to keep it going. If one's theology is truly helpful, then it is worth sharing, as much as, and maybe more than, food. And according to the general model of faith, a basic imperative is to love others, which includes sharing with them helpful information, including one's theology. So missions should endure, and perhaps even be strengthened, and this without encouraging the bigotry that has sometimes infected missions in the past. At the same time, one will not have the desperation to change others without first identifying their felt needs and ascertaining whether one can truly help.

This subject obviously branches off in numerous directions such as the consideration of various models of the Atonement, or the implications for religious liberty. For now we will leave these areas and move to one more area where scientific theology may be of particular help, life after death.