

THANK GOD FOR THE GENITIVE!

ROBERT H. COUNTESS, PH.D.*

The "Speaking Out" section of *Post* magazine recently carried an article by William F. Buckley, Jr. entitled "Thank God for the Rich!" Therein he attempted to demonstrate the benefits to society as a whole when there are in such a society wealthy patrons of the arts, charities, and civic organizations. The present paper attempts to thank God for the riches of His grace as demonstrated by the contents of Ephesians 2:8-10. The purpose of this study is to incise in greater bold relief the Scriptural doctrine of free, sovereign grace. The points to be discussed are (1) the significance of the genitive in the phrase διὰ πίστεως; (2) the retro-cipatory character of τοῦτο and (3) the exclusion of boasting by μα .

At the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin there were six "position" papers presented by outstanding worldwide evangelicals. Dr. Harold John Ockenga prepared as his position paper, "The Basic Theology of Evangelism." Particularly relevant to the present study is this excerpt from Dr. Ockenga's paper:

Faith is erroneously ascribed to God as a gift (see Eph. 2:8 where "gift" is neuter and "faith" is feminine. Salvation is the antecedent of gift.) Man is commanded to repent, to believe, to convert. The Bible places these acts within the ability of man. . . . For my part, I approve a practical *synergism* of offering prevenient grace, the responsibility of each individual, and of election in Christ of all who believe. Thus I can say that salvation is all of God, reprobation is all of man. (*Christianity Today*, Oct. 28, 1966, pp. 9-14.)

Dr. Ockenga speaks with admirable conciseness and clarity. His position is clearly to be identified in the main with historic Arminianism and to be differentiated from historic Calvinism.

If ever in the past he subscribed to the system of doctrine as taught in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, he does not now so subscribe. For example, Chapter IX, 3 reads:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

The next paragraph of this seventeenth century document asserts that "God... by His grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good..." And in X, 2 one learns that a man "is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call..." Surely every-

*Pastor, Reformed Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

one will agree that the *Westminster Confession* is describing regenerating grace and not a universal, prevenient, non-regenerating grace of the sort Ockenga speaks.

Already, no doubt, some hearing these words are uneasy because a secondary standard is being employed rather than the primary standard, Holy Scripture itself. Let us look now at the text of Ephesians 2:8-10:

τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως· καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι. αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν ποίημα, κτισθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐπὶ ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς, οἷς προητοίμασεν ὁ θεὸς ἵνα ἐν αὐτοῖς περιπατήσωμεν.

Let us all agree that salvation has three temporal aspects as regarding the believer. They are past, present, and future. The Apostle Paul in verse eight apparently refers to the past aspect, to the conversion experience which is said to have been διὰ πίστεως.

Elementary Greek students usually have little difficulty learning the basic meanings of the preposition διὰ. They are (1) with the genitive: "through"; and (2) with the accusative: "on account of," "because of." If this simplistic statement about διὰ be applied to our phrase, we have no problem understanding that the Apostle regards FAITH as the *medium* through which salvation is personally appropriated and not that faith is the *cause* or *basis* of this salvation. But grammatical usage teaches us to be wary of the simplistic, especially concerning the meaning of prepositions. Even though Liddell-Scott state that the radical sense of διὰ is "through" there can be produced instances where the genitive appears to be causal and the accusative to signify agency. In general this writer would observe that the so-called causal uses of διὰ seem to be inextricably linked with agency (i.e. "by" or "through").

For example, one lexicon cites as causal John 1:3— δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο. [cf. Col. 1:16— τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται.] God apparently worked *through* the Son in creating all things and, therefore, the Son Himself in some sense *caused* or created. Another example given is Acts 3:18— ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἃ προκατήγγειλεν διὰ στόματος πάντων τῶν προφητῶν. Here the mouth of all the prophets is the channel or medium *through which* God announced beforehand the sufferings of Christ. The prophets indeed *caused* the message to be proclaimed but only inasmuch as their mouths had been selected as channels or media for the divine communication.

But how is one to know if διὰ πίστεως in Eph. 2:8 is an exception to the normal meaning of διὰ with the genitive? One cannot know apart from the immediate context and then from the greater context of the Bible. If the normal meaning be followed, Paul says that we are saved through the faith medium; if the abnormal, then we are saved *because God looked down the corridors of the centuries and foresaw that we would believe.* (As if foresight/foreknowledge could be separated from causality!) In actuality the latter view tacitly assumes that the text ought to read διὰ πίστεως, "on account of faith."

Romans 3:25 furnishes an instance where *διά* occurs twice, once with each case. I shall paraphrase:

Whom God set forth as a satisfaction to be appropriated through faith [*διά πίστεως*.] in His blood, to be a demonstration of His righteousness on account of passing by [*διά τὴν πάρεσιν*] of previously committed sins.

Personal salvation is appropriated by the believer *through* faith as its medium; God's righteousness has been set forth *on account of* or *because of* His forbearance. Forbearance, then, made salvation necessary, whereas faith is the channel through which it consciously is realized by the believer when the Spirit regenerates him.

Let us move on to the second matter, that of the retrocipatory character of *τοῦτο*. In classical Greek the nearer demonstrative pronouns are *οὗτος, αὕτη, τοῦτο* and *ὅδε, ἧδε, τόδε*. The former group may be translated "this" and usually refers the reader to that which has preceded. The latter group may also be rendered "this" (or "the following") and refers* the reader to that which is upcoming. Hence, the neuter *τοῦτο* may be regarded as retrocipatory and the neuter *τόδε* as anticipatory. That this distinction generally exists between these demonstratives may be observed by reading, for example, Xenophon's *Anabasis*. Exceptions are rare. Likewise in Hellenistic Greek this distinction is not inflexible but is usually maintained. And if one will begin to underline the occurrences of *τοῦτο* and *τόδε* in the New Testament, he will observe some worthwhile distinctions.

But what of Ockenga's exegesis when he states that "Faith is erroneously ascribed to God as a gift. . . 'gift' is neuter and 'faith' is feminine. Salvation is the antecedent of gift"? He is absolutely right in asserting the feminine gender of *πίστις* and the neuter gender for *δῶρον*. But is he justified in assuming that the neuter *τοῦτο* *does not* and *cannot* refer to "faith"? Further, is the general theological tradition—which has spawned so many of us—justified in asserting the difference in grammatical gender between *πίστις* and *τοῦτο* as if the mere assertion itself deals the *fait accompli* to any further discussion about the origin of faith?

First of all, in languages which do have gender, gender is never completely linked with physical sex. For example in Greek, "house" is sexless, but may be denoted by either the masculine *οἶκος* or the feminine *οἶκος*. On the other hand, gender is *partially* linked to sex—e.g., names of male human beings, designations of male kinship relations such as "uncle," designations of occupations usually performed by men are modified by masculine adjectival forms. In view of this, one should not be surprised to find that where grammatical gender and physical sex conflict, *the gender of a pronoun may sometimes agree with the physical sex of its antecedent rather than the grammatical gender.*

Returning to the case in point, one may observe that since both *πίστις* and *τοῦτο* are sexless, Paul would violate no propriety of physical gender at all by referring back to faith with *τοῦτο* instead of *αὕτη*.

Secondly, one recognizes the nearer antecedent to *τοῦτο* to be "faith."

In view of the *fact* that the same apostle teaches elsewhere that faith is something *given* rather than something generated within man by man, why does Ockenga (or anyone) object to πίστις as being the antecedent of τοῦτο?

Because to you it was given in behalf of Christ not only to have faith in Him, but also to suffer in His behalf (Philippians 1:29).

To this reference might be added those which assert that God effectually *wills* personal salvation: e.g. John 1:13; Romans 9:16; and Philippians 2:13.

Thirdly, there is ample precedent in Greek syntax for viewing πίστις, τοῦτο as is herein being done. In Abraham Kuyper's *The Work of the Holy Spirit* reference is made to Kühner's *Ausführliche Grammatik der Griech. Sprache* (II, 1, p. 54). Kuyper's translation runs thus:

A *neutral* demonstrative pronoun is frequently used to refer to a preceding masculine or *feminine* noun, when the meaning expressed by this word is taken in a general sense. (Kuyper, p. 412.)

The following examples are but three of those cited in Kühner's detailed work:

Plato, *Protagoras*, 357, C. Ὁμολογοῦμεν ἐπιστήμης μηδὲν εἶναι κρεῖττον, ἀλλὰ τοῦτο κρατεῖν, ὅπου ἂν ἐνῆ, ἂν ἐνῆ, καὶ ἡδονῆς καὶ τῶν ἄλλῶν ἀπάντων.

"We confess nothing to be better than knowledge, but this always has the upper hand over both pleasure and all other things."

Plato, *Menon*, 73, C. Ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν ἡ αὐτὴ ἀρετὴ πάντων ἐστὶ πειρῶ εἰπεῖν καὶ ἀναμνησθῆναι, τί αὐτὸ φησὶ Γοργίας εἶναι.

"Therefore, because it is the same virtue in all cases, you try to tell and remember what Gorgias says it to be."

Xenophon, *Hiero*, ix, 9. Εἰ ἐμπορία ὠφελεῖ τι πόλιν, τιμώμενος ἂν ὁ πλείστα τοῦτο ποιῶν καὶ ἐμπόρους ἂν πλείους ἀγείροι.

"If commerce profits any city, the one doing this most would be honored and would gather more merchants."

One stands, therefore, on firm ground when he concludes regarding the retrocipatory character of τοῦτο and the use of gender, that τοῦτο not only *may* refer to "faith" but in fact *does*.

According to Dr. Ockenga such a concept of faith is *erroneous*. Yet Paul says that the by-grace-coming-through-faith-salvation is not of yourselves, but is ALL a gift from God.

Lastly, in this passage we observe that *-μα* allows no boasting. Verses 9-10 may be paraphrased:

For we are His workmanship [ποίημα] because we were created in connection with Christ Jesus unto good works, which works God prepared beforehand in order that we might walk in them.

Bruce Metzger, in his *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*,

discusses word suffixes such as *-συνη*, *-ῦκος*, *-ινη*, *-σις* and *-μα*. He states that *-σις* usually denotes *action*, e.g. *κοίσις* "judging"; and *-μα* *result*, e.g. *κόριμα* "judgment." Therefore one may view *ποίησις* as an action being performed. James 1:25 refers to the man who is both hearer and doer and says that he shall be happy in connection with his "doing" [*ποίησις*].

On the other hand *ποίημα* is that which is the result of making or doing. As always, however, we must steer our bark between Scylla and Charybdis if we are to avoid an unscholarly oversimplification, because if we research the matter intensively enough, somewhere we will discover a writer who has not observed any such distinction between *ποίησις* and *ποίημα*. Context should really be the deciding factor.

What then is the contextual environment of verses 9-10? The participle *κτισθέντες* is Aorist Passive and calls to mind Psalm 100—"It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves." The phrase *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* must refer to salvation. All men are created by God physically and thereby partake of a physical brotherhood with God as father. But only those who accept the Gospel are presented in Scripture as being "in Christ." These form a spiritual brotherhood that transcends all national and racial boundaries. The verb *προητοίμασεν* means to prepare beforehand and fits with other "beforehand" references in Scripture such as Eph. 1:4 where believers are said to have been chosen by God prior to the world's founding.

The context, therefore, of *ποίημα* bears out the *result* suffix *-μα*. Believers are the *result* of God's sovereign selection in Christ Jesus, selected to live piously and perform, due to a changed nature, good works which God Himself prepared for them. *Ποῦ οὐδὲν ἢ καύχησις*; asks Paul in Romans 3:27. *Ἐξεκλείσθη*. Why is it locked out? Because *-μα* allows no boasting.

CONCLUSION

What is the fundamental thrust of Eph. 2:8-10? It appears to be that salvation with all its component parts is of God; even the faith with which a man subjectively appropriates the Gospel is bestowed by God. But someone will say: "That is not the Gospel; that is "Calvinism." Allow me to quote briefly from that great expositor of the Scriptures and lover of the lost souls of men, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, for he disavowed any such dichotomy between the Gospel and Calvinism:

It is no novelty, then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine.

I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines, that are called by nickname CALVINISM, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus.

To Spurgeon the Gospel and Calvinism, or, if you will, TULIP, were synonyms. Were he alive today he no doubt would justly berate the omnipresent pollution of Calvinism by those who select the "T" and the "P" or just the "T" and pass the result off as a viable form of Calvinism.

Dr. Ockenga, for his part, has chosen "a practical *synergism*" based on prevenient grace. All men everywhere, it seems, must be enabled to accept or reject the Gospel in order to be held responsible by God. But I

would say then that if man is not responsible before God unless he receives this prevenient grace, and if the latter be *universal* in its extent, then prevenient grace itself cannot be resisted by anyone. God must be seen to *force* this grace upon all men everywhere, so that they are enabled to accept or reject the Gospel. Why, therefore, should Ockenga or anyone oppose the Calvinistic "irresistible grace"? Can it do any less harm to the will—as it is alleged to do!—than prevenient grace must be admitted to do?

Dr. Ockenga's exegesis—that faith comes from man and not from God—must be found wanting in the opinion of the present investigator. Dr. Ockenga, in reality, is suggesting an emendation to the text that would alter *διὰ πίστεως* to *διὰ πίστιν*. He is overlooking the *retrocipatory* character of *τοῦτο* which has as its antecedent, salvation with all its parts. And he fails to acknowledge that *μα* places salvation entirely in the hands of the electing God. Ockenga's practical synergism is eminently impractical because it renders salvation impossible for anyone. Spiritually dead men cannot "synergize" with God. And if prevenient grace renders them spiritually able, then they are no longer dead but regenerate. But if they reject the Gospel they will be regenerated lost men. Arminian synergism, although motivated with lofty intentions, must be rejected as both unscriptural and impractical.

Jesus asseverated in John 6:65 that *οὐδεὶς δύναται ἔλθεῖν πρός με ἔαν μὴ ᾗ δεδομένον αὐτῷ ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς*. Let us therefore thank God for the genitive in Eph. 2:8, for the accusative would preclude the salvation of any.