

CHRIST ALONE EXALTED

Themes in the preaching of Tobias Crisp, D.D.

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All Crisp's works – his sermons which he preached in many places, but particularly here in Brinkworth, where he was Rector and resided from 1627 to 1642 – have the title 'Christ Alone Exalted', which gives an indication of the nature and aim of his preaching. He was regarded as an antinomian by many. The term antinomian means 'against the law' and refers to those who maintain that the law is set aside by the Gospel. But his sermons nowhere show that he defended licentiousness in any form. The charge of antinomianism, therefore, has no ground, for we find that even the apostles themselves were subject to a similar slur, as Paul mentions in Romans 3, "as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say, Let us do evil, that good may come." (Romans 3:8)

The thrust of Crisp's preaching was to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and abase man, and to set forth the only ground of our salvation, which is the free grace of God in Jesus Christ.

I shall give a short account of his life, and then expound the principal parts of his preaching to help us appreciate the value of his ministry.

LIFE

Tobias Crisp was born in 1600, the third son of Ellis Crisp, sometime Sheriff of London, who died 1625. He was born in Bread Street, London. His elder brother was Sir Nicholas Crisp. He received his schooling at Eton and afterwards matriculated at Cambridge, where he took his degree of B.A. He later removed to Balliol College, Oxford, where he graduated M.A. in 1626. He married at about this time Mary Wilson, the daughter of a London merchant and Member of Parliament.

He was briefly Rector of Newington Butts, but was presented to the Rectory of Brinkworth, Wiltshire, in 1627. Here he became very popular on account of his preaching, and also his bountiful hospitality. It was said that he was able to entertain as many as a hundred persons at one time at his house, and make ample provision for man and horse.

While he was incumbent this handsome pulpit was installed, which bears the inscription, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel, Anno Domini 1630". The Communion Table dates

from 1633; the communion plate, comprising a silver dish, 1631, and flagon 1637; and were all presented to the church during Crisp's time here.

He obtained the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Oxford University, but we have no date for this. Latterly during his time at Brinkworth he was subjected to petty persecution from royalist soldiers because of his sympathies with puritanism, and he retired to London in 1642. Towards the close of that year he held a public disputation with very many adversaries on the subject of Free Grace. It was said that the eagerness with which he debated this matter undermined his constitution, and as a result he contracted to smallpox from which he died on 27 February, 1642/3.

'CHRIST ALONE EXALTED'

I shall, in setting out the various points of his theology, deal first, by way of introduction, with the overall theme of his system, which is, as I have stated, 'Christ Alone Exalted'. He directs our gaze from ourselves, and from everything else, to Christ alone. The principal difficulty which many believers encounter is the tendency to look at themselves and not at Christ. They examine their experience, their feelings, their conscience, their works; they are turned in upon themselves in their search for the evidence of their being Christians, and they neglect to look to Christ. Crisp provides the perfect antidote to that morbid condition that afflicts so many, especially young Christians. “

The fullness of God's grace does not depend upon anything in us. He, Christ, is not only the way from the fault of sin, but also the way from the power of it. We are delivered from the fault of sin immediately, but by degrees from its power. And our favour with God, does not depend upon our success in subduing our sins, but by our being found in Christ.

In a word, our peace is in Christ not in ourselves. It is a common failing in believers – their preoccupation with themselves, their failure to look to Christ. “Beloved,” says Crisp, “if you will fetch your peace from anything else in the world but Christ, you will fetch it from where it is not.”

The two volumes of Crisp's sermons were edited with explanatory notes by John Gill, who was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by the University of Aberdeen, of which, when the honour was conferred upon him, he said in his characteristic way, "I never thought it; I never sought it; and I never bought it." He very ably defends Crisp against the charge of antinomianism, which was, as I have said, unjustifiably brought against him. The fault, it appears to me, lies not with Crisp, but with what Toplady later characterised as the cold, "cramp, dark religion" of the age which succeeded him; an age when Arminianism took hold of the establishment, and of non-conformity, and which they have never properly succeeded in shaking off.

So, I want this afternoon to share with you a packet of Crisp's – a packet of Crisp's sermons. In the old packets of crisps you would find a small blue paper containing salt. Similarly, you will find that Crisp's sermons are seasoned with salt. For this reason they have not lost their savour, but still have a relish today for the hungry soul.

THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

I want now to introduce some of the themes or principles that inform Crisp's preaching, and the first is *The Preeminence of Christ – "Christ Alone Exalted"*. Dr Crisp directs our gaze from ourselves and everything else to Christ alone. In preaching from John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life", he shows how the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to escape the wrath of God and the condemnation of sin. "It is the main stream of the gospel," he says, "that Christ justifies the ungodly."¹ "There is not one sin you can commit after you receive Christ, that God can charge upon you. 'He hath laid on him the iniquities of us all'; they cannot lie upon Christ and upon us, too."² He does not lay upon him some iniquity but all.

He was made sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. "If we be righteousness, where is our sinfulness to be charged upon us?"³ "But do not those who receive Christ commit sin?" he asks. "Yes, they do. If they commit sins, are they not reckoned

¹ Vol. I, p7

² Ibid., p9

³ Ibid., p11

sinner? No, in the sight of God they are righteous.”⁴ This is perfectly compatible with Luther’s teaching, “Mourning in myself, rejoicing in the Lord; sinful in myself, righteous in the Lord.”

The great point to grasp is that our peace is in Christ not in ourselves. Crisp directs our gaze away from ourselves and from everything else, to ‘Christ alone’.

Crisp shows very considerable dialectical skill in the way he opens up a subject, making its meaning crystal clear. He does not rest on the surface of things. Much of the effect of his preaching was attributable to the compelling nature of his arguments. He puts a matter in a bold and striking way. He opens up a fresh vista. For example, God is not offended with the believer, because he finds the sin in Christ not in the believer. “I have not said God is not offended with the sins that believers commit, but that God stands not offended with the persons of the believers for the sins committed by them.”

HOW CHRIST SANCTIFIES

Secondly, how Christ sanctifies, breaks the power of sin in the believer. If a believer be overtaken in a gross sin he is not under damnation, Crisp contends. “But you will say, then a man may go and do what he wills ... like a wild ass ... It is true our natures are themselves mad, and if they had the reins, would run wild; but you must know, that Christ breaks their wildness, and then he dare let a believer loose to that, in respect of which an unbeliever, a wicked man, would take advantage to sin (Jer. 31:18, 19).”⁵

Christ breaks in the spirit of the believer. But, why, some may ask, must not hell and damnation be a bridle? “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3). Here we see how tame the people of Christ are. Thy people are a willing people. How so? By fear and damnation? No such thing. But in the day of thy power, and the beauty of

⁴ Ibid., p12

⁵ Ibid., p34

holiness, they shall be a willing people.⁶ “He [the believer] will never run away, though the gate stands open.”⁷

Christ, you see, is the life of the Christian. Without that life in us we can do nothing. Like a tree, Christ is the large root of the soul, sending up the sap into the tree.

‘Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.’ You poor maid-servants or widows, ... your stock is small, and you can do little. But, if you are married to a rich man, your stock would be great, and you could do more. So with Christ, the Lord Christ is the whole stock of the Christian. ‘It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell’... Col. 1:19.⁸

Again, Crisp’s interpretation of the text “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life...” is interesting. He contends that it does not mean strictness of life as may be commonly supposed. “Men generally suppose that besides Christ there is something more in the way that leadeth to life, i.e. man’s own righteousness, not only Christ.⁹ But it is a strait or narrow gate – i.e. man’s own righteousness must be cut off – nothing in the way but Christ.” As Gill points out in his comment here and elsewhere “Christ calls himself a door or a way, why not a gate and a way?” Christ argues against the false prophets who would establish the righteousness of man as a way to life. But Crisp contends that Christ is a shady way from the wrath of God – a quiet way – all is peace while you are in Christ.¹⁰

To those who argue that though God gave Christ freely, yet we must have hands to receive him, Crisp responded that though men have no hands to take Christ yet they may receive him. “Imagine”, he says, “a poor indigent person who could not ask ... would you not still give to him?” So God deals with men in bestowing Christ on them.¹¹ For example, “What is it for Christ to be given ‘to open blind eyes’? Christ is actually given before ever their blind eyes were opened.”¹² The sole work of Christ is to open blind eyes. “There must, of course, be

⁶ Ibid., p35

⁷ Ibid., p36

⁸ Ibid., p80

⁹ Ibid., p95

¹⁰ Ibid., p97

¹¹ Ibid., p166

¹² Ibid., p171

faith in the manifestation of Christ to the soul, but there is no qualification wrought in the heart of any person before Christ be actually passed over to such a person.”¹³

Crisp says that he will clear this point by evidence. “If Christ be sent to bind up the broken hearted, it cannot be done before he come. He must be there to do it. Indeed, Christ must be present in order that persons might be sensible of a broken heart. First he breaks, then he binds.¹⁴ People think of their mournings and sorrows over sin to get Christ, but it is plain that the very spirit of mourning is the work of Christ.”¹⁵ Even faith itself, the most radical of all graces, is not given until Christ himself be given to men, who works this very faith, Hebrews 12:2, “the author and finisher of our faith.” Again Psalm 68:18 and Ephesians 4:8 “gifts for rebellious men.”¹⁶ As a body without a soul is dead, “so every person in spiritual actions is wholly dead, till Christ the soul of the soul be infused into him, to animate and enliven him.”¹⁷

THE NATURE OF GRACE

Thirdly, a proper understanding of the nature of grace. Properly understood grace is simply being received back by God. At a stroke Crisp demystifies grace. Christ is the way to grace and glory. That which is most properly grace is simply favour, not inherent graces, virtues, holy aspirations. Sanctification is not so much grace itself as the fruit of grace. Grace is often reified and wrongly thought of as some kind of quality or efficacy infused into the soul and thus empowering it. For example, the Church of Rome teaches that grace is a substance which is conveyed to the soul through the sacraments. Such notions are quite wrong and misleading. “Christ”, says Crisp, “is a way to favour and lovingkindness in God. Christ is the way to all fruits and graces, as you call them.”¹⁸ When a person has been banished and received back and reconciled this is grace. “The apostle Paul mentions this: ‘Ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.’ Ephesians 2:13.”

¹³ Ibid., p172

¹⁴ Ibid., p175

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p176

¹⁷ Ibid., p178

¹⁸ Ibid., p37

“As Christ is a way into the pure grace and mere favour, and loving kindness of God, so also unto all the fruits of grace, all the manifestations of it in the expression of God’s loving kindness in the fruits of the Spirit.”¹⁹

First, there is the opening of the eyes of the understanding to see our filthy condition and our need of Christ. Christ himself is the way to this: “I will give thee for a covenant to the people to open blind eyes” Isaiah 42:6. Men are mistaken when they think that the law makes them see their own vileness. It is the work of Christ. The law is a looking-glass, but it does not give eyes to see. Set a looking glass before a blind man – he sees nothing. Christ alone does that. The work of free grace is the work of Christ. He gives repentance. Acts 5:31, “God hath exalted him... to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel.” Faith also is properly the work of Christ in the believer, and a grace of graces. He is “the Author and Finisher of our faith” Hebrews 12:2.²⁰

Secondly, there is also the acceptance of the righteousness of Christ alone and the renunciation of all self-righteousness. All walking according to God’s law (even the most blameless), not only before, but after, conversion, is truly counted loss and dung. “I count all things but loss and dung” says the apostle, and notice, he says this not before but after conversion. Isaiah similarly speaks of his righteousness as filthy rags. Jesus bids us when we have done all to consider that we are but unprofitable servants. This applies to all our works before and after conversion. But Crisp adds: “Let me not be mistaken here. I do not say, that the motions themselves of the Spirit ... but the whole work as, and when, done by a sanctified person.”²¹

GRACE IS COSTLY TO THE FATHER

Fourthly, although grace is free to the believer it is costly to the Father. Crisp seeks to establish that it is only for the sake of Christ that we are accepted by the Father. Only Christ can pronounce a person free from guilt of sin. The law cannot do it, for it is the law of sin and death, Romans 8:2. Much less can our hearts do it. “If our heart condemn us, God is greater

¹⁹ Ibid., p39

²⁰ Ibid., p40

²¹ Ibid., p373

than our heart, and knoweth all things”, 1 John 3:20. And if a man could perform a right action without blame, what satisfaction would that be for his former transgressions? But Christ is able to save to the uttermost. “Christ is the absolute and complete way to rid every soul that comes to him from all his filthiness.”

But, “do not those who receive Christ actually commit sin?” Yes, they do. Their souls are a ‘mint of sin’.²² If they do any good, it is not they, but it is the Spirit of God that does it. If then they commit sin are they not reckoned sinners? No, in the sight of God they are righteous, though themselves are sinners. “The truth is,” says Crisp, “men dote upon establishing a righteousness of their own to bring them to Christ; and it is but presumption, or licentious doctrine, that Christ may be their Christ, and they receive him, and be considered simply ungodly, as enemies.”²³

All this magnifies the sheer grace and mercy of God, that it is a sovereign grace that saves sinners, and that we have no part in it at all. Again: “God neither looks to anything in the creature to win him to shew kindness, nor yet anything in the creature to debar him; neither righteousness in men that persuades God to pardon sin; nor unrighteousness in men that hinders him from giving this pardon, and acquitting them from their transgressions; it is only and simply for his own sake that he doth it unto men.”²⁴

Here Crisp outlines the “great exchange” that is at the heart of the Gospel: “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 5:21. The sinner’s sins “are all charged upon Christ, he being made sin for him; yet Christ is not an actual sinner, but Christ is all the sinners of the world by imputation.”²⁵ (This is similar to the passage in Luther’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, where he envisages “our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law” saying to his only Son “be thou that person who hath committed the sins of all men: see thou pay and satisfy for them ... Now, sin being vanquished and death abolished by this one man, God would see nothing in the whole world if it did believe but a mere cleansing and

²² Ibid., p12

²³ Ibid., p15

²⁴ Ibid., pp15-16

²⁵ Ibid., p16

righteousness.”) Such is the freeness of God’s grace in Christ, “Not for your sakes, but for mine holy name’s sake”, Ezekiel 36:22. That is the only ground of salvation.

ASSURANCE

I come now fifthly to assurance. The Christian ought not to be sad regarding his future state. If that is the case then there is something wrong. He is out of the way. Some may say, believers are often oppressed with sadness and heaviness. Crisp maintains that if the believer is sad in respect of his concern for his present or future state then he is out of the way of Christ, and he does not enjoy Christ as he ought to do. For this reason the apostle exhorts believers to rejoice always. “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice”, Philippians 4:4. And while the believer may experience mourning, there is “more joy in the mourning of the believer than in all the mirth of the wicked man,” says Crisp.²⁶ He quotes the proverb, “Some men for joy do weep, others for sorrow sing,” and comments, “I say, believers weep for joy, and never mourn more kindly, than when they see the joy of the Holy Ghost, in the freeness and fulness of the Lord Jesus Christ, poured out upon them.”²⁷

Again, “This peace [of the Gospel] is everlasting, it is unchangeable; God is not a friend today with his people, and falls out with them tomorrow; whom he loves, he loves to the end.”²⁸ “[Christ] did not pay a price for some [damages] that were present only, but he paid the damages of all that should come after, from the time of his suffering to the end of the world,”²⁹ i.e. he has answered for our past, present, and future sins. This is the source of peace. Look at Daniel 9:24. For what should the Messiah suffer? “For the finishing the transgression, and for putting an end to sin; for the making reconciliation, and to bring in everlasting righteousness. ... When is a thing finished? When all is done, and nothing more needs to be done or added to it. This church”, said Crisp, by way of illustration of this point, “was finished, when the lead was laid, and the windows glazed, and no workman had anything more to do: now the time of Christ’s suffering was the time of finishing transgression; as much as to say, Christ made an

²⁶ Ibid., p87

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. p260

²⁹ Ibid. p261

end of sin; that is, God had no more in the world to reckon with persons for sins.”³⁰ This is the ground of assurance of salvation.

Again, God says, “Your sins and your iniquities I will remember no more.” When afflictions come, God is not remembering your sins. Whatever things befall the children of God are not punishments for sin, nor remembrances of it. How often are sincere Christians troubled at trouble, at ill health, or mishaps, and say, What have I done to deserve this? The truth is that they have done nothing to deserve it, but what Christ has already answered for them, and established their peace with God. “Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me.” Lack of assurance arises from trusting in our own works to bring peace.

“It smelleth too much of exalting the creature,” says Crisp, to think that performances can cleanse and remove sin ... “all your performances, fastings, prayers, and tears are never able to present you without spot or wrinkle before God”. Indeed, there will be more spots and wrinkles than there were before. Suppose a man’s face were full of spots of dirt, and this man should go to a nasty channel to wash his face with dirty water. Will his face be cleaner after he hath so washed?”³¹ The only source of peace and assurance is not anything that we do, but only the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Men begin this question of assurance in the wrong way; they look to themselves for “some previous dispositions and qualifications of the spirit, as integrity, sound repentance, conversion, and other fruits of sanctification.”³² Until they can find these they conclude that none of the grace of Christ belongs to them. But what says the Psalm: “Thou hast ascended up on high [it is spoken of Christ, for so the apostle explains it] ... thou hast received gifts for men, even for the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell among them.” How comes the Lord God to dwell among rebellious men? But the Lord stands off and separate from iniquity. “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God.” There must be a taking away of iniquity before there can be a receiving graciously.³³ This is the paradox as all the doctrines of the gospel are

³⁰ Ibid. p263

³¹ Vol. II, pp56-57

³² Ibid. p83

³³ Ibid. p88

to carnal men. “How can these words stand together, that the Lord dwells among rebellious persons, yet cannot dwell with wickedness?”³⁴

“Christ hath so received gifts from the Father, that the loathsomeness and hatefulness of this rebellion is laid upon the back of Christ ... God satisfied himself in [Christ]; and that is the only reason why it comes to pass that God can dwell with them that act the thing, because all the filthiness and hatefulness of it is transacted from them upon Christ ... The Holy Ghost doth not say, that the Lord takes rebellious persons, and fits, and prepares them by sanctification, and then, when they are fitted, he will come and dwell with them.”³⁵

THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Sixthly, the Nature of the Covenant of Grace. What is this Covenant? First, a word in general about covenants. A covenant is a mutual agreement between parties. There are two sorts of covenant which God enters into with men. (1) *The covenant of works*: “Do this and thou shalt live.” (2) *The new covenant*. Jeremiah 8, and Hebrews 8, “a better covenant,” a covenant of grace. The covenant mentioned in Isaiah 42:6 & 7 is the second covenant, of grace (see also Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26; and Hebrews 8). Christ himself is that very covenant.

Now the great difference between the covenant of grace and all other covenants, Crisp maintains, is this: “All other covenants of God, besides this, run upon conditions on both sides.” God promises; man must obey and do. “But in this covenant of grace ... it is far otherwise: there is not any condition [on man’s part].”³⁶ Repentance and faith are not conditions of the covenant of grace, but fruits of it. Witsius agrees with this. In *The Economy of the Covenants* he says: “We agree with them, who think, accurately speaking, that the covenant of grace has no conditions on our part, properly so-called.”³⁷ Repentance and faith are then not conditions but fruits of the covenant.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. p90

³⁶ Vol. I, p136

³⁷ Ibid.

The covenant of grace rests upon this principle, that Christ is God and his people in one. It is illustrated in the text Matthew 1:23, “They shall call his name Emmanuel, which ... is, God with us.” We need to understand afresh the solidarity of the elect and Christ. In John 17 Christ’s prayer is “that they may be one, even e as we are one; I in them, and thou in me.” Modern thought is too atomistic and individualistic. As a consequence these profound statements of Scripture are not understood and their significance passes us by. Christ is, according to Scripture, the covenant in his own person. The Father sees the deity and the humanity made up in one, to wit in Christ’s person: “Behold, I and the children whom thou hast given me.” Christ is the covenant equivalently, and all the fruits of the covenant in their season are equivalently conveyed to the believer in Christ.³⁸

If this be so, if Christ be given for a covenant, then men begin from the wrong end when they seek comfort in the graciousness of their own spirits. We must begin with Christ not with self. “Oh, what a do is here with, or in men, with breaking their own hearts, and forsaking their sins! ... they run to their inherent righteousness ... their prayers, their tears... Alas, Christ is never thought of ... here is ploughing with a wooden plough”. A pump that is dry needs not pumping but priming. You must consider Christ as freely given you, even before you can believe.”³⁹

THE TIME OF A PERSON’S JUSTIFICATION

Seventhly, regarding the time of a person’s justification. Crisp argues correctly that the sinner *after* he is justified believes. “It is not”, he says, “the faith of the man that simply and properly justifies, but it is that Christ in whom he believes” who justifies. He believes in him [Christ] “that justifieth the ungodly” (Romans 4:5).⁴⁰ Justification is an act of Christ. It is not an act of faith. In this Crisp is supported by the learned Herman Witsius who has written in his *Economy of the Covenants*, 1,3,C.I. f18, “The Covenant of Grace, or the gospel strictly so-called, which is the formula of the covenant, seeing it consists in mere promises, properly prescribes nothing as a duty; it requires nothing; it commands nothing, no, not indeed believe,

³⁸ See this argument developed Vol. I, pp149ff

³⁹ Vol. I, p184

⁴⁰ Ibid., p143

trust, hope in the Lord, and the like.”⁴¹ And, again, in another place, “Nor does that seem to be accurately said, that faith is a condition which the law requires of us, that we be accounted righteous and guiltless with God. The condition of justification, properly speaking, is no other than perfect obedience; this the law requires, nor does the gospel substitute another, but teaches that the law is satisfied by our surety, Christ; moreover it is the business of faith to accept of the satisfaction offered to it, and by accepting, to make it its own.” Vol. 1, 142.⁴²

All this is of the first importance for a proper understanding of justification. We speak commonly of justification by faith. But that is a rather misleading expression. Properly speaking we are justified by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2:8. If we were justified by our faith we would be building again a religion of works. It is the death and resurrection of Christ that justifies – his perfect righteousness alone – and that is imputed or counted to those who believe in him. As Crisp himself puts it:

An ungodly person, after he is justified, believes; but you must understand, it is not the faith of the man that simply and properly justifies, but it is that Christ in whom he believes: ‘believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly’. ... it is not believing that justifies. ... Justification is an act of Christ; it is not an act of faith. But you will say, It is an act of Christ by faith. I answer, then Christ justifieth not alone. Is faith Christ himself? If not, then Christ must have a partner to justify.⁴³

We see how jealous Crisp is for the uniqueness of the work of Christ. He will not allow it to be compromised or detracted from in any way by the work of man. “Christ alone exalted.”

THE NATURE OF FAITH

Eighthly, the Nature of Faith. “What is faith for?” asks Crisp. He answers: “[Faith] serves for the manifestation of that justification which Christ puts upon a person by himself alone; that you by believing on him may have the declaration, and manifestation of your justification.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid. p142

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. p143

⁴⁴ Ibid. p144

“Faith is the ground of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” ... “Faith is the evidence of things, it is not the being of things; ... A man is justified, and that by Christ alone, but it is not known to him, it is an unseen thing. Well, how shall he see this, and know that it is so? The text saith, Faith is an evidence ... faith makes it known, by faith we come to apprehend it, by faith we come to rejoice in it.”⁴⁵

In his sermon on “The Act of Believing is not our Righteousness” Crisp sets out to make this matter very clear. Faith does not itself justify.

In Romans 5: 1 the apostle saith, ‘Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.’ In chapter 8:33, he saith, ‘It is God that justifieth.’ Now, I beseech you, compare these texts together; then tell me, whether the act of believing, except it hath reference to the object, which is Christ, of itself justifies, or how else these two places can be reconciled: it is God that justifieth, and it is faith that justifieth; faith is not God, neither is God faith. If therefore it be faith, in respect of its own act, that justifieth, it is not God that justifieth us; and if it be God that justifieth us, then it is not faith, in respect of its own act; how will you reconcile it? When therefore the Holy Ghost speaks of faith justifying, it speaks of it as laying hold upon God for our justification; and therefore, though faith here appears as that which lays hold upon the righteousness of God, yet it cannot be said to be that righteousness that justifieth us.⁴⁶

But there is another question also that needs to be resolved. There are those who maintain that faith is to be understood as the instrumental cause of justification, and therefore it goes before the justification of a person. But Crisp replies (and he is conscious that there are many ‘catching ears’ about him, and he wants to make this point abundantly clear), “faith as it lays hold upon the righteousness of Christ, doth not bring this righteousness of Christ to the soul, but only declares the presence of it in the soul that was there, even before faith was.”⁴⁷

Crisp goes on to ask some very searching questions to drive home his point. Faith is one of the fruits of the Spirit, that are wrought by the Spirit of Christ in those that are his. Gal. 5:22. “If, therefore, believing be a fruit that persons bear, by virtue of union to the vine, Christ, then it

⁴⁵ Ibid. p145

⁴⁶ Vol. II, p344

⁴⁷ Ibid., p345

must needs follow, they must first be in him, and then believe.”⁴⁸ [The branch cannot bear fruit before it abides in the vine.] The apostle (in Heb. 12:2) saith expressly, that Christ is the author of our faith. “Is he the author of faith, and yet is it that faith the author of our union unto him? Can a father beget a child, and yet this child beget his own father? ... Can you bring forth fruit before you are in the vine? Can you believe before you are in Christ?”⁴⁹

THE NEW COVENANT OF FREE GRACE

Ninthly, the New Covenant of Free Grace. Crisp was a bold preacher of free grace, by which he meant that there were no qualifications required by God in those who received it. As Christ is a free gift, so God will not consider anything as a condition. “Come, buy... without money and without price.” Isaiah 55:1.

“But,” it may be objected, “is not unbelief a bar to hinder from having a part in Christ? ... It is a bar to hinder the manifestation of Christ to the spirit: but it is not a bar to hinder one from having a part in Christ, on whom God doth bestow him.”⁵⁰ What is it for Christ to be given to open blind eyes? Christ is actually given before the blind eyes are opened ... If Christ be sent to bind up the broken-hearted, it cannot be before he come. He must be there to do it. But you will say there must be broken hearts first for them to be bound up. That broken heart is to be considered in a double sense, either, first, simply for a broken heart; or, secondly, for one sensible of its own undoing. Such persons are not sensible of their broken hearts before Christ comes. “First, he breaks, then he binds them up.”⁵¹

“People think,” said Crisp, “by their humiliations, sorrows, mournings and obedience ... to get Christ, but it is plain that the very spirit of mourning is the work of Christ himself upon the person. Even faith itself ... the radical grace of all graces, is not given until Christ himself be given, who works this very faith”. Hebrews 12:2, “The author and finisher of our faith.” Psalm 68:18 and Ephesians 4:8, “gifts for rebellious men” ... “Pray, what gracious

⁴⁸ Ibid., p349

⁴⁹ Ibid. pp349-50

⁵⁰ Vol. I, p170

⁵¹ Ibid., pp174-5

dispositions, what qualifications are [to be found] in rebellious men?”⁵² He is present before everything, like the builder of a house is present before it is begun.

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Tenthly, Christian Liberty. The contrary of freedom is bondage. If we would know what bondage is we shall get a better idea of freedom. Bondage is “an obligation unto, and under the curse of the law by reason of transgressing it. ... A person [in that condition] can make no escape from under the curse of the law.”⁵² For every fault committed there must be stripes inflicted. Threatenings and menacing of the curse follow hard upon each other. He lives under a perpetual curse for every work has some defect in it. It is a kind of death to be under this curse. This applies not only to those who are openly profane, but also to the strict, exact person. The law “will pick a quarrel with the best of these performances”.⁵³ In the second place, there are not only menacing and threatenings, but also blows and judgments. “It is true that the apostle says, that the law speaks life; ‘Do this and thou shalt live’, but it is poor comfort because it is impossible.⁵⁴ It is like saying to a prisoner at the bar, ‘Take all England and remove it to the West Indies, and then thou shalt be saved from death’.”⁵⁵ The bondage of the law is not only in its cursings, but also in the absence of all comforts. The law requires works, but provides nothing with which to produce them – like Pharaoh’s task masters.⁵⁶ Who are those who are under the bondage of the law? Whosoever will apply still to themselves the curse and sentence of the law. You may think to avoid the penalty of the law by your exactness and obedience. But you must render complete compliance – the least tittle in which you fail, and you are gone for ever!⁵⁷

What, then, is freedom in Christ? It is freedom “from all this bondage under sin and the law ... Christ exempts men and discharges them, and acquits them from all the menaces, and

⁵² Ibid., p197

⁵³ Ibid., p201

⁵⁴ Ibid., p202

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p205

⁵⁷ Ibid., p207

threatenings” of the law.⁵⁸ It cannot pronounce one curse against them. “The freemen of Christ, when they transgress the law, as in all things they sin, yet when they sin, there is no curse, no menaces, no threatenings of the law executed upon them.” (John Gill adds here the comment, “Sin often separates between God and his own people, with respect to communion, but never with respect to union to him or interest in him.”)⁵⁹ And Crisp himself adds, “I do not say the law is absolutely abolished, but it is abolished in respect of the curse of it, to every man that is a free-man of Christ.”⁶⁰ Consonant with this, we often sing the lines, “He hath hushed the law’s loud thunder.”

A CALUMNY

In conclusion let me say a word to refute the calumny that has been brought against Crisp, that he was an antinomian and a preacher of licentiousness. The following passage from his own works is sufficient to acquit him of this charge:

There is [says Crisp] a corrupt liberty that the apostle speaks of in Gal. 5:13. He tells us thus; ‘that we are called unto liberty,’ but saith he ‘use not that liberty as an occasion of the flesh.’ A licentious liberty is nothing else but this, namely, when men turn the grace of God into wantonness, and abusing the gospel of Christ, continue in sin, that grace might abound. Unto which the apostle affixes an abhorrence; God forbid, saith he, any man should make use of such liberty as this. I am confident of it, and affirm boldly, there is not one man made free in Christ, that makes it his rule, namely, to be bold to commit sin with greediness, because of the redemption that is in the blood of Christ; but that Christ who hath redeemed us from sin and wrath, hath also redeemed us from vain conversation; and there shall not be a making use of the grace of God, as emboldening, and encouraging, to break out into licentiousness. All that have this freedom purchased by Christ for them, have also the power of God in them, which keeps them that they break not out licentiously; the seed of God abides in them, that they cannot sin, as in 1 John 3:9, that is, they cannot sin after this fashion.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp207-208

⁶⁰ Ibid., p210

⁶¹ Ibid., pp195-6

To which Gill adds the note, “This paragraph, as well as a multitude of others, shows that the Doctor was no friend to licentiousness, and what a madness it is to charge so worthy a person with holding licentious principles.”⁶²

The reason why this outrageous allegation was levelled unjustly against Crisp was that there grew up in the period immediately following Crisp’s death a Protestant scholasticism, which was exemplified by such men as Richard Baxter, who wrote against Crisp when his sermons were reprinted. But Baxter’s book takes Antinomianism as a whole, and speaks of many things that are not found in Crisp at all. However, where he does criticise Crisp he is wide of the mark, and often denounces statements which are not confined to Crisp but are to be found in the Reformers themselves, though he seems to be oblivious to this.

For example, Baxter wrote: “What Christian can believe Dr Crispe [*sic*] and his sectaries, that Christ took not only the punishment and guilt... but all the very sins themselves of all the Elect, habitual and actual ... and so really became the most wicked man in all the world.”⁶³ But, as I have already pointed out, this is exactly how the Reformers viewed the matter, and those words of Luther’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* make the matter abundantly clear. “Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and so to be holden under the same that we could never be delivered from it of our own power, sent His only Son into the world, and laid upon Him all the sins of all men, saying, be Thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner who did eat the fruit in Eden; that thief who hanged upon the cross; and briefly, be thou that person who hath committed the sins of all men: see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them ...”⁶⁴

What is this, but to set out vividly what Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “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”? Some have tried to lessen the force of this assertion of the apostle by saying that here

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *The Scripture Gospel Defended, and Christ, Grace, & Free Justification Vindicated Against Libertines*, Upon the sudden reviving of Antinomianism, which seemed almost extinct near Thirty Four Years: And the reprinting of Dr Crisp’s Sermons with Additions. Richard Baxter, 1690, p3

⁶⁴ *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* by Martin Luther (English translation by Erasmus Middleton, B.D.), Harrison Trust, London, pp167-8

‘sin’ means ‘sin offering’ or ‘sacrifice for sin’, but that is inadmissible as the context itself makes clear.

Such language may have breached Richard Baxter’s theological protocols, yet it sets out clearly, vividly and powerfully the true doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and that is precisely what Crisp himself was doing.

Baxter also criticised Crisp who, he alleges, suggests that “it is against Christ and his grace for us to intend our salvation, or any good to ourselves by any Duty we do, or to look to be ever the better for praying, obeying, believing, but that we must do all only in thankfulness, and for the good of others.”⁶⁵ But a self-regarding motive, which is what Baxter argues for here, seems to be at odds with the note struck in the New Testament, where we find thankfulness and praise to God. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” That ought to be the chief motive of the redeemed, according to Scripture. Not “do all that you might improve yourself and become better for it.” There is something of the Roman Catholic motive of merit mongering in that. Rather, the whole object of our redemption in Christ according to the apostle Paul is that we should be “to the praise of the glory of his grace,” Ephesians 1:6.

CONCLUSION

I hope that this brief introduction to Tobias Crisp and his works gives you the flavour of the man. He was a learned man, but above all he was a spiritual man, with a proper discernment of the essence of the Gospel and the spiritual freedom it brings. He had an earnest desire to lead people into the liberty of the Gospel. It is so easy for Christianity to become just some higher spiritual law, “touch not, taste, not, handle not”. Natural religion without the light of revelation is legalistic, and the natural man, when he gets hold of the Christian faith, will make a legal system of it, as is the case with Roman Catholicism and Liberal Protestantism. It is what has happened throughout the history of the Church, and is today an ever present danger. Crisp provides a bracing antidote to that kind of thing. He must be read with discernment, but the

⁶⁵ Baxter op. cit. p4

excellent notes provided by the erudite Dr John Gill serve to make Crisp's meaning and intention clear where he might not always be perspicuous to the uninitiated reader. I commend the man and his writings to you. They bring a breath of fresh air to the stagnant state of much that passes for Christianity today.