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Review of John Piper, *What Is Saving Faith?*

Reflections on Receiving Christ

as a Treasure

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John Piper. *What Is Saving Faith? Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 300 pages. Hardcover, \$34.99.

What is the true nature of saving faith? Are emotions or affection necessary elements to the essence of saving faith? According to John Piper in his recent book, *What Is Saving Faith? Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure*, the answer is yes. In this work, Piper seeks to defend the argument that “saving faith does indeed have in its very nature affectional elements, dimensions, or aspects” (14). Therefore, a faith that does not have these affectional elements is not a saving faith, but a false faith (15). Knowing that his thesis will prove to be controversial, Piper sets out to assure his readers that he stands firmly within the tradition of the Westminster Confession, 11.2 (32). Therefore, it is upon this basis that the reviewer will judge the central thesis of Piper’s work. The review will seek to answer this question: does this view of saving faith stay within orthodox, Reformed standards, or does it stray into the area of heterodoxy? Unfortunately, the answer will be proven to be the latter.

The book contains five distinct sections, beginning with the historical debates and personal experiences which occasion this work. Beginning with a brief survey of the Lordship controversy of earlier decades, Piper lays forth his concern that many in the broad evangelical church have fallen prey to this “looming calamity” and succumbed to the “deadly disease of churchgoing unbelief” (30). Untold numbers have given a profession of faith but have failed to have the root of the matter in them. Seeking to avoid the twin pitfalls of Roman Catholicism, which subsumes sanctification into justification, and of Sandemanianism, which makes faith a mere assent to theological truth, Piper aims to bring the category of affections into the essence of saving faith to show what true justifying faith really looks like.

The concern here is well noted. False professions have been an issue since the beginning. Jesus Himself drives the concern home when he proclaims that many who have done good works, prophesied, and cast out demons all in His name will hear the utterly terrifying words, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:23b, KJV). Piper is right to sound the alarm and to warn believers that their faith may be invalid. Unfortunately, Piper’s cure is worse than the disease. The cure he offers is not to just revisit the historic Reformed doctrine that has lasted throughout the ages and has served as a comfort for believers through the centuries, but to redefine the three central elements that have defined saving faith: knowledge, assent, and trust. Piper does not want to add affections as a fourth category, but to show that “for *knowing* to be saving, it must be a knowing of Christ as a treasure, and for *assenting* to be saving, it must be assenting to Christ as a treasure, and for *trust* to be saving, it must be a treasuring trust” (59n4; italics original).

Piper employs well-known Reformed theologians of the past that appear to agree with him. One such notable theologian is Francis Turretin. As Piper sees it, Turretin’s choice to treat the acts of faith more distinctly only serves to confirm his views (61-63). At first glance, the quotes from Turretin that are used seem to only bolster Piper’s argument, especially when he notes that Turretin uses affectional words, such as “embrace,” and “inestimable treasure.” However, this does not paint the whole picture. Turretin, arguing against the Roman Catholic view (which Piper himself rejects), makes a key distinction between faith and love: “The former is concerned with the promises of the gospel; the latter with the precepts of the law (which on this account is said to be the end or “fulfilling of the law,” Rom. 13:10). The former is the cause, the latter the effect. . . . That is the instrument of justification, while this is its consequent fruit.”¹

¹Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Ginger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992-1997), 582.

There is no doubt that faith and love are in close relationship, but we need not bleed one into the other. Rather, they need to remain distinguished. Love is the “proper and immediate effect of faith, which cannot be separated from its cause.”²

Following Turretin’s lead, we know that love is a vital part of the Christian life, and is connected with faith in such a way that they cannot be separated. In order to truly follow Christ, we must be a people of love. Likewise, the Scriptures are clear about the necessity of love. Jesus taught that the whole law can be summed up by loving the Lord and loving our neighbor (Matt. 22:40). The Apostle Paul concurs, stating that love “worketh no ill to his neighbor” and that love is a fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10). Yet, a question arises: if love is the fulfillment of the law, and love is also of the essence of faith (as Piper says), then is saving faith keeping the law?

No doubt, if someone were able to keep the law perfectly, they would be saved, but they are not able to do so, which is why we need Christ’s imputed righteousness (which Piper affirms). Reformed theologians like Thomas Goodwin would readily recognize that Christ lived by faith and that even this faithful obedience is imputed to us.³ Yet, is this not also the case with the love of Christ who always loved His Father and neighbor perfectly? Remarkably, Piper opts not to address Matthew 22:40 or its parallel passages. What of the doubting believer who struggles to wonder if they love enough? Piper puts that question to the reader: “Do you have enough treasure in me to move you to let other treasures go? If you have not yet found your supreme treasure in me, you are not ready to be my disciple” (233). How does one know if that is really the case, especially considering the fact that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and

²Ibid.

³“First; in some sense he had a faith for justification Luke unto ours, though not a justification through faith, as we have.” Thomas Goodwin, *Christ Set Forth: As the Cause of Justification and as the Source of Justifying Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 2015), 4.

desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9a, KJV)? The believer, struggling with assurance, is now drawn to look at his own deceitful heart in the war against idols and to ask if Jesus is his supreme treasure, instead of looking towards the promises of God and the finished work of Christ which includes an imputed perfect love. Stated another way, Piper’s book unwittingly points people to look at the effects of faith and not the source of faith.

Ultimately, this reviewer appreciates a lot of Piper’s works and resonates with some of his concerns. Had he simply argued that love, like all good works, are necessary for final glorification, I doubt there would be much cause for concern. However, this is not what is argued, and therefore, this book cannot be commended. Redefining what the Reformed church has always understood saving faith to be is not the cure for false professions. Rather, the solution is the principal acts of saving faith: accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by the virtue of the covenant of grace (Westminster Confession, 11:2).