

Cheap Grace Masquerading as Pure Grace: The Unfortunate Gospel of Rev. Clark Whitten —Alan Chambers' Mentor, Pastor, and Chair of His Board

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As I noted in Appendix 2 (pp. 31-35) in my online article "[Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?](#)," if one wants to understand Alan Chambers' theological views one needs to sample the problematic views on grace by Alan's pastor at Grace Church Orlando, Exodus Board chair, and theological mentor: Clark Whitten. Rev. Whitten is the author of *Pure Grace*, a recent book published by Destiny Image Press. One can read the introduction and first chapter at <http://news.destinyimage.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Pure-Grace.pdf>. Additional pages can be viewed on Amazon.com.

How high is Alan on Clark's book? In his blurb for the book Alan says: "To say that I recommend [Clark's book *Pure Grace*] is the understatement of the century." At a service in Whitten's church on [Mar. 25, 2012](#) Alan Chambers introduced Clark's book with the words: "God has unveiled something that has been veiled for hundreds and hundreds of years." Alan believes that for centuries the church has not understood the fullness of God's grace until Rev. Whitten came along to expound it in his new book. This sounds like the kind of thing one would hear about in a cult.

Although Whitten tips his hat to Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers for getting justification by faith correct, he alleges that they got wrong the doctrine of sanctification. And "nothing has changed in the church for 500 years," Whitten tells us. Until now, that is. Whitten believes that his understanding of grace is inaugurating a Second Reformation. "And the gospel is going to become good news again," Whitten claims.

Sadly, what Clark Whitten calls "pure grace" is really "**cheap grace**." I'm sure that Rev. Whitten is a very nice man and means well. I've never met him personally and bear him no personal ill-will. Nevertheless, I believe that he is terribly misguided in thinking that the Reformers misunderstood the gospel when they proclaimed that a transformed life was the necessary outcome of genuine saving faith.

This is how the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (martyred near the end of Hitler's reign) defined "cheap grace" in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937): "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession." That is exactly what Clark (and Alan) teaches: Forgiveness without having to repent of grossly immoral behavior, an end to church discipline since all sin is equal and all believers sin regularly, and a view of confessing our sins to God after conversion as a waste of time. Bonhoeffer adds: "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." I'm not suggesting that Clark *wants* believers to experience grace without discipleship, dying to one's self, and letting Christ live in them. I am saying, though, that he and Alan *assure* self-professed believers (falsely) that the nature of grace is such that believers *can* have one without the other. Again Bonhoeffer: Cheap grace is the notion that "you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." Clark and Alan say that one *shouldn't* but they also assure Christians that one *can*.

In short, ***the preaching of cheap grace is the proclamation that atonement can be had without a Spirit-led life.*** That is exactly what Alan and Clark preach. They say that believers should be led by the Spirit but they also assure those who not led by the Spirit that they will "go to heaven" regardless. The extreme version of the "once saved, always saved" doctrine peddled by Alan and Clark does not regard a transformed life as a necessary byproduct of justifying faith but rather treats a life led by the Spirit of Christ as optional for salvation.

Clark Whitten in his book *Pure Grace* diminishes the importance of a transformed life by claiming that:

- it was not part of the purpose of Christ's death
- it is not necessary for inheriting the kingdom of God
- it was not part of God's purpose in giving the Spirit
- immoral behavior on the part of self-professed believers does not move God
- God is neither pleased by a believer's obedience nor "ticked off" by a believer's radical and unrepentant disobedience
- it is a waste of time for believers to confess their sins to God

We shall now compare Rev. Whitten's claims against the witness of Scripture.

I. Is it true that transformation of our behavior was *not* one of the chief purposes in Jesus' death?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, Jesus *did* die to transform our behavior. Whitten claims: "Listen, Jesus did not die to modify your behavior!" Certainly Jesus came to usher in a new creation, a new humanity, through the down payment or deposit of the Spirit that is more

than just a minor tinkering of fleshly existence. Yet this new creation includes a fundamentally transformed life that involves major behavioral change. Paul speaks about this often. For example in **2 Cor 5:15** Paul asserts that Christ “died for all *in order that those who live might no longer live for themselves but rather for the one who died for them and was raised.*” Similarly in **Rom 7:4** Paul declares: “You were put to death (in relation) to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might become another’s, to the one who was raised from the dead, *in order that we might bear fruit for God.*” According to **Rom 8:29**, “those whom [God] foreknew he also *foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son,*” which entails a transformed life. **Gal 2:19-20** Paul states, “I, through the law, died in relation to the law, *in order that I might live for God...* I no longer am living, but Christ is living in me.” These verses indicate that a major purpose in Jesus’ death, God’s plan, or the dying of believers with Christ was to get people to stop living for themselves and start living for God; in short, a major behavioral change. We should be reminded of this purpose every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus in John’s Gospel also refers to this moral purpose: “I appointed you in order that you should go and bear fruit” (15:16).

II. Is it true that immoral behavior on the part of self-professed believers does not move God to judgment?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, immoral behavior on the part of self-professed believers does move God ... to judgment. Whitten claims: “My bad works don’t move God any more than my good works move Him. He simply isn’t moved by ‘works’ of any kind. If you are motivated to do a great work for God, good luck!” Yet bad works and immoral behavior among believers do indeed move God. They move God to judgment. Initially they move God to the judgment of discipline, as in the case of the Corinthian abuse of the have-nots at the Lord’s Supper:

So whoever is eating the bread or drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be held liable (to the penalty) for the body and the blood of the Lord.... For the one who is eating and drinking is eating and drinking judgment on himself if he does not use judgment in distinguishing (the wider meaning of) ‘the body.’ Because of this many among you (are) weak and sick and a quite a few sleep.... But when we are being judged by the Lord we are being disciplined, in order that we may not be condemned with the world.... If anyone is hungry, he (or she) should be eating at home, in order that you may not be coming together for judgment. (**1 Cor 11:27-34**)

When the discipline of the Lord is rejected, then divine condemnation with the world becomes a real possibility. So Paul demands that the Corinthians remove from their midst the self-professed believer who is sleeping with his stepmother, as a last-ditch measure to save the man from eternal destruction, for otherwise as a “sexually immoral person” he would not inherit the kingdom of God (**1 Cor 5:5; 6:9-10**). The New Testament is full of warnings to believers

that if they continue to live under sin's primary control their fate will be destruction rather than eternal life (a small sampling of which are cited below).

III. Are self-professed believers free to lead a life of sin without repentance and still be assured of “no condemnation”?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, self-professed Christians are *not* free to live a life under sin's primary control and still be assured of “no condemnation”; only those who are led by the Spirit are God's children. Whitten claims: “We are free to [do anything, good or bad] ... all without condemnation from God.... Our liberty isn't negated by our sin.” When Paul states in **Rom 8:1** that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” he means only those who live under the controlling influence of Christ's Spirit, who are actually led by the Spirit and who do not live in conformity to the sinful impulse operating in the flesh. So **Rom 8:12-14**:

So then, brothers (and sisters), we are debtors not to the flesh, (that is,) to live in conformity to the flesh. For, if you continue to live in conformity to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by (means of) the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being led by the Spirit of God, these (very ones) are sons (and daughters) of God.

So Christians are *not* free to be under sin's controlling influence. Those that are will not inherit eternal life. The children of God are those who are led by the Spirit of God, not those who live their lives in conformity to the flesh.

Those who are not led by the Spirit are under the law's jurisdiction and curse. Can we fall back under the law's jurisdiction and curse? Yes. Paul indicates two ways in which this could happen. One is direct: to attempt to take on the yoke of the law by making its key entry rite, circumcision, mandatory for spiritual existence. Believers who do so, Paul says, become “debtor[s] to do the whole law,” “are discharged from Christ,” and “have fallen out of grace,” so that Christ is “no longer of help” to such persons (**Gal 5:2-4**). The second way to come back under the law's jurisdiction and curse is more indirect: one's life can be controlled in the main by the sinful desires of the flesh rather than by the Spirit: “If you are being led by the Spirit you are not under (the jurisdiction of) the law” (**Gal 5:18**). Only if one is being led primarily by the Spirit is one not “under the law.” Otherwise, one runs the risk of being put back under the law's jurisdiction and subject to its curse. Paul makes the point clear in the verses that immediately follow:

The works of the flesh are apparent, which are (of the following sort): sexual immorality (*porneia*), sexual impurity (*akatharsia*), licentiousness (*aselgeia*), idolatry ... and the things like these, (about) which I am telling you beforehand [i.e., before God's day of

judgment], just as I told (you) beforehand [i.e., when I was personally with you] that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (**Gal 5:19-21**)

Paul is saying: Here's what happens when you are not led by the Spirit and instead practice sexual immorality in serial-unrepentant ways (i.e., homosexual practice, incest, adultery, fornication): You are at risk of not inheriting God's kingdom. Paul reminds the Galatian believers that he had warned them about this when he was personally with them and he was warning them again now. In short, Paul was in earnest.

Only those who live for God and not for themselves are living by faith, have Christ living in and through them, have crucified the flesh, and are Christ's. When Paul says a few verses later in **Gal 5:24** that "those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and its desires" he means that they have received Christ's Spirit, have Christ living in them, and *consequently* are now no longer living the immoral lives that they once led when they were unbelievers. This recaps a point that he made earlier in **Gal 2:19-20**, a section that introduces the thesis for the final section of the letter in 5:13-6:18:

I died in relation to the law in order that I might live for God; I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live but Christ lives in me and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and handed himself over for me.

When Paul says that he has been "crucified with Christ," he means that he no longer lives for himself but "for God" because now Christ lives in him. And the life that he now lives in the flesh he lives by faith in the one who loved him so much that he gave up his life for him. And the life of faith is not a one-time deal but a continual "yes" to the commands of God. In short, to have crucified the flesh is to live now for God through the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, to be led by that living life force and not merely to have it. The Spirit is not some lifeless stone in our heart that we carry around at will to do whatever we want to do. It is like the wind (same Greek word, *pneuma*) and blows where it wills (John 3:8) and we must be led by it if we are to remain in it. Anything else is heresy.

Those who assure self-professed believers that the way to life is not barred to those who live unrepentant immoral lives deceive them. The difference between reaping death and reaping eternal life is the difference between a sin-controlled life and a Spirit-controlled life. Paul seals the deal by reminding the Galatian believers later in the letter:

Do not be deceiving yourselves: God is not to be mocked, for whatever a person sows, this also he (or she) will reap, because the one who sows to his (or her) own flesh will, from the flesh, reap (a harvest of) destruction; but the one who sows to the Spirit will, from the Spirit, reap (a harvest of) eternal life. And let us not be bad in doing what is good for in due time we will reap (our harvest), *if* we do not slack off. (**Gal 6:7-9**)

The same injunction, "Do not be deceiving yourselves," appears in **1 Cor 6:9-10**:

Or do you not know that unrighteous people will not inherit God's kingdom? *Do not be deceiving yourselves*: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor 'soft men' (*malakoi*; i.e. men who feminize themselves to attract male sex partners), nor men who lie with a male (*arsenokoitai*) ... shall inherit the kingdom of God.

In these contexts "deceiving yourselves" refers to thinking that as a believer one can live one's life primarily in conformity to the flesh by engaging in various forms of immorality and still reap a harvest of eternal life or inherit God's kingdom. Rev. Whitten and Mr. Chambers believe precisely that. However, they do not just deceive themselves. When they tell self-professed Christians who are unrepentant about ongoing homosexual practice that they can still "go to heaven" they deceive such persons as well.

Paul offers a very straightforward "two-ways" theology in Gal 5:13-6:9 (as in Rom 8:1-14). And the two ways are not: If you mouth a few words of confession that Jesus is Savior and Lord you get to reap eternal life irrespective of whether you live a life controlled by the Spirit; and if you don't mouth these words of confession you don't get to receive eternal life. That's not the dividing point between the two ways. The dividing point between the two ways is living in conformity to the Spirit or living in conformity to the flesh. That determines who reaps eternal life and who doesn't. It is a theological principle that is antithetical to the message now proclaimed by Mr. Chambers and Rev. Whitten. But it is the gospel.

Grace is unmerited, not unconditional; we are not free to do bad without condemnation from God. For Rev. Whitten and Mr. Chambers grace is unconditional. Yet we saw in **Gal 6:9** a very important condition: "Let us not be bad in doing what is good for in due time we will reap (our harvest of eternal life), *if* we do not slack off." "If" introduces a condition. What is the condition to gaining eternal life? Not slacking off in doing what is good. But Whitten says: "We are free to [do anything, good or bad] ... all without condemnation from God.... Our liberty isn't negated by our sin." Yet apparently it is. This is why Paul insists in **Gal 5:13**: "You were called to freedom, brothers (and sisters); only (do) not (turn) the freedom into a starting-point [or: a base of operations or staging ground; an opportunity or pretext] for the flesh." This is why Paul adds in 5:21: "I am telling you beforehand [i.e., before God's day of judgment], just as I told (you) beforehand, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Paul tells the Roman believers in **Rom 6:16-23** that slavery and freedom are relative concepts.

Do you not know that the one to whom you are presenting yourselves (as) slaves for obedience, you are slaves to the one whom you are obeying, (mark you) either of sin for death or of obedience for righteousness. ... For just as you (once) presented your members (as) enslaved to (sexual) uncleanness and to (other acts of) lawlessness for lawlessness [i.e., for the purpose of engaging in lawless conduct], so now present your members (as) enslaved to righteousness for holiness [i.e., for the purpose of living holy or sanctified lives]. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to

righteousness. So what fruit were you having then? (Things) of which you are now ashamed, for the end of those things (is) death. But now, having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you have your fruit for holiness [or: sanctification], and the end (is) eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Everyone is free in some capacity, whether to do right or to do wrong. Everyone is a slave in some capacity, whether to God and righteous living or to sin. Far from telling Roman believers that they are “free to be bad without condemnation,” Paul reminds them of what the outcome of such a life is: death, not eternal life. To be sure, eternal life remains a gift from God. No one can earn it or merit it in any way. Nevertheless, self-professed believers who live as slaves of sin will be compensated by their master with death, while self-professed believers who are slaves to God and so bear the fruit that makes for holy lives will receive the gift of eternal life. This is, again, the teaching of the two ways. The line of demarcation between those who go to death and those who go to life is not just saying Jesus is Lord or not. It is actually living as his slaves by means of God’s Spirit or not. Those who say that Jesus is their Lord but who live as if sin is their lord deceive themselves. Grace *is not* unconditional. One has to say “yes” to God in faith and continue doing so and thereby let the power of Christ’s Spirit be the controlling influence in one’s life.

Grace *is* undeserved and unmerited. Living in the Spirit is not a meritorious action because the power comes from God. But it is necessary that one respond to God in faith; as Paul says in **Rom 1:17**, the Christian life is “from faith to faith.” From beginning to end, from first to last, we must exercise faith. The life that we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God, in one who loved us enough to die for us. The flipside of a life of faith is Christ living in us, empowering and controlling our lives, we being led by him. When it is otherwise, it is because we are no longer living by faith. And those who do not live by faith are not justified before God.

IV. Is it true that the “anti-gospel” says that the Spirit was given to enable us to lead lives for God?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, the Holy Spirit was indeed given to empower us to live transformed lives for God. Whitten claims that the “anti-gospel” says: “The Holy Spirit was given to you to empower you to act better and better and convict you of your sin when you stray.” Far from being the “anti-gospel,” this message is part of the core gospel. This is a major point in Paul’s transition from Rom 7 to Rom 8. Paul lays out several “laws” or regulating principles in **Rom 7:22-23** that characterize the pre-Christian life: the law of Moses that is good but external and weak; the law of the mind (i.e. human rational ability to perceive know what is good) that can approve of the good and is internal but is likewise weak; and the law of sin (i.e. sin as a regulating power) that is evil but both internal and strong. The result of the interplay of

these “laws” is summarized in Rom 7:5: “For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions that (came) through the law were at work in our members, so as to bear fruit for death.” **Romans 8:1-17** introduces a new “law” or regulating force for those who believe in Christ: “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This new life makes possible what was previously not possible due to the weakness of the law of Moses (which could legislate but not empower obedience): to fulfill “the righteous requirement of the law in us who are walking not in conformity to the flesh but in conformity to the Spirit” (8:4). “Those who are in conformity to the Spirit” are now “able to please God” (8:8-9). How they please God is made clear in evident in Rom 8:13b-14: “If by (means of) the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being led by the Spirit of God, these (very ones) are sons (and daughters) of God.” God gives us the Spirit in part to enable us to live morally transformed lives. Paul summarizes the message of Rom 8:1-17 in **Rom 7:6**: “But now we have been discharged from the law, having died (to that) by which we were being held down [i.e. the law], so that we serve (as slaves) in newness of Spirit and not oldness of letter.” The pre-Christian is characterized as a life controlled by sin operating in the flesh, “bearing fruit for [= that leads to] death.” The Christian life is characterized as a life controlled by the Spirit, “bearing fruit for God” that leads to life (7:4).

As Paul puts it in **Gal 2:19-20**, living by faith leads to Christ living in me (= being led by the Spirit of Christ) which, in turn, results in a life lived “for God.” So too in **Gal 5:16-25** Paul affirms:

Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.... But if you are being led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are apparent, which are ... sexual immorality, uncleanness, licentiousness.... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.... If we live by [or: in] the Spirit, let us also line up with the Spirit [i.e. in our behavior].

Clearly this passage stresses the importance of the Spirit for empowering believers to leave behind immorality and lead now a righteous life. The self-professed believer who continues to live a sexually immoral life “rejects not a human being but God who gives the Holy Spirit to you,” that is, to enable you to live sexually pure lives (**1 Thess 1:8**). Self-professed believers who live unrighteous lives “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (**Eph 4:30**), which is a way of convicting us of sin. The Spirit is the means by which believers are being “transformed into [Christ’s] likeness from (one degree of) glory to (another degree of) glory” (**2 Cor 3:18**). It is the means by which “the life of Jesus” is being “manifested in our bodies” as we bear up under deprivations and difficulties, with the result that “our inner person is being renewed day after day” (**2 Cor 4:10-11, 16**). There is definitely a sense here of increasing sanctification. True, believers are also already sanctified (= made holy) through the cleansing effect of Christ’s atoning death and through sharing in Christ’s Holy Spirit. At the same time, this sanctification must work itself out in the day-by-day behavioral transformation of the believer in the form of

“walking in the Spirit,” “living in conformity to the Spirit,” “lining up with the Spirit,” and “being led by the Spirit.” Whitten gets matters entirely backwards. The “anti-gospel” is not the affirmation of God giving us the Spirit to empower us to lives of obedience day-by-day but rather the denial of such.

V. Is it the “anti-gospel” to say that God is pleased when his people do what is right and displeased when they do what is wrong?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, God is pleased when we do right and displeased when we do wrong. Whitten alleges that the “anti-gospel” says: “God is pleased when you act right. When you don’t, He will clean your clock! Fear God and keep His commandments.... [As a believer it is foolish to think that you can do anything to] tick the Big Guy off.” As regards pleasing God by one’s behavior, Paul indicates in **2 Cor 5:2** that believers are to “aspire to be pleasing to him (God).” In **1 Thess 2:4** Paul affirms that, since God has entrusted him and his coworkers with the gospel, “so we speak, not as pleasing people but (pleasing) God who tests our hearts.” When he begins moral exhortation in the same letter he states: “We ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus [that], just as you received from us the (instruction about) how you ought to walk and please God, just as you do indeed walk, that you abound more” (**4:1**). In **Gal 1:10** Paul indicates that he does not compromise the gospel because he tries to please God rather than humans. In **Phil 4:18** Paul tells the Philippians that their sacrificial gifts to him are “pleasing to God.” The unmarried have more time and opportunity than the married to consider “how [they] may please the Lord” (**1 Cor 7:32**). It is “those who are in the flesh,” not those who walk in the Spirit, who “cannot please God” (**Rom 8:8**). According to **Col 1:10** believers are “to walk worthily of the Lord for all ‘pleasingness’ [i.e., in order to please him] by every good work, bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God.” **Ephesians 5:10** urges believers to discern by testing “what is pleasing to the Lord.” Obviously, then, God is pleased by right conduct. In **1 John 3:22** we read: “Whatever we are asking we receive from him because we are keeping his commandments and doing the things that are pleasing in his sight.” According to **John 8:29**, Jesus declares: “The one who sent me is with me ... because I am always doing the things that are pleasing to him.” It follows that God is pleased by the good behavior of his people and displeased by the bad.

VI. Is an injunction to “fear God and keep his commandments” the message of an “anti-gospel”?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, an injunction to “fear God and keep his commandments” is not part of an “anti-gospel.” Yes, New Testament authors can refer to the believer’s relationship of God as one primarily based on love rather than fear. Often quoted and

to some extent misinterpreted is **1 John 4:18**: “Fear is not in love but perfect love casts out fear.” This is usually interpreted to mean that because we know that God loves us (4:19) we should not fear that God will punish us on the day of judgment (4:17-18). Yet this interpretation leaves out John’s statement in **4:20**: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.” “Perfect love” includes the self-professed believer’s love for one’s brother or sister in the faith and a keeping of the commandments. Thus: “Whoever is keeping his word, truly in this one the love of God has been perfected” (**2:5**). “For this is the love of God: that we are keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not heavy [i.e., burdensome]” (**5:3**). Without such obedience there is no basis for “boldness on the day of judgment” (**4:17**).

According to Paul in **Rom 8:15**, “you did not receive a spirit of slavery (to fall) back into fear but (rather) you received a spirit of adoption (as sons) by which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” However, this message applies only to those who are actually being led by the Spirit and putting to death the sinful deeds of the body (8:12-14). In the very same letter Paul can warn Gentile believers who have been grafted into the lineage of Abraham: “Don’t be high-minded but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you!” (**Rom 11:20-21**). In **Phil 2:12** Paul urges believers: “Be working at your own salvation with fear and trembling.” In **2 Cor 7:1** Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “cleanse yourselves from every defilement of the flesh and of the spirit, bringing about [or: completing, perfecting] holiness [or: sanctification] in [or: by] fear of God.” A motivating factor on the part of Paul and his coworkers for proclaiming the gospel amidst opposition is “fear of the Lord,” that is, the awareness that “all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ” to be recompensed for the good and bad done through the body (**2 Cor 5:10-11**). **Ephesians 5:21** states that believers are to submit themselves to one another “in [or: out of] fear of Christ.” According to **1 Pet 1:17**, “if you call upon as Father the one who judges impartially in accordance with the work of each, behave in fear during the time of your sojourn (on earth).” In **1 Pet 2:17** we find these terse exhortations to believers: “Honor all. Be loving the brotherhood [i.e., your siblings in the faith]. Fear God. Be honoring the king.” The church in Palestine is commended in **Acts 9:31** because they were “going in the fear of the Lord.” Jesus himself warned his disciples not to fear humans, who can only kill the body, but rather to fear God who can cast into hell (**Matt 10:28 par. Luke 12:5**). Obviously, then, self-professed believers should have an attitude of fearing God, especially when they contemplate the possibility of abusing his grace. For God will not be mocked but will bring destruction on those who claim to be his but live in conformity to the flesh (Gal 6:7).

What about the injunction to “keep the commandments”? Is this too part of the anti-gospel, as Whitten claims? The Johannine corpus is full of statements about the importance of keeping God’s commandments for believers. In addition to 1 John 5:3 noted above, compare **John 14:15** (“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”); **14:21** (“the one who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him”); **15:10** (“If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept the commandments of my Father and remain in his love”); **1 John 2:3-4** (“And by this we know that we have come to

know him: if we are keeping his commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know him,’ and is not keeping his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in this one”); **3:24** (“the one who keeps his commandments remains in him and he [God] in him”). In **Rev 12:17** and **14:12** the children of God are defined as “those who are keeping the commandments of God.” Clearly, those who claim to know God and love Jesus keep his commandments. Self-professed believers who make this claim but do not keep his commandments are liars. They do not “remain in (Jesus’) love.”

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, believers can tick the Big Guy off when they persist in serial-unrepentant sin of a severe sort. This is why in the context of a midrash (exegesis) of God’s judgments upon the wilderness generation of Israelites, Paul can issue a warning to the church at Corinth that just as most of that past generation never made it to the promised land but were destroyed for their idolatry and sexual immorality, so too the same could happen to them (**1 Cor 10:1-13**). As an example, Paul notes that if the spiritually “strong” at Corinth go to an idol’s temple to eat, they “provoke the Lord to jealousy” even if they are convinced that idols have no real existence (**10:19-22**). Paul adds ominously: “We are not stronger than God, are we?” (**10:22b**).

VII. Is it true that confessing our sins for forgiveness is a waste of time?

Contrary to what Rev. Whitten says, believers should continue to confess their sins to God. According to Rev. Whitten, “Christians are not required to confess their sins to God in order to be forgiven, we already are forgiven.... How much time will that free up!” (p. 20). **First John 1:9**, he claims, “is not directed toward believers, but toward those who need salvation” (p. 94). The context, however, does not support Whitten’s assertion: John is speaking to self-professed believers (“we”) in the present time:

⁵And this is the message that we have heard from him and are announcing to you, that God is light and there is no darkness in him. ⁶If we say that we have partnership with him and are walking in darkness, we lie and do not have the truth; ⁷but if we are walking in the light as he himself is in the light we have partnership with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹**If we are confessing our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

^{2:1}My children, I am writing these things to you in order that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate [or: defense lawyer; intercessor; someone called to one’s aid] with the Father, Jesus Christ, (the) righteous one. ²And he is an atonement [i.e., a means of making amends] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world’s. ³And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we are keeping his

commandments. ⁴The one who says, “I have come to know him,” and is not keeping his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him. ⁵But whoever is keeping his word, the love of God has been perfected in this one; by this we know that we are in him. ⁶The one who says that he remains in him ought—just as that one walked—also himself to be walking [in this way]. (1 John 1:5-2:6)

The series of “we’s” in parallel if-clauses (protases) in 1:6-10 make clear that the address is to persons who are self-professed believers:

⁶If we say that we have partnership with him and are walking in darkness...

⁷but if we are walking in the light as he himself is in the light....

⁸If we say that we do not have sin....

⁹If we are confessing our sins....

¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned....

Compare the first-person plural in 2:2, in contrast to unbelievers: Christ “is an atonement [i.e., a means of making amends] for *our* sins, and not for *ours* only but also for the whole world’s” (emphasis added). Moreover, in 1:9 John uses what is known as a present general conditional construction which often has the sense “if ever such-and-such is the case, then such-and-such always follows.” This, along with the use of a present subjunctive, suggests ongoing action: “If ever we are confessing our sins....”

In addition, while Rev. Whitten claims that forgiveness from God is a one-time occurrence, the context indicates that the effects of atonement (the cleansing from all sin) apply only to those who continue to walk in the light (1:6-7). “If we are walking in the light ... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” If instead we are walking in darkness, that is, are not keeping his commandments and so not walking as Jesus walked (2:3-6), then the atonement does not continue to apply. Believers must “remain” in partnership with Christ in order to continue to have access to the effects of Christ’s atoning death. In calling on self-professed believers to walk in the light and keep the commandments, John is aware that believers will not be able to stop sinning completely. However, he assures them that when they do sin, they can maintain partnership with Christ and fellow believers by confessing their sins to God, which sins will be forgiven because they have an advocate or intercessor in the person of Jesus Christ whose death served as an atonement for the sins of the world (2:1-2). So John is saying:

You must walk in the light and keep the commandments to remain in partnership with Christ. Otherwise you do not remain in partnership with him and the blood of Christ will not cleanse your sins. But when you do sin—and you can’t avoid sin entirely—don’t get discouraged. When you confess your sins to God, remember that you have as your defense lawyer Jesus who made amends for the world’s sins through his death on the cross. When you confess your sins, you maintain

partnership with Christ. Then continue leading your lives in the light, believing in him and demonstrating that faith by keeping the commandments.

Let us consider a possible counter-argument here. Suppose someone were to argue that 1:7 (“if we are walking in the light as he himself is in the light we have partnership with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”) wouldn’t make any sense if walking in the light referred to not sinning (for then there would be no need for the cleansing promised at the end of the verse); so that “walking in the light” must refer to a purely relational reality, being in Jesus who is the Light of the world, rather than to the believer’s conduct.

I frankly don’t know *any* reputable Johannine scholars who think that “walking in the light” here is a purely relational reality disconnected from transformed life. A misstep occurs if one construes as the only behavioral interpretation of “walking in the light” perfectionism. John is clear that he is not referring to perfectionism: “If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8). John is using the expression “walking in the light” to refer to the primary pattern of one’s behavior, whether controlled by sin or controlled by Christ, not to the complete absence of sin. All New Testament scholars recognize that “walking” is a metaphor for *behavior*. As the standard NT Greek-English Lexicon notes, “to walk” used metaphorically means: “to conduct one’s life, *comport oneself, behave, live as habit of conduct*” (BDAG). “Walking in the light” in 1:7 clearly parallels “keeping his commandments” in 2:3-6. Note the obvious parallelism between 1:6-7 and 2:4-5:

^{1:6}If we say that we have partnership with him *and are walking in darkness*, we lie and do not have the truth.”

^{2:4}The one who says, “I have come to know him,” *and is not keeping his commandments* is a liar and the truth is not in him.

^{1:7}but *if we are walking in the light* as he himself is in the light we have partnership with one another....

^{2:5}But *whoever is keeping his word*, the love of God has been perfected in this one; by this we know that we are in him.

The one who is walking in the darkness is the one who is not keeping God’s commandments. The one who is walking in the light is the one who is keeping God’s word. Similarly, John states in **2:9-10**: “The one who says that he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother remains in the light.” Remaining in the light requires conformity in behavior to the one who is the light, here exhibited through love of the brethren. “The one who says that he remains in him ought—just as that one walked—also himself to be walking [in this way]” (2:6).

We should not be surprised that 1 John 1:9 refers to the believers’ confession of sins. The Lord’s Prayer includes a forgiveness petition to God: “forgive us our debts as [i.e., to the extent

that] we ourselves also have forgiven our debtors.” In Rev. Whitten’s thinking, this must be converted from an ongoing request to an assertion that we no longer need to ask for forgiveness. **Mark 11:25** also indicates that God’s ongoing forgiveness hangs in the balance of our interactions with others: “And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against someone, so that your Father in the heavens may also forgive you your transgressions.” Similarly, in **James 5:15** one reads that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sin, it will be forgiven him.” If the person’s sins are already completely forgiven, what need is there for God’s new forgiveness of the sin punished with sickness? The risen Christ calls on several churches in western Asia Minor (Turkey) to repent (**Rev 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19**), which certainly includes an acknowledgement to God of wrongdoing and a request for forgiveness. We see this in **Acts 8:22** when Peter rebukes Simon Magus: “So repent from this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord, (asking) whether perhaps the intent of your heart will be forgiven you.” In **2 Cor 12:21** Paul expresses his fear that when he comes again he “may have to mourn over many who have continued in their former sinning and did not repent of the sexual impurity (*akatharsia*), sexual immorality (*porneia*), and sexual licentiousness (*aselgeia*) that they practiced.” Both here and in the texts in Revelation the repentance is clearly directed to God.

I have not attempted an exhaustive refutation of every point in Rev. Whitten’s book. Were I to do so, this response would be many times longer than it currently is. However, I think that I have given sufficient reason for readers to assess Rev. Whitten’s theology as deeply flawed and even dangerous. Although Clark Whitten (and, by extension, Alan Chambers, his disciple) does not favor immorality, he does provide the grounds for self-professed believers who want to engage in it to continue to do so without repentance.

Both Clark Whitten and Alan Chambers would respond that by emphasizing God’s wonderful grace, a grace that a believer could never fall away from (despite Paul’s remark to the Galatians 5:4: “You fell out of grace!”), a believer is better stimulated to righteous conduct than if the believer thinks that he or she will fall away by committing sin. I certainly agree that Jesus and Paul often stimulate ethical conduct by emphasizing the magnitude of God’s grace. In fact, this is the preferred means, *though never intended as the only means in Scripture*. The grace of God never extends to an automatic “get out of jail free” card for those who are not led by the Spirit of Christ (a favorite metaphor of Alan Chambers). When self-professed believers abuse that grace by turning it into a license to lead immoral lives, Jesus and Paul (and all NT writers) were not averse to issuing warnings that people who do such things don’t inherit the kingdom.

One could appeal to Romans 2:4 for the view that “the goodness of God leads (us) to repentance.” Yet the wider context shows also the place for warnings:

But do you take this into account, O human, you who is judging those who are practicing such things and (yet) does them (also), that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the wealth of his kindness and of his holding back (of wrath) and of his patience, not knowing that the kind aspect of God (is supposed to) lead you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and unrepentant heart you are storing up for yourself wrath on the day of wrath and of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will repay to each in accordance with his works” [Prov 24:12; Ps 62:11]. (**Rom 2:3-6**)

Yes, Paul says, the kindness of God should lead us to repentance. But it doesn't do that for everyone. And for such persons Paul employs the language of warning regarding future cataclysmic judgment: They will not escape condemnation because they store up wrath for the day of wrath. An interesting connection here is that the Greek word for “kindness” (*chrēstotēs*; compare the related form “kind aspect” [*chrēstos*] also in 2:4) is found elsewhere in **Romans** only in **11:22** and there three times (apart from a citation of the Greek Old Testament in Rom 3:12) :

See then (the) *kindness* and severity of God: on the one hand, on those who fell [i.e. unbelieving Israel], severity; on the other hand, on you [Gentile believers] (the) *kindness* of God, if you continue in the *kindness*, since (otherwise) you too will be cut off.

The context for Paul's statement is the illustration of the people of God as a cultivated olive tree. Some Israelites, designated as “branches,” have been broken off (i.e., removed from the sphere of salvation) because they failed to believe in Christ as their Messiah (11:17-21). But Paul says that they can be grafted back in if they don't “continue in unbelief” (11:23). Paul acknowledges that Gentile believers in Christ have responded positively to God's kindness in Christ, unlike unbelieving Israel. However, Paul is not above warning them that “*you* [Gentiles] stand (firm) by faith. Don't be high-minded but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you” (**11:20-21**).

In other words, it will be *easier* (not harder) for God to remove Gentile believers from the sphere of salvation than it was to remove Jews, *if* they don't continue to stand in faith and live lives of holiness commensurate with God's kindness. For the Gentiles are not a natural part of the olive tree (11:24); that is, they are not natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom the promises were given. The threat of “cutting off” the Gentile branches means the same thing as for the Israel branches: loss of salvation. After having been incorporated into the people of God through union with Christ, Gentile believers can be removed, which is why Paul tells them not to “be high-minded but fear.” The fate of neither group is irrevocable: Jews cut off can be grafted in if they believe in Christ; and Gentiles who believe in Christ can be cut off in the future if they do not continue to lead a life of faith, a holistic life reorientation to God.

So Rom 2:4 leads us, both in the larger context of 2:3-6 and in the connecting link to 11:22, precisely to the conclusion that ethical conduct is stimulated not only (1) by emphasizing the

magnitude of God's undeserved and unmerited favor but also (2) by strong warnings of judgment for those who do not repent of their immoral behavior. When warnings such as these are eliminated altogether—as Alan and Clark have done—the result is the promotion of immorality.

But doesn't Paul say in Romans 6 that believers in Christ have already "died to sin" (v. 2) and are now "alive to God" (v. 11) as a relational reality rather than as something accomplished in our behavioral transformation? That already we have been "set free from sin" and have become by virtue of our in-Christ status (not our behavior) "slaves of righteousness"? Not exactly.

Paul's argument in Romans 6 is not that believers *don't* sin to increase grace but rather that believers *shouldn't* do so. Paul is making an argument against any believer who might be tempted to lead a life under sin's control either in order to increase grace (6:1-14) or simply because as those "under grace" we allegedly can no longer be judged for leading a life of sin (6:15-7:6). Nor does God's love and grace automatically *compel* us to walk in newness of life, since Paul feels obliged in Rom 6 to exhort readers not to fall back into sin but to walk in a manner consistent with becoming united to Christ by means of his Spirit. Believers must "count [themselves] dead to sin but living for God (as those) in Christ Jesus" (6:11). They must no longer "let sin reign in your mortal body so as to obey its desires" but must instead "present [themselves] to God as if alive from the dead and [their] members as instruments of righteousness for God" (6:12-13). Yes, by virtue of being joined to Christ and living in conformity to the Spirit the Roman believers have been "freed from sin" and now conduct their lives as people "enslaved to righteousness" (6:18). At the same time Paul makes clear to them that if they live *as if* sin is their lord then in fact sin *is* their lord and will recompense them with death:

Do you not know that the one to whom you are presenting yourselves (as) slaves for obedience, you are slaves to the one whom you are obeying, either of sin for death or of obedience for righteousness.... For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what fruit were you having then? (Things) of which you are now ashamed, for the end of those things is death.... For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (**Rom 6:16, 20-21, 23**)

Consequently, Paul has to exhort his audience: "Just as you (once) presented your members as enslaved to (sexual) uncleanness and to (other acts of) lawlessness for lawlessness [i.e., for the purpose of engaging in lawless conduct], so now present your members as enslaved to righteousness for holiness [i.e., for the purpose of living holy or sanctified lives]" (6:19). Paul doesn't assume that they are now enslaved to righteous conduct but rather argues that they must be so.

The answer to the first question, "Should we remain on in sin in order that grace may increase?" (6:1) is that leading a life under sin's control does not do God a favor since everything associated with Christ (his death and resurrection, our baptism into him, and his current reign) all point to God's purpose in destroying sin in the human body (6:2-14). The answer to the second

question, “Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” (6:15) contradicts Clark’s and Alan’s claim that bad behavior can never interrupt one’s relationship with Christ. For Paul goes on to argue that only those who are led by the Spirit, who live in conformity to the Spirit and so “put to death the deeds of the body” are in fact children of God and heirs of eternal life in God’s kingdom (Rom 8:12-14, 17). All others, including self-professed believers, who live in conformity to sin operating in the flesh are destined for death rather than life (8:13).

To be sure, Paul brackets the discussion of “why not sin?” in Rom 6:1-8:17 with what I call “bookends of grace” in ch. 5 and in 8:18-39, where Paul emphasizes the magnitude of God’s grace as a stimulus for moral transformation. Believers should be so grateful to God for everything done through Christ that they live for God rather than for themselves. I agree that this is Paul’s preferred motivation for moral conduct and that it is better to surrender to God out of sheer gratitude for his grace than merely out of a sense of cold obligation. Nevertheless, Paul inserts in this “ring composition” the warning that, if self-professed believers choose instead to let sin control their lives and do not repent, they will reap death rather than eternal life (6:1-8:17). When self-professed believers live as “slaves of sin” rather than “slaves of righteousness” they cannot claim “no condemnation” since they no longer live under Christ’s controlling influence in any meaningful sense. Far from establishing that warnings have no place in a gospel of grace, Romans 6 shows that warnings play a vital role in Christian exhortation for those who are tempted to turn God’s grace into a license to gratify innate urges to do what God expressly forbids.