

Let Me Draw a Picture

A good picture can make truth memorable and applicable. This section features drawings used by counselors and teachers to communicate important biblical ideas to others.

The Daily Christian Life

by Dana L. Stoddard

When I was a young boy, my family often visited our kin on Limestone Ridge outside of Ripley, West Virginia. I received a lasting education from Cherry, a milking cow with a keen eye for any novice milker. The three-legged stool had to be in just the right position in order to avoid Cherry's hoof or her ever-ready tail. If the stool was too far forward, too far back, or too close to Cherry, I would be stepped on, slapped with a stinging tail, or pushed backward while being drenched with an overturned pail of milk! If the three-legged stool was out of balance—tipped one direction or another on the rough floor—the novice was in real jeopardy.

The Christian life is like that three-legged stool. The three legs are: Repentance, Faith, and New Obedience. Each leg connects to the person of Jesus Christ and His work. All three legs must be in balance in order for the daily, normative Christian life to succeed and proceed.

Many of our counselees from evangelical backgrounds are trained to believe that the Christian life is like Dizzy Dean's proverbial base runner who "slud" into second base and lies in the dust, "safe," having received the "fire insurance" of salvation. They have repented once, had faith (or a faith experience) once, and committed to obey once. They are therefore "safe"—saved—in the dust of second base. Faulty theological positions at any of these three points will bring

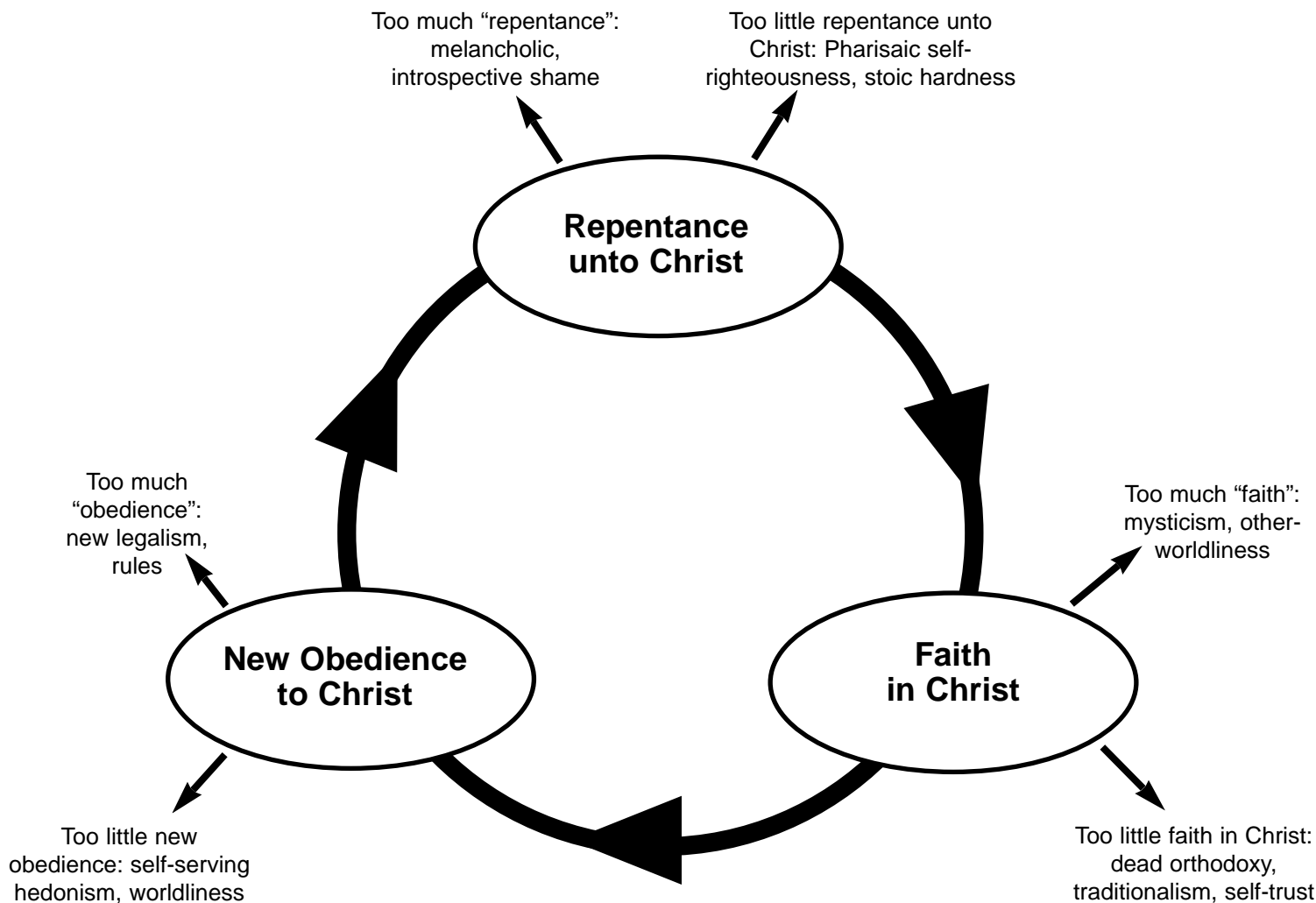
counselees limping through the Christian life, feeling like they are getting nowhere. And they are getting nowhere. Any base runner knows he must pop up from second base, check his third base coach, find the ball returning from the outfield, see the ball returned to the pitcher, dust himself off, see the pitcher address the rubber, take a lead, and get ready for the next play. So it is with the Christian life. It is not an act, but a process. It is an ongoing, *daily* process of Repentance, Faith in Christ, and New Obedience. The Christian doesn't repent once and have done with it. Nor do we have faith once, and then have no more need of faith since we are "safe." Nor do we serve one day, and then have no need to serve anymore. Yet, too many Christians so separate the "biggy" of conversion, when they first repent and believe, that they do not see it connected as the first in a *daily* chain of repentances, believing again, and commitment to serve again today and tomorrow. Maturity (growing up in Christ) is the goal of the Christian life, not "getting saved." "Getting saved" is deliverance from the punishment of sin and the beginning of deliverance from the power of sin. We sing often of this double deliverance:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.

Let the water and the blood, from Thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its *guilt* and *power*.

Here is a picture I often use to help people understand the way the Christian life works. It also illustrates common errors when the three legs of the stool (Repentance, Faith in Christ, and New Obedience) get out of

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balance in the Christian's life. I will explain each of the elements in turn.

A. Repentance

Over the past twenty years, I have found great value in the Heidelberg Catechism. It is such a win-some development of what every Christian should know. Written for the believer, it is pastoral when compared to other catechisms. My clients have often commented on its tenderness in dealing with theology. In the pastoral light of this confession of faith, let us consider what every Christian must understand concerning repentance, turning from darkness to light.

Q. 88 What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion? (Conversion is the first time you repented.)

A. Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new.

Please note the process orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism. For the believer, repentance is a dying-away and a coming-to-life. It is not simply a once-for-all act by the believer, by which we die to old self and come to new self.

The two elements can be further defined as:

Q. 89 What is the dying-away of the old self?

A. It is to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it.

It is normative in a Christian's repentance that our sorrow, hating, and running should grow and mature.

Q. 90 What is the coming-to-life of the new self?

A. It is wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to.

Repentance drives a counselee to Christ, to joy and delight, to serving God in every kind of good. This is both definitive at conversion and growing as we grow.

But the process can be short-circuited, either by wallowing in self-absorbed "repentance" or by denying the need for growth in intelligent repentance unto Christ.

1. Too Much Repentance

Instead of the ongoing circle of daily Christian living, a counselee may err with an over-emphasis on "repentance." The counselee may wallow in "repentance" to the de-emphasis of faith in Christ and new obedience. This leads to a joyless, depressive life of introspection, melancholy, and self-pity. An introspective person wallows either in personal failures or in being a victim of others. But in biblical repentance, the

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counselee owns the responsibility for his sin and honestly takes his title, "Sinner," just as God lovingly takes the title, "The One Who Justifies the Ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). The melancholy, self-absorbed person is not really repenting at all. He or she wallows in a "sorrow that leads to death" (2 Cor. 7:8-10), that turns in on itself. The "victim" wallows in "my fault" and/or "your fault." Perhaps he reads the codependent literature and then is "freed" to blameshift. The introspective is often given a false basis for "self-esteem": "it's not my fault because in my family of origin..." or "affirm yourself as basically a good person."

True repentance turns *from* sin and *to* Christ. But introspective folks remind me of Numbers 21. Deadly snakes are everywhere. God has instructed Moses to lift the bronze serpent in the midst of the camp. But the introspective victim or self-punisher will not come and look. Instead, he looks at the two puncture holes the serpent has left in his leg. He examines the red lines of the poison as it advances to his heart. He studies the origin of the illness to its tragic conclusion. If he hears the Gospel herald,—"Look at the bronze serpent and live"—he instead studies *how* he should look. He examines his looking, but never looks. It is a remorse unto death.¹

2. Too Little Repentance

Error can be found on the other end of the extreme

¹See C. John Miller, *Repentance and 20th Century Man* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980), for a fine analysis of the difference between repentance and introspection.

by de-emphasizing ongoing repentance and overemphasizing faith in Christ and new obedience. Such a Christian becomes the stoic. This is the hardhearted soul that "touches no one and no one touches him." Your counselee may come from a congregation where he was trained to show no weakness, where "remaining sin" was viewed as "something you need to study more to understand," where knowledge is falsely equated with practice, or where true repentance, faith and obedience are supposed to eliminate the need for ongoing repentance. Studying repentance and talking about repentance do not amount to repentance.

Counsees need to learn early in their Christian experience to tell the truth like the Christian learner in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. 60 How are you right with God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commands and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

As the Christian learner, your Christian counselee knows that his redeemed conscience accuses him daily, that he has sinned against the Lord and His commands daily, and, to be honest, he has never fully kept any one of those commands. The reality of the Christian counselee's experience is that he is still inclined toward all evil. This is the stuff of which real daily repentance is made. It drives the counselee to realize his need to become "clean" again, clean like when he was first washed, first made right with God in justification.

B. Faith in Jesus Christ

Christian learners neither stop and grovel in this real experience of daily sin (introspection), nor deny the existence of daily sin (violating the experience of the conscience). They look again to Christ, who grants and credits to the Christian counselee the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ as if the counselee has never sinned nor been a sinner, as if the counselee had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient. This is grace-filled counseling and growth, a daily-renewed reliance on the living Christ.

Free, unmerited grace is found in the person of Christ Jesus. It is found in the work of Jesus. Past: election, regeneration, justification, adoption. Present: the

power, presence, and protection of the Holy Spirit. Future: the return of Christ for His beloved people. True repentance drives us to faith, to see the Savior anew and afresh daily. This is the experience of Augustus Toplady:

Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law's demands;
could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone, Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;
naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

Sadly, the three-legged stool can get out of balance here also.

1. Too Much "Faith" in Experience

On one extreme we may over-emphasize faith to the injury of repentance and new obedience. We can become so "heavenly minded we are no earthly good." Counselors from some congregations are caught in the trap of living for experiences, feelings, "revelations." They are ready to confuse revelation with illumination. They are so catechized to "Jesus only" that they have often minimized "every Word that proceeds out of His mouth." Such clients are prime candidates for the New Age movement and other forms of mysticism. They tend to be more feeling-motivated than other counselors, justifying this motivation on the basis of personal revelation.

2. Too Little Abiding and Deepening Faith in the Person of Christ

At the other extreme we may major on a very poor substitute for the Lamb—knowing more about Christ the Savior. Counselors may exchange the person of the Savior for more data concerning the Savior. At this point the Christian counselee may spin out of the circle of the daily Christian life and get into church-going traditionalism, serving Christ because we "ought," getting our strokes by becoming the Christian who knows doctrine or ministers to others, the knowledgeable "caretaker" serving others. Unthinking, selfish pastors and church leaders often encourage such folk because they are reliable. They will be there "every time the doors open." Joy is gone, and dead orthodoxy is your client's Sunday morning soul mate. Many congregations get caught in this terrible, vicious trap, teaching

the flock how to be "right" (correct in their knowledge concerning Christ)—"dead" right.

You and your counselee must see our Savior in such a way that you remember "who you are," and "whose you are." This is the beginning of accurate biblical self-knowledge. The catechism puts it this way:

Q. 1 What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the

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devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! He is a faithful Savior. The cleansing your counselee so dearly desires is to be found "in Him." As we practice the presence of Christ in our lives as counselors and encourage our clients to do the same, our hearts are moved with gratitude and appreciation for who He is and what He has done for sinners, is doing, and will do. He is the Rock in a very dry, weary land. He is Home for strangers and aliens in the wilderness. He is Rest upon the pilgrimage. He is Provider, Protector, and Encourager for pilgrimage burnout and suffering. He is Burden Bearer for remaining sin in sinners.

Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye *at times* can see the very dying form of One Who suffered there for me:

and from my stricken heart with tears *two* wonders I confess,
the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.

I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place:
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face;

content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor

loss;
my sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.
(Elizabeth C. Clephane, 1872)

As the Christian learner views Christ each day, his heart is moved with gratitude and appreciation for Christ's once-for-all finished work on the cross. He is moved with confidence to rely on a living Savior and Master. He is moved with hope that God will fulfill all His promises. Faith's gratitude, confidence, and hope fuel the third leg in the triple crown of the daily Christian life: new obedience. The Heidelberg Catechism captures the transition from sin, to Christ, to obedience this way:

Q.2 What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?

A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sin and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

Here is the outline of the daily Christian life: Sin, Grace, Gratitude. Here are the legs of my milking stool: Repentance, Faith in Christ, New Obedience. My sin and misery call me to repentance. Christ's grace calls me to faith. Gratitude for past grace, hope in future grace, and the power of present grace call me to new obedience.

C. New Obedience

This gratitude, appreciation and thankfulness should fuel a Christian learner's commitment to new obedience. It is just at this point that much evangelical theology falls into a theological error that hurts the Christian counselee. It is an error played out each week in our congregations and in Christian counseling by counselors and counsees alike.

We are saved by grace. God's unmerited favor is the ground of our salvation. We are also holy before the Lord by virtue of that same grace secured in the once-for-all act of Christ on the cross (1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:2).

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified [past perfect] in Christ Jesus, and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:2, 30)

It is by virtue of Christ's perfect life, death on the cross, and resurrection—plus nothing—that we are justified (made and declared right with God), and sanctified (set apart, kept, and viewed as right in the Lord's eyes by virtue of His obedience). Christ is our holiness. Christ is

our sanctification.

John Murray in Volume II of his *Collected Works* calls this "definitive sanctification."² Being made and declared holy is a definitive act of God alone in Christ. This position of holiness is secured for the believer once for all, for all time, in Christ's atonement. The disposition to holiness is created in regeneration by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the ground of whatever you

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encourage your Christian counselee to do in new obedience, in progressive sanctification.

When a counselee sees in faith that he is holy before the Lord who saved him, he will face his present failings in the light of his present position, and God will fill him with gratitude, appreciation, and thankfulness in Christ and for Christ. These are the appropriate motivations for the practice of godliness. This correct motivation is not an abstract, moral "oughtness."

We live in the tension of the "already" and the "not yet." We are already holy, and, at the same time, "not yet" consummated in that holiness. We are already a new person in Christ, but are not yet finished with putting off the previous habit patterns of the old person we were (Eph. 4:20-24). To see this is to view God's Word from a redemptive-historical perspective. The task of progressive sanctification is to become who and what you already are! It is to *increasingly* think God's thoughts after Him, to do Christ's way of living after Him.

The *ground* is definitive sanctification; the *result* is progressive sanctification. These two must not be reversed or confused. Often I find that definitive sanctification is ignored by Christian counselors to the injury and frustration of their counsees. Many may read this and be concerned that it will lead to antinomianism, much like the concern expressed in Romans 6:1 after chapter 5 expounds a definitive righteousness in the one act of the one Man, Jesus Christ. "We died to sin" (Rom. 6:1) (definitive sanctification) and can therefore say to one another, "...do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (Rom. 6:12) (progressive sanctification). Christians can change!

²John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) pp. 277-284.

Christians alone have the ability to substantively change! The foundation of this ability is in the finished and applied work of Christ. It is as if we never sinned or were a sinner, as if we were as perfectly obedient as Christ was for the believer.

Herman Ridderbos in *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, calls this tension the indicative/imperative.³ Most counselors focus on the imperatives (do not let sin reign, put off/put on, do not offer the parts of your body to sin), without recognizing that this is only possible because of the indicative (you are dead to sin, you are a new person, you are in Christ). It is the indicative that makes the ability to do the imperative possible. Other indicative/imperatives are found in Colossians 3:1-4; Romans 6:14, 8:1, 2, 9-13; and Philippians 2:12. Perhaps the classic is Philippians 2:12-13, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling [imperative], for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose [indicative]."

Paul regularly uses this literary device to grab his audience's attention by the demand of the humanly impossible, and then encourages his audience with the possibility secured in Christ's atonement, present activity, and future act.

Counselors in the private ministry of the Word and pastors in the public ministry of the Word can do great injury to their counselees and flock by stressing the imperatives of the Pauline material without the indicatives. They can shame their counselees and flock into the appearance of obedience, without giving the herald of hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We can see this worked out in the simple things of the Christian life, like the tithe. We are to be "cheerful" givers. In the Greek, "cheerful" has the connotation of a belly laugh. "What, that is all He wants, a tithe! Why would I not give that freely after all He has done for me!" *That* is new obedience, a rightly motivated obedience!

1. Too Little New Obedience

If new obedience is not fueled by this gratitude, we will see the extreme of living in disobedience. Such a counselee has scorn and contempt for others' efforts to grow holy and to minister to others. Such a counselee is proud and hedonistically self-centered. Such a counselee sees the ministries of his local congregation as being for his needs (versus Eph. 4:11-12). He acts like an insistent baby bird in a nest, demanding food from his mother, instead of equipping himself to minister to oth-

ers. A generation of self-serving hedonists fills many of our congregations. We reap the result in our counseling.

Let me offer two tests for your congregation in this area. First, how many of the Sunday School classes and weekly ministries of the congregation were specifically originated for and continue to be designed for

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unchurched people? Is there a balance between nurture and evangelism, or is church "all about me/us"?

A second test: Is it socially acceptable to leave your local congregation's worship service and state, "I didn't get much out of that sermon"? Worship must be worship. See Psalm 95:1-7. The object and audience of worship is the risen Christ. It is Him, the Rock of our salvation, that all elements of worship must address—not the worshipers. We are the called-out participants in worship given the privilege to enter into "ascribing Him worth." That is the meaning of the English word "worship." To confuse nurture, evangelism, and fellowship in worship with the task of worship is to drain our gratitude and appreciation of Christ's person and work.

2. Too Much "Obedience"

The other extreme is to live the daily Christian life with an over-emphasis on obedience. What you do in service as a counselor/pastor becomes the standard you set for others. You define socially acceptable Christian behavior by your own subjective standards or by the local congregation's (often unwritten) standards. "All the folks in this congregation will follow my (our) rules and standards for service and conduct." Many conservative Protestants get caught in this trap. Having been saved by grace, plus nothing, we now live and instruct others to live by a New Legalism. No matter what that legalism looks like, it will not pass muster. "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings" (Col. 2:20-22). Where is the law of liberty? We are often much closer to the Pharisees and the Judaizers than we want to admit. The injury is played out in counselees under such teachings in every Chris-

³Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975) pp. 253-278.

tian counselor's office

A "cookbook" approach to counseling says, "Do this, and this, and don't do this and that. Take two prayers, and call me in the morning." Many have taken the imperatives of the Pauline material (without the foundation of the indicatives or their own imperatives) and bullied, frightened, shamed, and cajoled their clients into the sawdust Christianity of New Legalism.

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What should happen in new obedience is that I present the foundational truth that my counselee (like myself) cannot please God by good works and obedience, but that Christ has perfectly pleased His Father by His works, which are now given to the counselee to follow. As a result, why should my client not serve Him with joy?

And I will fail. My counselee will fail. We will both fail—daily. But we will also succeed. The Heidelberg Catechism says this, after having surveyed the Christian's response to the Law:

Q. 114 But can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly?

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments.

That is the tension of the "already but not yet." Romans 5 and 6 are followed by Romans 7 and 8. If it is true for the mature Christian, Paul, it will be true for me and those I counsel. The very good that I set myself to do, I will not do perfectly, and the very thing I wish to avoid

in my style of sinning is the very thing that I continue to do. Yet, I grow. I put to death the deeds of the flesh. This tension should drive me to repentance again, and desire for a new and fresh dependence upon my Savior. That is what it did to Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will save me from this body of death?" (7:24). The answer is not the imperatives stripped from the ground of definitive sanctification. The answer is in the finished work of Christ on the cross and in His resurrection power by the Holy Spirit. "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25a), even though the tension remains. "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (in my members) (7:25b).

What is the result of this fresh repentance and faith in the mature Christian Paul? He sees the indicative again: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). And he goes on to practical obedience to the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8, 12-16).

Each day, I can encourage my clients to begin again, to repent again, to see Jesus again, and give themselves to new obedience again. They will change, knowing that they will fail again, but that they can and will return to a faithful Savior in repentance, and they will grow. And the circle of daily Christian living will not be broken until the tension is broken in His return. Even so—Lord, come quickly!

If balance is not found in new obedience, you will disciple your counselees to live as orphans or rebels or Pharisees, instead of as sons and daughters of a great Father who loves them and has prepared good works for them to walk in (Eph. 2:10).

Maintain this daily balance in your own life. Encourage it in the lives of your counselees. If you don't, Cherry, the milking cow, will swat you with her tail, or knock you for a loop with her hoof or flank. If you do, you will minister life and hope, both to yourself and to those you counsel. Use the Repentance-Faith-Obedience drawing to help pull those you counsel into the circle of life.