

# A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JOHN PIPER'S “CHRISTIAN HEDONISM” (1)

---

*Manuel Kuhs*

*To all those children of God who, due to false teaching and their own sin, struggle each day to believe they really are children of God.*

The title of this essay implies a grave charge against a much-respected teacher in conservative evangelicalism and even in many conservative Reformed churches. To give a personal testimony, I have benefited in many ways from the teaching ministry of John Piper, having been influenced by him in my late teens. Positively, the Lord used him to cement my belief that God's Word is “living and active” as well as to expose the prosperity gospel for what it is (all of which is not so clear in the “evangelicalism” that I come from)—a false, carnal “gospel.” For this, I thank John Piper.

However, as I began to grow in my knowledge of God's Word, I began to examine in more detail Piper's “Christian Hedonism.” I found the following deadly errors:

1. Christian Hedonism is *utilitarianism*—serving God ultimately in order to get something from Him (in this case, spiritual “pleasure”).
2. It *redefines faith* to include a fruit of faith (joy), thereby deviating from the biblical, Reformed view of faith and destroying all true assurance and joy.
3. Its elevation of emotions and feelings leads to *charismatic pharisaism*, where people judge their own and others' spiritual standing by outward emotional expressions and accordingly are tempted to “produce” these feelings.
4. A *denial of gratitude* as the main motivation for obedience, replacing it with the desire to “meet conditions” for “future grace.” Its “*conditional grace*” theology is a definite deviation from salvation by grace alone, committing Christian Hedonism to joining the Federal Vision

and the New Perspective on Paul movements on a gradual journey back to Rome.

Christian Hedonism is therefore in direct conflict with the *Three Forms of Unity* on multiple points, and as such cannot be tolerated in Reformed churches—unless one wishes to change the *Three Forms*.

A quick caveat: By no means am I saying that all the followers of Christian Hedonism, nor even Piper himself, necessarily consciously believe these things. They are, however, as I will prove, integral to the theology of Christian Hedonism and a necessary consequence of it.

Since these are indeed grave charges, I will attempt carefully to prove them from Scripture, the Reformed confessions and Piper's writings.<sup>1</sup> I hope the reader will give me an objective hearing.

### What is Christian Hedonism?

Instinctively, a Christian will be repulsed by the title which Piper has chosen to give his teaching. Piper himself says, "I put little stock in whether anybody calls this vision of God and life 'Christian Hedonism' ... my prayer is that the truth in it will run and triumph."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, we will reserve our judgment of this doctrine for the "truth in it," though we certainly object to the terminology.

It is, first, a "vision of God and life." That is, it is a world-and-life view, a high claim indeed and one that renders Christian Hedonism worthy of careful scrutiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> When I quote from the Reformed confessions, I am not thereby placing their authority on par with that of Scripture (the confessions themselves declare Scripture to be the only authoritative, infallible rule of faith; see, for example, *Belgic Confession* 7). The reasons I quote them are multiple. First, they represent the beliefs of the church of the past, which, though one might hesitantly and respectfully disagree with parts of them as a child with an erring father, only an arrogant fool would completely ignore them. Second, they are the binding doctrinal standards of all those Reformed and Presbyterian churches which still subscribe to them. Third, the *Three Forms of Unity* are the doctrinal standards to which I submit personally as being faithful summaries of the teachings of Scripture. Fourth, they state many things far better than I could ever hope to do.

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), p. 399.

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

However, the claims get higher. Says Piper, "Unless a man is born again *into a Christian Hedonist* [sic!] he cannot see the kingdom of God."<sup>3</sup>

That is, Christian Hedonism is a *doctrine of salvation*. This begs the question which everyone involved with John Piper must, for the sake of his own soul, answer: Is it the historic, orthodox, biblical and Reformed doctrine or is it heresy? Did Piper merely reformulate the truth and give it a bad name?

Piper adds another astonishing claim: "Christian Hedonism ... is what the whole universe is about."<sup>4</sup> So what is this vitally-important "Christian Hedonism"?

The meaning of the term "hedonism," especially in the context of the controversy over Piper's usage of it, has itself become controversial. Conveniently, Piper provides his own definition, which we will take as an accurate representation of what Piper means by it:

Hedonism is "a theory according to which a person is motivated to produce one state of affairs in preference to another if, and only if, he thinks it will be more pleasant, or less unpleasant for himself."<sup>5</sup>

*Christian Hedonism*, then, is a "philosophy of life"<sup>6</sup> whereby a man should do something "if, and only if," it results in pleasure *in God*, since it is only in God through Christ as revealed in Scripture that man can truly and ultimately be satisfied. This supposedly gives God the most glory since, to quote one of the main slogans of this theory, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

Further, Christian Hedonism claims that it is the antidote to two great evils plaguing Christianity, *dead orthodoxy* and *carnal Christianity* (i.e., antinomianism). The former it aims to alleviate by claiming that joy in God is a duty commanded by Him and not merely an accidental side-product of

---

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), p. 55; italics Piper's.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 21. In the Preface, Piper states that *Desiring God* is "the longer version of this book."

<sup>5</sup> *Desiring God*, p. 366.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

obedience—and thence joy-less worship is not pleasing to God. The latter it battles by teaching that to “think [one] believes” on the Lord Jesus Christ is not enough—rather, one must also “treasure him more than anything else.”<sup>7</sup>

If it seems that there is a large emphasis placed on emotions, this is indeed correct. Words such as “treasure,” “joy,” “pleasure” and “satisfaction” appear on nearly every page of *Desiring God* and *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, the two main books in which Piper sets forth his theory (the latter being an abridgment of the former).

However, Christian Hedonism is *not*, as many claim, merely condemning “joyless” worship and teaching that joy is a duty commanded by God. Neither is it merely identifying “carnal Christians” as being no Christians at all.

Christian Hedonism is more than this; far more. It is, in fact, both *hedonistic utilitarianism* and a false view of faith and assurance. To prove these allegations we will now proceed.

As we do so, we must keep in mind that Piper contradicts himself at many points. Any reader of Piper should be aware that false teachings never openly identify themselves as such. At times, he teaches the orthodox doctrine; it is where he is developing his new Christian Hedonism that he becomes heterodox and often contradicts things stated previously. Whether Piper is consciously attempting to fool his readers or whether he is fooled himself only God knows, though we believe with the judgment of charity, and certainly hope, that it is the latter. It is not the intent of this article to pass judgment upon Piper’s own salvation, and we would hope that any readers of this article would not childishly see it as such and then refuse to examine the actual issues. However, this certainly does not detract from the need to oppose his heretical teachings. Even more so, we hope the Lord would be pleased to grant him repentance to the acknowledging of the truth (II Tim. 2:25).

## Hedonistic Utilitarianism

Piper clearly teaches that God created all things for the purpose of glorifying Himself. This he makes abundantly clear, for which we commend him. He then modifies the first answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* to

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

render it thus: "The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* [instead of "and"] enjoying him forever." Piper then interprets it thus: "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."<sup>8</sup>

From this one would expect Piper to conclude that the highest thing man should seek after is to make "glorifying God" the *end* and "enjoying him forever" the *means* thereof. And indeed, here it becomes apparent that Piper carries two faces. For sometimes, this is indeed his view: "I *must* pursue joy in God if I am to glorify Him as the surpassingly valuable Reality in the universe."<sup>9</sup>

However, this is *not* Christian Hedonism. Several paragraphs later, Piper shows his other face:

Christian Hedonism as I use the term does not mean God becomes a means to help us get worldly pleasures [notice the qualification!]. The pleasure Christian Hedonism seeks is the pleasure that is in God Himself. He is the end of our search, not the means to some further end ... Christian Hedonism does not reduce God to a key that unlocks a treasure chest of gold and silver. Rather, it seeks to transform the heart so that "the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver" (Job 22:25).<sup>10</sup>

God is not the means toward "worldly pleasures"—why qualify it with "worldly"? Because "worldly" pleasure wouldn't satisfy us; rather, He is the means toward "the pleasure that is in God Himself." God is not "reduced" to a "key that unlocks a treasure chest of gold and silver"—again, such a treasure wouldn't satisfy us; rather, this god is exalted to a key that unlocks the treasure chest of joy that is found in him. As Piper says later on, "Christ becomes for us a Treasure Chest of holy joy."<sup>11</sup> Notice: God is a *means* for man to attain pleasure.

Piper continues,

Christian Hedonism does not make a god out of pleasure. It

---

<sup>8</sup> *Desiring God*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23; italics Piper's.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

says that one has already made a god out of whatever he finds most pleasure in. The goal of Christian Hedonism is to find most pleasure in the one and only God and thus avoid the sin of covetousness, that is, idolatry (Colossians 3:5).<sup>12</sup>

That it is idolatry to find pleasure in anything apart from God we do not deny, and that therefore we should seek pleasure in God we do not deny either; but what we *do* deny, and what makes Christian Hedonism turn pleasure into a god, is its claim that *the pleasure received from worshipping God should be the highest motivation for that worship* (remember Piper's definition of hedonism). It is notable that even in this paragraph Piper presents finding "most pleasure" (in God) as the "goal of Christian Hedonism."

This is (supposedly) acceptable because God also gets what He wants: glory. As Piper summarises, "we get the happiness in Him; He gets the honour from us."<sup>13</sup> A splendid business deal indeed!

Piper explains the relationship between us seeking pleasure in Him and He being glorified in this way:

Consider the analogy of a wedding anniversary ... Suppose on this day I bring home a dozen long-stemmed roses for [my wife]. When she meets me at the door, I hold out the roses, and she says, "O Johnny, they're beautiful; thank you" and gives me a big hug. Then suppose I hold up my hand and say matter-of-factly, "Don't mention it; it's my duty."

... If ... she asks me, "Why do you do this?" ... the answer that honors her most is "Because nothing makes me happier tonight than to be with you."

"It's my duty" is a dishonour to her.

"It's my joy" is an honour.

There it is! The feast of Christian Hedonism.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

One critic has succinctly summarised Piper's teaching:

Let us use the earthly analogy of marriage to address this question. I have two possible options of what to say to my wife ...

Option 1) I love you; therefore I will live to please you alone [and try to find pleasure in you], even sacrificing my life and my earthly pleasures if need be, so as to ensure you are cared for and all your needs are met.

Option 2) I love pleasure; and I have chosen you as the vehicle through which all my pleasure will be derived, and only through you will I pursue any pleasure, and you will satisfy my every desire so as to give me the pleasure for which I live, and any loving or beneficial thing that I do for you will only be done contingent on the expectation that I will somehow benefit from that action by experiencing pleasure from it.

If your wife thinks that Option 2 is as selfish as my wife thinks that it is and if she thinks that Option 1 is the truly loving position to take (in fact she is still waiting for me to get down on one knee, gaze up into her eyes and reread Option 1) then imagine praying Option 2 to a jealous God. If a wife wants to hear you say, "I love you and will live to please you" do you not think that God Himself wishes to hear the same? Do you really believe that God wants you to pray to Him and say, "Dear God, I love pleasure, therefore I only worship You to get pleasure in You, so please me in all that I do"?<sup>15</sup>

It does *not* glorify God when we ultimately make Him the *means* whereby we receive pleasure and try to keep Him happy with this by claiming that this glorifies Him the most! The greatest commandment is to love *God Himself*, not *pleasure in God* (Matt. 22:36-38). The highest thing we are to seek after is *God Himself and His glory* and not *pleasure in God*.

If a Christian Hedonist will only do something "if, and only if," he receives pleasure from it, then it follows that he will obey God "if, and only if," this

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://christianhedonismfaq.wordpress.com/>

gives him pleasure. In other words, the Christian Hedonist's chief motivation in all things is his own pleasure. That is, the Christian Hedonist is a hedonist.

Piper even admits it: "all genuine emotion is an end in itself."<sup>16</sup> "Happiness in God is the end of all our seeking. Nothing beyond it can be sought as a higher goal."<sup>17</sup>

This is plain idolatry. We should "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33) and not our own pleasure. Paul commands that even our "genuine emotion" should merely be a means to an end: the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31).

All Piper's supposed scriptural proofs can be reduced to this: He quotes passages in which the worth of God is exalted by the pleasure that is found in Him, and passages in which the saints are commanded to find their delight in Him. From these, Piper concludes that the pleasure found in God is the *highest* thing we should seek after and should be our *highest* motivation in all obedience. However, there is simply not a single text in all of Scripture that teaches this.

*Christian Hedonism* is nothing more than *utilitarianism*—reducing God to a means whereby we may obtain what we desire.

This theory he develops and applies to every area of the Christian life; chapter titles of *Desiring God* include: "Conversion: The Creation of a Christian Hedonist," "Worship: The Feast of Christian Hedonism," "Love: The Labour of Christian Hedonism," "Scripture: Kindling for Christian Hedonism," "Prayer: The Power of Christian Hedonism," "Money: The Currency of Christian Hedonism," "Marriage: A Matrix for Christian Hedonism," "Missions: The Battle Cry of Christian Hedonism," "Suffering: The Sacrifice of Christian Hedonism." All these holy callings of the Christian life are turned ultimately into a means for us to get pleasure (in God).

Considering the weakness of his scriptural "proofs," perhaps the most serious defence that Piper puts up, especially for those who subscribe to the *Three Forms of Unity*, is his claim that "the entire [*Heidelberg Catechism*] is structured the way Christian Hedonism would structure it."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *Desiring God*, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. If this claim were true, I would by God's grace endeavour to have my fellow-

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

Piper jumps at the *Catechism's* usage of the words "comfort" and "happiness" the way a Unitarian jumps at the phrase "Son of God." Yes, the *Catechism* is themed around the comfort of the Christian; yes, Christ is "our only comfort in life and death;" but where in all of the *Catechism* does it ever claim that the ultimate motivation for us coming to God and obeying Him is to receive comfort? Or where does it say that our motivation for everything should be the seeking of pleasure?

Asks Piper, "Why did the original framers of the four-hundred-year-old catechism structure all 129 questions so that they are an exposition of the question 'What is my only comfort?'"

Zacharias Ursinus, one of the principal authors of the *Catechism*, answers this question in his commentary on the *Catechism*:

The question of comfort is placed, and treated first, because it embodies the design and substance of the catechism. The design is, that we may be led to the attainment of sure and solid comfort, both in life and death.<sup>19</sup>

Nowhere in the *Catechism* is the comfort received in God made the highest reason for obedience. The "design" of the *Catechism* is "comfort" ultimately because God commands, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (Isa. 40:1). Not because the seeking of comfort should be the highest motivation for the worship of God.

Furthermore, the "comfort" of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which is nothing but the comfort of the gospel, is the "certain knowledge" and "assured confidence" that "I, with body and soul, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup> This "comfort" is not a mystical "feeling" or some sort of spiritual "pleasure," as Piper seems to think (more on this in the next section); it is a certain knowledge and assured confidence.

---

ship/church amend this error, and if this were not possible, I would not be able to subscribe to the *Catechism*.

<sup>19</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Co., 1888) ([www.archive.org/details/commentaryofzach00ursiuoft](http://www.archive.org/details/commentaryofzach00ursiuoft)).

<sup>20</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 21, 1.

In short, Christian Hedonism teaches that ultimately we should worship God *in order to be satisfied* (and fortunately for both parties involved God is also happy because this way He is supposedly most glorified); the Scriptures teach that ultimately we should find our satisfaction in God *in order to worship Him* (I Cor. 10:31).

Christian Hedonism makes an idol out of pleasure.

### A Redefinition of Faith: The End of Joy and Assurance

In accordance with the purpose of Christian Hedonism to make the seeking of pleasure in God the highest goal of a Christian, it teaches that seeing a “spiritual delight in God” in oneself is a necessary prerequisite for assurance of salvation: “This ... delight in God is the self-authenticating evidence that God has called us to be beneficiaries of his grace. This evidence frees us to bank on the promise as our own.”<sup>21</sup>

That is, according to Piper, a Christian cannot correctly be convinced that the promises of salvation revealed in God’s Word are for him unless and until he sees within himself a “delight in God,” until he observes himself “delighting ... [and] being satisfied with [God],” which is, according to Piper, “the heart of saving faith.”<sup>22</sup>

The key question is: If “being satisfied with God” is the “heart of saving faith,” what does Piper mean by “being satisfied”? If his definition here is not the historic definition of faith, then he is denying the historic doctrine of justification by faith alone.

It has always been the most ardent confession of Reformed churches that good works are a necessary result of, *but never part of*, faith itself. That is, justification and sanctification, though inseparable, are distinct. As the Apostle Paul says,

And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work (Rom. 11:6; cf. Rom. 3:20, 23-24, 28; 4:2-3, 6, 9).

---

<sup>21</sup> *Future Grace*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

After himself proving this from various Reformation creeds such as the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Westminster Confession*, Piper expresses agreement: "In no way do I mean to confound justification and sanctification."<sup>23</sup>

His agreement must however be taken with a pinch of salt. Although Piper approvingly quotes Reformed confessions in his book *Future Grace*, we have already seen that he really does not understand the confessions, and he himself states in *Desiring God*, in reference to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: "Not that I care too much about the intention of seventeenth-century theologians [i.e., the authors of the *Westminster Standards*]."<sup>24</sup> This attitude is also a denial of I Corinthians 12:21.

The biblical, Reformed and orthodox definition of saving faith is expressed in the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q. 21. What is true faith?

A. True faith is not only a *certain knowledge* [John 6:69; 17:3; Heb. 11:3, 6], whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an *assured confidence* [Eph. 3:12], which the Holy Ghost [Rom. 4:16, 20-21; Heb. 11:1; Eph. 3:12; Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:21; Acts 16:14; Matt. 16:17; John 3:5] works by the gospel in my heart [Rom. 10:14, 17; Matt. 9:2]; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin [Rom. 5:1], everlasting righteousness, and salvation [Gal. 2:20] are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits [Rom. 3:24-26].<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the *Belgic Confession* states,

We believe that ... the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him [Eph. 3:16-17; Ps. 51:13; Eph. 1:17-18; I Cor. 2:12], and seeks nothing more besides Him [I Cor. 2:2; Acts 4:12; Gal. 2:21; Jer. 23:6; I Cor. 1:30; Jer. 31:10].<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *Desiring God*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Belgic Confession* 22.

This “certain knowledge” is not merely intellectual; for then it would not differ from the knowledge of devils and reprobates (James 2:19; John 2:23-24). Rather, it is a *spiritual* knowledge which is worked in us by the Holy *Spirit* (I Cor. 2:10-16).

The “assured confidence” whereby faith “embraces Jesus Christ” and knows that “not only to others, but to me also ...” is also worked in us by the Spirit. David J. Engelsma puts it well:

The Spirit binds the word of God on the regenerated heart of the elect child of God, so that he believes the word of God concerning Jesus Christ [i.e., certain knowledge] and believes on Christ for forgiveness and eternal life. Precisely in this way—the way of hearing and believing—and at this moment—the moment of hearing and believing—the Spirit witnesses to the spirit of the believer that the believer is forgiven and saved, as Romans 8:16 teaches [i.e., assured confidence].<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, Piper correctly states that a mere intellectual assent to and understanding of the truth is not saving faith. He then correctly states that there is a *spiritual* aspect, that the sinner must “embrace all that God promises to be for us in Christ Jesus,” as Piper words it.

However, what Piper *means* by creedal words such as “spiritual,” “resting” and “embrace” is emphatically *not* what the Reformed creeds mean by it.

Says Piper,

Therefore, two things are necessary for saving faith to emerge. One is [knowledge] ... The other is that we must apprehend and embrace the *spiritual beauty* and worth of Christ through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Without this compelling *spiritual taste of Christ’s captivating excellence*, a person’s conviction about a testimony may be no more than the devil’s useless assurance that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He “believes” it, but he does not apprehend it as beautiful and precious and wonderfully suited to accomplish good and holy

---

<sup>27</sup> David J. Engelsma, “The Gift of Assurance” (South Holland, IL: Evangelism Committee of South Holland Protestant Reformed Church, 2009).

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

purposes. He assents in one way, but not with a hearty, or, as the Puritans say, "cordial" assent. *He does not taste Christ as compellingly attractive.* His "faith" is dead because it is not animated by the essential thing: spiritual apprehension of spiritual beauty.<sup>28</sup>

Spiritual apprehension and taste ... moves the heart to embrace and *savor* the reality.<sup>29</sup>

We must have a spiritual "taste" that he is gloriously precious beyond all competing values and treasures. When this happens, we not only affirm Christ as the true object of someone else's testimony; we also "embrace" him as the spiritually excellent treasure of our souls. *This is the essence of faith.*<sup>30</sup>

I say that saving faith must "include" delight.<sup>31</sup>

What we must say about resting is that to be a saving resting it must be a repose, not merely of safety from hell, but also *a repose of satisfaction in the beauties of God* (Psalm 16:11).<sup>32</sup>

An essential element of faith is *delight* in the goodness of God, *attraction* to him and confidence in him.<sup>33</sup>

When the Reformed creeds say that faith is "embracing Christ," they mean that it is a resting in Him alone *for salvation*, a cessation of the performance of works in order to merit salvation; when Piper talks about "embracing" as part of faith, he means a spiritual "tasting," a "repose of satisfaction in the beauties of God," "delighting," etc. Piper means mystical, "spiritual" emotions and feelings.

That this is a radical departure from historic orthodoxy becomes strikingly clear when, after quoting Charles Hodge as stating on behalf of the Reformed faith that "joy" is "produced" by faith, Piper ominously says,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Future Grace*, p. 202; italics mine.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201, italics Piper's.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202, italics mine.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204, italics mine.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205, italics mine.

## *British Reformed Journal*

But I want to say a bit more than Hodge does. I don't want to say merely that faith in promises produces "confidence, joy and hope," but that *an essential element* in the faith itself is confidence and joy and hope.<sup>34</sup>

How then does this arrival of joy relate to saving faith? The usual answer is that joy is the fruit of faith ... *But there is a different way of looking at the relationship of joy and faith* ... Before the confidence [of being saved] comes the craving. *Before the decision comes the delight.*<sup>35</sup>

Piper is indeed correct in that confidence is not only produced by faith but is inherent to it. But now it has become clear beyond dispute: Piper has made "joy" (by which he means mystical experiences and "spiritual feelings") *part of faith itself* as opposed to the infallible *product* of it!

A redefinition of faith!

And therefore a denial of justification by faith alone!

Writes Piper,

I use different words to unpack what *believe* means. In recent years I have asked, "Do you receive Jesus as your *Treasure*?" Not just *Savior* ... Not just *Lord* ... The key is: Do you treasure Him more than anything else?... Could it be that today the most straightforward biblical command for conversion is not, "Believe in the Lord," but, "Delight yourself in the Lord"?<sup>36</sup>

By thus redefining "believe" with "treasuring Christ" (by which he means mystical, spiritual emotions), he has clearly and unambiguously departed from the historic, Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone.

What are the implications of this for the daily life of the child of God?

"Justification" refers to a legal declaration that someone is righteous (Prov. 17:5; Deut. 25:1). Therefore, one essential aspect of justification *by faith alone*

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205; italics Piper's. Note the ominous beginning: "But I want to say a bit more than Hodge does."

<sup>35</sup> *Desiring God*, pp. 71-72; italics mine.

<sup>36</sup> *Desiring God*, p. 55; italics mine.

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

is that faith is the only and exclusive way in which God declares *to us* that He has forgiven us our sins. Therefore, to define "faith" is to define how *I* may be assured by God that *my* sins are forgiven and that *I* am righteous in His sight. Engelsma states, "Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins. Justification is the forgiveness *in the forum of the believer's consciousness.*"<sup>37</sup>

This is the clear, simple teaching of Scripture. In the following passage, assurance of salvation is an intrinsic *part* of justification by faith.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us (Rom. 5:1-5).

Thence, Piper's redefinition of faith is a redefinition of how *I* may be assured of *my* own salvation. What results from this redefinition is a hideous doctrine which leaves believers in a terrible predicament.

Let every reader observe this carefully: If "spiritual joy" is of the "essence" of faith, and if this "evidence" is necessary in order for us to "bank on the promise as our own," that is, if we must observe within ourselves a "delight" and "attraction" to the "beauties of God," *before* we can be assured we are saved, it is then necessary that we rejoice and delight in God *while we as yet believe (or at least suspect) ourselves to be lost, damned, hated by God and on the broad road to hell with no hope!*

If Piper is correct, *then we will never properly be assured of the forgiveness of our sins and God's love for us!* For who but a deluded fanatic can take pleasure in and rejoice in a God who is opposed to him and will soon destroy him in the eternal lake of fire, inflicting fiery vengeance upon him?

As the Scriptures say, "There is no peace ... unto the wicked" (Isa. 48:22). Calvin states, "If we ... are uncertain whether we have the love or the hatred

---

<sup>37</sup> "Gift of Assurance," p. 7; italics Engelsma's.

of God, our felicity will be cursed, and therefore miserable.”<sup>38</sup> The *Canons of Dordt* express it thus: “If the elect were deprived of this solid comfort [i.e., assurance] ... they would be of all men the most miserable.”<sup>39</sup>

It is completely absurd to say one must rejoice in God *before* believing that one is saved and loved by God. In this way, no-one can ever arrive at true joy! For joy comes fundamentally from “being justified by faith” (Rom. 5:1)!

Far from encouraging true delight in God, Piper’s doctrine of assurance destroys the comfort of believers and thereby prevents them from rejoicing in the God of their salvation and doing good works accordingly.

Ultimately, since (according to John Piper) “delight in God is the self-authenticating evidence” that enables us to believe we are saved, and since (according to Scripture and common sense) it is impossible to have true joy in God before having the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, therefore no-one can be properly assured of his salvation.

This terrible doctrine goes against the whole testimony of God’s Word<sup>40</sup> and is nothing but the Romish doctrine of assurance (or rather, of doubt).

Think of Abraham:

And being not weak in faith, *he considered not his own body now dead*, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness (Rom. 4:19-22).

Piper would say, “No, Abraham; it is not enough to merely look to God and believe Him, you must also examine your own heart to see whether you delight in and treasure God before you can ‘bank on his promises.’”

Everywhere Scripture commands us to look to Christ for our assurance

---

<sup>38</sup> *Institutes* 3.2.28.

<sup>39</sup> *Canons of Dordt* V:10.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed proof of this, see “Gift of Assurance.”

## John Piper's "Christian Hedonism"

(Num. 21:8-9; Isa. 45:22; John 3:14-15; 6:40) not to ourselves. For "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Is not a looking *away* from self to God the very nature of faith?

Says Calvin,

Free promise we make the foundation of faith ... this promise [of salvation] must be gratuitous; for a conditional promise, which throws us back upon our works, promises life only in so far as we find it existing in ourselves. Therefore, if we would not have faith waver and tremble, we must support it with the promise of salvation [i.e., an unconditional promise].<sup>41</sup>

Doubtless, if we are to determine by our works [anything we do, e.g., joy] in what way the Lord stands affected towards us, *I admit that we cannot even get the length of a feeble conjecture*: but since faith should accord with the free and simple promise, there is no room left for ambiguity.<sup>42</sup>

Piper's doctrine of assurance is nothing but mysticism. And this is no surprise, considering the influence of the Puritan Jonathan Edwards on Piper:

It is no secret, from what I have written elsewhere, that I am deeply indebted to Jonathan Edwards in the development of my understanding of God and life. J. I. Packer said of my book, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, "Jonathan Edwards, whose ghost walks through most of Piper's pages, would be delighted with his disciple." That was a very generous tribute. I hope it is true of this book as well. I write with Edwards looking over my shoulder.<sup>43</sup>

Though Piper does not go so far as to claim, as did many of the Puritans as well as the *London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), that assurance is *not* part of faith, his mystical redefinition of faith requiring joy in God *before* one can be assured of salvation makes assurance equally subjective and

---

<sup>41</sup> *Institutes* 3.2.29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 3.2.38; italics mine.

<sup>43</sup> *Future Grace*, p. 387.

introspective. Engelsma's evaluation of the Puritan doctrine of assurance therefore applies:

[According to this false view of assurance] the sinner is looking mainly, if not exclusively, within himself for assurance of salvation, rather than away from his sinful, uncertain self, with its fickle feelings, to Jesus Christ "out there" in the promise of the gospel.

Mysticism's way to assurance is illusory, deceiving and perilous. Those who desperately seek and work for assurance along the way of mysticism either doom themselves to a life of doubt (because they never can obtain the "overpowering light" or achieve the "greatest experience"), or, if they do finally find the feeling they think they are seeking, consign themselves to perpetual questioning, whether the feeling was genuine (so much depends on the feeling, after all), or, if they do firmly base their assurance on an experience, subject themselves to God's condemnation (for He will have assurance of salvation, like salvation itself, come through faith that rests on Jesus Christ as evidently set forth in the Scriptures, and through faith only).<sup>44</sup>

*to be concluded (DV)*

---

<sup>44</sup> "Gift of Assurance," pp. 41-42.