

# **Robert Sandeman**

**{1718-71}**

Having just finished Sandeman's major work addressed to the Calvinistic Anglican writer James Hervey; {Letters on Theron and Aspasio, 1757;} and having re-read, what I've extracted from that work, for the fourth & fifth time; I've become more and more impressed with the vital significance of what this writer was enabled to discern on many matters which directly affect the glorious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially regarding a believer's valuation of Christ's Person & Accomplishments; and thus, we venture forth to unfold a few of the Gospel truths which are found herein, of one whose books have been labeled unclean, and tossed unto the dunghill of forbidden & forgotten texts. Sandeman has been accused of affirming that a bare mental assent to the propositions of the gospel was sufficient for salvation. From what I've read, I sort of see that gravitation, but I also see that he had a rather sharp 'spiritual' insight into the rank Conditionalism {a works orientated salvation, oft in the form of preparatory 'grace,}' those man-enthroned/Christ deposed views of salvation {oft by law/gospel admixtures, thus overturning the perfect offering of Christ,} & that self-absorbed experimentalism {'Christian' subjectivism - oft dressed in 'Calvinistic' garbs,} that had virtually engulfed the whole of 'mainstream Puritanism' in one way or another, in his day, and how much more so in our day of 'revitalized Calvinism.' Overall; we see {in the light that we have been currently allotted} no serious deviations from the truths of the Gospel; though sometimes his wording is awkward; and would tend to give one the impression that he attributed more to faith, than Christ himself? Notwithstanding; Sandeman firmly held to an unconditional salvation in Christ, exposed by name many whom he felt compromised the Gospel, &c., and for this was explicitly hated. For Sandeman, salvation was exclusively & entirely by Christ's work alone! Obviously, our desire to see a re-evaluation of Sandeman's writings in the light of Holy Scripture, comes not without a caution to "test all things," whilst holding fast to only that which is good.

## **Brief Biographical Account**

Although there has been enough written about Sandeman's life to satisfy the curious; I did want to include a few extracts from his writings, and some brief biographical information as chiefly furnished in Walter Wilson's, "History of Dissenting Churches, 1810."

Robert Sandeman, a nonconformist theologian, was born in Perth, Scotland in 1718, the second of twelve children to a linen weaver, David Sandeman and his wife Margaret. He attended the University of Edinburgh over a two-year period beginning in 1734, where he initially seemed destined for a career in either medicine or the Established Church. It was here, however, where he encountered the teachings of John Glas, {1695-1773,} and joined his Dundee Congregation in 1735. It was during this period that he apprenticed as a linen weaver for a number of years before starting a family business with his brother William. In 1737 he married Glas' daughter Catherine. They did not have any children by the time of

her death in 1746. At the age of 26 he was selected as an elder of the Glasite church in Perth. Following her death, Sandeman devoted his life to the Church and Holy Scripture. He traveled between Perth, Dundee, and Edinburgh where he served as elder among these Glasite congregations. In 1757 he came to wider attention by publishing his Letters on Theron and Aspasio, in which he attacked the theology of James Hervey; whose 'Theron and Aspasio' had been published in 1755. He was more forceful than Glas and also more controversial. It was he who was largely responsible for spreading the teachings of Glas, alongside those of his own, both within Scotland and elsewhere. As a result of this, outside Scotland the Glasite denomination was known as Sandemanian, reflecting this revitalized sentiment. He came to America in 1763 where he was instrumental in the establishment of 'Churches' in Boston, Massachusetts; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and Danbury, Connecticut. He settled in Danbury and remained there until he died on April 2, 1771 at the age of 53 years.

## **SANDEMANIANS**

This denomination originated in Scotland, about the year 1728, and has been distinguished in that country by the name of Glasites. Mr. John Glas, the founder of the group, was a Minister of the Established Church {as were many of his ancestors, as far back to the era of the 'Reformation'} in that Kingdom, but being charged with a design of subverting the National Covenant, and sapping the foundation of all national establishments, by maintaining that the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world, was expelled {suspended from the ministry in 1728 – nine years later he was restored by the General Assembly without motion on his part, to the office of a Minister of the Gospel, but not to that of a Minister of the Church of Scotland, because of his Congregational principals} by the Presbyterian Synod from the Church of Scotland. His sentiments, regarding primarily ecclesiastical matters, are fully explained in a small piece which he published at that time, entitled, "The Testimony of the King of Martyrs," and preserved in the first volume of his Works. In consequence of his expulsion, those who adhered to his teachings formed themselves into separated churches, conformable, in their institution and discipline, to what they apprehended to be the plan of the first churches recorded in the New Testament. According to one source, the Glasites had no Written Creed, as they accepted the Scriptures literally, wherever they could be so interpreted; they had no active propaganda, as they believed that the command to preach the Gospel to every creature was confined to the Apostles; they refrained from religious conversation in mixed companies, but to anyone who asked, they would readily give an account of their understanding of the Gospel, with meekness and fear; they had no missions, home or foreign; and no Sunday Schools, as they contended that parents were to teach their own children.

In 1757, Mr. Robert Sandeman, an Elder in one of these churches in Scotland, published a series of letters, addressed to Mr. James Hervey, occasioned by his "Dialogues between Theron and Aspasio" in which he endeavored to show that Mr. Hervey's notion of faith was contradictory to the Scripture account, and could only serve to lead men, professedly holding the doctrines called Calvinistic, to establish their own righteousness upon their frames, feelings, and acts of faith. These 'letters' were to become Sandeman's definitive statement on Gospel truth & practice, and consequently burst like a bomb into the 'Evangelical Camp' throughout England, Scotland, and the North American Colonies.

Sandeman began with what he perceived as the principal root of a heretical corruption of the Pure Gospel, and that was Arminianism, which he alleged that Hervey advocated despite his limp and superficial creedal adherence to 'Calvinistic' truth. Within these 'letters' Sandeman decisively opposed any teaching that advocated human effort or religious duty, however sincerely devout, {works righteousness, duty faith, preparatory grace &c.,} as could be constructed into a works gospel, and as merits on the part of the individual to obtain salvation.

Sandeman had a sharp perception that the notion of so-called faith which the majority of religionists advocated in their scheme of the Gospel was nothing more than a kind of natural and religious exertion of the mind and will which proved to be no less offensive than other forms of works righteousness. He insisted that men in their blinded opposition to the true revelation of Christ and in accordance with the total depravity of their darkened minds could not as so much as to even think upon {rightly} Christ, because their valuation of his Person & Work would be necessarily diminished and utterly defective; and that God bestowed the gift of faith in Sovereign Discretion and Effectual Application, apart from the 'willing or doing' on the part of the those who sought for some ground of effort/works based assurance apart from the work of Christ Alone. He also emphasized the fact that there was no separating the agency of the Holy Spirit from the Knowledge & Revelation of Gospel Truth, so that those {the elect} whom the Lord would separate unto Himself, would be separated, in fact and effectually, unto the truth of the Gospel. "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God; for our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." {I Thes.1:4,5}

Sandeman writes; "As to general calls or invitations with promises annexed, such as, 'Come unto me, and I will give you rest;' it may suffice to say, that all who are led to understand who it is that calls and invites, and how well it becomes him to say, "I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save," are so taught of the Father; they are his called and chosen, to whom the promise belongs. And none but those who understand who it is that calleth, will ever understand what it means to come, or to whom, or yet have a proper relish for the rest promised to those who come. So before it be disputed whether there be any blessings promised to unbelievers to encourage them to come to Christ, it may be proper, first to inquire, whether an unbeliever can have a relish for the blessings Christ promises; for unless this point be first cleared, it is not manifest how they can bear the aspect of encouragements to him."

This led the way to a controversy amongst those who are called Calvinists, concerning the nature of faith; and the effect was that quite a number of men were persuaded of what Sandeman observed, and were consequently compelled to join his efforts; among these were several Independent Ministers, such as Mr. Barnard, Mr. Chater, Mr. Prentice, Mr. Boosey, &c., but the most eminent was Mr. Samuel Pike, who joined the Sandemanian Church in London, in 1765, and became an eminent preacher among them.

In the letters above-mentioned, Sandeman strongly reprobates the writings of several 'Divines' who had obtained a considerable name and reputation in the religious world; men such as Flavel, Whitefield, Marshall, Boston, Guthrie, the Erskines, Watts, Doddridge, Romaine, &c., whom he treated with but little ceremony, considering them as great corrupters of the Word of God, and destroyers of men's souls. Some of these "popular preachers," as he termed them, had, {among other things,} encouraged sinners to believe that the 'favorable symptoms' and those 'gracious' dispositions of their own hearts were the

ground of their acceptance by God, and the evidence of their being 'in favor' with God. The account he gives of a sinner's justification is as follows: "Every doctrine, then, which teaches us to do or endeavor anything toward our acceptance with God, stands opposed to the doctrine of the Apostles; which, instead of directing us what to do, sets before us all that the most disquieted conscience can require, in order to acceptance with God, as already done and finished by Jesus Christ. What Christ hath done, is that which pleases God; what he hath done, is that which quiets the guilty conscience of man as soon as he knows it; so that whenever he hears of it, he has no occasion for any other question but this, Is it true or not? If he finds it true, he is happy; if not, he can reap no comfort by it. If then we slight the comfort arising from the bare persuasion of this, it must be owing, at bottom, to our slighting this bare truth, to our slighting the bare work of Christ, and our considering it as too narrow a foundation whereon to rest the whole weight of our acceptance with God. Whereas all Christians of the same stamp with Paul, can never see it in too bare a light, and are ready to say, Far be it; that we should glory, save in the cross, where that work was finished." The popular doctrines he considers to spring entirely from the pride of man, who is unwilling to admit the gospel account of acceptance with God, through the work already done and finished by Jesus Christ alone. "Every scheme of religion devised by man, {says he} has been continued for the gratifying of this principle; and from hence every corruption of that religion which came from heaven takes its rise." "There is no occasion to fear that ancient Christianity be injured by debasing the names most highly esteemed amongst men. Christianity rather suffers when the character of God is debased. And this is always done when men go about to vitiate or change the true ground of acceptance with Him."

Again; "Whatever doctrine then teaches us to think, that our friendly correspondence or acceptance with God is begun by our own good endeavors, seconded by the Divine aid, or even first prompted by the Divine influence, leads us to look for acceptance with God by our own righteousness; for whatever I do, however assisted or prompted, is still my own work; otherwise the most common actions of life could not be called our own, seeing in all these we must still acknowledge our dependence on God, "in whom we live, move, and have our being." Agreeably to what is now said, we may find Philosophers and Pharisees, both ancient and modern, in the height of their self-applause, acknowledging Divine assistance, and ready to agree in using language like this, "God, I thank thee for my excellency above other men." We must begin our religion then as we would end it. Our acceptance with God, first and last, must rest entirely on the work finished by Jesus Christ on the cross; or we must betake ourselves to what many call the religion of nature, and what God warrants us to call the religion of pride, as being no less opposite to the law of nature, than to the Gospel."

As to the relentless hostility which he encountered, he says in a letter to a friend, written in 1758, "My friends and I are all well familiarized with the charge of being enemies to Christianity, and destitute of charity; and what is more, we do not want to appear in any other light to our adversaries." "In the one respect, the good people are offended with us for legalism, or setting up the Popish merit of good works; and in the other, for Antinomianism. For you may easily judge, the good people would not find fault with us but for something that is bad." "Our greatest danger is, lest we forget our due regard to the Gospel by paying too much to men. And had I formally understood certain idols of the present generation of Pharisees as well as I do now, I had treated them even less respect

than I have done; for my friends and I in evaluating Gospel preachers, judge it safest, first to settle in our minds what is the Gospel that Paul preached; and we consider none as Gospel preachers but those who objectively preach that. If men do not truthfully preach that, it signifies little to us what pretensions they may have to the character of being 'truly gracious persons, sincere in their views, sound in their principles, or having a real love to the doctrines of what is called Free Grace.' Many, it would seem, having first imbibed a high opinion of the goodness of certain eminent preachers, too fondly or inconsiderately presume their doctrine must be sound; and thus the attention of many is drawn away from the ancient form of sound words and simplicity of the apostolic Faith, which insensibly wears out of sight, while the minds of men are occupied with the importance of other things very foreign to it." "I must give my opinion of my own performance, for I am ready to say that I propose to contend for the Divine Righteousness, finished on the cross as the sole requisite to Justification. In evincing this, we look around on all sorts of men, and examine their various pretensions to Righteousness on every side. Whatever we find opposed to or set up instead of the Divine Righteousness we resolutely attack. In doing this, we make use of every weapon that we can lay our hand upon, and according to our various occasions, we lay hold on whatever weapon that we can most readily yield, and by which we may cut deepest, whether it be satire, disdainful irony, the contemptuous smile, indigent frown or more cool reasoning; and all along, we appear to think very gravely that the Scripture supports us in all this. We have a particular eye on Jeremiah's maxim of war, "spare no arrows;" for whatever person or thing is exalted or esteemed in competition with the Righteousness of Christ in the matter of Justification, must draw our indignation, in proportion as we love the Divine Truth."

One reason that Sandeman was so hated in his day is because he was not afraid to expose all, by name, whom he felt had deviated from the true Gospel of Christ. An example, as follows: "Seeing it is the fashion to recommend religious books, I am willing to comply with it for once. If anyone chooses to go to hell by a devout path, rather than by any other, let him study to form his heart on any one of these four famous treatises: Mr. Guthrie's, "Trial of a Saving Interest in Christ;" Mr. Marshall's, "Gospel Mystery of Sanctification;" Mr. Boston's, "Human Nature in its Fourfold State;" and Mr. Doddridge's, "Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul." If any profane person, who desires to be converted, shall take pains to enter into the spirit of these books, it will be easy to show, from the New Testament, that he thereby becomes twofold more the child of hell than he was before."

Again; "The writer has of late got many recent proofs, clearly showing, how much our modern Pharisees reverence their renowned rabbis above the Scriptures. He has got abundant reason to conclude, that they would easily have indulged him in using great freedom with the gospel, had he only shown greater deference to the revered names of the demi-gods of his country. Moreover, by the general stupid surprise which they have openly avowed at the notion of a devout path to hell, they have shown themselves no less inattentive to the New Testament, than their ancestors were to the Old, who had the assurance to say, "Search, and look, for out of Galilee arises no prophet;" though their own Scriptures showed not only that the great light was to shine in Galilee, but also that the first prophet who preached repentance to the Gentiles, {even Jonah, whom Christ referred to as his corresponding sign,} was a Galilean. As to the notion of a devout path to hell, the passages ascertaining and describing such a notion are too numerous to be quoted here. But if any of our modern Pharisees should think the inquiry worth their while they may

consult a concordance, at the word 'hell.' He who has not a concordance, may read the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel."

Amid much hostility from the professing 'church,' Sandeman did receive some consolation from a few that had begun to identify with his passionate zeal for the Truth of the Gospel. Among those was Samuel Pike, a Pastor of an Independent Church in London, who heard about the 'Letters' from members of his own congregation, and wrote to Sandeman in 1758. "For my own part, I must profess, that there are many thoughts and sentiments in it that are of great value and importance, apprehending your description, both of the ground of our Justification and the Nature of Faith to be true and just; and hope, so far, have reason to be thankful, that your letters ever came to hand; for they have contributed not only to confirm, but likewise to clear and elucidate my own conceptions on the subject ... and I am thankful, because it has been a happy means, under the Operations of the blessed Spirit, of confirming my faith, of clearing my views, relieving my mind, comforting my heart and enlivening my love to Christ." Though Pike initially read Sandeman's work with mingled feelings and many reservations; once he entered into correspondence with Sandeman, he was eventually won over to his sentiments, and ended his days as a Sandemanian.

Oddly; the historian Walter Wilson tries to link John Johnson with Robert Sandeman, where he states that; "there is also another class of Sandemanians called Johnsonians, from Mr. John Johnson, of Liverpool." {History of Dissenting Churches, Vol.3, pg.267} Though there may have been some similarities between these two groups of believers, I think that Mr. Johnson would immediately dismiss any connections with Robert Sandeman; especially since Johnson wrote an entire series of replies to John Huddleston {a Sandemanian} in dissecting a few of his Sandemanian Propositions; published by Huddleston in 1766, under the title of: "The Propositions, which Occasioned the Late Difference and Separation in the Baptist Church at Whitehaven, &c." Johnson writes; "I read with pleasure some Part of the Dialogues between Theron and Aspasio; although I observed many Expressions which hung too loose, too straggling from the solid Foundation of Gospel Truth; some Sentences very flat and dry; dashed with Legality, Tradition, and the Spirit of the World. But still, as his main Design seemed to be the magnifying of free Grace in Christ, I was willing to pass these Defects with Candor; being well assured, that Perfection is not to be expected in any human Composition." Undeniably, both groups like the Brownists of old, were strongly disposed to hold communion with no one outside their immediate fellowship. Their strong aversion to "the popular preachers" led them entirely to disregard the writings of those whom men esteemed as 'sound divines;' and it would seem, that they seldom troubled themselves with theological writers out of their own communion. It should be recorded that both groups were in general well versed in the Sacred Volume, which they substituted for other books, and of which they were, not infrequently, very skillful expounders thereof; also that Seminaries for training young men to the ministry they totally discarded. In fact; all Sandemanians were opposed to the stated ministry and all forms of priestliness. Rather than the terms 'bishop' or 'minister,' they would call their leaders 'elders.'

In conclusion, we insert the following, which may be found in the Preface of Sandeman's book, in relation to how he saw himself in the light of his desire to see the truth of the Gospel set forth.

"As the writer never had the honor to be a reverend gentleman, he has no title to urge on his neighbors his notion of the gospel, under pretense of his being vested with any

commission, or bearing any message from heaven. As he never had any pretensions to priesthood, it would be absurd in him to move them, by declaring how much he would offer, suffer, or intercede for their benefit. As he stands perfectly on a level with them all as to the kingdom of heaven, he has no title to dictate to them, or assume any airs of authority over them; nor does it become him to quarrel with them for neglecting his creed; yea, he is well satisfied, that they run no risk by despising anything that comes from him, provided they reverence their Maker to whom alone they are accountable. On the other hand, they cannot reasonably grudge him the liberty of expressing himself with the utmost confidence in behalf of his own creed. Again, as he is persuaded, 'tis not his business to consult the interest of religion, otherwise than by maintaining the truth of the gospel against all who corrupt it, and committing the success wholly to heaven, he has no reason to be greatly disconcerted at any opposition to his notion of that truth; all his readers, then, are very welcome for him to take their own choice, and treat it as they shall find occasion. Those who incline to reject it have this to encourage them, that the great majority of those who have the first repute either for orthodoxy, godliness, or good sense, will always be ready to keep them in countenance in so doing. And as for the cause to which the writer professes himself a retainer; he can assure them that it is already as advantageously situate in the world as becomes it, so stands in no need of any of them. - It belongs only to God so to mold and dispose the minds of men, as to make them see things in their proper point of light, and accordingly understand them as they really are."

Overall, and regardless of what the 'reformed masses' say in attempting to drown Sandeman's writings; we encourage a prayerful & careful examination thereof. MPJ