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# Theology for the Pulpit The Unity of the Godhead: The Chief Cornerstone of Definite Atonement

Steven Lawson<sup>1</sup>

The atoning death of Jesus Christ stands at the very heart of the gospel message. Christ and him crucified is the centerpiece of the Christian faith. His sovereign lordship and saving work are the alpha and omega of what we believe and proclaim. *Solus Christus*—Latin for Christ alone—is the power of God unto salvation and the wisdom of God unto eternal life. Jesus is the only Savior of the world, the sole Redeemer of those held in the bondage of their sins. He is the only hope for rebels against the rule of God to have a right standing before him and the only basis for admission into heaven. In short, there is no other hope for the sinner to find acceptance with God except in Jesus Christ.

Certain questions concerning the cross must be raised by thoughtful students of Scripture. We must ask the hard questions: For whom did Jesus die? Did he die for the entire world? Did he redeem every single person without exception? Did he die for people who were already condemned and suffering in hell? If so, what was the purpose of such a sacrificial death for damned souls enduring eternal torment? Did he die in vain for those who perished in unbelief?

In this article, we will explore a key argument in favor of answering these questions by affirming that Jesus dies only for the elect—a doctrine often referred to as definite atonement, particular redemption, or limited atonement. This is the biblical truth that Jesus died a definite death for a definite number of people that secured a definite result. It means that when Jesus Christ died, he exclusively bore the sins of the elect of God. He shed his blood for only those who would believe in him. This position understands the Bible to teach that Jesus did not die for those who were already in hell—or for those who would

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Lawson, DMin, is Founder and President of OnePassion Ministries.

eventually suffer in the lake of fire and brimstone. Neither was he made to be sin upon the cross for those who would die in their sin. Instead, Jesus laid down his life for his sheep, his chosen bride—the church.

Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof rightly defines the issues at hand when he states,

The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only. This is equivalent to saying that he died for the purpose of saving only those to whom he actually applies the benefits of his redemptive work. . . . The designs of God are always surely efficacious and cannot be frustrated by the actions of man. This applies also to the purpose of saving men through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Pinpointing the crucial question, Berkhof presses the issue further:

Did the Father in sending Christ, and did Christ in coming into the world, to make atonement for sin, *do this with the design or for the purpose of saving only the elect or all men?* That is the question, and that only is the question.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative understanding of the cross is that Jesus Christ died for everyone in the world. But consider the illogical presuppositions of this position. The argument maintains that each Person of the Trinity works to save an entirely different group of people. Within this thinking, God the Father merely looked down the tunnel of time to see who would choose him. Upon obtaining that knowledge, he, in turn, reciprocated and chose them back to be his elect. The Son then died for a distinctly different group of people—the entire world. The Holy Spirit then works upon a yet different group of people, only those who hear the gospel. All of this latter group are wooed, but only some believe.

By this confused understanding, there is utter disunity within the Godhead. Here, the Father works to save the elect, a divine choice

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1958), 394.

<sup>3</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 394.

merely based upon his foresight. The Son works to save every single person, dying for all mankind. The Spirit works to save all who hear the gospel, succeeding with some who believe, while failing with those who reject the message. By this hypothetical setup, each Person of the Godhead is working in contrary realms of endeavor. This position is the complete opposite from the words of Jesus, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

What I will suggest in this article is that the principle reason to believe that Jesus died for the elect is the oneness of the divine will in the saving purpose of the Trinity. A perfect solidarity exists between the Father, Son, and Spirit in their mission of salvation. They are intent upon saving these same chosen ones. Only this understanding preserves the integrity of the Godhead. Only this doctrinal position unites the saving enterprise of each Person of the Godhead toward the same individuals. The ones whom the Father has chosen are those whom the Son has redeemed and the Spirit regenerates—no more, no less.<sup>4</sup>

### The Indivisible Nature of God

The most strategic place to begin our study of the extent of the death of Christ is by affirming the indivisible nature of God himself. A right view of the cross starts with rightly understanding the essential being and inner working of the three Persons of the Trinity. We must know how God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in perfect oneness. Grasping the extent of the atonement begins with seeing how all three Persons of the Trinity are united in one saving purpose.

Historically, orthodox Christians firmly hold to the doctrine of the Trinity. The biblically consistent position is that there is one God who exists in three Persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. Each divine

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<sup>4</sup> The limitations of this article do not allow us to address every aspect of this profound subject. Many important aspects of this issue could be explored. Many more verses will beg to be exegeted, but cannot be given the attention they deserve due to the shortage of the present space. For further study, consider reading John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, John Murray’s *Redemption: Accomplished, and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), and David and Jonathan Gibson’s *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

Person is co-equal and co-eternal. Each one is of the same divine essence and is absolutely perfect in the same attributes. All three Persons are equally holy, equally righteous, and equally omnipotent. Likewise, they possess the same mind, affections, and will. All that the Father knows, the Son and the Spirit know. All that the Father chooses to do, the Son and the Spirit choose to accomplish. This solidarity was true in the creation of the universe. It is true, moment by moment, in God's governance over the affairs of providence. And it is true in God's singular saving will.

This oneness in their saving mission is why Jesus said we must baptize "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). This three-fold emphasis in baptism recognizes that all three Persons are involved in saving the same lost sinners. God the Father is a Savior, choosing his elect and entrusting them to the care of the Son. God the Son is a Savior, dying in the place of these elect sinners. God the Spirit is a Savior, regenerating these elect souls and granting them repentance and faith. Therefore, Christians do not baptize in the name of Jesus only, because he is not the only saving Person in the Godhead. Rather, we baptize in the name of all three Persons, because all three are directly involved in saving sinners—the *same* sinners, namely the elect of God.

## **The Trinitarian Mission of Salvation**

At the most foundational level, the trinitarian mission of redemption is the chief cornerstone of our understanding of the saving mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus was sent into the world to do the will and work of the triune Godhead. He came on a specific mission of salvation to accomplish the eternal will of the Father. The design of Christ's incarnation was not arbitrary, nor vaguely focused. Instead, Jesus was entrusted with a narrowly-aimed and tightly-defined assignment. Jesus principally came to die for the sinners he was commissioned to save.

Concerning this definite purpose, Jesus said, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Jesus was consciously aware that his primary mission was for rescuing sinners from divine wrath. He had not come for their judgment and eternal condemnation. The



world was already in such a state. John the Baptist identified Jesus as “he whom God has sent” (John 3:34). Jesus himself affirmed, “the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). He stated that being saved requires that one “believe in him whom he sent” (John 6:29). At the same time, unbelievers “do not believe that the Father has sent me” (John 6:38).

## **The Unity of Their Divine Purpose**

Regarding his coming into the world, Jesus proclaimed, “the living Father sent me” (John 6:57). Jesus claimed, “I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me” (John 7:29). In this sending, the Son remained one in purpose with the Father. Jesus said, “He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone” (John 8:29). As Jesus carried out his saving mission, the Father would abide in the Son and the Son in the Father. This speaks to the perfect unity of their divine being and will during Jesus’s earthly life and ministry. Here is the unbroken solidarity of their eternal purpose during Jesus’s incarnation.

As Jesus came into the world, he stressed that he came from the Father. He said, “I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but he sent me” (John 8:42). Jesus said he is the One whom “the Father sanctified and sent into the world” (John 10:36). This mission was to do the will of the Father and to accomplish the works the Father gave him to do. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he said the miracle was “so that they may believe that you sent me (John 11:42). A critical aspect of saving faith is believing that Jesus was sent by the Father to save sinners.

In his high priestly prayer, Jesus intercedes with the Father, saying that those given to him (John 17:2) will know “Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3). Jesus acknowledged that one distinguishing mark of a true believer is, “they believed that you sent me” (v. 8). Of one mind with the Father, Jesus agreed, “You sent me into the world” (v. 18). Again, “You sent me” (v. 21). Once more, “You sent me” (v. 23). Concerning the elect, Jesus stated, “These have known that you sent me (v. 25).”

## **The Solidarity of Their Sovereign Will**

It is agreed by all believers that the Father sent Jesus into this world to save. But for *whom* did God send his Son to die upon the cross? Jesus spoke emphatically that he was sent to accomplish a specific work. Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). In his saving work, Jesus would never act contrary to the will of the Father.

In taking the role of a servant, Jesus always acted in perfect harmony with the will of the Father. He said, “the Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (John 5:19). This perfect oneness of their divine will arises from the perfect oneness of their divine essence. The unity of their divine being and attributes caused Jesus to do only the will of the Godhead. He could not do the contrary. In humble subordination to the Father, Jesus proclaimed, “I do not seek My own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). It was this oneness of purpose that was evidenced at the cross.

Nowhere was there a tighter solidarity of purpose within the Godhead than when Jesus hung upon the cross. In Jesus’s death, the Father and he were working together with one mind and one purpose, collaborating on one saving mission.

Regarding this unified intent, Jesus said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me (John 6:38).” The context of these words concerns the coming of Jesus to redeem “all that the Father gives me” (v. 37). This is an unmistakable reference to his intention to save the elect. About “all that he has given me,” Jesus states, he will “lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day (v. 39).” At the cross, Christ specifically chose to save this same group of sinners who were given to him by the Father. This refers to the elect of God. At the end of the age, Jesus will resurrect unto life these same ones for whom he died.

## **The Eternal Nature of Their Love**

In the discourse on the Good Shepherd, Jesus speaks with unmistakable clarity about the limited extent of his death. Jesus said, “I

am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15). Being the good shepherd, Jesus states that the scope of his death will be exclusively for his sheep. Jesus will lay down his life for his sheep and lose not one of them. He loves his sheep, even as the Father loves him and he loves the Father. Because of this special love he has for them, he will sacrifice his own life unto death on their behalf.

These sheep were given to Jesus by the Father before he came into the world. Because they were chosen by the Father and entrusted to him as his flock, they are the particular object of his special, redeeming love. Not all people are his sheep (v. 26). Those who die in unbelief were never given to him. But Jesus intimately knows his own sheep and calls them individually by name (v. 3). He has foreknown each one of them from long ago, even from eternity past. He risks his own life despite threatening dangers in order to save them. All for whom he lays down his life will be saved. None for whom he dies will ever perish. This truth can only teach definite atonement.

## **The Oneness of Their Redemptive Plan**

Precise and profound are the words Jesus spoke on another occasion. He once again addressed the subject of those who “the Father . . . has given . . . to me” (John 10:29). In this context, Jesus taught that the Father and he work together in perfect unity to save forever the same sinners. Jesus said, “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (v. 28)—referring to these given ones, the elect of God. He then said, “no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (v. 29). Clearly, the Father and the Son are holding the same group of sinners in their hands. They are preserving the same ones from eternal destruction. The Son is not holding one group, while the Father is holding a different group. Rather, the Father and the Son are securely holding the same group—the elect of God. This was true at the cross in their saving purpose of redemption.

In the next verse, Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). Here, he establishes the oneness of their saving mission. When Jesus says that he and the Father are “one,” he does not refer to Them being one person. According to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, they are

two distinct Persons. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Rather, this means they are “one” in their saving purpose, “one” in their sovereign will, and “one” in their redemptive mission. Nowhere would this unity of purpose be more clearly evident than in the cross upon which Jesus died. Jesus came to redeem those whom the Father gave to him in eternity past to be his chosen bride. It was for these the Father commanded him to lay down his life (John 10:18).

## **Christ’s Priestly Intercession to the Father**

As the life of Christ unfolds, so does the clarity of his words on definite atonement. The night before his death, Jesus prayed to the Father, “even as you gave him authority over all flesh, that to all whom you have given him, he may give eternal life” (John 17:2). By his “authority over all flesh,” Jesus claimed absolute sovereignty over the destiny of every human life. In his saving death, he pledged to the Father to give eternal life to “all whom you have given him.” Those who were given to him are the elect. For these alone he will die, and to these alone he will give “eternal life.”

Jesus then prayed, “I glorified you on the earth, having accomplished the work which you have given me to do” (v. 4). In fulfilling the Father’s saving plan, Jesus came to save those whom the Father had given to him. This “work” assigned to him by the Father looks ahead to what he will accomplish upon the cross. This “work” refers to the atonement he will make the next day. These verses define the extent of his saving work upon the cross. As Jesus died, he did so exclusively for “all you have given him” (v. 2), the elect of God.

In this same prayer, Jesus made it clear that he was interceding for the elect, not for the non-elect. He prayed, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom you gave me; for they are yours” (v. 9). In like manner, he would die specifically for these same chosen ones. Jesus further prayed, “for all things that are mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them” (v. 10). Here he explained why his saving efforts would be so narrowly-aimed. It is because he jointly shares together the elect in the Trinity’s saving purposes.

## Finished Transaction Between Father and Son

As Jesus hung upon the cross, he completed his mission of salvation. He cried out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The word “finished” (*teleō*) means to bring something to a completed end. It carries the idea of succeeding in a task. This was an emphatic shout of victory, the declaration of a victor. By this proclamation, he declared that he was successful in fulfilling the mission that had been entrusted to him by the Father. At the cross, the sins of the elect were laid upon him, and he paid in full the sin debt of all for whom he died. He was the Lamb of God, who took away their sins (John 1:29, 35).

There was only resounding victory in the death of Christ. There was no defeat in his death. He did not suffer loss for any who would die in unbelief. None for whom he died will ever pay the price for the wages of their sins. “The certificate of debt” for everyone chosen by the Godhead was “nailed . . . to the cross,” “canceled out,” and “taken . . . out of the way” (Col 2:14). This cry of triumph from the cross proclaimed the finished transaction between the Father and the Son on behalf of all for whom he died. The debt had been paid in full. The mission was successfully completed.

## The Predetermined Plan of God

As the apostles carried forward the ministry and message of Jesus, they proclaimed this same truth. In Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost, he connected Christ’s atoning death to the Father’s eternal plan in electing individual sinners. He announced, “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death” (Acts 2:23). These two saving acts—Christ’s redeeming death and the Father’s eternal decree—are united here and cannot be separated. These two divine acts are singularly directed to the same people, the elect of God.

In this same sermon, Peter announced that it was the Father’s sovereign purpose to save “as many as the Lord our God will call to himself” (v. 39). Here, the doctrine of election stands behind and directs the effectual call of the Spirit. The Father will bring to himself “as many as” he will sovereignly summon—not one person more, not one

person less. All those chosen by the Father will be called to himself. Likewise, it is exactly these chosen ones who were given to Christ to die for their sins. Only by this understanding is the unity of the Trinity preserved. Otherwise, the Godhead would be fractured in their eternal purpose and divided in their saving will.

## **The United Efforts of the Godhead**

In Romans, the apostle Paul teaches the singularity of purpose between the Father's sovereign choice to love his elect before time began and the extent of the Son's atonement. He writes, "those whom he [the Father] foreknew, he also predestined" unto salvation (v. 29). Foreknowledge does not refer to divine foresight, as if God looked into the future to discover who would believe in Christ. Rather, foreknowledge refers to his sovereign choice of whom he would choose to love with distinguishing, redeeming love (Rom 9:13). These are the elect whom he "predestined" to be "called," "justified," and "glorified" (v. 30).

As Paul clarifies his teaching, he states that these chosen ones are those for whom Christ died. He writes, "He [the Father] . . . did not spare his own Son, but delivered him for us all (v. 32)." Those for whom God gave his Son are identified as "us" and "all," referring to all the elect. Lest there be any misunderstanding, these for whom God did not spare his Son are specifically identified as "God's elect (v. 33)." Paul further comments, "Christ Jesus is he who died, yes, rather was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us (v. 34)." Those for whom Jesus interceded upon the cross in his death are those for whom he presently intercedes in heaven, that is, the elect of God.

Here again, we see the unbreakable unity of the Trinity in the sovereign will of the Father and the saving intent of the Son. Those whom the Father chose in eternity past are the same ones for whom the Son died two thousand years ago. Likewise, these are the very ones whom the Spirit regenerates and grants repentance and faith. Only by this proper understanding of the operations of the Godhead can we accurately view the cross.

## Christ's Ransom Paid to the Father

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul shows the inseparable connection between the Father's eternal will in election and the Son's definite atonement. He gives praise to God the Father for "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3). These blessings of salvation were initiated by the Father in eternity past through his sovereign choice of his elect "before the foundation of the world (v. 4)." In turn, the Father guaranteed these blessings would come to these chosen ones whose salvation was "predestined (v. 5)." At the cross, God's Son secured "redemption through his blood" and "the forgiveness of our trespasses" for these same chosen ones (v. 7). Here, the extent of the atonement is defined by the truth of sovereign election.

The word "redemption" (*apolytrōsis*) means the payment of a ransom to secure the release of one who is enslaved.<sup>5</sup> It conveys the deliverance of one who is held captive in bondage. This passage states that an actual redemption price was paid by the Son "through his blood" (v. 7) that successfully secured the freedom of imprisoned slaves to sin. This was a real transaction that took place at the cross between the Son and the Father. In the death of Christ, he bore the sins of the elect and paid the ransom price to purchase their release from its penalty, which is death and condemnation.

In the death of Christ, the ransom was not paid to the devil, as some have erroneously speculated. The purchase price was paid to the Father. It was the holiness of God that had been offended. It was the Law of God that had been broken. It was the wrath of God that needed to be appeased. The blood of Christ was offered to God the Father to appease his righteous anger. The ransom was paid by Christ to the Father in an actual transaction that secured the forgiveness of the elect.

Later in Ephesians, Paul explicitly specifies that Christ died for the elect when he writes, "Christ . . . loved you and gave himself up for us (Eph 5:2). The extent of Christ's atonement is restricted to "you" and "us," referring exclusively to believers. Paul reinforces this when he adds, "Christ . . . loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5:25)." He stresses that Jesus died for the church, the universal body of

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<sup>5</sup> See Leon L. Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), Chapter 5.

believers, which is composed of the elect only. In both of these passages, Paul maintains that Jesus died exclusively for the elect.

## **The Sovereign Will of Election**

The apostle Peter likewise shows the unbreakable link between the sovereign will of the Father in election with the death of Christ. Peter addresses those “who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood” (1 Pet 1:1-2). We see here again the tight solidarity between each Person of the Godhead. Those whom the Father chose for salvation (v. 1) are the same ones that the Spirit has sanctified (v. 2). These, in turn, are those who obey Jesus Christ and have been sprinkled by his blood (v. 2).

The clear implication of these verses is that Jesus Christ shed his blood exclusively for those who will be sprinkled with his blood at the time of their conversion. These who would believe are the same ones who the Father chose in eternity past. Likewise, these are the same ones the Holy Spirit is sanctifying. This Trinitarian teaching in relationship to the salvation of sinners is consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Peter makes further clarification that Jesus “redeemed” these ones “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18-19). As seen in Ephesians, the word “redeemed” (*lytroō*) means to buy back someone who is held in bondage by the payment of a price. It means to obtain the release of a captive by the payment of a ransom. In this verse, it means to pay the price for the freedom of a soul that has been taken captive by sin. At the cross Jesus died in the place of the elect who were being held in the bondage of their sin. The purchase price paid to God to secure the salvation of the elect was the shedding of his own blood.

## **The Triumphant Extent of the Cross**

The purpose of this article has not been to address every argument in favor of definite atonement or answer all objections. Rather, I have explored the doctrine through the lens of one fundamental



## The Unity of the Godhead

biblical truth: the unity of the triune God. When we determine what God purposed to accomplish, then we know for whom Christ died. The *extent* of the atonement is determined by its *intent*. The objective of the cross was determined by the unconditional election of the Father, and Jesus died in oneness of saving purpose with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Because Jesus died exclusively for the elect, not one drop of his blood was shed in vain. Not an ounce of his life's blood was wasted. All for whom Jesus Christ died will be saved. This is the glorious message of the cross. Because of the victory of his death, Christ is building his church and the gates of Hades cannot—and will not—prevail against it. This is the truth that Jesus successfully redeemed all he came to save.

The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to any understanding of the extent of the atonement. A right belief about the doctrine of God should always be the lens through which this crucial subject is seen and rightly apprehended. The study of Theology Proper is the best interpretive grid through which to view this truth.

May this reality be sounded from every pulpit. May it be shared by every Christian. May it be held firmly by every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.



# Plain Speech on Church Discipline

Chipley McQueen Thornton<sup>1</sup>

One of the biblical marks of a true church is the proper practice of church discipline. However, few American evangelical congregations practice it. Consider J. Carl Laney's survey:

In a recent survey of 439 pastors on the matter of church discipline 50 percent acknowledged situations in their ministry where discipline would have been appropriate but no action was taken. Three major hindrances to the practice of church discipline were mentioned: (a) fear of the consequences or outcome, (b) preference for avoiding disruptive problems, and (c) ignorance of the proper procedures.<sup>2</sup>

That survey was taken in 1984. We had hoped the renewed emphasis on church discipline in the late twentieth/early-twenty-first century might help matters. It seemed to gain traction for a while, but then petered-out. Now, the situation seems to have worsened. A variety of reasons could be mentioned: the rage of the "seeker" (church growth)

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<sup>1</sup> Chipley McQueen Thornton, PhD, is Lead Pastor of First Baptist Church, Springville, Alabama.

<sup>2</sup> J. Carl Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (O-D 1986): 357. See also J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 142, where Laney states, "The pastors sampled came from a broad spectrum of denominations and theological persuasions. The largest groups of respondents represented the following: United Methodist (70); Southern Baptist (61); those who simply labeled themselves 'Baptist' (46); Missouri Synod Lutheran (20); the American Lutheran Church (19); the Lutheran Church in America (18); those who simply identified themselves as 'Lutheran' (22); the Assemblies of God (21); no denomination indicated (61). . . . The remainder of the 439 surveys came from pastors of such denominations as the Wesleyan Church, Church of God, Free Methodist, Christian Church, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Moravian, Conservative Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Mennonite, Church of the Brethren, Foursquare, Presbyterian Church in America, Church of Christ, General Association of Regular Baptists and many more." Laney's volume describes the survey at length on pages 140-150.

movement; the advent of the emergent church movement; the financial implications of taking a hard stance on church discipline, especially in megachurches strapped with massive building costs/debt; unhealthy churches planting more unhealthy churches; etc. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 opened-up a newfangled concept: online church. Further, the pandemic gave anyone who wanted it the excuse to forsake the assembly: health concerns. In all this, church discipline has been (all but) halted.

A new generation of pastors now is emerging—a generation who wasn't there when the resurgence of congregational discipline took place. If they've witnessed it at all, it's often done wrongly. In my conversations with younger pastors, they seem to be asking three questions: (1) When do you do it?; (2) How do you do it?; and (3) Why do you do it? We can't tackle every issue related to congregational discipline here. What we can do is acquaint a fresh generation of pastors as to its pervasive importance to a congregation's overall health. To do so, I've organized my thoughts this way: (1) a deep, exegetical dive into Matthew 18:15–20; (2) biblical guardrails for defining disciplinable offenses; and (3) implications pastors must consider as they execute congregational discipline.

## **Defining Church Discipline: An Exegesis Matthew 18:15–20**

### **The Structure of Matthew 18**

Matthew 18 is the fourth of five major teaching discourses found in Matthew's Gospel.<sup>3</sup> Some claim chapter 18 is a loose collection of sayings.<sup>4</sup> Others view the chapter as having definite structure (though they differ on the number of sections).<sup>5</sup> The theme of chapter

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<sup>3</sup> Estella B. Horning, "The Rule of Christ: An Exposition of Matthew 18:15–20," *Brethren Life and Thought* 38 (Spr. 1993), 69; R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 269.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 514.

<sup>5</sup> See Edward Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. by David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 358; R.T. France, *The Gospel According to*

18 is the relationship of believers within the church.<sup>6</sup> Verses 1–4 speak of entrance into the kingdom through child-like faith. Verses 6–9 warn of the consequences of causing another believer to stumble. Verses 10–14 illustrate the value of each believer. Verses 15–20 set forth procedures of church discipline and restoration. Finally, verses 21–35 illustrate God’s emphasis on forgiveness.

Matthew 18:15–20, therefore, is the fourth of five discourses in the chapter.<sup>7</sup> It neatly falls between sections discussing the value of each believer (10–14) and the emphasis of God’s forgiveness. Davies and Allison correctly observe, “In short, the way in which Matthew encircles vv. 15–20 is proof of his deep pastoral concern.”<sup>8</sup>

## Matthew 18:15

*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*<sup>9</sup>

This verse begins with the Greek phrase, “Moreover, if” (Ἐὰν δὲ).<sup>10</sup> Likely, this construction contrasts the “sinning brother” (v. 14) with the heavenly Father’s will that not one of the “little ones” perish.<sup>11</sup> This

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*Matthew*, 269; Estella Horning, “The Rule of Christ: An Exposition of Matthew 18:15–20,” 69–70; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:750–51.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Holman Publishers, 2000), 285. Contra James L. Boyce, “Transformed for Disciple Community: Matthew in Pentecost,” *Word and World*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Sum 1993): 313. Boyce asserts the emphasis as the unifying theme of the “kingdom of heaven.”

<sup>7</sup> See Dennis Duling, “Matthew 18:15–17: Conflict, Confrontation, and Conflict Resolution in a ‘Fictive Kin’ Association,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 37, pt. 1 (1998): 257.

<sup>8</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:751.

<sup>9</sup> All Scripture references taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>10</sup> Ἐὰν δὲ plus the aorist subjunctive occurs nine times in Matthew 18:15–20. See Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 531. Hagner states, “Each of these clauses, except the last, introduces a potential situation and is followed in the apodosis by what is deemed the appropriate action.”

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 367.

contrast is followed by the phrase, “your brother sins against you.” Three pertinent issues deserve mention.

First, the word ἀμαρτήσῃ simply means “to sin.”<sup>12</sup> Hagner suggests the word “is probably left deliberately imprecise so that a broad variety of offenses can be included.”<sup>13</sup> It is the only time that Matthew uses the word in this form (aorist, active, subjunctive, third person singular). Second, the word “brother” refers to a Christian brother. Davies and Allison state, “Here it clearly means ‘Christian brother.’”<sup>14</sup> Most scholars concur.<sup>15</sup> Third, scholars are divided on whether the phrase, “against you” (εἰς σέ) is part of the original Greek text.<sup>16</sup> Some ancient manuscripts have it; others don’t.<sup>17</sup> The parallel passage in Luke 17:3 omits the phrase. Even so, some scholars favor its inclusion on linguistic and contextual grounds.<sup>18</sup> Linguistically, Blomberg suggests it was omitted from some manuscripts “due to ‘homophony’—parts of different words that sound alike so that part of the text is accidentally omitted.”<sup>19</sup> Contextually, Gundry favors its originality for the following reasons: (1) Matthew inserts “between you and him alone” in the next clause and (2) that personal connection appears to

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<sup>12</sup> Cleon Rogers, Jr. and Cleon Rogers, III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, 530. See also William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 698. Hendriksen comments that the word “is of a very general nature.”

<sup>14</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:782.

<sup>15</sup> See Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 33b, 531; R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 274; Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 278; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 452.

<sup>16</sup> See Bruce M. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 45.

<sup>17</sup> See R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 274; Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 268, where Harrington states, “This phrase is absent from many important manuscripts. It was probably a scribal addition under the influence of Matt 18:21.” See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:782, fn. 3; Hagner, *Matthew*, 529.

<sup>18</sup> See Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, 278; Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, 367; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, trans. by James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 451; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:782; Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 453, fn. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 279.

carry over into the next section on forgiveness between two “brothers” (vv. 21–35).<sup>20</sup>

At this point, a decision must be made that will affect the application of the entire process: i.e., (1) if “against you” is original, then the thrust is the offended person must confront the sinner; however, (2) if “against you” is not original, then it opens-up the possibility for anyone to confront the sinner. Perhaps the most powerful piece of evidence is this: The phrase is not in the earliest manuscripts. Further, even if we omit the phrase, the general term for “sin” (ἁμαρτήση) still *would include* those sins committed against individual brothers. I conclude (albeit with some hesitation) the phrase probably should be omitted, although the unspoken implication “against you” certainly is implied and does no violence to the biblical author’s intent. The application (as we shall see) is that, when possible, the offended person should initiate the first step toward restoration.

The next phrase, “go . . . tell” lumps two imperative verbs next to one another (ὑπαγε ἐλέγχω). The first means “to go.”<sup>21</sup> The second means “to lay open, expose, uncover, reveal.”<sup>22</sup> The implication is: A single disciple should go to the individual privately and expose the sin. Preferably, the one who was wronged should initiate this, though we could think of scenarios in which this may not be possible or practical (i.e., it would not be wise for a woman who is wronged to confront another woman’s husband alone and in private).

The last phrase stacks two more verbs on top of one another, “if he listens . . . you have gained,” (ἀκούση ἐκέρδησας). The first means “to hear,” but has the connotation “to obey” (cf. John 5:25; 9:27;

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, 367.

<sup>21</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 41. Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, 291, notes that the present tense implies a “gentle, patient series of confrontations.”

<sup>22</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:783. See also Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 41. They add, “the implication that there is adequate proof of wrongdoing.” Scholars note there may be an echo of Leviticus 19:17. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 269, states, “The verb *elegxon* suggests the influence of the Septuagint text of Lev 19:17 (*elegmo elegxeis*). See D. A. Carson, *Matthew, Mark, Luke, Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 402; Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 367; Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 530; Edward Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, 358.

Acts 28:28).<sup>23</sup> The second means “to win, to gain.”<sup>24</sup> Christ asserts: When a person repents, then the brother has been won and should be restored to fellowship within the community of believers.

To summarize, Christ addresses his disciples in verse 15. He states that if a Christian brother sins, then the offended disciple privately should confront the sinning brother. He should expose to him the particular sin. The purpose is to persuade him to repent and, thus, be restored.

## Matthew 18:16

*But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

The first phrase contains the exact same verb for “listen” (ἀκούσῃ) as the previous verse and presents the undesirable scenario of an unrepentant person. The second phrase introduces another imperative verb, “take” (παράλαβε), indicating the single disciple should confront the sinning brother with two or three witnesses. The third phrase is almost an exact quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15 of the LXX.<sup>25</sup> Calvin documents the purpose of the witnesses: “to give greater weight and impressiveness to the admonition.”<sup>26</sup> The aim of this second step (i.e.,

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<sup>23</sup> See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:783; J. Carl Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” 359; Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 530, notes the term has the sense of responding appropriately.

<sup>24</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Keys to the Greek New Testament*, 41; Matthew K. Parackel, “Authority and Discipline,” *Cummunio Viatorum* 28, no. 3–4 (1985): 123.

<sup>25</sup> William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 700, fn 658, states, “The Hebrew text of Deut. 19:15 literally reads, ‘Upon the mouth . . . of two witnesses or upon the mouth of three witnesses the matter shall stand.’ The Septuagint inserts ‘all.’ . . . Clearly Matthew’s slight variation is not of any material nature. The rule as expressed in Hebrew was meant to apply to every case. And Matthew’s ‘by the mouth of two witnesses or three’ is identical in meaning to the fuller Hebrew phrase.” See also Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 532.

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. by William Pringle, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 355. Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, 292 states that reasons for the witnesses might be (1) to bring loving persuasion; (2) to prepare for the straying brother’s resistance; or, (3) to provide one or two moderators.



group confrontation) remains the same: To persuade the erring brother to repent and be restored to fellowship within the community of believers.

## Matthew 18:17

*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Matthew now presents a scenario in which the erring brother becomes hardened. “If he refuses” (παρακούση) means “to ignore, to refuse to listen to.”<sup>27</sup> The matter, at this point, escalates to a “church” (ἐκκλησία) matter. Nearly all scholars view this as the local assembly of believers rather than the universal church.<sup>28</sup>

The next phrase contains two items of interest. First, the verb, “if he refuses” (παρακούση) is repeated (perhaps for emphasis). Second, Matthew follows-up with this phrase: “let him be to you [singular, σοι] as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Carson states, “This suggests that each member of the church is to abide by the corporate judgment and reminds the reader of the individual responsibility each believer has toward the others, already presupposed by the singular ‘your brother’ in v. 15.”<sup>29</sup> Practically speaking, then, each individual member of the congregation is to treat the unrepentant brother as a pagan or tax collector, so that the congregation acts as one.

The practical difficulty comes in understanding precisely how a pagan or tax collector is to be treated. Calvin clearly asserts, “the meaning is, that we ought to have no intercourse with the despisers of *the Church* till they repent” (emphasis original).<sup>30</sup> Keener states they

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<sup>27</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> See W. F. Albright, *Matthew*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 220–221; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:785; Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 532; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 268.

<sup>29</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 403; Contra Stephenson Brooks, *Matthew’s Commentary: The Evidence of His Special Sayings* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 101. Brooks states, “The singular σοι can only refer to the original brother described in v. 15.”

<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 358. D.A. Carson, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 403,

should be treated as “unclean and to be avoided.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Laney exhorts, “It means to keep loving him as Jesus loved the publicans and sinners.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, we must determine the proper behavior toward unrepentant sinners.

It is generally recognized that Matthew wrote to a mainly Jewish-Christian audience. Jews despised both pagans and tax collectors.<sup>33</sup> Jews faithful to the Torah would have “nothing to do” with such a person and would break off all private contact with the person.<sup>34</sup> Since Matthew was writing to Jews (the audience—in the larger context of the entire Gospel narrative), Jesus was speaking to Jews (the disciples—in the immediate context), and the sinning brother had been given at least three opportunities to repent, then we can conclude that normal and friendly intercourse should cease until the sinning brother repents. However, this is not to suggest the Christian community “go dark” on the person or cease all communication without exception. To the contrary, he should be actively and warmly engaged with the gospel. The congregation must be clear that, in their eyes, he is demonstrating actions consistent with an unregenerate heart. At the same time, the congregation should seek to evangelize him with some sense of urgency.

## **Matthew 18:18**

*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

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states, “It is poor exegesis to turn to 8:1–11; 9:9–13; 15:21–28 and say that such people should be treated compassionately. The argument and the NT parallels (Rom 16:17; 2 Thess 3:14) show that Jesus has excommunication in mind.”

<sup>31</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 454; See also R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 275; Ulrich Luz, *Hermeneia*, 452; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (James Family Christian Publishers, Reprint), 254.

<sup>32</sup> J. Carl Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” 362; See also Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, v. 22, 279; James L. Boyce, “Transformed for Disciple Community: Matthew in Pentecost,” 313.

<sup>33</sup> See Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC, vol. 33b, 532.

<sup>34</sup> Luz, *Hermeneia*, 452.

Hiers lists five main interpretations of this passage:<sup>35</sup> (1) that authority was given to absolve or release a person from some sort of vow;<sup>36</sup> (2) that authority was given to determine which actions were forbidden and which permitted;<sup>37</sup> (3) that authority was given to exclude persons from the community (the majority view);<sup>38</sup> (4) that authority was given to forgive or withhold sins;<sup>39</sup> or (5) that Jesus's judgment pronounced upon the cities of Jerusalem would be ratified at the judgment before the Son of man.<sup>40</sup>

We must consider something else as well: The verse also appears in the context of the church (ἐκκλησίᾳ) in Matthew 16:19. However, three interesting differences should be noted between that passage and this one. First, the first line ("I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven") is absent from Matthew 18:18.<sup>41</sup> Second, Peter is addressed individually in Matthew 16:19, whereas the verbs are

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Hiers, "Binding' and 'Loosing:' The Matthean Authorizations," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (June 1985): 233–35. Hiers ultimately concludes that the verse expands on Jesus's authorization to exorcise demons by resolving whatever problems arise in the church.

<sup>36</sup> Hiers cites Z.W. Falk, "Binding and Loosing," *JJS* 25 (1974) 92–100 as defending this view; yet, I was unable to find other reputable scholars who take this position.

<sup>37</sup> See R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 275; Mark Allan Powell, "Binding and Loosing: A Paradigm for Ethical Discernment from the Gospel of Matthew," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30, no. 6 (Dec 2003): 438–45; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2004), 620.

<sup>38</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 280; George Wesley Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The Mellen Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, book 2 (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1996), 740; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:787; Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, 532–33; Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 215; Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 269; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 702; Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, 369; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 454–455; Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 176–77; Frank Stagg, *General Articles: Matthew–Mark*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 184; Weber, *Matthew*, 294.

<sup>39</sup> See John MacArthur, *Matthew 16–23*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 137–38.

<sup>40</sup> Hiers cites A. Schweitzer and Bornkamm as defending this position. Again, I was unable to find any other reputable scholars who take this position.

<sup>41</sup> See John Emerton, "Binding and Loosing—Forgiving and Retaining," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (Oct 1962): 325.

(second person) plural in Matthew 18:18. Third, the context of Matthew 16:19 concerns matters of conduct generally, whereas Matthew 18:18 concerns church discipline specifically.

Another issue to consider is this: The verbs from the respective roots, “to bind” (δέσσητε), and “to loose” (λύσητε), may be translated one of two ways in both Matthew 16:19 and in Matthew 18:18. They could be translated by the periphrastic future perfect passive tense, i.e., “shall have been bound;” or, they could be translated as a simple future tense, i.e., “will be bound.” If the former, the action of the church has already been anticipated in heaven. If the latter, the action of the church will be validated by heaven. Stagg rightly concludes, “Either way, agreement between heaven and church is pictured.”<sup>42</sup>

Based on the evidence presented above, I tend to agree with Hiers’s third option: That authority was given to exclude persons from the congregation. Calvin is persuasive when he says “whoever treats with ridicule the reproofs and threatenings of *the church*, if he is condemned by her, the decision which men have given will be ratified in heaven.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, the very fact the disciplinary procedure escalated to this point illustrates the authority of the congregation to determine which actions are permitted and which actions are forbidden (Hiers’s second option). In other words, the congregation has the authority to determine, based on case-specific contexts, what is or is not sin *for the purposes* of church discipline. I shall qualify this delegated “authority” below, but for now will leave it at this: The word, “to sin” (ἁμαρτήση), is an imprecise term—and a general one—that could include any and all sins. It follows that Jesus—and Matthew—likely left it imprecise, deliberately, to cede authority to the congregation to determine which sins are disciplinable offenses versus which ones are not.

I propose a combination of Hiers’s options two and three seems best. The “binding/loosing” refers to excommunicating/readmitting the erring brother. However, it can only refer to excommunication/re-admission because of the congregation’s conviction of what the congregation has deemed as sin (“whatever you bind on earth”) or not sin (“what you loose on earth”). Christ seems to grant the local congregation authority to “declare the terms under which God either forgives

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<sup>42</sup> Frank Stagg, *General Articles: Matthew-Mark*, 184.

<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 358. Emphasis original.

or retains sins (cf. John 20:22b–23).”<sup>44</sup> As Derrett concludes, Matthew 18:18 “grants a power finally to expel the recalcitrant; but the text itself speaks of a power which is not limited in this way: it does not necessarily have to do with forgiveness, or refusal to forgive sins. It enables, rather, conduct to be categorized, defined, both for the past and the future.”<sup>45</sup> In short, Christ appears to grant the congregation power to define what constitutes a disciplinable offense *and* to exercise discipline for those defined offenses.

## Matthew 18:19

*Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.*

Some scholars believe this verse is not included in the original. Albright states, “It is unlikely that this verse is in its original context, for while vs. 18 dealt with conduct on the part of the community’s members, vs. 19 is an exhortation to faithfulness in prayer.”<sup>46</sup> Albright neglects to recognize the context of the passage. First, the phrase begins with the connective adverb, “Again” (πάλιν), clearly connecting this verse to the previous discussion of congregational discipline. Second, the theme remains constant. Blomberg notes, “In this context v. 19 simply restates the theme of v. 18.”<sup>47</sup> Third, in no way does it violate the context of the previous verses. The thrust of this verse deals with congregational discipline and restoration.

Let us briefly explore three points. First, Derrett suggests this verse refers not to agreement in prayer, but to agreement between the offended and the offender.<sup>48</sup> He argues the word αἰτήσονται (“they ask”) can refer to out of court settlement disputes. Consequently, two individuals who come to such an agreement will receive the approval

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<sup>44</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary, 620.

<sup>45</sup> J. D. M. Derrett, “Binding and Loosing (Matt. 16:19, Matt. 18:18, John 20:23),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (Mar 1983): 116. Contra Herbert W. Bassler, “Derrett’s ‘Binding’ Reopened,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (June 1985): 297–300.

<sup>46</sup> W.F. Albright, *Matthew*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 221.

<sup>47</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC, 281.

<sup>48</sup> J. D. M. Derrett, “Where Two or Three Are Convened in My Name . . . : A Sad Misunderstanding,” *Expository Times* 91 (1979): 83–86.

of the Father in heaven. I found few who agree with Derrett on this point.<sup>49</sup>

Second, in keeping with the context, the root word of the term “anything” (πρᾶγμα) does have legal connotations (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1). Luz, perhaps correctly, suggests, “πρᾶγμα is a general term and is by no means a *terminus technicus* for ‘legal matter.’ When the reference is to a legal matter (as, e.g., in the case of 1 Cor 6:1) the context must clearly indicate as much.”<sup>50</sup> Luz’s line of thinking is used by those who wish to keep this passage centered exclusively on agreement in prayer-matters. However, Matthew 18:15–17, in fact, is set in a judicial context in which sin allegations are made, individual rights are protected (by two or three witnesses), and decisive action is taken (one way or the other). Carson is on-target when he says, “Scripture is rich in prayer promises, . . . but if this passage deals with prayer at all, it is restricted by the context and by the phrase *peri pantos pragmatos*, . . . which should be rendered ‘about any judicial matter.’”<sup>51</sup> This legal framework is in keeping with the context: congregational discipline.

Third, both verse 18 and verse 19 have the combination “earth . . . heaven” (though *heaven* is in a different form in the original). Hendriksen comments, “According to verse 18 the discipline exercised on earth is confirmed in heaven; according to verse 19 the prayer offered on earth is answered by Christ’s ‘Father in heaven.’”<sup>52</sup> This word-play illustrates further evidence of the development of the author’s thought.

I conclude: This verse is a continuation of the discussion of congregational discipline. The promise remains that if two are in agreement (possibly referring to the two witnesses in v. 16) on the matter of congregational discipline, then it will be done for them by the Father.

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<sup>49</sup> I located only one other scholar was found to support the view: Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation, 215.

<sup>50</sup> Luz, *Hermeneia*, 458.

<sup>51</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, 403.

<sup>52</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 702.

## Matthew 18:20

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*

Many commonly have misunderstood this verse as saying that Jesus is with two or three persons who are gathered in his Name. Weber accurately points out the weaknesses of this interpretation, “But such an interpretation is wrong for two reasons: (1) it takes the statements out of the context of church discipline and the pursuit of the straying brother; and (2) the conclusions that it leads to regarding prayer is contrary to Scripture.”<sup>53</sup> We might add: Jesus’s presence resides in and with every individual believer, not merely when two or three decide to congregate. More importantly, the context of congregational discipline continues from verses 15–19 and carries through the end of this verse.

The first phrase, “For where two or three are gathered in my name,” likely expands from the “two” witnesses mentioned in the previous verse<sup>54</sup> and has to do with the decision concerning the erring brother of the believing community.<sup>55</sup> This verse appears to provide spiritual assurance in the midst of practicing the difficult, and often-times uncomfortable, task of congregational discipline. Understood this way, Christ’s presence is assured, in a special way, during the actual execution of congregational discipline. The phrase, “there am I among them,” may be referring to a Jewish belief. Davies and Allison explain:

Verse 20 especially recalls a saying in *m. ’Abot* 3.2, recorded in the name of R. Hananiah b. Teradion (who was killed in the Bar Kokba revolt), the father-in-law of R. Meier: ‘But if two sit together and words of the Law (are spoken) between them, the Divine Presence rests between them . . .’. Similar is the saying attributed to R. Simeon ben Yohai (A. D. 100–70) in *m. ’Abot* 3.3:

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<sup>53</sup> Weber, *Matthew*, 294.

<sup>54</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 703.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, 177.

'If three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Law, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God.'<sup>56</sup>

Regardless, the assurance of having Jesus Christ present is comforting, especially considering the nature of the disciplinary circumstances.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Matthew 18:15–17 sets forth proper procedures for congregational discipline. First, a sinning brother should be confronted privately and individually (v. 15). Second, the unrepentant brother should be confronted privately by one or two more (v. 16). Third, the matter of the unrepentant brother is then to be brought to the congregation (v. 17). The purpose of each step is to persuade the sinning brother to repent that he may be restored to fellowship within the community of believers. Fourth, normal intercourse with the unrepentant brother should cease except for warm, heart-felt evangelistic purposes.

Verses 18–20 provide three beautiful promises. First, Christ promises that whatever the congregation binds and looses on earth will agree with heaven. This binding/loosing appears to be the authority of each local congregation to define what constitutes a disciplinable offense *and* the authority to exercise discipline for that offense. Second, Christ promises that if two are in agreement (possibly referring to the two witnesses in v. 16) regarding congregational discipline, then it will be done for them by the Father. Third, Christ promises to be in the midst of those who gather for the purpose of disciplining a wayward brother.

## **Defining Disciplinable Offenses**

Defining what constitutes a disciplinable offense is, perhaps, the trickiest part. Each situation is different, and the elders in each congregation must exercise careful wisdom and discernment. Never lose sight of the ultimate aim in the text: restoration of the wayward

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<sup>56</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:789–90.



brother. Mark Dever offers several other practical benefits for practicing congregational discipline:

1. For the Good of the Person Disciplined
2. For the Good of the Other Christians, as They See the Danger of Sin
3. For the Health of the Church as a Whole
4. For the Corporate Witness of the Church
5. For the Glory of God, as We Reflect His Holiness<sup>57</sup>

Scholars tend to categorize disciplinable offenses into broad categories. For instance, Kitchens posits the following four categories: (1) private and personal offenses that violate Christian love; (2) divisiveness and factions that destroy Christian unity; (3) moral and ethical deviations that break Christian standards; and (4) teaching false doctrine. Such categories can be helpful. However, they do not detail specific disciplinable offenses. This leads to the present-day dilemma: No one is clear about which sins rise to the level of discipline.<sup>58</sup>

As such, the Apostle Paul provides specific commands to disassociate with certain persons on at least six occasions in Scripture. He commands the respective congregations not to associate (1 Cor 5:9; 2 Thess 3:14), to turn away (Rom 16:17), to reject (Titus 3:10), to keep away from (2 Thess 3:6), and to avoid (2 Tim 3:5) certain types of people. We also have an instance in which Paul himself “handed over to Satan” certain individuals (1 Tim 1:19–20). As well, Galatians 6:1 contains an inference to disciplinable offenses. While space prevents a detailed exposition of the above-mentioned passages, a few general observations might offer some guidance in defining specific disciplinable offenses.

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<sup>57</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 186–92. See also Herbert Bouman, “Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (1959): 513–515.

<sup>58</sup> See Mark Littleton, “Church Discipline: A Remedy for What Ails the Body,” *Christianity Today* (May 8, 1981): 31.

## Disciplinable Offenses in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

A grievous situation arose in 1 Corinthians 5: A man committed sexual immorality with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1). Paul lamented that the Corinthian saints did not mourn over this wickedness (1 Cor 5:2). Then, he commanded them "to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor 5:5), indicating excommunication.<sup>59</sup> He later commands the congregation "not to associate" or "not even to eat" with a sinning brother (1 Cor 5:11). It remains unclear if the latter phrase refers to the Lord's Supper or not. However, the phrase, "not to associate" (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι), means "to have no company with."<sup>60</sup> Paul follows this command with a litany of vices defining what constitutes a sinning brother: the immoral,<sup>61</sup> covetous, idolater, reviler,<sup>62</sup> drunkard, or swindler.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, disciplinable offenses include this litany of vices. The elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters based on the authority that Matthew 18:18 vests in the congregation.

## Disciplinable Offenses in Romans 16:17–18

God divinely placed Romans 16:17–18 near the conclusion of the letter to the Romans. It is a warning to watch out for false teachers. Paul actually says to "avoid them" (ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν) (Rom 16:17).<sup>64</sup> The particular sins of these heretics are that they create "divisions"

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<sup>59</sup> See Harold Mare, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1976), 217–18; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 99.

<sup>60</sup> Archibald Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Vol. IV, The Epistles of Paul* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1931), 115. This word is used only three times in the New Testament (1 Cor 5:9, 11; 2 Thess 3:14).

<sup>61</sup> BDAG, 855, defines this term as "one who practices sexual immorality."

<sup>62</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the New Testament*, 358, define this term as "one who attacks another with abusive language."

<sup>63</sup> BDAG, 134, defines this term as a "robber".

<sup>64</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the New Testament*, 345, state that this term means "to come away from someone, to shun, to avoid."

(διχοστασίας)<sup>65</sup> and “obstacles” (σκάνδαλα).<sup>66</sup> Verse 18 declares these heretics do not serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, disciplinable offenses include these two types of sin: “divisions” and “obstacles.” Again, the elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters of these two sins.

## Disciplinable Offenses in 1 Timothy 1:19–20

The situation in 1 Timothy 1:19–20 is similar to the previous discussion in that it confronts two false teachers, Hymenaeus and Alexander. Their specific sin was blasphemy. The Apostle Paul states in this text that he handed them over (παρέδωκα) to Satan. Scholars debate the exact meaning of this phrase. However, it seems clear that the Apostle Paul is referring to some form of disciplinary action. Knight concludes, “Thus ‘delivering over to Satan’ is inextricably involved in putting a person out of the church fellowship (cf. Matt 18:17).”<sup>67</sup> Lea and Griffin iterate the same, “By excluding them from the fellowship of God’s people, Paul hoped that Satan’s affliction of the troublemakers would teach them not to insult the Lord by their words and deeds.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus, unrepentant blasphemy is a disciplinable offense. The elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters.

## Disciplinable Offenses in Titus 3:10

Titus 3:10 similarly addresses “one who stirs up division” (αἰρετικὸν), a Greek term which refers to a “division-maker.”<sup>69</sup> Lea and

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<sup>65</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 345. This term means division, offense, cause of stumbling.

<sup>66</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 539, fn. 49, states that this term refers to “the bait stick of a trap, and then trouble generally.”

<sup>67</sup> George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 111.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 81.

<sup>69</sup> Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC., 28.

Griffin comment that the words *heresy* and *heretic* are derived from the term,<sup>70</sup> while Knight more specifically states that the term refers to those who follow the teachings described in verse 9. Those teachings include such things as foolish controversies, genealogies, and quarrels about the law.<sup>71</sup> The Apostle Paul commands to “have nothing more to do with him” (παραιτοῦ), a Greek term which “probably has the sense *discharge, dismiss, drive out.*”<sup>72</sup>

Accordingly, disciplinable offenses include the above-mentioned types of factions. Once again, the elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters based on the authority that Matthew 18:18 vests in the congregation.

## **Disciplinable Offenses in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15**

The sin addressed here is laziness. The Apostle Paul twice mentions how to deal with idle people. The first is to “keep away” (στέλλεσθαι) from them (2 Thess 3:6). Rogers and Rogers state:

The word originally meant “to get ready,” “to equip,” esp. in reference to equipping an army for an expedition or for sailing. Then it came to mean “to bring together” or “to gather up,” as for instance one gathers or tucks up clothes. From this comes the sense of an inner gathering-up or withdrawal, and so of flinching and avoiding. Here it is withdrawal from brethren who are out of step.<sup>73</sup>

The second is to “not associate” (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι) with them (2 Thess 3:14), the same word used with the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5.

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<sup>70</sup> Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC, 328.

<sup>71</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, 354, states, “The law in view here is undoubtedly the OT law, with which the false teachers were especially concerned (1 Tim 1:7ff.)”

<sup>72</sup> BDAG, 764. Emphasis original.

<sup>73</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 485. See also BDAG, 942. Bauer cites the term as meaning “to keep one’s distance, keep away, stand aloof.”

The Apostle Paul had addressed idleness in his first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:11-12). Greene states, “Some members of the congregation continued the practice of not working but depending instead on others for their daily bread (2 Thess 3:11).”<sup>74</sup> Paul commands them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to withdraw from any brother “who is walking in idleness” (ἀτάκτως). Some versions translate “idleness” as “disorderly” (i.e., KJV). Tyndale renders it “inordinately.” Yet, the translation “idleness” captures the meaning nicely. Leon Morris explains:

“Disorderly” is the adverb from the same root as that which we examined in the note on “idle” (1 Thess 5:14). It shows us that the same people are in mind as in the former passage, and, that their offense was idleness. Paul speaks of the brother “that walketh disorderly” (*REB* “who falls into idle habits”); he is speaking of a continuing practice, not of an occasional offense.<sup>75</sup>

The nuance of idleness comes into sharper focus in the subsequent verses. Paul states the Thessalonians should follow his example of working night and day so as not to be a burden to them (2 Thess 3:7-9). He then states, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thess 3:10). Paul later attacks those who won’t work, calling them “busybodies” (2 Thess 3:11). The obvious implication: stay away from idle, lazy, slothful people.

The Apostle’s precise command is, “You keep yourself away from” (στέλλεσθαι) such persons (2 Thess 3:6). He later adds the already familiar command to “not associate” (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι) (2 Thess 3:14) with such people.

Thus, idleness is a disciplinable offense. As always, the elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters.

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<sup>74</sup> Gene Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 341.

<sup>75</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 253.

## Disciplinable Offenses in 2 Timothy 3:1–5

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, warning him of treacherous, ungodly behaviors in the last days.<sup>76</sup> Paul names certain types of persons to “avoid” (ἀποτρέπου) (2 Tim 3:5b), a term which appears only here in the New Testament. Bauer says the term means to “purposely avoid associating w. [sic] someone.”<sup>77</sup> Rogers and Rogers use more emphatic language, “The vb. [sic] is a strong one, implying that Timothy is to avoid them w. [sic] horror.”<sup>78</sup> The following three verses provide a list of eighteen types of people to avoid.

Verse 2 warns to avoid people who are lovers of self, lovers of money, proud (ἀλαζόνες),<sup>79</sup> arrogant (ὑπερήφανοι),<sup>80</sup> abusive (βλάσφημοι),<sup>81</sup> disobedient to parents, ungrateful (ἀχάριστοι),<sup>82</sup> and the unholy (άνόσιοι).<sup>83</sup> Verse 3 warns to avoid the heartless, unappeasable (ἄσπονδοι),<sup>84</sup> slanderous (διάβολοι),<sup>85</sup> without self-control, brutal (άνήμεροι),<sup>86</sup> and haters of good. Verse 4 warns to avoid the

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<sup>76</sup> Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy*, 223, speak of the term “the last days” as referring to the time of Christ’s completion of redemption until his return. Naturally, this would include Timothy’s day as well as ours.

<sup>77</sup> BDAG, 124.

<sup>78</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504.

<sup>79</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term means a boaster or bragger.

<sup>80</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term means haughty, arrogant, or one who shows himself above his fellow.

<sup>81</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term means abusive speech or slanderer.

<sup>82</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term means not thankful or not grateful.

<sup>83</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term may also mean wicked.

<sup>84</sup> BDAG, 145, states that it refers to “one who is unwilling to negotiate a solution to a problem involving a second party.”

<sup>85</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504, say, “Those who promote quarrels in hope that they may gain from them.”

<sup>86</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. This term means not tamed, uncivilized fear, or savage.

treacherous (προδόται),<sup>87</sup> reckless (προπετείς),<sup>88</sup> conceited (τετυφωμένοι),<sup>89</sup> and lovers of pleasure.

As such, disciplinable offenses include the above-mentioned types of sins. Of course, the elders of each local congregation will need to guide the members in defining more specific parameters based on the authority which Matthew 18:18 vests in the congregation.

## Defining Church Discipline in the Court of Law

American society today seeks to wield power through lawsuits. Congregational discipline does open-up pastors—and the congregation—to certain liability risks, particularly when the discipline is done outside of established protocol. To wit, establishing proper protocol (and following it) becomes critical. Implementing certain safeguards can mitigate risk and, hopefully, avoid lawsuits altogether.<sup>90</sup> Three main legal theories are used against churches in most lawsuits: (1) invasion of privacy; (2) outrage (intentional infliction of emotional distress); and, (3) defamation.<sup>91</sup> Quine notes that in every case he read, which was allowed to go to through a jury trial, the jury decided *against* the church.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, Laney offers the following suggestions:

1. Spell-out completely your beliefs in the church constitution or bylaws.
2. Acquaint those seeking membership with the church constitution.

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<sup>87</sup> Rogers and Rogers, *Key to the Greek New Testament*, 504. Rogers and Rogers state, “This term was used of one who is a traitor to his oath or one who abandons another in danger.”

<sup>88</sup> BDAG, 873. This term means rash, reckless, or thoughtless.

<sup>89</sup> BDAG, 873. This term means to be puffed up.

<sup>90</sup> Jay A. Quine is the pastor of Van Alstyne Bible Church, Van Alstyne, Texas. He is a former Municipal Court Judge and a former Deputy Prosecutor in Colfax, Washington. Quine has written an excellent two-part article on Court involvement regarding church discipline. See Jay A. Quine, “Court Involvement in Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Ja-Mr 1992), 60-73; Jay A. Quine, “Court Involvement in Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Ap-Je 1992), 223-36.

<sup>91</sup> Quine, “Church Discipline” (Ja-Mr 1992), 67.

<sup>92</sup> See JQuine, “Church Discipline” (Ap-Je 1992), 236, fn. 41.

3. Specify in the constitution: Members of the church have entered into a covenant to minister to one another's spiritual needs, and since this relationship is entered by mutual consent with the church leaders and congregation, it also ends only by mutual consent.
4. Refrain from publicizing information disclosed to the church leader in confidence.
5. Respect the privacy of the one being disciplined.
6. Refrain from publicizing the action outside the church family.
7. Consider out-of-court settlements or alternative settlement means if a lawsuit is filed.<sup>93</sup>

Wayne House, a former professor of law, adds the following practical guidelines:

1. Prepare church documents with an eye toward potential litigation.
2. Prepare church members for church discipline by having them sign a statement detailing the church's position (indicating their understanding of the moral, governmental, and doctrinal positions of the church, that they agree with these positions, and that they will submit to the spiritual authority of the church and its leadership).
3. Follow the church's standard consistently on all members to avoid potential allegations of discrimination.
4. Be up-front and honest with potential plaintiffs.
5. Consult an attorney.<sup>94</sup>

I should mention one other thought here. Some years ago, I worked for a law firm that defended employers in labor & employment litigation. I once had to subpoena a pastor: all notes, correspondences, emails, texts, etc. regarding a church member (the plaintiff). This

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<sup>93</sup>J. Carl Laney, "Church Discipline Without a Lawsuit," *Christianity Today* 28, no. 16 (W9 1984): 76.

<sup>94</sup> Wayne House, "Church Discipline and the Courts," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 70-72. At the time his article was written, House was the Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies and Apologetics at Faith Seminary, Tacoma, Washington, and Adjunct Professor of Law at Trinity International University.



alerted me to the implication for pastors: Anything reduced to writing (or on a device) could find its way into a court of law; and thus, into the public eye. Any documentation, therefore, should be exact, truthful, and factual. Remember, double-deleting items doesn't delete them. Hard drives can be subpoenaed and deleted data can be extracted forensically.

## Conclusion

Holy Scripture clearly calls the congregation to be a covenant community in the truest sense of the phrase. Healthy congregations will practice congregational discipline and restoration with a specific aim: not excommunication, but restoration.

The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession recognized the great importance of congregational discipline (my modernized rendering follows):

To each of these congregations he has given all power and authority needful for their carrying out that command which he has written for them to observe in worship and *discipline*. Such power and authority align with his mind as declared in his Word, with commands and rules for the true and correct exercise and execution of that power (2 LBF 26.7, emphasis mine).<sup>95</sup>

Those wise Baptist divines also saw the ultimate aim as restoration. They even offered specific instructions on restoration (2 LBC 26.13), which included seeking godly counsel from sister congregations in difficult cases (2 LBC 26. 15).

May this new generation of pastors rediscover, anew, this critical mark of a healthy congregation. It will make your congregation so much healthier in so many other areas, too.

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<sup>95</sup> The Confession cites the following Scripture references: Matthew 18:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 1 Corinthians 5:13; and, 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.



# Biblical Ordinances and Visible Signs: How Baptists Weakened Biblical Authority by Limiting Ordinances to Two

Scott Aniol<sup>1</sup>

Modern Baptists frequently claim that a key Baptist distinctive is the conviction that the church has been given only two ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>2</sup> For example, *The Baptist Faith and Message (2000)*, the confessional statement of the Southern Baptist Convention, describes a New Testament Church as a “congregation of baptized believers” that, among other things, observes “the two ordinances of Christ,” and the GARBC website similarly states, “The local church should practice two ordinances: (1) baptism of believers by immersion in water . . . and (2) the Lord’s Supper, or communion.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is often reflected in the first “T” in the convenient acrostic “B-A-P-T-I-S-T”: **B**iblical Authority; **A**utonomy of the Local Church; **P**riesthood of the Believer; **T**wo Ordinances; **I**ndividual Soul Liberty; **S**aved, Baptized Church Membership; **T**wo Offices; **S**eparation of Church and State. See, for example, *Baptist Distinctives: Are They Important to You?* (Schaumburg, IL: The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, both the *BF&M* and the *GARBC Articles of Faith* appear to be based on the 1833 *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, which simply says, “observing the ordinances of Christ” without specifying only two. The 1925 *BF&M* retained that language, while the 1963 and 2000 revisions added “two,” though the *GARBC Articles of Faith* did not. Similarly, Howard Foshee’s 1973 *Broadman Church Manual* states, “Baptists adhere to the concept that Christ left two ordinances for Christians to follow. These ordinances are baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (Howard B. Foshee, *Broadman Church Manual* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973], 33). Likewise, R. Stanton Norman claims, “Baptists have historically practiced two religious observances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005], 129); and Gregg Allison insists, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two ordinances given by Christ to his church” (Gregg R.

Yet this paper will demonstrate that limiting church ordinances to two has not always been the case for Baptists. Instead, I will show that Baptists only recently began using this language, adopting the term *ordinance* to replace the term *sacrament* in describing baptism and the Lord's Supper. I will first demonstrate that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptists listed more than only two ordinances for the church, followed by an exploration of their use of the term "sacrament" to distinguish baptism and the Supper from the other ordinances. I will then identify when and why language among Baptists changed to limit the ordinances to two and argue that this change weakened biblical authority among modern Baptists.

## Ordinances vs. Sacraments in Baptist Usage

### Ordinances

Early English Baptists employed the term "ordinance" more broadly than modern Baptists often do. For example, in his 1609 "Short Confession of Faith," John Smyth (1554–1612) states the "holy ordinances contained in the Word of God" for the church to be "ministers of the gospel, the doctrines of the holy Word, the use of the holy sacraments, the oversight of the poor, and the ministers of the same offices; furthermore, the exercise of brotherly admonition and correction, and, finally, the separating of the impenitent."<sup>4</sup> In 1674, Hanserd Knollys (1514–1596) described prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and singing as ordinances;<sup>5</sup> Thomas Patient (d. 1666) listed prayer, hearing, baptism, the Lord's Supper, thanksgiving, almsgiving, and maintenance;<sup>6</sup> Thomas Collier (c. 1615–c. 169) listed baptism, prayer, praise, preaching, the Lord's Supper,

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Allison, "Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 [2009]: 10).

<sup>4</sup> John Smyth, "Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles (1609)," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William L. Lumpkin, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 100–113.

<sup>5</sup> Hanserd Knollys, *Christ Exalted: In a Sermon* (London, 1645), 2; Hanserd Knollys, *The World That Now Is; and the World That Is to Come: Or the First and Second Coming of Jesus Christ* (London: Thomas Snowden, 1681), 70–76.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Patient, *The Doctrine of Baptism* (London: Hills, 1654), 171.

assembling, admonition, discipline, community of goods, and holiness;<sup>7</sup> and Praisegod Barbone (c. 1598–1679) used the term *ordinance* for everything ordained by Christ for the church.<sup>8</sup> The articles of faith in Benjamin Keach’s (1640–1704) church state that Christ’s holy ordinances include “prayer, [reading] the Word of God, and preaching, with baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, etc.,”<sup>9</sup> and elsewhere he lists other ordinances such as church discipline and days of prayer and fasting.<sup>10</sup> Keach also argued that “laying on of hands (with prayer) upon baptized believers . . . is an ordinance of Christ, and ought to be submitted unto by all such persons that are admitted to partake of the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>11</sup> He called singing a “sacred ordinance,”<sup>12</sup> explicitly arguing that singing is just as much “an holy ordinance of Jesus Christ” as baptism is.<sup>13</sup> He taught that “the work of a pastor is to preach the Word of Christ, or to feed the Flock, and to administer all the ordinances of the gospel which belong to his sacred office.”<sup>14</sup>

This extended view of the term *ordinance* was reflected in early Baptist confessions as well. The *First London Confession of Faith* published in 1644 explicitly identifies preaching as an ordinance along with baptism in Article 38, though it does not call the Lord’s Supper an ordinance. The 1651 *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* describes “all the laws or ordinances of Jesus Christ” for “the congregation or

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Collier, *The Right Constitution and True Subjects of the Visible Church of Christ* (London: Henry Hills, 1654), 9–18, 70–86.

<sup>8</sup> Praisegod Barbone, *A Reply to the Frivolous and Impertinent Answer of R. B. to the Discourse of P. B.* (London, 1643), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of the Faith of the Church of Christ, Or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-Down* (London: Wing, 1697), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and Its Discipline Display’d Wherein a True Gospel-Church Is Described: Together with the Power of the Keys, and Who Are to Be Let in, and Who to Be Shut Out* (London: Wing, 1697), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 23–24. See also Benjamin Keach, *Laying on of Hands upon Baptized Believers, as Such, Proved an Ordinance of Christ. In Answer to Mr. Danvers’s Former Book Intituled, A Treatise of Laying on of Hands* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1698).

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: Or Singing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: Hancock, 1691), 86.

<sup>13</sup> “You, it seems, take the same way to destroy the ordinance of singing God’s praises, as they take to destroy the ordinance of baptism: but this will do your business no better than that will do theirs; dipping is washing, but every washing is not dipping” (Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 18).

<sup>14</sup> Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 8–9.

fellowship of Christ” as the Lord’s Supper and prayer (including “sounding forth his praises with understanding” (51–53). The 1678 *Orthodox Creed* describes as “ordinances of God” baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and fasting. The 1689 *Second London Baptist Confession* identifies baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church to the end of the world” (28.1); while it does not explicitly identify any additional ordinances beyond the two, it never directly states these two are the only ordinances and later ambiguously refers to “professed subjection to the ordinances of the gospel” (26.6), stating that a church “consists of officers and members . . . for the peculiar administration of ordinances” (26.8). In fact, though it does not use the term “ordinance,” Article 22 lists other “parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him” in addition to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, including “the reading of Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord” (22.5).<sup>15</sup>

Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists continued along the same line, some referring ambiguously to ordinances without limiting to two, and others explicitly listing ordinances beyond only baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For example, in 1743 Benjamin Griffith (1688–1768) states that a pastor is “to administer all the ordinances of Christ, amongst them: as baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, and herein he must be careful to follow the primitive pattern, thereby to hold forth the great end, wherefore they were ordained.”<sup>16</sup> In 1769, John Gill (1697–1771) explicitly lists “public ordinances of divine worship” beyond baptism and the Supper, including the public ministry of the Word, public prayer, singing psalms, and place and time of public worship.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Charleston Baptist Association’s 1774 A

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<sup>15</sup> The likely reason the *Confession* uses the term *ordinance* only for baptism and the Lord’s Table is that its use of the term replaced *sacrament* from the *Westminster Confession*. More below.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church (1743),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 98.

<sup>17</sup> John Gill, *A Body of Practical Divinity: Or a System of Practical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (1769) (Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001), 896–972.

*Summary of Church Discipline* notes that church members must “walk together, in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord”<sup>18</sup> and insists that pastors “are to administer the ordinances of the gospel in a strict conformity to the Word of God.”<sup>19</sup> It does explicitly identify the Lord’s Supper as an ordinance,<sup>20</sup> but it does not mention baptism nor limit ordinances to two.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it claims that “excommunication is on all hands acknowledged to be an ordinance of Christ, the great Head of the church,”<sup>22</sup> and in the context of discussing this ordinance also refers to “all other ordinances in general.”<sup>23</sup> In 1847, Joseph S. Baker (1798–1877) also called church discipline an ordinance of the church, insisting, “We are sticklers for the rules which God has prescribed for the administration of gospel ordinances.”<sup>24</sup> W. B. Johnson (1782–1862) in 1864 lists among the ordinances: church discipline, restoration, the Lord’s Supper, exercise of spiritual gifts, giving to those in need, the reading of Scripture, singing, and prayer, all to be observed on the first day of the week.<sup>25</sup> Even the 1833 *New Hampshire Baptist Confession* describes a “visible church of Christ” as broadly “observing the ordinances of Christ,” without mentioning what those ordinances are. Interestingly, the 1920 *Baptist Faith and Message* and the GARBC *Articles of Faith*, both originally based on the *New Hampshire Confession*, retain the ambiguous language; only later in 1963 does the *BF&M* explicitly

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<sup>18</sup> The Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, “A Summary of Church Discipline (1774),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 118.

<sup>19</sup> “Summary of Church Discipline,” 121.

<sup>20</sup> “The constitution of churches is plainly supposed, *Acts 2:47, Matt.18:17, etc.*, and it is necessary, in order that the disciples of Christ may enjoy the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, which is a church ordinance, that they watch over one another, warn the unruly, and lay censures on disorderly and impenitent persons” (“Summary of Church Discipline,” 118, 121).

<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, it does mention “administering the Word and ordinances” (“Summary of Church Discipline,” 119).

<sup>22</sup> “Summary of Church Discipline,” 128.

<sup>23</sup> “Summary of Church Discipline,” 131.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph S. Baker, “Queries Considered or an Investigation of Various Subjects Involved in the Exercise of Church Discipline (1847),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 264, 277.

<sup>25</sup> W. B. Johnson, “The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ (1846),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

limit the ordinances to two, and the present form of the GARBC *Articles* does not.

## Sacraments

Clearly, Baptists well into the nineteenth century used the term *ordinance* more broadly than simply to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Those who listed other ordinances, however, did nevertheless often set baptism and the Supper apart from the other ordinances. For example, Keach stated, "all persons have free liberty to assemble with the church, and to partake of all ordinances, save those which peculiarly belong to the church; as the Lord's Supper, holy discipline, and days of prayer and fasting."<sup>26</sup> These ordinances, therefore, were limited to church members only, while other "public" ordinances, according to Keach, were open to non-member participation, such as prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, and singing.<sup>27</sup> Keach's catechism states explicitly: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ from the other ordinances of God in that they were specially instituted by Christ to represent and apply to believers the benefits of the new covenant by visible and outward signs" (Q. 99).<sup>28</sup>

In order to set these two ordinances apart from the others, early Baptist authors often—though not universally—employed the traditional term *sacrament*. John Smyth's 1610 Confession states, "There are two sacraments appointed by Christ, in his holy church, the administration whereof he hath assigned to the ministry of teaching, namely, the Holy Baptism and the Holy Supper."<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the 1678 *Orthodox Creed* refers to baptism and the Supper as "those two sacraments," which are "ordinances of positive, sovereign, and holy

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<sup>26</sup> Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> "Yet others may attend on all other public ordinances with the church; as public prayer, reading, and preaching the word and in singing God's praises, as hath formerly been proved" (Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 60).

<sup>28</sup> *Instructions for Children: Or, The Child's and Youth's Delight Teaching an Easy Way to Spell and Read True English Containing the Father's Godly Advice and Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual Manner to Educate Their Children with a Scripture Catechism, Wherein All the Chief Principles of True Christianity Are Clearly Open'd. Together with Many Other Things, Both Pleasant and Useful for the Education of Children* (Horsely-down New Stairs, Southwark: John Robinson, 1763).

<sup>29</sup> Smyth, "Short Confession."



institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church, to the end of the world.”<sup>30</sup>

Keach likewise used the term. He defined a “church of Christ” as a congregation “among whom the Word of God and sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ’s institution,”<sup>31</sup> and he distinguished performing “all duties of instituted worship” from administering the “sacraments.”<sup>32</sup> He specifically designated the Lord’s Supper as “a holy sacrament,”<sup>33</sup> and his catechism asks, “What are those gospel ordinances or sacraments, which tend to confirm us in this faith?” The answer is: “the Lord’s Supper and baptism.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, as John Gray asserts, “Keach believed that God commands the church to uphold nine ordinances, of which two are sacraments or signs.”<sup>35</sup> Kiffin also distinguished between “Word and sacraments,”<sup>36</sup> and both Thomas Lambe (d. 1672) and Hercules Collins (1646–1702) also used the term.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptists argued that there are more than two ordinances given to the church, and they set baptism and the Lord’s Supper as special, but although some

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<sup>30</sup> “The Orthodox Creed, or a Protestant Confession of Faith, Being an Essay to Unite and Confirm All True Protestants in the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion, Against the Errors and Heresies of Rome (1679),” in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 325.

<sup>31</sup> Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 5–6. See also *Preaching from Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (1681) (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 715: “That the true church of God is a number of sincere and godly Christians who have solemnly covenanted, and given up themselves, to walk in the true order and fellowship of the gospel, according to the exact rule of God’s Word, amongst whom the Word of God is truly preached, and the sacraments are duly and in a right manner administered.”

<sup>32</sup> “The New Testament is the only rule or perfect copy, by which we ought to act and perform all duties of instituted worship, and administer sacraments, &c. which are mere positive precepts, and depend only upon the will and pleasure of the law-maker” (Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin’d Or, Baptism in Its Primitive Purity* [London, 1689], 141).

<sup>33</sup> Keach, *Preaching from Types and Metaphors*, 632.

<sup>34</sup> *Instructions for Children*, 85.

<sup>35</sup> John Kimmons Gray, “The Preacher of Spiritual Worship: Benjamin Keach’s (1640–1704) Desire for Primitive Purity in Worship” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 251–52.

<sup>36</sup> William Kiffin, *A Brief Remonstrance of the Reasons and Grounds of Those People Commonly Called Anabaptists, for Their Separation* (London, 1645), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Lambe, *A Confutation of Infants Baptisme* (London, 1643), 37; Hercules Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation from the Communion of the Church of England* (London: How, 1682), 393.

designated the latter as *sacraments*, this practice was certainly not universal. In fact, no major Baptist confession other than the *Orthodox Creed* used the term *sacrament*; notably, the 1689 *Baptist Confession* explicitly replaced the term *sacrament* in the Westminster Confession with *ordinance* throughout. This alone likely influenced the change in later Baptist use of the terms.

## Shift in Later Baptists

Language referring to only two ordinances begins to appear more regularly among Baptists in the mid-nineteenth century. A few authors in the early nineteenth century seem to imply only two ordinances, such as George Gibbs in 1821 and Edward Underhill (1813–1901) in 1845.<sup>38</sup> In 1849 J. L. Reynolds (1812–1877) clearly argued, “The New Testament contains traces of only two Christian ordinances. These are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>39</sup> In 1860, P. H. Mell (1814–1888) asserted that “a minister has two functions” consisting of “preach[ing] the gospel” and “administer[ing] the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper,” seemingly restricting ordinances to those two as distinguished from preaching.<sup>40</sup> In 1863 Eleazer Savage (1800–1886) also appears to distinguish “observance of the ordinances” from

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<sup>38</sup> “The duties which Christianity enjoins upon its disciples are classed under two heads; moral and positive. The former arise from the moral relation or fitness of things, and approve them selves to the consciences of all intellectual beings; the latter are founded upon an express command, and derive their obligation from the authority by which they are enforced: such are the two ordinances of the Christian church—baptism and the Lord’s supper” (George Gibbs, *A Defence of the Baptists: Or, the Baptism of Believers by Immersion the Only Baptism of the Christian Dispensation*, 2nd ed. [London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1829], 4); “Baptism and the Lord’s supper are the two visible ordinances of the covenant of grace” (Gibbs, *A Defence of the Baptists*, 29); “Looking , then , at the two ordinances of the gospel . . .” (Edward Bean Underhill, *The Baptist Record, and Biblical Repository*, vol. 2 [Oxford: G. & J. Dyer, 1845], 8).

<sup>39</sup> J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ, in Its Internal and External Development (1849),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 363.

<sup>40</sup> P. H. Mell, “Corrective Church Discipline: With a Development of the Scriptural Principles Upon Which It Is Based (1860),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 458.

preaching and prayer.<sup>41</sup> In 1882, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) unequivocally asserts, “We know of two ordinances instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ—the baptism of believers and the Lord’s Supper; and we utterly abhor and reject all pretended sacraments of every kind.”<sup>42</sup>

John Briggs suggests that this shift in language among Baptists in the nineteenth century, what he describes as a “low view of the sacraments,” grew in conjunction with the arguments of Robert Hall (1764–1831) and others in the early nineteenth century in favor of a more open communion. Briggs suggests, “In refusing communion to others, the closed communionists, Robert Hall argued, were like the Roman Catholics setting themselves up as the only true church.”<sup>43</sup> Catholicism was enjoying somewhat of a revival in England at the time, and so this ad hominem association of closed communion with Catholicism, according to Briggs, “made Baptists far too negative and reactive in their thinking about the sacraments, now more frequently referred to as ordinances, although all too often conceived in such minimalist terms as even Zwingli would not own.”<sup>44</sup>

Argument against Romanist sacramentalism does appear to factor, for example, in Reynolds’s claim in 1849 that the New Testament contains only two ordinances. In the context of this claim, Reynolds strongly insists that “the external means of grace possess no intrinsic efficacy, but derive their tendency to confirm and strengthen the saints solely from the appointment of God. None of them are invested with the agency of an *opus operatum*, a power to convey grace by their inherent efficiency.”<sup>45</sup> Reynolds also rejects the term *sacrament* because it is “not to be found in the Word of God.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 1887 James Petigru Boyce (1827–1888) claimed that “the continued use of the word sacrament . . . led many to attach a superstitious sacredness to [the] ordinances” of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, insisting

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<sup>41</sup> Eleazer Savage, “Church Discipline, in Two Parts, Formative & Corrective; in Which Is Developed the True Philosophy of Religious Education (1863),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 511.

<sup>42</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “The Right Observance of the Lord’s Supper (1882),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 45 (Lond: Passmore & Alabaster, 1899), 421.

<sup>43</sup> J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 64.

<sup>44</sup> Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Reynolds, “Church Polity,” 363.

<sup>46</sup> Reynolds, “Church Polity,” 389.

that use of the term “has no scriptural authority.”<sup>47</sup> Concern about Romanist superstition may have subsequently solidified replacing the term *sacrament* for baptism and the Lord’s Supper with the term *ordinance*, as well as the consequent result of insisting on only two ordinances. For example, in 1874 Spurgeon commented, “I have often grieved over the fact that these two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, have become nests in which the foul bird of superstition has laid her eggs.”<sup>48</sup>

By the twentieth century the practice among Baptists of replacing *sacrament* with *ordinances* and thus limiting ordinances to two had become firmly established.<sup>49</sup>

## Defining the Terms

What appears evident is that a key reason Baptists have limited ordinances to two is that they replaced the term *sacrament* with *ordinance* due to concern with what the former term implies about baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, a brief survey of the meaning and use of both terms may provide some clarity.

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<sup>47</sup> James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology (1887)* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 423.

<sup>48</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “The Double Forget-Me-Not (1874),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 54 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1908), 315.

<sup>49</sup> As noted above, the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* retained from the New Hampshire Confession ambiguity regarding the number of ordinances, and the GARB *Articles of Faith* still does; but the 1963 *BF&M* states that churches observe “the two ordinances of Christ,” which the 2000 revision retains. Some Baptist authors do acknowledge the shift in language from *sacrament* to *ordinance*. For example, R. Stanton Norman, while claiming, “Baptists have historically practiced two religious observances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” admits, “evidence does exist that a few Baptists on occasion have used the term *sacrament*, but the vast majority of Baptists commonly use the word *ordinance* to refer to baptism or the Lord’s Supper. The words *sacrament* and *ordinance* are sometimes used interchangeably” (Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 129). Others make historically indefensible claims, such as Paul Enns who states, “Protestants have historically recognized two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1989], 359); and Rolland McCune asserts, “Some, mainly non-Baptists, have adopted the word *sacrament* for ordinance” (Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 3: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* [Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Se, 2010], 269).

## Ordinance

Historically, the term *ordinance* signified those clear prescriptions given by Christ and his apostles for the church. Often early Baptists' descriptions of the ordinances include modifying phrases that indicate as such. Many examples were already cited above, but a few more will solidify the point. For example, Keach admonished churches to "keep all the ordinances of Christ as they were once delivered to the saints, owning the Holy Scriptures to be the only rule of their faith and practice."<sup>50</sup> Ordinances were commands of "divine institution" that must be observed, according to Keach.<sup>51</sup> Knollys insisted that "the whole worship of God and all the sacred ordinances of the Lord be administered according to the gospel institutions, commandments, and examples of Christ and his holy apostles," and he condemned "inventions and traditions of men being mixed with the holy ordinances of God."<sup>52</sup> William Kiffin claimed, "I have no other design, but the preserving the ordinances of Christ, in their purity and order as they are left unto us in the holy Scriptures of truth, and to warn the churches to keep close to the rule, least they be found not to worship the Lord according to his prescribed order he make a break among them."<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Reynolds argued, "To a devout mind, it cannot be a matter of trivial interest, that the ordinances of the gospel not only derive their validity from the appointment of the great Head of the Church, but are hallowed and commended to our imitation by his own example." On this basis, he argued, "Baptism is a positive institution."<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, Baptist use of the term *ordinance* to describe all of the biblically prescribed elements of public worship fit within their broader concern for what Matthew Ward calls "pure worship" based upon clear biblical prescription.<sup>55</sup> Early English Baptists clearly

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace: Or the Covenant of Peace, Opened. In Fourteen Sermons* (London: Bridge, 1698), 252-53.

<sup>51</sup> Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Hanserd Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation* (London, 1688), 123-24, 101-103.

<sup>53</sup> William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (Baptist Standard Bearer, Incorporated, 2006), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, "Church Polity," 364.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

articulated in their confessions of faith, “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself” (LBC 22:1). John Spilsbury (1593–1668) declared, “The holy Scripture is the only place where any ordinance of God in the case aforesaid is to be found, they being the fountain-head, containing all the instituted rules of both of church and ordinances.”<sup>56</sup> John Gill later proclaimed, “Now for an act of religious worship there must be a command of God. God is a jealous God, and will not suffer anything to be admitted into the worship of him, but what is according to his Word and will.”<sup>57</sup> They insisted that the practices of the church be limited to what Scripture—specifically, the New Testament—commanded, and as Kiffin noted, “that where a rule and express law is prescribed to men, that very prescription, is an express prohibition of the contrary.”<sup>58</sup> This concern among Baptists continued well into the early nineteenth century, as seen by John Fawcett’s (1739–1817) very direct assertion in 1808:

No acts of worship can properly be called holy, but such as the Almighty has enjoined. No man, nor any body of men have any authority to invent rites and ceremonies of worship; to change the ordinances which he has established; or to invent new ones. . . . The divine Word is the only safe directory in what relates to his own immediate service. The question is not what we may think becoming, decent, or proper, but what our gracious Master has authorized as such. In matters of religion, nothing bears the stamp of holiness but what God has ordained.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the term *ordinance* meant those practices for the church’s worship that were clearly prescribed in the New Testament; these ordinances must be practiced, and no other. Knollys defined the “pure worship of God” as that which strictly observed the “holy

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<sup>56</sup> John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: n.p., 1643), 89.

<sup>57</sup> John Gill, *Complete Body of Practical and Doctrinal Divinity: Being a System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Printed for Delaplaine and Hellings, by B. Graves, 1810), 899.

<sup>58</sup> Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 28–29.

<sup>59</sup> John Fawcett, *The Holiness Which Becometh the House of the Lord* (Halifax: Holden and Dawson, 1808), 25.

ordinances of the gospel.”<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Henry Jessey (1603–1663) insisted, “Forms or ordinances are ways and means of divine worship, or Christ’s appointment,”<sup>61</sup> and these early Baptists defined “will-worship” as “every administration and application of an ordinance of Christ, otherwise than according to the rule of the Word.”<sup>62</sup> Edward T. Hiscox (1814–1901) helpfully defined *ordinance* as “institutions of divine authority relating to the worship of God, under the Christian Dispensation.”<sup>63</sup>

W. B. Johnson explicitly derived the term *ordinance* from 1 Corinthians 11:2, which in the King James Version reads, “Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances [παράδοσεις], as I delivered them to you.”<sup>64</sup> He stated, “I use the term *ordinances* . . . as meaning exercises of divine worship, enjoined upon the disciples in their stated meetings.”<sup>65</sup> Joseph Baker likewise alluded to 1 Corinthians 11:2 when he admonished, “Let us labor to keep the law of God, as well as the ordinances of the gospel, ‘as they were delivered to the saints.’”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, regardless how much early Baptists debated exactly what the ordinances were or how they should be practiced, biblically-pure worship was *the* early English Baptist distinctive.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, fidelity to New Testament prescription continued well into the nineteenth century. As late as 1881, William Wilkinson (1833–1920) argued, “It is not for obedience in baptism according to any definition, even according to the true definition, that Baptists stand. What Baptists stand for is obedience to Christ in everything—

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<sup>60</sup> Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation*, 189.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Jessey, *A Storehouse of Provision to Further Resolution in Several Cases of Conscience* (London: Charles Sumptner, 1650), 9.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Cox, Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin, *A Declaration Concerning The Publike Dispute Which Should Have Been in the Publike Meetinghouse of Alderman-Bury* (London: n.p., 1645), 18.

<sup>63</sup> Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1894), 119.

<sup>64</sup> Modern versions translate *paradoseis* as “tradition.”

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, “The Gospel Developed,” 204.

<sup>66</sup> Baker, “Queries Considered,” 282.

<sup>67</sup> This is the subtitle of Matthew Ward’s book and the core of his argument (Ward, *Pure Worship*). See also Scott Aniol, “Form and Substance: Baptist Ecclesiology and the Regulative Principle,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2018).

in baptism, certainly; but in all other points not less. Their organizing principle is the principle of universal obedience.”<sup>68</sup>

Twentieth-century Baptists agree with earlier definitions of *ordinance* as a New Testament command for church practice, such as Sam Bradford, who states, “An ordinance is understood to be a symbolic ceremony exemplified by Christ, commanded by him for perpetual observance, and practiced by the NT church with their evident understanding that such observance should be continued in the practices of the NT church.” Nevertheless, he continues by asserting that such commands are only two.<sup>69</sup> Bradford is not unique. For example, Arthur Farstad insists that “to be a valid ordinance of the Christian church,” a practice had to be “instituted by Christ himself,” “practiced in the Acts of the Apostles,” and “explained in the Epistles of the NT.” He then claims, “Only two ordinances meet these three criteria: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Charles Ryrie argues, “Using the basic idea in ordinance of ‘prescribed rite or practice,’ a working definition of an ecclesiastical ordinance might be ‘an outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by his church.’ Such a definition,” Ryrie argues, “would reduce the possible number of ordinances to two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>71</sup> Rolland McCune similarly explains, “In the end, Scripture indicates that an ordinance must have the following four ingredients: sovereign authorization by the Lord Jesus Christ, symbolism of saving truth, specific command for perpetuation, [and] biblical evidence of historical fulfillment or practice. . . . Accordingly, Baptists assert,” says McCune, “that only two ordinances fit the biblical criteria—water baptism and communion.”<sup>72</sup>

Yet one wonders, if a proper definition of *ordinance* is a practice prescribed in the New Testament for observance by churches to the end of the age, as both early Baptists and recent Baptists seem to agree, then are there really only two practices that qualify? Certainly

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<sup>68</sup> William Cleaver Wilkinson, *The Baptist Principle in Its Application to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881), 8.

<sup>69</sup> Sam Bradford, “The New Testament Church,” *Central C. B. Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1958): 25.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur L. Farstad, “We Believe In: The Lord’s Supper,” *JETS* 4, no. 1 (1991): 7.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 149.

<sup>72</sup> McCune, *A Systematic Theology: Volume 3*, 269–70.



early Baptists seemed to go overboard in their debate over what elements may be considered biblical ordinances, but some are clearly prescribed and enjoy near universal agreement among Baptists: reading the Word (1 Tim 4:13, Col 4:16, 1 Thess 5:27), preaching the Word (1 Tim 4:13, 2 Tim 4:2), singing the Word (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19), prayer (1 Tim 2:1, Col 4:2, Eph 6:18), baptism (Matt 28:19), and the Lord's Table (1 Cor 11:23–32).

Hiscox's 1894 definition of *ordinance* and subsequent restriction to two illustrates the problem.<sup>73</sup> As mentioned earlier, Hiscox defines *ordinance* as "institutions of divine authority relating to the worship of God, under the Christian Dispensation." This leads him to acknowledge, then, that "in this general sense there are various ordinances; since preaching and hearing the Word, prayer, singing, fasting, and thanksgiving may all be considered as institutions of divine authority." However, he then reflects the change in terminology common to his day by stating, "but in a narrower and a more distinctive sense it has been common to call baptism and the Lord's Supper by this name." This leads him to insist, then, that baptism and the Supper are "are the only Christian ordinances committed to the churches, and are for perpetual observance," and again later, "These two, therefore, baptism and the Supper, are the two sacred rites, and the only ones, enjoined by Christ for perpetual observance in his churches. . . . Christ has appointed no others," Hiscox claims. "They are positive institutions, . . . their claim to respect and observance rests . . . on the simple fact that Christ has established them and commanded their obedience." But based on Hiscox's own definition of an ordinance, are preaching and hearing the Word, prayer, singing, fasting, and thanksgiving not committed to the church for perpetual observance?

If an *ordinance* is a church practice prescribed in the New Testament, then at minimum six qualify, not two. One may object to this argument on two grounds: first, some modern Baptist definitions of the ordinances insist that an ordinance must be prescribed by Christ himself, in effect ascribing more weight to the red letters in the NT than to the black. This objection fails since Jesus Christ himself delegated authority for the church to his apostles; Christ is the church's cornerstone, but the apostles are her foundation (Eph 2:18–22). Thus, in instituting the Lord's Table, for example, Paul could say, "For I

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<sup>73</sup> Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 119–20.

received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (1 Cor 11:23). To obey the apostles is to obey Christ, and to ignore them is to ignore their Master.<sup>74</sup> The second objection to listing at least six ordinances of the church is that it ignores the special significance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. To this objection I would simply reply that clearly early Baptists were able to set apart baptism and the Supper while at the same time listing more biblically-prescribed ordinances. They did so both through clear instruction and in some cases, as noted above, by retaining the word *sacrament*. This leads to a discussion of that term.

## Sacrament

Though the term *sacrament* came into use earlier,<sup>75</sup> Augustine (354–430) may have been the first to give the term clear definition: “The reason these things are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit.”<sup>76</sup> Often Augustine’s definition of *sacrament* is simplified to “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”<sup>77</sup> The medieval Catholic understanding of both the nature and number of sacraments devolved over time, yet the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers retained the term, restricting its use to describe only baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and insisting that the sacraments have no efficacy in themselves apart from the Word and Spirit. John Calvin (1509–1564) defined a sacrament as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on

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<sup>74</sup> Ryan J. Martin makes this argument in “Love for Christ and Scripture-Regulated Worship,” *Artistic Theologian* 8 (2020): 23–46.

<sup>75</sup> The Latin term, *sacramentum*, appears to come into use as early as Tertullian, as a translation of the NT Greek, μυστήριον (“mystery”). See Tertullian, *The Five Books Against Marcion*, in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, 3:319–474; Theodore B. Foster, “‘Mysterium’ and ‘Sacramentum’ in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions,” *The American Journal of Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 1915).

<sup>76</sup> Augustine, “Sermons,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 272.

<sup>77</sup> R. S. Wallace, “Sacrament,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 965. See Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, III, 84 (c. 410), in James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 120.

our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.”<sup>78</sup> But he strongly stresses, “it is not as if I thought that there is a kind of secret efficacy perpetually inherent in them, by which they can of themselves promote or strengthen faith.”<sup>79</sup> Rather, Calvin insisted, “let it be a fixed point, that the office of the sacraments differs not from the Word of God; and this is to hold forth and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace. They confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith.”<sup>80</sup>

Early Baptists used the term *sacrament* within this Protestant context, considering baptism and the Lord’s Supper to be visible signs of spiritual grace. For example, Smyth noted, “These are outward visible handlings and tokens, setting before our eyes, on God’s side, the inward spiritual handling which God, through Christ, by the cooperation of the Holy Ghost, sets forth the justification in the penitent faithful soul; and which, on our behalf, witnesses our religion, experience, faith, and obedience, through the obtaining of a good conscience to the service of God.”<sup>81</sup> Keach defined a sacrament as a “sign or representation.”<sup>82</sup> He argued that a sacrament has two parts, “an outward element or sign, and the inward grace signified by it.”<sup>83</sup> Kiffin also described the sacraments in language similar to Calvin: “As the Supper is a spiritual participation of the body and blood of Christ by faith, and so (not merely by the work done) is a means of salvation, so baptism signs and seals our salvation to us, which lies in justification and discharge of sin.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.14.1.

<sup>79</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

<sup>80</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

<sup>81</sup> Smyth, “Short Confession.”

<sup>82</sup> Keach, *Gold Refin’d*, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Keach, *Preaching from Types and Metaphors*, 636.

<sup>84</sup> Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 25–26.

## Means of Grace

Early Baptists agreed with their Reformed counterparts not only that baptism and the Lord's supper are visible signs of spiritual graces, but also that all the divinely instituted ordinances are means of grace to those who practice them in faith. For example, Keach stated, "We believe that the outward and more ordinary means, whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, are his holy ordinances, as prayer, the Word of God, and preaching, with baptism, and the Lord's Supper, &c. and yet notwithstanding it is the Spirit of God that maketh prayer, reading, &c. and specially the preaching of the Word, effectual to the convincing, converting, building up, and comforting, through faith, all the elect of God unto salvation."<sup>85</sup> Knollys asserted, "The end why the church is so planted, builded, and formed, is that they may meet together in one to worship God publicly in spirit and truth in all his sacred gospel ordinances, to the glory of God, and for the mutual edification of that mystical body of Christ, whose head he is."<sup>86</sup> Benjamin Cox (1595–c. 1663) said of baptism, "and where this obedience is in faith performed, there Christ makes this his ordinance a means of unspeakable benefit to the believing soul."<sup>87</sup> The 1689 *Confession* states that "the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened" (14.1). It says specifically of the Supper, "Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally, but spiritually present" (30.7). Later, Spurgeon stated that the Lord's Supper "is more than a memorial, it is a fellowship, a communion. Those who eat of this bread, spiritually understanding what they do, those who drink of this cup, entering into the real meaning of that reception of the wine, do therein

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<sup>85</sup> Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 20–21.

<sup>86</sup> Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation*, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin Cox, *An Appendix to a Confession of Faith* (London, 1646), 38.

receive Christ spiritually into their hearts.”<sup>88</sup> Spurgeon’s catechism explicitly states, “The outward and ordinary means whereby the Holy Spirit communicates to us the benefits of Christ’s redemption, are the Word, by which souls are begotten to spiritual life; baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and meditation, by all which believers are further edified in their most holy faith.”<sup>89</sup> Boyce similarly states, “The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are also means of sanctification.”<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, many modern Baptists who restrict ordinances to two define those ordinances similarly to the more historic definition of sacrament. For example, Hiscox defines the two ordinances as “visible signs which appeal to the senses, [and] teaching institutions which appeal to the understanding and the heart.”<sup>91</sup> A. H. Strong similarly states, “By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ had appointed in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel.”<sup>92</sup>

## What We Lost

What this brief historical survey has demonstrated is that the terms Baptists have used to describe all of the clearly prescribed New Testament elements of public worship and the two distinct visible signs has changed over time. One might suggest that this was simply a necessary simplification of language as Baptist doctrine became more settled. However, I would suggest that along with this change,

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<sup>88</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “The Greatest Exhibition of the Age (1889),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 39 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1893), 218.

<sup>89</sup> Question 71, *Spurgeon’s Catechism*, 1855.

<sup>90</sup> Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology (1887)*, 421. Even Paige Patterson argues that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are more than “mere symbol” and contribute to sanctification (Paige Patterson, “Observing Two Ordinances—Are They Merely Symbols?,” in *Upon This Rock: A Baptist Understanding of the Church*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010], 102–15). See also Michael A. G. Haykin, “‘His Soul-Refreshing Presence’: The Lord’s Supper in Calvinistic Baptist Thought and Experience in the ‘Long’ Eighteenth Century,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 177–93.

<sup>91</sup> Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 120.

<sup>92</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 930.

especially in insisting that the NT contains only two ordinances, Baptists lost at least three important biblical emphases.

First, and most importantly, modern Baptists have weakened the importance of biblical authority over their worship, at least in part by losing the term *ordinance* to describe all NT commands for church practice. By restricting the term *ordinance*—a term that both means and is explicitly defined by Baptist authors as “a command”—to only baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Baptists at least imply that churches need not restrict their practice only to what the New Testament commands. Certainly churches may do more than baptize and celebrate the Supper. All other elements of public worship are left ambiguous and, by implication at least, require no biblical prescription. Thus, while all Baptist churches also include preaching, prayer, Scripture reading, and singing, most do not refer to them as NT ordinances, and they often include more than what the New Testament prescribes.

That modern Baptists lost the early Baptist allegiance to strict biblical simplicity in worship during roughly the same period as the shift in language from at least six ordinances to two is no coincidence. Many Baptist church services today could hardly be described as regulated by Scripture, including as they do many elements not prescribed in the NT. Along with other factors, such as revivalism, pragmatism, and church growth methodology, one contributor to this loss of concern about biblical authority in worship may be the language Baptists use to describe what they do when they gather. Recovering the term *ordinance* for *all* of the biblically-prescribed elements of worship could help to stress their importance and prevent the introduction of elements not prescribed.

Second, over-reaction to the *ex opera operato* sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism by Baptists, part of the reason for changing the meaning of the term *ordinance*, has weakened Baptists’ understanding of the spiritual benefit of all the biblically-prescribed ordinances. As noted above, Baptists throughout history have recognized that God has prescribed the means through which he sanctifies his people, namely, the six ordinances. The regular, disciplined use of these means of grace progressively forms believers into the image of Jesus Christ; these are the means through which Christians “work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [them], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). They are means of grace for a believer specifically because they are what God has

ordained in his Word; in fact, the prescribed elements are the Word—reading the Word, preaching the Word, praying the Word, singing the Word, and “seeing the Word” in baptism and the Supper. Calling them all ordinances will help to recover recognition that they are means of grace.

Third, change in terminology has also led to weakening the special spiritual significance of baptism and the Supper. This is ironic, considering that one reason many Baptists give for specifically designating only baptism and the Supper as ordinances is that it raises the significance of the two above everything else. However, the change in terminology has had the opposite effect. The Lord’s Supper particularly has become rather insignificant in many Baptist churches, perhaps observed once a quarter or once a month, but certainly not as frequently as other elements these Baptists do not even consider ordinances. Recovering the traditional use of ordinances at minimum helps to demonstrate that all of what the NT prescribes for worship, including baptism and the Supper, are equally important for the spiritual well-being of the congregation.

## Proposal

At minimum, I propose that we should stop claiming that holding to two ordinances is a Baptist distinctive. It may be now, but it has not been historically nor biblically. The New Testament prescribes at least six ordinances for the church: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, preaching, Scripture reading, prayer, and singing—we ought to call them ordinances to emphasize their biblical mandate, just like our Baptist forefathers did.

We ought also to set apart baptism and the Lord’s supper from the other ordinances in that (a) they are unique to the church (and not Israel), (b) they are restricted to believers, and (c) they are visible signs. However, nineteenth-century Baptist rationale for rejecting the term *sacrament* does have warrant, especially so as Evangelical rapprochement with Roman Catholicism grows and errant sacramentalism threatens a biblical view of worship. Perhaps we can distinguish them simply through explanation and practice, or perhaps deliberately using a term like *visible sign* would communicate their significance.

Attention to clarity in the terms we use for the practice of public worship may help us to “stand firm and hold to the [ordinances]<sup>93</sup> that [we] were taught by [Christ’s apostles], either by [their] spoken word or by [their] letter[s]” (2 Thess 2:15).

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<sup>93</sup> παραδόσεις.



# The Rise and Fall of Keach’s Catechism: Evidence of an Underdeveloped Baptist Theology of Children

Corey Johnson<sup>1</sup>

How does the Baptist tradition view believers’ children? Historically, Baptists have axiomatically rejected infant church membership and infant baptism, yet this level of consensus does not exist regarding a positive understanding of believers’ children. Baptist literature is teeming with thorough considerations of believers’ children in terms of who they are not (they are not the proper recipients of baptism or church membership by birth),<sup>2</sup> but the same thorough consideration has not been given to believers’ children in terms of who they are.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of consideration concerning the positive understanding of believers’ children has been recognized and expressed by Baptist theologians for more than five decades. In 1970, Clifford Ingle wrote: “What Southern Baptists need is a positive theological understanding of the child.”<sup>4</sup> Thomas Halbrooks, a decade later, observed that “Baptists have been delinquent in giving adequate attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> Corey Johnson, PhD, is a pastor at Providence Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of scholarly works on seventeenth-century English Particular Baptists related to the children of believers’ see Corey W. Johnson, “Instructor of Children: An Analysis of Benjamin Keach’s Doctrinal Understanding of Believers’ Children” (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 25–29.

<sup>3</sup> An important question that needs to be examined is whether believers’ children are to be considered as disciples (who are raised and encouraged in the ways of God), or as little heathens (who are nothing more than evangelistic prospects)? Pedobaptists such as David Engelsma assert that rejecting covenant children is to consider them outside the church because “they are nothing but heathens, little heathens to be sure, but heathens nevertheless, like all other ungodly people, whom the church at the most should evangelize” (David Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* [Grandville, MI: Reformed Free, 2005], 10).

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Ingle, *Children and Conversion* (Nashville, TN: Broaman, 1970), 15.

relationship of the child to the church.” While Baptists have emphasized regenerate church membership and rejected infant baptism, Halbrooks notes that “Baptists did not consider the place of children in the church to be a fitting topic for extended theological debate.” As a result, Halbrooks points out that Baptists have been unclear in answering questions such as: What is the eternal fate of infants who die? Is there a proper age for baptism and church membership? Is there an advantage to being born into a Christian home?<sup>5</sup> Mark Dever echoes these sentiments in his 2012 publication, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, indicating that “one of the areas in most need of reexamination in today’s churches is the relation of the children of church members to the church.”<sup>6</sup>

Such a reexamination is necessary since the church’s practice pertaining to children flows directly out of its beliefs about children. Practical concerns related to what the child and the church can and should do flow directly out of the fundamental nature of who the child is in relation to the church. G. S. Harrison summarized this issue well as he connected the practical to the fundamental:

Are we to regard them as Christians (in the full sense of that term, and surely there is no other) until they specifically deny it by word and/or by life? Or conversely, are we to look upon them as non-Christians until by word and life they specifically

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Halbrooks, “Children and the Church: A Baptist Historical Perspective,” *Review & Expositor* 80, no. 2 (1983): 179. In response to Halbrooks, it is unfair to assume that Baptists intentionally left questions unanswered regarding the children of church members. The Baptist tradition has not existed in a context that lent itself to a thoroughly developed theology of children. Early Baptists were consumed with the question of identity, namely the identity of the church; since Baptists rejected the practice of infant baptism it was necessary to define who belonged to the church. Therefore, early Baptists spent considerable time articulating and defending regenerate church membership and believer’s baptism. In fact, these beliefs still receive considerable attention today. In addition to establishing and defending Baptist identity, Baptists have also been involved in a great number of controversies throughout the years that have taken much time and attention away from the discussion of the theology of children. Some controversies in which Baptists have been involved include soteriology, missions-sending organizations, the use of confessions, slavery, Baptist church succession, biblical inerrancy, and the role of women in the church.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 153.

deny it? Is their state (not counting the beneficial home influences that will bear upon them) no better than that of the most godless heathen? Dependent upon your answer will be your whole approach to the children's work of the church. How do the responsibilities, duties and potentialities of the children of believers differ from those of the children of unbelievers?<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the number of young adults leaving the church warrants a reexamination of the church's relationship to believers' children. According to Lifeway Research, sixty-six percent of young adults who attended church regularly as teenagers stopped attending between the ages of eighteen to twenty-two.<sup>8</sup> This statistic is consistent with previous studies that highlight a similar trend. According to the Family Life Council findings in 2002, eighty-eight percent of children raised in evangelical homes leave church at the age of eighteen, never to return.<sup>9</sup> Another study conducted by Lifeway in 2007 shows that seventy percent of young adults between the ages of twenty-three to thirty stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages eighteen to twenty-two.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a survey performed by the Pew Research Center in 2012 demonstrated that eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds make up the least religious age group.<sup>11</sup>

While these statistics point to the need for a reexamination of the church's relationship to believers' children, this article would be remiss to claim that no research has been done in this area. Scholarly work related to practical considerations such as baptismal and

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<sup>7</sup> G. S. Harrison, "The Covenant, Baptism and Children," *Tyndale House Bulletin* 9 (October 1961), 14.

<sup>8</sup> "Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go between Ages 18-22," accessed Nov 18, 2019. <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Young-Adult-Church-Dropout-Report-2017.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Walker, "Family Life Council Says It's Time to Bring Family Back to Life," accessed November 18, 2019. <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc02/newsroom/newspage.asp?ID=261>.

<sup>10</sup> Scott McConnell, "Lifeway Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-year-olds Drop Out of Church," Lifeway.com, accessed November 18, 2019. <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>.

<sup>11</sup> "Nones' on the Rise," accessed November 18, 2019. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. This paragraph has been adapted from Johnson, "Instructor of Children," 4-5.

conversion age does exist,<sup>12</sup> but there is little to no work regarding the fundamental nature of the child.<sup>13</sup> The aim of this paper, however, is

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<sup>12</sup> The following is a brief survey of the significant scholarly works related to childhood conversion and baptismal age. Lewis Craig Ratliff considered the question of conversion and baptismal age in Southern Baptist churches, and he argued for a conversion age of no younger than fourteen (Lewis Craig Ratliff, “Discipleship, Church Membership, and the Place of Children among Southern Baptists an Investigation of the Place of Children in a Baptist Church in View of Christ’s Teachings on Discipleship and the Baptist Doctrine of the Church” [PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963]). Along similar lines Melvin Douglass Clark focused on evangelism of children in Southern Baptist churches and he argued against the baptism of young children (Melvin Douglas Clark, “The Evangelism of Children: A Study in Southern Baptist Practice” [PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1969]). Gary Thomas Deane’s work compliments both Ratliff and Clark as he observed the childhood conversion experience. His focus was on the child’s conception of conversion, baptism, and membership, and his findings demonstrate a better understanding of these three elements among older children (Gary Thomas Deane, “An Investigation of the Child’s Conception of Christian Conversion, Baptism, and Church Membership Compared with Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development” [EdD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982]). After Deane, John Warren Withers considered the social forces affecting baptismal age in Southern Baptist churches, and he attributed the decline in baptismal age to social factors (John Warren Withers, “Social Forces Affecting the Age at Which Children Are Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches” [PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997]). Following in the same vein is Thomas Sanders who examined the phenomenon of childhood conversion (Thomas J. Sanders, “The Kingdom of God Belongs to Such as These: Exploring the Conversion Experiences of Baptist Children” [PhD diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2009]); and B.J. Cranford who observed current practices in Baptist churches related to the age of accountability, conversion, and the faith development of children in the church [B. J. Cranford, “A Study of Baptist Pastors’ and Childhood Ministry Leaders’ Practices Relating to the Age of Accountability” (EdD diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2016)]. Continuing the theme of childhood conversion and baptismal age, Gordon Miller and Robert Matz rejected the psychological theories which impacted the aforementioned works but they continued to examine childhood conversion and baptismal age (Robert Joseph Matz, “Should Southern Baptists Baptize Their Children? A Biblical, Historical, Theological Defense of the Consistency of the Baptism of Young Children with Credobaptistic Practices” [PhD diss., Liberty University, 2015]; Gordon Goldsbury Miller, “A Baptist Theology of the Child” [ThD diss., University of South Africa, 1992]). Although not a dissertation like the aforementioned works, the compilation of essays on children and conversion, edited by Clifford Ingle focuses primarily upon the topics of baptismal age and childhood conversion. Ingle, *Children and Conversion*.

<sup>13</sup> *Children and Conversion* edited by Clifford Ingle is the closest I have found to addressing the fundamental nature believers’ children, but this work is mostly concerned with practical considerations pertaining to baptismal age and childhood conversion.

not to address these fundamental questions but rather to draw awareness to the need for Baptists to address such questions pertaining to the relationship between believers' children and the church. This objective will be achieved by surveying the historical changes that occurred in Baptist children's instruction. During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, catechetical instruction of children was prevalent among Baptists, but this once-common practice was almost completely abandoned when the twentieth century experienced a shift from catechetical instruction to the evangelistic emphasis of Sunday school. This transformation was not necessarily caused because Baptists failed to address the fundamental nature of believers' children, but it ought to give us pause and lead historians and theologians to ask whether this transformation was the result of theological development, the outcome of pragmatism,<sup>14</sup> or the outworking of Baptists spending too little time considering and articulating the fundamental nature of believers' children. Regardless, the need remains for Baptists to consider the relationship between believers' children and the church. In order to bring awareness to this need within Baptist theology, this paper will survey Benjamin Keach's influence upon catechetical instruction until the nineteenth century and will then present the shifts that occurred in the twentieth century, both in the method used to instruct children within Baptist churches as well as in the party primarily responsible for children's training and instruction.

## Children's Instruction in Baptist Churches

### Benjamin Keach: Instructor of Children

Early in their history, Baptists utilized catechetical instruction to train children in the knowledge of God. As Tom Nettles observes: "Baptist catechisms have existed virtually since the appearance of

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Gantt attributes the shift away from catechetical instruction to the result of other methods, revivalism, and pragmatism (Susan Denise Gantt, "Catechetical Instruction as an Educational Process for the Teaching of Doctrine to Children in Southern Baptist Churches" [The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004], 18).

modern-day Baptists in the seventeenth century.”<sup>15</sup> And this question-and-answer approach to impart sound biblical doctrine was the joint responsibility of both the church and the parents during the first two-and-a-half centuries of its use in Baptist churches.

One example of catechetical instruction is seen in the ministry of Benjamin Keach,<sup>16</sup> a Baptist pastor who published several children’s primers, the most popular being *Instructions for Children: or, the Child’s and Youth’s delight. Teaching an easy way to Spell and Read true English. Containing the Father’s Godly Advice, directing parents in a Right and Spiritual manner to educate their children.*<sup>17</sup> This children’s primer appealed to so great a market that it went through thirty editions by 1763,<sup>18</sup> nearly 70 years after it was first published. The primer included practical skills; however, Keach’s ultimate purpose was to provide children with a theological education. Sound biblical doctrine lies at the core of this primer as Keach provides instruction in the ways of God while calling upon children to come to Christ without delay. Aiming to educate children about God, man, Christ, salvation, the church, and other foundational doctrines, Keach wrote three different catechisms, each

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<sup>15</sup> Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life*, Calvary Press Baptist Heritage Series (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1998), 22. “Both Particular Baptists and General Baptists in England used catechisms to instruct children and adults” (*Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms, Library of Baptist Classics* [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996], 16). Research done by Timothy George demonstrates that Baptists, from their earliest days, “published catechisms and used them as a means of imparting basic Christian instruction to new believers and passing on the faith intact to the rising generations.”

<sup>16</sup> Keach was not the first Baptist minister to publish a catechism. Henry Jessey printed *A Catechism for Babes, or Little Ones* in 1652. Jason Duesing argues for Henry Jessey as a Baptist pastor. See Jason G. Duesing, *Henry Jessey: Puritan Chaplain, Independent and Baptist Pastor, Millenarian Politician and Prophet* (Borderstone Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Keach was convicted for publishing doctrines, in his 1664 children’s primer, that were contrary to the Church of England. Consequently, copies of this primer were confiscated and burned, but it is believed that Keach re-wrote this primer from memory and published it as *The Child’s Instructor*, but no extant copies have been found. While *The Child’s Instructor* is no more, Keach published two additional children’s primers, both of which are accessible today: *The Child’s Delight* and *Instructions for Children*.

<sup>18</sup> Edward C. Starr, ed. *A Baptist Bibliography Being a Register of Printed Material by and About Baptists: Including Works Written against the Baptists* (Rochester: American Baptist Historical Society, 1952–1976), 13:20.

one intended for a distinct age group, and these catechisms comprise the bulk of his children's primer.

Furthermore, Keach wrote these catechisms to equip parents with the tools necessary to instruct their children in a "right and spiritual manner." The title of Keach's primer alone demonstrates his belief that parents play an important role in the education of their children.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the fact that he, as a pastor, published a catechism to aid parents in teaching their children also reveals that Keach believed pastors, alongside parents, maintain a connection and a responsibility to the children of church members.

Jonathan Arnold concludes that Keach published his catechism as a means of placing the sole responsibility of children on the parents;<sup>20</sup> however, Keach's production of a catechism to equip parents to teach their children does not imply that he absolves all responsibility for the unbelieving children in his church. In one of his writings, Keach describes children who grow up in the church as having not only parents, but also ministers, to instruct them, pray for them, and be a godly example for them,<sup>21</sup> which implies a relationship between the children of believers and the church. Rather than placing the sole responsibility on the parents, it is best to say that Keach placed the primary responsibility for the child's training and instruction on the parents, with the church (namely the pastor) playing a supporting role.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The very title of Keach's catechism specifies that this catechism is written for parents to educate their children: *Instructions for Children, or, the Child's and Youth's Delight. Teaching an Easy Way to Spell and Read True English. Containing the Father's Godly Advice, Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual Manner to Educate Their Children*

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan W. Arnold, "The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)." DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2010, 72–3.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin'd, or, Baptism in Its Primitive Purity: Proving Baptism in Water an Holy Institution of Jesus Christ, and to Continue in the Church to the End of the World* (London: 1689), 121.

<sup>22</sup> For more interaction with Keach's understanding of the responsible party for the child's training and instruction see Johnson, "Instructor of Children," 170–82.

## **The Baptist Catechism: Commonly Called Keach's Catechism**

Following in the footsteps of Benjamin Keach, Baptists continued using catechetical instruction to teach children sound biblical doctrine. One such catechism that gained popularity among Baptists was *The Baptist Catechism: Commonly Called Keach's Catechism*, about which Tom Nettles notes: "Perhaps more than all others combined, this catechism defined what it was to be a Baptist throughout the eighteenth century, for some years into the nineteenth."<sup>23</sup>

Though its name may imply differently, Keach's level of involvement in writing *The Baptist Catechism* is widely disputed. Timothy George suggests that William Collins assisted Keach in the drafting of *The Baptist Catechism*,<sup>24</sup> while Tom Nettles deems that William Collins was equally involved with Keach in the composition of the catechism.<sup>25</sup> Thomas Crosby, Keach's son-in-law, does not attribute the catechism to Keach at all,<sup>26</sup> but D. B. Riker and Barry Vaughn, on the contrary, attribute this catechism almost entirely to the hand of Keach.<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Arnold says Keach's authorship of the catechism is in "serious doubt,"<sup>28</sup> a position which is consistent with Austin Walker.<sup>29</sup> In Walker's biographical work of Keach, he references Joseph Ivimey, who asserts that William Collins, rather than Keach, was asked by the 1693 assembly to draw up a catechism.<sup>30</sup> While Ivimey asserts that Collins was tasked with authoring the catechism, it is Keach's name that would be associated with the work in 1764, when

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<sup>23</sup> Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy and Denise George, ed. *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, Nashville, TN (Broadman & Holman Publishers: 1996), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)," 256.

<sup>27</sup> Riker, *A Catholic Reformed Theologian*, 46. Vaughn argues with Nettles' position based upon the structure of the catechism in relation to the Second London Confession (Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach," 256).

<sup>28</sup> Arnold, "The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach," 60.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, *Benjamin Keach*, 219.

<sup>30</sup> Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1:533.



his portrait served as its frontispiece.<sup>31</sup> Almost a century later, in 1851, the catechism was still in print and known as: *The Baptist Catechism, Commonly Called Keach's Catechism*.<sup>32</sup> As seen above, Keach's authorship of *The Baptist Catechism* is shrouded by mystery; however, his influence upon children's instruction is not. The mere fact that his name was attached to a catechism which circulated 150 years after his death represents the impact he made upon children's doctrinal instruction.

### **Richard Furman**

One prominent figure who used *The Baptist Catechism* to instruct children in the eighteenth century was Richard Furman, the long-time pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>33</sup> Like Keach, Furman believed children should be taught through catechetical instruction; therefore, he gathered the children quarterly to ask them questions from *The Baptist Catechism* so he might instruct them in biblical doctrine.<sup>34</sup> While Furman himself catechized the children on these occasions, he expected them to arrive prepared for the sessions. This is evidence that he relied upon parents to catechize their children at home.<sup>35</sup>

Furman is noteworthy not only for his catechetical practice but also for his encouragement to the Charleston Association in 1792, when, in a circular letter, he addressed the responsibility of both the church and parents in the doctrinal instruction of children. He

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Williams, *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists to Which Is Added a Baptist Directory* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1903), 150.

<sup>32</sup> *The Baptist Catechism: Commonly Called Keach's Catechism, or, a Brief Instruction in the Principles of the Christian Religion, Agreeable to the Confession of Faith Put Forth by Upwards of an Hundred Congregations in Great Britain, July 3, 1689, and Adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association, September 22, 1742*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851.

<sup>33</sup> Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Jesse L. Boyd, *A History of Baptists in America: Prior to 1845* (New York, NY: The American Press, 1957), 100.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Allen Tupper, *Two Centuries of the First Baptist Church of South Carolina, 1683-1883* (Baltimore: R.H. Woodward and Company, 1889), 300. Tupper records: "Dr. Furman would in his majestic, winning manner, walk down the pulpit steps and with book in hand, commence asking questions, beginning with the little ones (very small, indeed, some were, but well taught and drilled at home.) We had to memorize the whole book, for none knew which question would fall to them."

assumes “private and public catechizing, in which care is not only taken to teach them a form of sound words, but to lead them into the sense spirit of the Christian doctrine.”<sup>36</sup> Whereas Furman is similar to Keach in his affirmation of the church’s responsibility to pray for and instruct children in sound biblical doctrine, as the letter continues it is clear that Furman progresses a step further than Keach in defining the church’s responsibility to the children of church members, describing them as being “placed under [the] guardianship of the church: [they] have a particular claim to their prayers, attention and care; and [they are] especially entitled to those ordinances which are designed to be the means of conversion.”<sup>37</sup> Furman’s use of the term “guardianship of the church” likely denotes the church’s responsibility to protect and nurture the children, which reaches beyond Keach’s documented position on the matter.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, since Furman excludes children from baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it is reasonable to assume that “the ordinances which are designed to be the means of conversion” refers to the hearing of the preached Word and the study of doctrinal instruction from which children must not be withdrawn, a position Keach maintained as well.<sup>39</sup>

While Furman patterns after Keach in many ways regarding the children of believers, especially in his encouragement toward parents to teach sound Christian doctrine through catechetical instruction, he furthers the Baptist understanding of children by placing the children of church members under the church’s care and by taking a direct role in their doctrinal education through his quarterly catechetical gatherings. These additional elements denote a slight shift in the pastor’s responsibility concerning the instruction of children in the eighteenth century, particularly in Baptist churches across America, as the pastor became more involved in the lives’ of believers’ children.

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Furman, *A History of the Charleston Association of Baptist Churches in the State of South Carolina with an Appendix Containing the Principal Circular Letters to the Churches* (Charleston, SC: The Press of J. Hoff, 1811): 6–11, quoted in Susan Denise Gantt, “Catechetical Instruction as an Educational Process for the Teaching of Doctrine to Children in Southern Baptist Churches” (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004), 166.

<sup>37</sup> Gaantt “Catechetical Instruction,” 198.

<sup>38</sup> See Johnson, “Instructor of Children,” 170–82.

<sup>39</sup> In one sermon Keach exhorted parents to bring their children to sit “under the clear preaching of the gospel” (Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d*, [London: L. I. Higham, 1701], 3:394).

Keach preached sermons with the expectation that children would be in attendance; Furman did the same, yet he also held childrens' meetings during which he addressed them directly.

### **Charles Spurgeon**

Keach's catechism would maintain its prominence in the early nineteenth century; however, as the century moved on, the catechism experienced alterations. Charles Spurgeon was "persuaded that the use of a good catechism in all our families will be a great safeguard against the increasing errors of the times,"<sup>40</sup> so he compiled a catechism for his congregation in 1855 by combining the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and *The Baptist Catechism*. Like Keach, Spurgeon believed that both the church and parents had an obligation to instruct their children in the great doctrines of the faith, which he expounded upon in one of his sermons:

In matters of doctrine, you will find orthodox congregations frequently change to heterodoxy in the course of thirty or forty years, and that is because too often there has been no catechizing of the children in the essential doctrines of the gospel. For my part, I am more and more persuaded that the study of a good Scriptural catechism is of infinite value to our children.<sup>41</sup>

Continuing in the tradition of Keach and Furman, Spurgeon maintained the church's and the parents' joint responsibility in teaching children sound doctrine through catechetical instruction, and he even regarded the absence of children's catechetical instruction as a great contributor to the loss of orthodoxy in a congregation. Spurgeon, like those who went before him, understood the importance of teaching children sound doctrine; however, as the nineteenth century progressed, practices once common in the instruction of children were abandoned as new developments surfaced.

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<sup>40</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *A Puritan Catechism, with Proofs* (London, 1855), Preface.

<sup>41</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "A Promise for Us and for Our Children," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1864), 214-15.

## The Abandonment of The Baptist Catechism

By the end of the nineteenth century, *The Baptist Catechism* lost its popularity, and its use greatly diminished. Because of the catechism's difficulty, James P. Boyce wrote a new catechism to replace it.<sup>42</sup> In the preface to *A Brief Catechism*, Boyce writes:

The author of this brief Doctrinal Catechism knows of no work of the kind in circulation among Baptists. Keach's Catechism, generally called the 'Baptist Catechism,' is scarcely used at all. No reason can be assigned for this, except that it is too difficult for children. In this present work an attempt has been made to simplify, as far as possible, without sacrificing important truth.<sup>43</sup>

Not only did Boyce seek to replace Keach's catechism, but he also notes the decline in Baptist catechetical instruction, stating that he "knows of no work of the kind in circulation among Baptists." William Cathcart also recognized this trend at the end of the nineteenth century, writing: "This neglected custom of the past should be revived in every Baptist family in the world, and all our Lord's Day schools should place the same little work in their regular system of religious training."<sup>44</sup> Unlike Boyce, however, Cathcart recommended *The Baptist Catechism*:

*Keach's Catechism*, with all the soundness of its distinguished author, two hundred years old, and others of later date, can be had for a trifle from the Baptist Publication Society. We ourselves, derived incalculable benefits from a thorough drilling in the *Westminster Catechism* in childhood, and we commend to

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<sup>42</sup> Halbrooks, "Children and the Church," 181.

<sup>43</sup> James P. Boyce, *A Brief Catechism* (Louisville, KY: Caperton & Cates Publishers, 1878), 4.

<sup>44</sup> William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia. A Dictionary of the Doctrines, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of the General History of the Baptist Denomination in All Lands: With Numerous Biographical Sketches of Distinguished American and Foreign Baptists, and a Supplement.* (Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1883), 294.

all our brethren a *Baptist Catechism* and Confession for children and adults.<sup>45</sup>

While Cathcart recommended *The Baptist Catechism*, by the end of the nineteenth century its use was almost completely abandoned.

## New Objectives and Shifting Responsibilities

Although the American Baptist Publication Society and the Sunday School Board selected John A. Broadus to author *A Catechism of Bible Teaching*, which was published in 1892,<sup>46</sup> catechetical instruction would eventually be replaced by new methods, as the Sunday School initiative gained prominence in Baptist churches. Started by Robert Raikes “around 1780 to instruct poor children in reading as well as societal virtues,”<sup>47</sup> Sunday School played an extensive role in replacing catechetical instruction.

While method and format for children's instruction changed, so did the emphasis of the instruction (which moved from doctrine to moralism to evangelism) as well as the party responsible for training these young minds. These new objectives and shifting responsibilities which accompanied the new methods of childrens' instruction will be surveyed below.

## Moralism

Though Baptists like Richard Furman brought children into the church for the sole purpose of religious instruction,<sup>48</sup> the church deviated to moralism as the primary emphasis of children's instruction during the nineteenth century, evidenced by publications from

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<sup>45</sup> Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*, 294.

<sup>46</sup> Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts*, 183.

<sup>47</sup> John M. Yeats, “In Praise of Industry: Early Nineteenth-Century Concepts of Work,” *Journal of Markets & Morality*, no. 1 (2011): 148. Sunday School began as an interdenominational organization. D. C. Armstrong, “‘A Clarion Call’: The Origin of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board” (*Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*, 2007), 15–16.

<sup>48</sup> Halbrooks, “Children and the Church,” 181.

the Sunday School Board. *The Sunday School Primer* (1864) included a moral lesson entitled “The Two Dogs”:

Two dogs, Tray and Snap, went out one day to walk. Tray was a good dog, and would not hurt the least thing in the world; but Snap was cross, and would snarl and bite at all the dogs that came in his way. At last they came to a great town, and all the dogs came out to see them. Tray hurt none of them, and was kind to all; but Snap would growl at all, and at length he bit one that came near him. Then the men and boys came out with clubs and stones, and they beat Snap, and the dogs sprang on him and tore him in pieces. As Tray was along, they dealt with him in the same way, and so he met with his death at the same time. They thought Tray was bad, because he was with a bad dog. We should learn from this that good boys and girls may come to much harm if they go with those who are bad.<sup>49</sup>

As seen in this lesson, moralism was emphasized over doctrine, a shift foreign to men like Benjamin Keach. In his writings, Keach emphasized godly living which is “a holy conformity to [true and right doctrine], and he stressed “hating and loathing sin and cleaving to God.”<sup>50</sup> He did not confuse exhortation to godly living with moralism for he believed “you must first have Union with [Jesus Christ], before you can bring forth Fruit to God; you must act from Life, and not for Life.”<sup>51</sup> It is unlikely that the author of “The Two Dogs” denied conversion and replaced it with works-based righteousness, but the mere existence of this morality tale is evidence of the shifting tides regarding the emphasis of children’s instruction in the Baptist tradition.

Further evidence of this shift from emphasizing doctrine to emphasizing moralism in children’s instruction is found in the preface of Basil Manly, Jr.’s *Little Lessons for Little People* (1864), in which he writes, “While you learn these Little Lessons, ask God to make you good children, for Jesus’s sake and then when you grow up, you will be

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<sup>49</sup> Sunday School Board. *The Sunday School Primer* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board Southern Baptist Convention, 1864), 14, quoted in Gantt, “Catechetical Instruction as an Educational Process for the Teaching of Doctrine to Children in Southern Baptist Churches,” 223.

<sup>50</sup> Keach, *Travels of True Godliness*, 3, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification*, 37.

good men and good women, and when you die, you will go to Heaven.”<sup>52</sup> That same year, during a Sunday morning service, Charles Spurgeon voiced his concern regarding the moralistic emphasis invading Sunday schools:

I think that in some Sunday-school addresses there is not always the gospel so clearly and decidedly proclaimed as it should be. It is not very easy, I know, to preach Christ to little children, but there is nothing else worth preaching. To stand up and say, “Be good boys and girls, and you will get to heaven,” is preaching the old covenant of works, and it is no more right to preach salvation by works to little children than to those who are of mature age.<sup>53</sup>

While Spurgeon recognized the dangers moralism brought to Sunday schools, others were not so concerned. Edward T. Hiscox, for instance, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, observed the main purpose of Sunday school as “forming characters to virtue and moulding their hearts to good morals.”<sup>54</sup>

Before looking at the next shift in children's instruction, it is worth noting that this move toward moralism as the primary emphasis of children's instruction indicates the need to re-examine the Baptist understanding of the child in relation to the church. It is not as though Baptist pastors prior to the nineteenth century were unconcerned with morality, but morality was not their utmost priority. For example, Benjamin Keach was concerned with the godly character of the children in his church, admonishing them to stay away from wicked juveniles and to “strive against the evils of your heart;”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (B&H Publishing Group, 1990).

<sup>53</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “A Promise for Us and for Our Children,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 10 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1864), 213.

<sup>54</sup> Edward T. Hiscox, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches*, 9th ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1980), 257–58.

<sup>55</sup> Keach also taught children to obey their parents, to seek wisdom, and to not be like those who oppose God's grace, but instead to seek God's truth (Benjamin Keach, *Instructions for Children, or, the Child's and Youth's Delight. Teaching an Easy Way to Spell and Read True English. Containing the Father's Godly Advice, Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual Manner to Educate Their Children* [London: Printed for J. How, 1710], Lessons 2–4, 7, 15).

however, the primary emphasis of his instruction was not moralism but Christian doctrine.<sup>56</sup>

Based upon limited evidence, it appears that those who followed in Keach's footsteps did not maintain a solid foundation encompassing the reasons children should live godly lives.<sup>57</sup> Had a proper foundation been maintained by Baptists, they may have avoided the shift to moralism altogether, or at least withstood the over-emphasis of practical morality, which made its way into Baptist Sunday school children's literature during the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> The basis for which unconverted children should live godly lives is certainly a question that yearns for an answer among Baptists, and the neglect to articulate the Baptist understanding of believers' children may help explain the nineteenth-century transition from a doctrinal emphasis to a moralistic emphasis in children's instruction.

## Evangelism

Baptist Sunday school literature experienced another shift in emphasis during the twentieth century when, in 1922, the Sunday School Board presented evangelism as the main objective of Sunday school,<sup>59</sup> and Arthur Flake established policies and practices that furthered evangelism as Sunday school's primary aim.<sup>60</sup> In *Building a Standard Sunday School*, he wrote: "The supreme business of

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<sup>56</sup> See Johnson, "Instructor of Children," 87-143.

<sup>57</sup> Why should children, who are unconverted, obey the commands of Scripture? I am not advocating that they should not obey, but on what basis should they obey these commands? On the basis that they might be converted? On the basis that they are storing up less guilt? On the basis that God will bless them in this life? On the basis that their godly living is a means of grace? This list of questions is not exhaustive, but the concern is that Baptists have not adequately handled these queries.

<sup>58</sup> George Marsden notes that social moral reform was a primary goal in nineteenth-century American Protestantism. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Halbrooks, "Children and the Church," 187, note 18.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas J. Sanders, "Such as These: Exploring Conversations with Southern Baptist Children About Conversion and Baptism," *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 2 (2013): 265. Sanders also records: "Leadership manuals of this period focused on laying the foundation for conversion with Beginner and Primary (ages 4-8) and active evangelism with Juniors (ages 9-12) (Coker, 1963; Proctor, 1966)."



Christianity is to win the lost to Christ. This is what churches are for... surely then the Sunday school must relate itself to the winning of the lost to Christ as an ultimate objective."<sup>61</sup>

Not only was evangelism emphasized in Sunday school, but "special services were offered for children during revival services. These special services were highly evangelistic and often pressured children to make a profession of faith."<sup>62</sup> This emphasis upon evangelism carried ramifications that Baptist churches would be forced to address, such as a proper age for conversion. In 1966 and 1967 the Southern Baptist Convention reported a spike in the number of baptisms of children younger than six years old.<sup>63</sup> "Many Southern Baptists in the last two decades [of the twentieth century] increasingly resisted such early professions of faith;" as a result, "the Sunday school guidelines were revised to delay active evangelism until at least age twelve."<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, the transitions in children's instruction, first from a doctrinal emphasis to a moralistic emphasis, and then from a moralistic emphasis to an evangelistic emphasis, further suggest that Baptists have not adequately addressed the relationship of children and the church, which, correspondingly, has left many pertinent questions unanswered. For instance, Scripture teaches parents to "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it,"<sup>65</sup> but why does Scripture give such instructions? Is it because training our children will be the means by which God saves them? Or is it because this will serve as the foundation upon which our children build once they come to faith? Or is there another reason altogether?

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<sup>61</sup> Arthur Flake, *Building a Standard Sunday School*. (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Convention), 106, quoted in Anthony L. Chute, Michael A. G. Haykin, and Nathan A. Finn, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 217.

<sup>62</sup> B. J. Cranford, "A Study of Baptist Pastors' and Childhood Ministry Leaders' Practices Relating to the Age of Accountability" (Dallas Baptist University, 2016), 23.

<sup>63</sup> Cranford, "A Study," 29. Robert Matz points out in his research that "there is little reliable research conveying the ages of baptism within Baptist churches prior to 1966" (Robert Joseph Matz, "Should Southern Baptists Baptize Their Children?, 123-24).

<sup>64</sup> Halbrooks, "Children and the Church," 183. W. A. Criswell, who was instrumental in this shift, "believed baptism was not for children younger than nine years of age" (Cranford, "A Study of Baptist Pastors; and Childhood Ministry Leaders' Practices Relating to the Age of Accountability," 25).

<sup>65</sup> Proverbs 22:6.

Questions such as these lead us to look once again to Benjamin Keach. While he believed that God can and does save children at a young age,<sup>66</sup> and while he implored children to seek God in their youth, evangelism was not his main emphasis.<sup>67</sup> Keach viewed children as disciples to be evangelized. He impressed upon children at an early age to come to Christ and to walk in the ways of God.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, although Keach and other Baptists of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries evangelized children, baptism was typically an adult occurrence.<sup>69</sup> The twentieth-century shift from adult baptisms to child baptisms indicates once more that Baptists did not develop a robust understanding of believers' children. Some important questions about baptism that must be asked: Is there a proper age for baptism?<sup>70</sup> Should the church baptize a child upon profession

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<sup>66</sup> In his catechism for children ten years old and younger, he endorses the writings of James Janeway, who writes about a five-year-old boy, a four-year-old girl, a nine-year-old girl, and "other Children whom God called before they were ten years old" (Keach, *Instructions for Children, or, the Child's and Youth's Delight. Teaching an Easy Way to Spell and Read True English. Containing the Father's Godly Advice, Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual Manner to Educate Their Children*, 30–33). In an argument against infant baptism Keach concedes that God does regenerate young children who are three or four years old (Benjamin Keach, *Light Broke Forth in Wales, Expelling Darkness, or, the Englishman's Love to the Antient Britains. Being an Answer to a Book, Intituled, Children's Baptism from Heaven, Published in the Welsh Tongue by Mr. James Owen* [London: Dorman Newman, 1692], 151).

<sup>67</sup> Keach's primary emphasis was to teach children sound biblical doctrine; however, he and those who followed in his wake do not address foundational questions related to teaching sound doctrine to children. For instance, do parents/pastors teach sound doctrine as a means of preparation, as a means of godly living prior to conversion, or as a means of grace?

<sup>68</sup> See Johnson, "Instructor of Children," 87–182.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Dever observes the baptismal age of several noteworthy Baptist ministers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and notes a delay in the age of baptism, which was typical among early Baptists. Men such as John Gill and Samuel Medley were brought up in Baptist homes and were both baptized after the age of eighteen. Charles Spurgeon baptized both of his sons when they were eighteen, and E. Y. Mullins, the son of a Baptist minister, was baptized at age twenty (Dever, *The Church*, 153, note 6). Mike Gilbert Smith notes that Baptists have historically waited until young people have some sort of independence, such as a job, before being baptized (Mike Gilbert-Smith, "'Let the Little Children Come to Me...' But Should We Baptize Them? Why Believers' Baptism Should Usually Be Adult Baptism," *Foundations: An International Journal of Evangelical Theology*, no. 63 [2012]: 100–101).

<sup>70</sup> This question is being asked by Southern Baptists, but there is no consensus. See Matz, "Should Southern Baptists Baptize Their Children?" Matz's

of faith in Christ, or should the church wait to observe whether the child bears the fruits of repentance? If baptismal delay is necessary, what is the church's responsibility to an unbaptized child who professes Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? While adult baptisms served as the historical practice among Baptists, the twentieth-century transition to an emphasis in evangelism in children's instruction, followed by the practice of baptizing children six years old and younger, exposes the need to re-examine the Baptist understanding of believers' children in relation to the church.

## Who Is Responsible?

In addition to the shifts from doctrine to moralism to evangelism as the primary emphasis in children's instruction, the Baptist understanding of the church's obligation to children shifted as well. Demonstrated by pastors such as Keach, Furman, and Spurgeon, the responsibility of children's instruction had previously been shared to some degree by both the pastor and the parents, but by the end of the nineteenth century children's instruction was assumed by the Sunday school.<sup>71</sup> James P. Boyce, like Keach, Furman, and Spurgeon, maintained that it was the pastor's and the family's duty to instruct children, yet he also notes the important role Sunday school served in this endeavor:

The desire has been felt to promote catechetical instruction in the family and the Sunday-school. It is believed that there are many who appreciate its value as a means of teaching the truth of God. . . . At the same time, Pastors of churches, Superintendents and Teachers of Sunday-schools, and pious parents, are urged to consider how far a partial recourse at least to

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research points to the issue of cognitive and volitional abilities of children. He poses the following questions: "Can a child understand the gospel message and respond to it? Is there a specific age at which children are first able to comprehend this message? Is it appropriate to share the gospel with children?"

<sup>71</sup> Armstrong, "A Clarion Call," 35.

catechetical instruction may tend to restore the vigorous piety of bygone days.<sup>72</sup>

While Boyce maintains the importance of catechetical instruction, his statement demonstrates the role of Sunday school in children's instruction. Susan Gantt observes that "the Sunday School would become a primary component in the education of children in Southern Baptist churches."<sup>73</sup> Anne Boylan, who traces the social history of American Sunday schools, writes: "Whereas in 1820 Protestants had thought about children's religious experiences primarily in terms of family and church, by 1880 it was impossible to conceive of them without reference to the Sunday school."<sup>74</sup> With the rise of Sunday school, responsibility for children's instruction shifted from the parent to the Sunday school, and from the pastor to the layperson,<sup>75</sup> who would eventually come under the purview of a professional Children's Minister.<sup>76</sup>

Again, turning to Keach is beneficial when considering the church's responsibility to the child. Keach took a personal interest in children and believed that those who grow up in the church enjoy parents as well as ministers who instruct them, pray for them, are a godly example for them, and ensure that the gospel is preached to them.<sup>77</sup> Still, he and those after him did not clearly articulate the pastor's or the church's responsibility to children.<sup>78</sup> If the Baptist church's

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<sup>72</sup> Boyce, *A Brief Catechism*, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Gantt, "Catechetical Instruction as an Educational Process for the Teaching of Doctrine to Children in Southern Baptist Churches," 191.

<sup>74</sup> Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 160.

<sup>75</sup> Boylan, *Sunday School*, 160.

<sup>76</sup> Gantt, "Catechetical Instruction as an Educational Process for the Teaching of Doctrine to Children in Southern Baptist Churches," 237. For a brief history of the minister of children up to the end of the twentieth century, see Kathryn Chapman, "The Minister to Children in Southern Baptist Life," *BHH* 25, no. 4 (October 1990).

<sup>77</sup> Keach, *Gold Refin'd*, 121.

<sup>78</sup> For instance, Keach does not adequately address or define the church's responsibility to the children of believers, whether in the context of the church body as a whole or in the context of pastoral responsibility, such as the pastor's pulpit obligations toward unbelieving children, his duty to examine the spiritual condition of their hearts, or his responsibility to provide them with counsel, direction, correction, or rebuke when necessary. It must be stated that Keach addresses children in a series of sermons; however, he does not delineate or define the pastor's pulpit

responsibility to the children of church members had been clearly understood and delineated, the shift away from parental responsibility in children's education may have been avoided with very little resistance.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, however, this shift did occur and serves as evidence that Baptists must re-examine the relationship between children and the church.

## Conclusion

The transitions that occurred in children's instruction among Baptists were not simply results of changes in practice but instead represent all-out foundational shifts. Because these shifts represent a completely different understanding of the child, it is reasonable to consider why they transpired. If the child is a disciple, such an idea would be reflected in the children's instruction, but if the child is to be evangelized the children's instruction would reflect that idea as well. At the very least, this paper is calling for Baptists to consider the issue at hand and ask why these changes occurred so readily within Baptist children's instruction. Perhaps this transition was the result of doctrinal development which gradually took place, but there is little evidence to substantiate this possibility. On the contrary, these changes appear to be more pragmatic in nature, as Baptist churches reacted to the cultural climate of the day, simply doing what worked rather than doing that which is laid out in the authoritative word of God.<sup>80</sup>

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responsibility to the children in attendance. His practice, however, alludes to some sort of responsibility for these children but he does not clearly articulate this responsibility.

<sup>79</sup> Voddie Baucham recognizes the dangers of the shift in religious training responsibilities in his introduction to *Family Driven Faith* as he writes: "Our children are falling away because we are asking the church to do what God designed the family to accomplish. Discipleship and multigenerational faithfulness begins and ends at home. At best the church is to play a supporting role as it equips the saints for the work of ministry." While the majority of twenty-first-century Baptists wrestling with the question of the church's responsibility to children will not go as far as Baucham suggests, his analysis shines light on the gravity of this issue as the church has replaced parents as the primary instructor of children (Voddie Baucham Jr., *Family Driven Faith* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007], 9).

<sup>80</sup> It is worth nothing that the way society viewed children changed due to the increase in child labor during the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, which led children to spend much of their time working rather than being educated. Jane

Since believers' children are "by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph 2:3), they must be evangelized; the gospel must be set before them (Rom 10:14–17). Parents—fathers in particular—are commanded to train their children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4; see also Prov 22:6), so children must be taught the truths of Scripture (Matt 28:19–20 implies both evangelism and teaching the whole counsel of God). Although children are born outside the covenant community and their obedience will not justify them before the Lord God, they are still expected to be obedient (Eph 6:1–3, Ecc 11:9, Prov 13:24, Prov 19:18).

The changes that occurred in the objectives and obligations of children's instruction within Baptist churches expose the need to further develop the Baptist understanding of believers' children in relation to the church. This is not to say that the failure to develop a robust theology of believers' children would have prevented the shift, but instead suggests that these monumental transformations prove the lack of a robust theology of believers' children. While such a deficiency is not the cause of these changes, at the very least, it is reasonable to assert that an underdeveloped Baptist understanding of believers' children made these changes possible.

While the method of instruction may have changed, since catechetical instruction is just one means of teaching doctrine to children, the overarching philosophy which shifted from doctrine to morality to evangelism points to a gap in the Baptist understanding of children. This is further evidenced in the shift away from parental responsibility and toward the responsibility of the Sunday school. A robust understanding of the child, according to biblical principles,<sup>81</sup> would have assured that Sunday school was developed as no more than a supplement to the obligations placed upon parents and pastors rather than as a replacement of their duties. Surely, seismic shifts such

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Humphries, "Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution," *The Economic History Review*, no. 2 (2013): 400.

<sup>81</sup> Several passages in Scripture indicate that parents are primarily responsible for training up their children (Gen 18:19; Deut 4:9–10; 6:1–7; 11:19; Josh 24:15; Eph 6:1–4). However, there are implications that can be drawn from Matthew 28:19–20 to suggest the broader responsibility of the church to make disciples of all nations, which includes the children of believers within the church's midst.

as these would have been met with intense scrutiny and examination instead of widespread acceptance.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, this brief survey of children's instruction demonstrates the need for a robust Baptist understanding of children. Baptists must determine who children are, in addition to who they are not, and should conclude whether children are regarded as nonbelievers until they prove otherwise or as believers until they prove otherwise. Baptists need to establish whether children are truly outside the covenant community or if they are in the "shadow" of the covenant community.<sup>83</sup> Finally, Baptists need to determine the obligations of the church to the children of church members as well as the benefits experienced by those who are born into Christian homes.

These will certainly be difficult questions for Baptists to address due to differing views on covenant theology and original sin. Additionally, because Baptists practice local church autonomy, it is difficult to affirm a consensus view on any one doctrine, so unity regarding the doctrine of the child will undoubtedly be laborious, if not impossible, to achieve. Without question, unforeseen challenges will occur, making these questions difficult to address, but there is no time like the present to develop a robust understanding of believers' children, especially since Baptists in the twenty-first century are experiencing yet another shift in children's instruction.

Sunday schools have been on the decline in Baptist churches since the 1960s<sup>84</sup> and are rapidly being replaced by other instructional methods. With the reemergence of a plurality of elders within Baptist

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<sup>82</sup> At this point in my research, I have found nothing to suggest that fundamental questions related to the child were addressed as these shifts in children's instruction took place. Rather, these shifts in children's instruction were results of the cultural factors of the day (e.g. child labor, excess drunkenness, etc.) and without a foundational Baptist theology of the child, children's instruction will be tossed to and fro with every new method and philosophy of the day.

<sup>83</sup> Alan Conner, *Covenant Children Today* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>84</sup> Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "Back to the Future: Why the Sunday School Is Key to Denominational Identity and Growth," *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 1 (2014): 27-29.

churches,<sup>85</sup> the full-time children's minister could be affected.<sup>86</sup> Some Baptist churches have even revived the use of catechetical instruction. Tom Ascol and the Founders Ministries published three Baptist catechisms for children's instruction,<sup>87</sup> while John Piper adapted *The Baptist Catechism* by adding his own commentary.<sup>88</sup> Because Baptists are currently experiencing another shift in children's instruction, the need is as great as ever to re-examine the relationship between children and the church<sup>89</sup> and to answer foundational questions regarding children's instruction.

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<sup>85</sup> John S. Hammett, "Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership," *Faith and Mission* 22, no. 3 (2005): 138. Hammett writes in his book review: "As the number of Baptist churches adopting a plural eldership has grown in recent years, so have the number of books discussing the issues surrounding church polity." Chute, Haykin, and Finn, 312. "While some Baptist churches have had multiple elders off and on since the seventeenth century, this approach had never been widespread. Even in churches large enough to employ multiple staff members, often the 'senior pastor' was the only minister considered to be an elder. That began to change in the 1990s."

<sup>86</sup> The role of Children's Minister in Baptist churches in America is not always filled by one of the pastors/elders in the church. The reemergence of a plurality of pastors/elders in Baptist churches may lead to pastoral oversight of the children's ministry, rather than a non-pastor "Children's Minister."

<sup>87</sup> Founders Press published three catechisms in the twenty-first century: *A Catechism for Boys and Girls* and "baptized" versions of both the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

<sup>88</sup> John Piper, "A Baptist Catechism," *DesiringGod*, accessed April, 2018. [https://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/blog/A\\_Baptist\\_Catechism-new.pdf](https://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/blog/A_Baptist_Catechism-new.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> It would be unfair to assume that Baptists intentionally left questions unanswered regarding the children of church members. The Baptist tradition has not existed in a context that lent itself to a thoroughly developed theology of children. Early Baptists were consumed with the question of identity, namely the identity of the church; since Baptists rejected the practice of infant baptism they had to define who belonged to the church. Therefore, early Baptists spent considerable time articulating and defending regenerate church membership and believer's baptism. In fact, these beliefs still receive considerable attention today. In addition to establishing and defending Baptist identity, Baptists have also been involved in a great number of controversies that have taken much time and attention away from the discussion of the theology of children. Some controversies in which Baptists have been involved include soteriology, missions-sending organizations, the use of confessions, slavery, Baptist church successionism, and biblical authority.



# Radical Grace

Jon Pratt<sup>1</sup>

Jesus often used the metaphor of fruit-bearing as a way of distinguishing between true and false believers. He did this with regard to the parable of the soils in which only the fourth soil produced fruit (Matt 13:23; Mark 4:20; Luke 8:15); he did this with regard to trees and their fruit (Matt 7:15–20; 12:33; Luke 6:43–45); and he did this when describing the fruit that remains because of its connection to the vine (John 15:2, 5, 8, 16). It is clear when considering passages like these that Jesus expected his children to bear fruit, i.e., to persevere in the faith.

Jesus is not the only one in the New Testament to make this point. Indeed, we could consider statements made by Paul (e.g. Rom 6:21; 7:6; Phil 1:6; Eph 2:10), Peter (1 Pet 1:6–8; 2 Pet 1:5–11), James (Jas 2:17), and John (1 John 2:3–6; 4:7–21; 5:6–7) that back up what Jesus taught: true Christians will persevere in the faith unto the end.<sup>2</sup>

These assertions by Jesus and the apostles are given to us in the indicative mood, and as such constitute true realities for every Christian.<sup>3</sup> However, the Christian's perseverance is not automatic, nor does it guarantee instant perfection from the point at which one is justified. Not only does the Christian's experience validate this fact, but Scripture also lends its voice with hundreds of imperatives, calling the believer to obey and to persevere. Rolland McCune summarizes the situation well: "If it is true that a believer *will* persevere [in the faith], then it is equally true that he *must* persevere."<sup>4</sup> Three examples of this

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Pratt, PhD, is Vice President of Academics and Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith (17.1) defines perseverance, "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally or finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

<sup>3</sup> I have simplified the definition of the indicative here, recognizing that technically, the indicative is not the mood of certainty as much as it is the mood of the presentation of certainty. See Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), 448.

<sup>4</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (3 vols; Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010) 3:181.

indicative-imperative tension communicate this truth: Philippians 2:12-13 (“work out your salvation . . . for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”); 1 John 3:14-18 (“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. . . . Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth”); Jude 1, 21 (“To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ. . . . Keep yourselves in the love of God”).

Christians have often wrestled with this indicative-imperative tension as they “strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). And on this road of progressive sanctification a major challenge is balancing the Scripture’s teaching about the indicatives and imperatives. An overemphasis in either direction can result in a tumble into the legalism/moralism ditch if the imperatives become the focus or alternatively into the antinomianism/quietism ditch if the indicatives take center stage.

While it is true that conservative Christians in some sectors of the evangelical world (e.g., some strident fundamentalists) slip into the imperative ditch and therefore teach a form of legalism,<sup>5</sup> others have fallen into the indicative ditch and proclaim a type of antinomianism.<sup>6</sup> This latter group in an ironic twist has taken the indicative statements about perseverance in the Bible (e.g., God promises that his children will bear fruit), and in their writing and practice have denied the necessity of perseverance in the life of the believer, essentially asserting that believers do not necessarily bear fruit.<sup>7</sup> They have done

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<sup>5</sup> “Legalism happens when *what we need to do*, not what Jesus has already done, becomes the end game,” Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Crossway, 2011), 46. Tchividjian also coins the term *performancism* to describe this type of approach to Christian growth. Ryan Haskins, Jeremy Litts, Jon Moffitt, and Byron Yawn (a.k.a. “The Boys”) refer to legalism/moralism as *pietism* in their book, *A Primer on Pietism: Its Characteristics and Inevitable Impact on the Christian Life* (Theocast, Inc., 2017). Also, Jon Moffitt, Justin Perdue, and Jeremy Buehler, *Faith vs Faithfulness: A Primer on Rest* (Theocast, Inc., 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Pyne, “Antinomianism and Dispensationalism,” *BSac* 153 (April-June 1996): 141, defines antinomianism as “endorsing lawless behavior.” Two helpful summaries of antinomianism can be found in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Crossway, 2016), 137-54; and Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* (P & R Publishing, 2013), 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> The bases for arguing in this antinomian direction vary from group to group. Reasons for denying perseverance include a desire to give assurance, to avoid

this by de-emphasizing the imperatives of Scripture to the point of reducing them to merely passive concepts, effectively negating the Bible's call for "Spirit-powered, gospel-driven, faith-fueled effort."<sup>8</sup>

In recent years three streams of antinomian teaching have come to light, and they flow out of three different models of sanctification teaching. But before delineating these streams, I must take a brief foray into the world of sanctification models.

Following the pattern first laid out in *Five Views on Sanctification*, five schools of sanctification teaching generally make up the landscape: Wesleyan, Keswick, Pentecostal, Chaferian, and Reformed.<sup>9</sup> Each of these views has particular points of emphasis, especially related to the initiation of sanctification (e.g., does God begin his work of producing fruit immediately after regeneration or does he wait for man to begin the process?) and the degrees to which God and man are involved in the ongoing growth of the Christian. For our purposes, these five models provide a helpful platform from which to consider antinomian teaching.

The current antinomian river flowing through American evangelicalism can trace its origins to three tributaries, each of which comes out of a different model of sanctification instruction. The first stream, based in the Chaferian model, is Free Grace theology.<sup>10</sup> Second,

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sully grace, not wanting to add to faith, or not wanting to be placed under the Mosaic Law (to name a few).

<sup>8</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness* (Crossway, 2012), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Melvin Dieter, ed., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987). This book uses these five categories but labels one the "Augustinian-Dispensational View." This unhelpful label used by John F. Walvoord, who penned that chapter, was called the "Chaferian" view by Charles Ryrie, "Contrasting Views on Sanctification," in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (ed. Donald K. Campbell; Moody Press, 1982), 189–200, and this is the preferable term.

A year after Dieter's book, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (IVP, 1988) appeared. It included chapters on Lutheran and Contemplative models in place of the Keswick and Chaferian models. Technically, the Lutheran view (penned by Gerhard Forde) should be taken as a subset of the Reformed view (differing especially on the "third use of the Law") while the Contemplative view (by Glenn Hinson) is too enigmatic and quirky to be considered as a definable model. Another excellent historical survey is found in William W. Combs, "The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology," *DBSJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 17–33.

<sup>10</sup> See Jon Pratt, "Issues in Sanctification, Lecture Three: The Free Grace Movement and Sanctification," MacDonald Lectures, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, February 5, 2019 (<https://vimeo.com/channels/macdonaldlectures2019>).

Pentecostalism has given birth to hyper-grace teaching.<sup>11</sup> Third, the Reformed model has produced a difficult-to-label group of antinomians. It is this third stream that I would like to introduce and evaluate in this essay.<sup>12</sup>

To reiterate, these three streams of antinomian teaching have precipitated a perilous slipping away from the New Testament's demands for obedience in the life of the Christian. And the third stream is particularly insidious which is why I am warning the reader to avoid this "irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness" (2 Tim 2:16). I shall proceed by considering first the *naming* of this Reformed-based grace teaching. Second, I will move from naming to the *history* of this teaching. Third, I will advance from history to the *doctrinal teaching* itself. Finally, I will compare this doctrinal teaching with the concept of perseverance and tease out some implications.

## What's in a Name?

At the outset I encounter the challenge of naming this group.<sup>13</sup> Since this group has been speaking and writing about their focus for less than fifteen years, neither its proponents nor its opponents have yet to develop an official name for it. Indeed, Zane Hodges had been writing and speaking about Free Grace for at least 15 years prior to the establishment of the Grace Evangelical Society, so it should not surprise us that the group I will discuss does not have a clear identity, a clear leader, or any particularly clear doctrinal statement.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Charisma House, 2014); Vinson Synan, ed., *The Truth about Grace* (Charisma House, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Free Grace and the hyper-grace movements, this group is still in its formative stages and has no identifying name. See the discussion below.

<sup>13</sup> I was first apprised of this group through a presentation by Pastor Gary Gilley at the national IFCA conference in South Bend, IN (June, 2018). He used the phrase "Liberate Theology" to describe the group, based upon the Liberate Conference that was hosted by Tullian Tchividjian and held in Fort Lauderdale, FL from 2012–2015. Due to the fact that the Liberate Network was dissolved in 2017, I think a different name would better describe the group. Also see Gilley's website, [www.tottministries.org](http://www.tottministries.org) and his 3-part series of articles: "Sanctification Debates: Parts 1–3," *Think on These Things* 24.1–3 (Jan–June 2018).

Furthermore, the broad range of denominational representatives who write and speak about this subject mean that an identifying name is unlikely to be forthcoming.<sup>14</sup>

This reality notwithstanding, several have attempted to label this teaching. One might consider Jen Wilkin’s suggestion, “celebratory failurism,” a bit too pejorative.<sup>15</sup> Gerhard Forde proposed, “radical Lutheranism,”<sup>16</sup> but this is a bit too narrow, considering the significant number of non-Lutherans who fit under this group’s umbrella. Another option—“confessionalism”—offered by a group of Nashville area pastors is too general to be helpful.<sup>17</sup>

So lacking any particularly appropriate name, I will label this group, *Radical Grace*. Like the Free Grace and hyper-grace streams, Radical Grace proponents emphasize the importance of *grace* in the lives of believers. But what distinguishes Radical Grace from the first two streams is the agreement of its adherents to the Law-Gospel distinction first emphasized by Martin Luther, and they equate the concepts of gospel and grace as a way of describing the NT teaching about the Christian life. Thus, Law is anything that makes demands on sinners, i.e., it gives imperatives which condemn. On the other hand, Gospel makes no demands because it “comes in the indicative voice” and issues in unconditional grace.<sup>18</sup> This context of grace, then, best explains the emphasis of Radical Grace teachers in contrast to a Law-

<sup>14</sup> In the literature I have read the proponents come from Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, and non-denominational churches.

<sup>15</sup> Jen Wilkin, “Failure is not a Virtue,” (May 1, 2014) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/failure-is-not-a-virtue/> (accessed 6/24/2021).

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism* (ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson; Eerdmans, 2004), 7, writes: “My thesis is that Lutherans . . . should become even more radical proponents of the tradition that gave them birth and has brought them thus far. . . . Let us be radicals: not conservatives or liberals, fundagelicals or charismatics (or whatever other brand of something-less-than gospel entices), but radicals: radical preachers and practitioners of the gospel by justification by faith without the deeds of the law.” Note that this chapter is a reprint of an essay that first appeared as “Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America,” *LQ* 1 (1987): 5–18.

<sup>17</sup> Haskins, Litts, Moffitt, and Yawn, *A Primer on Pietism: Its Characteristics and Inevitable Impact on the Christian Life*, 11; idem, *A Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest* (Theocast, Inc., 2018), 8; and Moffitt, Perdue, and Buehler, *Faith vs Faithfulness*, 4–5.

<sup>18</sup> William McDavid, Ethan Richardson, and David Zahl, *Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints)* (Mockingbird Ministries, 2015), 48–52.

oriented moralism that stifles freedom and enhances guilt-ridden legalism.

In using the modifier, *Radical*, to qualify this stream of Grace teachers, I am giving a nod to Gerhard Forde, who called his approach to the Christian life “Radical Lutheranism.”<sup>19</sup> But I am not going so far as to describe this group as Lutheran, for its advocates hail from several Protestant traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Now that we have settled the question of nomenclature, we move next to the history of Radical Grace.

## **A History of Radical Grace**

This historical survey will include an investigation of the origins, proponents, and writings of Radical Grace (RG).

### **The Origins of Radical Grace**

Of the many theological challenges confronting the reformers in the sixteenth century, the distinction between Law and Gospel as it relates to the doctrine of justification was certainly near the top of the list.<sup>21</sup> The Reformers taught that Law could never save but rather

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<sup>19</sup> Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” *LQ* 1 (1987): 5–18. Not only is his use of “radical” to describe his theology of sanctification in Lutheranism of unique historical import, but also his advocacy of the Theology of the Cross as opposed to the Theology of Glory. See, idem, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Most, if not all, of the Radical Grace advocates rely on Forde’s writings whether or not they specifically cite him. Thus, his influence should not be underestimated.

<sup>20</sup> In this study these include Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Baptists.

<sup>21</sup> Lutheran and Reformed theologians convened at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 and agreed on fourteen articles of faith. Of these “articles 4 through 7 all implicitly employ the distinction between law and gospel as a criterion by which Christ alone is identified as the subject of God’s saving grace” (Jonathan A. Linebaugh, “Introduction” in *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Jonathan A. Linebaugh [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018], 2). See Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Martin E. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 38:85–89, for the presentation of these articles and the significant

served to make demands that could never be met; Law corresponds to the effort of doing good works as a way of gaining favor with God, something which could never occur since justification can never be attained by works (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8–9). On the other hand, Gospel speaks of the free gift of grace given to the sinner by faith; absolutely no effort or good works are required for justification because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the ungodly as a gift (Rom 3:24–26).<sup>22</sup>

Thus, we should never mix Law and Gospel when calling a sinner to repentance. The unbeliever can receive justification by faith alone (Gospel) apart from any works (Law). Every evangelical believer affirms this great truth of keeping Law and Gospel separate when speaking of our justification. But how do these two ideas relate to the believer’s progressive sanctification? Does the Law have any connection to Gospel when speaking of the believer’s growth in holiness *after* his justification? Indeed, if the Reformers believed that the Law says *do* while the Gospel says *done*, how do these two concepts relate to the numerous imperatives found in the New Testament? While Luther and Calvin differed a bit in how they articulated the place of Law in the believer’s life, they agreed that obedience to the moral law was necessary. The Westminster Confession of Faith (19.6) clearly affirms, “Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly.” Calvin referred to this function of the Law as the “third use” of the Law.<sup>23</sup> And so a basic tenet of the Reformers is an explanation and

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reformers who signed their agreement including Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, Bucer, Oecolampadius, and Agricola.

<sup>22</sup> Myron Houghton, *Law and Grace* (Regular Baptist Press, 2011), 9, explains this distinction well: “The law makes demands while the gospel does not make any demands. In other words, the law says *do*, while the gospel says *done* (emphasis in original).”

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.12, “The third and principal use [of the law], which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.” Lutheran scholars have debated whether or not Luther held to the third use of the law, but Edward A. Englebrecht, “Luther’s Threefold Use of the Law,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 75 (2011): 135–50, shows that Luther held to the third use of the law as seen in a Christmas sermon (1522) and in a lecture on 1 Timothy 1:8–9 (1528). Also see Houghton, *Law and*

endorsement of how the moral law (the ceremonial and civil aspects of the law are abrogated with the coming of Christ) ought to function as a “means of sanctification” in the life of the believer.<sup>24</sup>

Since this connection of Law and Gospel in relation to sanctification is so readily affirmed by Protestants, we can understand how people growing up in circles where the third use of the Law is taught could easily slip into a form of merit-based performance in their efforts to grow in sanctification.<sup>25</sup> And it is the desire to correct this faulty practice that has generated the existence and development of its opposing but equally as errant nemesis, RG.

There seem to be three antecedent influences behind the current form of RG. First, we have “Radical Lutheranism,” particularly indebted to theologian Gerhard Forde (1927–2005) who coined the phrase.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Forde decried historical Antinomianism, but it appears that some of his provocative comments about sanctification (e.g., “Sanctification is a matter of being grasped by the unconditional grace of God and having now to live in that light. It is a matter of getting

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Grace, 10, and Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* (P & R Publishing, 2013), 3–5.

<sup>24</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, 68–71. Similarly, we see the same kind of treatment of Calvin’s third use of the law in two other “five views” books: Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 59–90; and Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (ed. Wayne Strickland; Zondervan, 1993), 13–58.

<sup>25</sup> There are likely several reasons why people might slip into merit-based performance besides an emphasis on the third use of the law. I am simply acknowledging that this basic plank in the Reformers’ platform has contributed to merit-based performance for many.

<sup>26</sup> Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” *LQ* 1 (1987): 5–18.



used to our justification.”<sup>27</sup>) have served as fodder for RG.<sup>28</sup> Second, we have the Anglican influence of Paul F. M. Zahl and Robert Farrar Capon, both Episcopal priests, who emphasized the freeing power of grace to the detriment of the enslaving nature of the law.<sup>29</sup> Third, we have statements about grace and law from the Reformed confessions (e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith, London Baptist Confession, etc.), Luther and Calvin themselves, and modern Reformed scholars which are used to downplay the importance of obedience to the imperatives while emphasizing the significance of the indicatives.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*,” (ed. Donald Alexander; IVP, 1988), 22–23. See also Forde, *A More Radical Gospel*, and idem, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

Mickey L. Mattox, review of *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* by Gerhard Forde, *JETS* 42.3 (1999): 537, aptly describes Forde’s theology of the cross: “Forde not only allows Luther’s assessment of the human condition apart from grace to do its work, but also lays out in clearest terms Luther’s understanding of the wondrous promises of the gospel. Only when God has become our most relentless enemy and truly slain us with the Law does he raise us up to new life by means of the Word. In both cases, as Forde points out, it is God who takes the initiative; the sinner suffers both the condemnation of the Law and the promise of the gospel as realities given from without. In this sense, one can speak of being a theologian of the cross only as one created by God, and not of becoming one as if it could be done through the exercise of some innate human capacity. To see things as they are, to know the self as put to death by God and raised to life by that same God, is itself a gift of God. This knowledge in turn enables the Christian to distinguish between theologies of glory and the theology of the cross.”

<sup>28</sup> Michael Allen, *Sanctification* (New Studies in Dogmatics; Zondervan, 2017), 30 n.15, writes: “The Radical Lutheranism of Forde . . . has exercised wider influence at the popular level in recent years, connecting to a number of Presbyterian or Reformed ministries (e.g., Tullian Tchividjian), to so-called reformational Anglican circles (e.g., Mockingbird), and elsewhere.”

<sup>29</sup> Zahl, *Grace in Practice*, 26–41; idem, *Who Will Deliver Us? The Present Power of the Death of Christ* (reprint, Seabury Press, 1983; Wipf & Stock, 2008), and Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Moffitt et al, *Faith vs Faithfulness*, 4, state: “We do look back to the confessions of faith that were produced during the era of the Reformation. These confessions arose, as confessions typically do, because theological clarity was required. The Reformation was a response to the rampant moralism and works-based system of the medieval church. Therefore, the confessions that were produced out of it push back against moralism.”

## The Proponents and Writings of Radical Grace

Before his disqualification from ministry,<sup>31</sup> Tullian Tchividjian exercised a huge influence in organizing support for RG. Tullian, the grandson of Billy Graham, took over as senior pastor at Coral Ridge Presbyterian, following D. James Kennedy. This move included a merger of churches as Tullian's church, New City Presbyterian, united with Coral Ridge in 2009. Between 2005 and 2015 he published eight books, but the two that contributed to his understanding of RG in regard to sanctification were *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (2011) and *One Way Love* (2013).<sup>32</sup> He also blogged regularly on The Gospel Coalition website ([www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org)) until he was removed due to "an increasingly strident debate going on around the issue of sanctification."<sup>33</sup> Just prior to his removal, a spirited exchange had been engaged between Tullian and Kevin DeYoung over the issue of sanctification I am discussing in this paper.<sup>34</sup> Besides his writing Tullian also hosted an annual conference at his church from 2012–2015 entitled "Liberate." Speakers included Steve Brown, Matt Chandler, Elyse Fitzpatrick, Ray Ortlund, Paul Tripp, Michael Horton, and Bryan Chapell. The conference led to the formation of the Liberate network, which would likely have grown into an organization similar to 9Marks, The Gospel Coalition, or the Grace Evangelical Society. However, when Tullian confessed to an extra-marital affair in 2015, the network closed within months of its beginning in 2016.<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, Tullian has

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<sup>31</sup> Tullian Tchividjian resigned from Coral Ridge Presbyterian in June, 2015 after admitting to an extramarital affair; he was deposed by the South Florida presbytery of the PCA in August, 2015; and he was fired from Willow Creek Church in March, 2016, following news of a second extramarital affair. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tullian\\_Tchividjian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tullian_Tchividjian) (accessed 7/26/21).

<sup>32</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*; and idem, *One Way Love* (David C. Cook, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Don Carson, "On Some Recent Changes at TGC," May 21, 2014 (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/on-some-recent-changes-at-tgc/>) (accessed 7/22/2021). Carson also stated, "The differences were doctrinal and probably even more matters of pastoral practice and wisdom."

<sup>34</sup> While all blogposts of Tullian Tchividjian have been removed from the TGC website, DeYoung's are still accessible. See this blogpost which gives some background to the situation: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/what-we-all-agree-on-and-what-we-probably-dont-in-this-sanctification-debate/> (accessed 7/22/21)

<sup>35</sup> See n. 30.

remarried (August 2016) and stepped back into pastoral ministry at *The Sanctuary*, an unaffiliated church in Jupiter, FL, which he started in September 2019.

While Tullian was certainly the most popular face of RG from 2011–2015, others advocated the same theological ideas and who continue to do so. This includes “The Boys,” a group of four pastors and church planters from the Nashville, TN area: Byron Yawn, Ryan Haskins, Jeremy Litts, and Jon Moffitt. They published two books: *A Primer on Pietism: Its Characteristics and Inevitable Impact on the Christian Life* (2017) and *A Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest* (2018).<sup>36</sup> They also produced a weekly podcast from December 2015 to June 2019, dealing with subjects like sanctification, assurance, law and gospel, Reformed theology, and “Pietism.”<sup>37</sup> These and other resources were available through their website, [www.theocast.org](http://www.theocast.org). Sadly, in the spring of 2019, the leader of the group, Byron Yawn, was disqualified from ministry due to moral failure; oversight of the website then fell to Jon Moffitt. Ryan Haskins and Jeremy Litts stepped away to concentrate on their church ministries, and Moffitt, who continues to pastor in Nashville, was joined by Justin Perdue and Jimmy Buehler on the weekly podcasts, trumpeting the same message as before.<sup>38</sup> While the *Primer* and *Pilgrim’s Guide* are no longer available, Moffitt, Perdue, and Buehler have co-authored two new books: *Rest: A Consideration of Faith vs. Faithfulness* and *Safe: An Intro to the Doctrine of Assurance*.<sup>39</sup> The three pastors have continued a weekly podcast from July 2019 up to the present.

Another strain of RG can be found at [www.trueface.org](http://www.trueface.org). This organization is led by John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, and Bill Thrall. These three have collaborated on Trueface’s most important book *The*

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<sup>36</sup> Both books are jointly authored by all four men and published by Theocast, Inc. Apparently, both are now out of print, though they can still be purchased on Amazon.

<sup>37</sup> Pietism, according to The Boys, is synonymous with moralism or legalism; it is preoccupied with the interior of the Christian life; its main focus is on the *duty* of the Christian above all other realities; it believes that *obligation* precedes *assurance*; and it is heavy on the imperatives of Scripture. All these phrases come from Ryan Haskins, Jeremy Litts, Jon Moffitt, and Byron Yawn, *A Primer on Pietism* (Theocast, Inc., 2017), 8–17.

<sup>38</sup> Justin Perdue pastors Covenant Baptist Church in Asheville, NC and Jimmy Buehler pastors Christ Community Church in Willmar, MN.

<sup>39</sup> Moffitt et al, *Rest: A Consideration of Faith vs. Faithfulness* (Theocast, 2021) and Moffitt et al, *Safe: An Intro to the Doctrine of Assurance* (Theocast, 2021).

*Cure*.<sup>40</sup> While Trueface is not as theologically driven as Liberate or Theocast, the group similarly emphasizes God's grace and acceptance while denigrating the kind of moralism that tempts Christians to keep striving to please God.

Three organizations, each of which provides written resources (blogs and books), podcasts, and national and regional conferences, strongly emphasize RG. Note the mission statements of each: [www.1517.org](http://www.1517.org)—"To declare and defend the Good News that we are forgiven and free on account of Christ alone";<sup>41</sup> Mockingbird—"Behind our entire project lies the conviction that none of us ever move beyond our need to hear the basic good news of God's Grace";<sup>42</sup> Lark—"Empowering a global conversation about God's Scandalous Grace."<sup>43</sup>

1517.org has few qualms in admitting its Lutheran roots and connection to Forde's radical Lutheranism.<sup>44</sup> The staff and scholars associated with 1517 include Scott Keith, Ron Rosenblatt, John Warwick Montgomery, Chad Bird, and Daniel Van Voorhis.<sup>45</sup>

Mockingbird claims to have no formal denominational affiliation, but its founder, David Zahl serves on the staff of an Episcopal church and the website ([www.mbird.com](http://www.mbird.com)) features a podcast with David and his two brothers, John and Simeon, who are the sons of Paul Zahl, an Episcopal priest. Furthermore, of the 30 books for sale on the site, half are written by one of the Zahls or Robert Capon, another Episcopal priest. The signature book of the website is *Law and Gospel*,

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<sup>40</sup> John Lynch, Bruce McNicol, Bill Thrall, *The Cure* (Trueface, 2011). A lot of the concepts found in this book first appeared in Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and John Lynch, *TrueFaced* (NavPress, 2004), which appears to be out of print but can still be purchased on Amazon.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.1517.org/about>. Accessed 7/22/21.

<sup>42</sup> <https://mbird.com/about/history-and-mission/>. Accessed 7/22/21.

<sup>43</sup> <https://larksite.com/about>. Accessed 7/22/21.

<sup>44</sup> On a personal note I attended a 1517 conference in Burnsville, MN in 2019. I was intrigued by a sticker on Scott Keith's laptop, which he clearly displayed during his session: "Forde Lives." Gerhard Forde died in 2005!

<sup>45</sup> There are too many books to list other than to note that the website has over 30 of Montgomery's books for sale as well as several titles by Chad Bird. Of particular interest in regard to RG see Chad Bird, *Upside-Down Spirituality: The 9 Essential Failures of a Faithful Life* (Baker, 2019), and idem, *Your God is Too Glorious: Finding God in the Most Unexpected Places* (Baker, 2018).

which clearly demonstrates the main themes of RG, which will be delineated below.<sup>46</sup>

Lark was founded by Russ Johnson in 2014 and originally was called The Table Network before changing its name to Lark and the Lark Collective in 2021.<sup>47</sup> Shortly after its founding, Tony Sorci joined Johnson, and they have labored together, creating a network of fellowships (churches?). Under the Table Network label, they published *Slow Down*.<sup>48</sup> Many of the same RG ideas from that book are found in their newest Lark publication, *Reclaim*.<sup>49</sup> A notable member of their network is The Sanctuary, pastored by Tullian Tchividjian.

Two final examples of RG come from a pastor and a professor.<sup>50</sup> R. W. Glenn, a former Minnesota pastor, wrote *Crucifying Morality: The Gospel of the Beatitudes* in 2013.<sup>51</sup> And Steven Paulson, who teaches at Luther House of Study in Sioux Falls, SD, has written a 3-volume work, *Luther's Outlaw God*.<sup>52</sup> Paulson is the clear frontrunner among Lutherans who are promoting and building upon Forde's radical

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<sup>46</sup> McDavid et al, *Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints)* (Mockingbird Ministries, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Lark is the general name of this non-profit organization, "a teaching ministry seeking to empower a global conversation about God's scandalous grace" (<https://larksite.com/faq>). The Lark Collective is the name of the network of individuals and churches who "want to join in the spread of God's scandalous grace among friends" (<https://larksite.com/about>).

<sup>48</sup> Russ Johnson, Gino Curcuruto, Tony Sorci, *Slow Down* (The Table Network, 2017). This book is still available on Amazon but is no longer on the website.

<sup>49</sup> Russ Johnson and Tony Sorci, *Reclaim* (Lark, 2021). After reading this book, I find it difficult to determine the denominational connections of Lark. The book cites Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran sources, yet it seems to lean in a post-emergent-church direction (e.g. "Providing people with a place to belong on their way to belief" [112]) all the while trumpeting "reckless" (57, 119) and "indiscriminate" (81, 85, 96) grace.

<sup>50</sup> I considered adding a third example, Barbara R. Duguid, *Extravagant Grace: God's Glory Displayed in Our Weakness* (P & R Publishing, 2013). While she makes several RG statements [e.g. "What if growing in grace is more about humility, dependence, and exalting Christ than it is about defeating sin?" (18) and "All our striving will consume our resting and we will live our lives in a swirl of ceaseless activity . . . resting must be primary" (225)], she tempers these with comments like this: "We are to strive for growth with all our strength and to work to put sin to death within us" (220).

<sup>51</sup> Shepherds Press, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Steven D. Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God: Volume 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Augsburg Fortress, 2018); idem, *Luther's Outlaw God: Volume 2: Hidden in the Cross* (Augsburg Fortress, 2019); and idem, *Luther's Outlaw God: Volume 3: Sacraments and God's Attack on the Promise* (Augsburg Fortress, 2021).

Lutheranism. While his three volumes do not necessarily deal with RG directly (and certainly not in a popular way as the many other books already mentioned in this section), they share all the qualities of Forde's project including his distinction between law and grace, his denial of the third use of the law, and his theology of the cross.<sup>53</sup>

## **The Teaching of Radical Grace**

As I move to discuss the tenets of RG, I want to clarify that RG does not promote heresy and that it is well within the boundaries of orthodoxy. In fact, it points out a key problem in the lives of many Christians today—moralistic/legalistic, performance-based approaches to sanctification. RG teaches that Christians do not gain more of God's love through obedience and performance, and it reminds us that our security in Christ and assurance of salvation can never be lost despite the sins we commit after our justification.<sup>54</sup> I have found their reminders of the meaning and application of God's grace to be refreshing and convicting because it is so easy to stumble (even if absent-mindedly) into the ditch of self-sufficiency and self-improvement in my personal walk with Christ. I believe that RG's emphasis on the acceptance of believers by Christ apart from any moral standard but the imputed righteousness of Christ gives freedom to those bound by pleasing man issues on the one hand and encouragement to those burdened with insecurity and fear on the other.

Nonetheless, imbalance in teaching always has negative consequences, and I fear that unguarded statements and overly triumphant perspectives have resulted in a harmful de-emphasis on the imperatives of the New Testament. This defines the basic problem at issue: RG has plunged so deeply into the indicative ditch of sanctification that their followers are finding it difficult to see, much less embrace, the importance of the imperatives on the other side of the road.

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<sup>53</sup> See note 24 for a description of Forde's theology of the cross. For a critique of this view of Lutheran theology see Christopher D. Jackson, *Pro Ecclesia* 29.3 (2020): 336–51. For a critique of Forde's view of the Law see Jack Kilcrease, "Gerhard Forde's Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique," *Concordia Lutheran Quarterly* 75 (2011): 151–79, and Engelbrecht, "Luther's Threefold Use of the Law," 135–50.

<sup>54</sup> Gilley, IFCA National Conference presentation on Liberate Theology, 5. See n. 12.

## What is the Problem?

In treating the teaching of RG, I will first consider the problem RG is seeking to address and then discuss the solution its proponents offer to that problem. First, what is the problem? Though all these authors agree on the problem, they tend to use different terms and descriptions to define it. For Johnson and Sorci, it is “moralism” taught by the “Church [which is] a place of performance and challenge” and emphasizes “personal morality.”<sup>55</sup> For Glenn, the problem is “reading texts that *are not commandments* as though they are” and turning them into “moralistic teaching.”<sup>56</sup> The Boys from Nashville refer to this problem as “Pietism.” Unfortunately, they take a circuitous route to describe what they mean by the term. It is “that approach to Christianity that is preoccupied with the interior of the Christian life.” Or it is “a commitment to the spirituality and moral progress of the individual Christian.” Or this: “Progress in the Christian life is its *summum bonum*. *Should* is pietism’s main focus.” Finally, “Pietism has committed itself to placing the *duty of the Christian* above all other realities.”<sup>57</sup> The authors of *The Cure* use an allegory to compare the two different ways that Christians approach their walk with God. They either live in the Room of Grace or in the Room of Good Intentions; it is problematic to live in the second room. Those in the Room of Good Intentions live by the two mottoes hanging on the wall in the room: “Striving hard to be all God wants me to be” and “Working on my sin to achieve an intimate relationship with God.” We can summarize this with the formula “More right behavior + Less wrong behavior = Godliness.”<sup>58</sup> McDavid, Richardson, and Zahl call the problem, “misguided Semipelagianism” which means that “God saves us and then the work of moral progress is up to us.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, Tchividjian uses “legalism, performancism, and moralism,” but he tends to use “performancism” most frequently. He explains that performancism “happens when *what we need to do*, not what Jesus has already done, becomes the end game.” This attitude demonstrates itself in moralistic living and preaching. In regard to

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson and Sorci, *Reclaim*, 20, 42.

<sup>56</sup> R. W. Glenn, *Crucifying Morality: The Gospel of the Beatitudes* (Shepherds Press, 2013), 17–18. Emphasis original.

<sup>57</sup> The Boys, *A Primer on Pietism*, 8–9. Emphasis original.

<sup>58</sup> *The Cure*, 14–17.

<sup>59</sup> *Law & Gospel*, 68.

living, the moralist believes that his “good behavior is required to keep God’s favor.” In regard to preaching, moralistic sermons “provide nothing more than a ‘to do’ list, strengthening our bondage to a performance-driven approach to the Christian life. It’s all law (what we must do) and no gospel (what Jesus has done).<sup>60</sup> There are three results that occur when performancism is one’s manner of approach to the Christian life: 1) we turn into complainers like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son; 2) it obscures the goodness of the good news because most lost people think that doing good works saves them; and 3) it traps us in slavery and despair.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the problem for Christians according to RG is that, even though believers have been justified by faith apart from works, they have slipped into a works-based approach to their sanctification, believing that their effort in doing good works will gain them greater favor with God. In other words, these moralistic, performance-based, Semipelagian Christians have fallen into the legalistic ditch of the sanctification road. This leads us to see how RG believes that this problem can be solved.

## **What is the Solution?**

The second step in our discussion of RG is to learn how these teachers believe that the problem of legalism should be resolved. In basic terms, RG teaches that believers must believe in and rest upon the indicatives of our salvation. I think we can summarize their approach to the solution under five broad ideas:

1. Relax and rest! “The bottom line is this, Christian: because of Christ’s work on your behalf, God doesn’t dwell on your sin the way you do. So, relax . . . and you’ll actually start to get better.”<sup>62</sup> “The believer rests in the Father’s arms instead of laboring to climb into them. We rest knowing our status is forever

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<sup>60</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 46–49. Note that the emphasis on all these quotes is in the original. Also see McDavid, Richardson, and Zahl, *Law & Gospel*, 61: “Performancism’ is a helpful way to describe what it looks like to justify ourselves.”

<sup>61</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 52–54.

<sup>62</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 184.



fixed.”<sup>63</sup> “Christianity is about coming over and over again to rest in the life that Jesus lived and the death that he died for you as a gift of sheer grace.”<sup>64</sup>

2. Remember and remind yourself! “Remembering, revisiting, and rediscovering the reality of our justification every day is the hard work we’re called to do if we’re going to grow.”<sup>65</sup> “If you continually remind yourself that you are accepted completely and solely because of the comprehensively perfect righteousness of Christ, then you can be confident that he will never reject you.”<sup>66</sup>
3. Trust in God and believe the gospel! “At the core, we’re just learning to trust and depend on our new identity. We’re learning to live out of who God says we are on our worst day. So a statement like ‘It’s less important that anything gets fixed, but that nothing is hidden’ is an example of living out of our new identity.”<sup>67</sup> “Real spiritual progress happens when our typical, natural understanding of progress is rooted out. The key to Christian growth, then, is not first behaving better; it’s believing better—believing more deeply what Jesus has already accomplished.”<sup>68</sup>
4. Receive Christ’s work on your behalf! Using Christ’s instruction about children, Johnson and Sorci say that children “are the quintessential models of reception. This example is fitting when you realize that Christ’s Kingdom is all about God giving and us receiving, not us accomplishing.”<sup>69</sup> “Only Christians know that the thing they so desperately need is the

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<sup>63</sup> The Boys, *Primer*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Glenn, *Crucifying Morality*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Tchividjian, “Work Hard! But in Which Direction?” TGC blogpost (June 8, 2011). Note: it will take some work to find this blogpost since TGC has deleted all of Tullian’s posts. Find it at <https://www.theaquilareport.com/the-role-of-effort-in-sanctification-a-dialogue-between-kevin-deyoung-and-tullian-tchividjian/100/> (accessed 7/23/21). I thank Bryan Blazosky for helping to locate this exchange between Tchividjian and DeYoung.

<sup>66</sup> Glenn, *Crucifying Morality*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Lynch, McNicol, and Thrall, *The Cure*, 84.

<sup>68</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 172–73.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson and Sorci, *Reclaim*, 87.

righteousness of Jesus, and they want to receive that gift anew every day.”<sup>70</sup>

5. Grow in understanding the gospel! “Whatever sanctification includes, it begins with an understanding of who we are in Christ and what he has freed us from.”<sup>71</sup> “The righteousness that Jesus [gives] . . . is the righteousness that you begin to possess as you grow in your understanding of what Jesus has done for you.”<sup>72</sup>

These same five themes—relax, remember, trust, receive, and grow in understanding—are found again and again in RG’s literature. I have limited each of the five categories to a few quotes for each, and I could have given many more.<sup>73</sup> The discerning reader may believe that this language sounds very similar to Keswick’s idea of “let go and

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<sup>70</sup> Glenn, *Crucifying Morality*, 64.

<sup>71</sup> The Boys, *A Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest* (Theocast, Inc., 2018), 125.

<sup>72</sup> Glenn, *Crucifying Morality*, 105.

<sup>73</sup> For example, notice this sampling of provocative statements quite common among these writers: “*Application* is almost always a code word for law” (Tchividjian, *One Way Love*, 155). In *The Cure* (22) Jesus meets the Christian: “He puts his hands on my shoulders, staring into my eyes. No disappointment. No condemnation. Only delight. Only love. He pulls me into a bear hug, so tight it knocks the breath out of me for a moment . . . After several moments, with a straight face He says, ‘That is a lot of sin. A whole lot of sin. Don’t you ever sleep?’ He starts laughing, and I start laughing.” The Boys (*A Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest*): “Sanctification is more about not having to do what we did before and less about avoiding bad things we once did. . . . Paul never offers sanctification as the measuring stick of God’s pleasure toward us” (125). “He has expressed the same love for us as his children as He does for Jesus, his only Son (John 17:20–24). That means all children at all times are equally receiving the affections of the Father as Christ receives them” (171). Robert Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Eerdmans, 1988), “Jesus I can love. He does everything, I do nothing; I trust him. It is a nifty arrangement.” Donavon Riley, “God Commands the Impossible and That’s Good,” blogpost, Mar 7, 2018, (accessed 7/23/21) <https://www.1517.org/articles/god-commands-the-impossible-and-thats-good>: “We are not expected to be doers of God’s command, but believers in God’s promise.” Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing* (96): “God works *his* work in you, which is the work already accomplished by Christ. Our hard work, therefore, means coming to a greater understanding of his work.”

let God.”<sup>74</sup> However, the quietism displayed in each of these instances is based upon different interests. For Keswick, letting go and letting God was the description of the crisis experience one needs to have in order to enter into the spiritual realm and out of the carnal realm; it is the ticket to the *beginning* of growth.<sup>75</sup> For RG, relaxing, receiving, and so on, are behaviors that wise Christians engage in as they grow in their maturity. Since the Reformed model of sanctification assumes an inevitable connection between one’s justification and sanctification, growth has already begun when faith is first exercised.<sup>76</sup> The quietism enjoined by RG teachers merely helps to increase the growth trajectory more rapidly and to ensure that growth occurs with the proper biblical motivation.

## Radical Grace and Perseverance

As stated above, there are aspects of this teaching that, when in balance, can provide encouragement to us in our ministries. We would be wise to ponder whether or not we give tacit approval to law-based, legalistic teaching that makes Christian living little more than rule following for the approval of God and others on the one hand or simplistic self-help lists of “be better Christians” on the other (e.g., 5 principles for Christian weight loss or 8 ways to be a better friend or 13 reasons why you shouldn’t say bad things about your pastor). Just as we are naturally inclined to think that salvation is something that can be earned by our good works, even for the justified sinner, who has come to accept the gift of faith and who has been saved by grace

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<sup>74</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, What It Is, and Why It’s Harmful* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017). This is the definitive book on Keswick theology and its mantra, “let go and let God.”

<sup>75</sup> Naselli, *No Quick Fix*, 30–39.

<sup>76</sup> This notion of an inevitable or necessary connection between justification and sanctification has been demonstrated in numerous writings supporting the Reformed view of sanctification. A sampling includes Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 49–60; Anthony Hoekema, “The Reformed View,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin Dieter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 62–77; Naselli, *No Quick Fix*, 49–55; and Jonathan R. Pratt, “The Relationship between Justification and Spiritual Fruit in Romans 5–8,” *Themelios* 34 (2009): 162–78.

alone apart from works (Eph 2:8–9), we are tempted to slip into moralistic thinking when it comes to our sanctification. But I believe we are correct to raise a red flag of warning with regard to the emphases of RG as it has developed into its current form during these past 15 years or so.

I remind us of the need we have to guard the biblical doctrine of sanctification from those who would slip into imbalanced approaches. Sanctification is a work wrought by God and the believer, who produces fruit solely because the Spirit enables him to do so. This is the mystery of sanctification so clearly stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” We also see it displayed in Philippians 2:12–13: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

As we have considered RG and its basic perspective on sanctification, we have seen a subtle and not-so-subtle de-emphasis on the doctrine of perseverance, i.e., the truth that God will enable his children to produce good works to the end of their lives. I am making this assertion on the basis of what we saw in the previous section of this paper. We have seen that RG’s way of resolving the problem of moralistic performancism in the believer’s experience of sanctification is to relax, remember, trust, receive, and grow in understanding—all of these ideas clearly falling on the “don’t work” side of the activity spectrum (viewing the activity spectrum with “working hard” on one end and “don’t work” on the other end). This lack of emphasis on effort in the Christian life is the failure of the RG project. In light of this failure I would like to provide three personal observations before giving my conclusion.

First, RG seems to overblow the problem of moralism/legalism/pietism. Certainly there are believers among us who like rules and boundaries; they like to color inside the lines; and they like clearly laid-out lists. There are also pastors who focus on the externals in their sermons and in counseling and who preach and teach in ways that reveal them to be shepherds insistent their sheep stay in line. For people bound by or who lean toward a moralistic approach to the Christian

life, RG offers some very helpful reminders, particularly that the indicatives of sanctification must not be forgotten in our walk of faith. But most would acknowledge that under the umbrella of conservative evangelical churches, the rule-keepers are in the minority. Too many believers in our churches live according to their feelings, like to color outside the lines, and do not like being told how they should live. No, it seems we struggle much more with license than with legalism. Many pastors are afraid to preach about holy living, fearing the backlash from their hearers. And as a result, our people are sometimes ignorant but probably more often happily guilt-free when it comes to making wise and discerning moral choices in their lives.<sup>77</sup>

My second observation: we must understand the imperatives of sanctification in order to correct the over-emphasis on the indicatives of sanctification so characteristic of RG, i.e., the best way to correct a distortion of the real thing is to understand the real thing better. Please understand that in looking more closely at the imperatives I do not want us to jump out of one ditch only to slide into the other. But so much of what is said in the RG literature either ignores these points about the imperatives or caricatures them. So I would like you to consider with me the goal of the imperatives, the motivation for obeying the imperatives, and the effort required by the imperatives.<sup>78</sup>

1. The Goal of the Imperatives: Holiness. If, indeed, God has called us to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:15–16), we need to consider

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<sup>77</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*, 17–19, provides eight possible reasons why Christians are not apt to have a concern for holiness: 1) it was too common in the past to equate holiness with abstaining from a few taboo practices such as drinking, smoking, and dancing; godliness meant that you avoided the no-no list; 2) there is a fear that a passion for holiness makes you some kind of weird holdover from a bygone era; 3) our churches have many unregenerate persons in them; 4) our culture of cool in regard to Christian freedom often means pushing the boundaries; 5) more liberal Christians think that labeling any behavior as “ungodly” is judgmental or intolerant [I recall hearing from a friend of mine who served as a principal in a Christian school being accused of “body-shaming” because she required the young ladies to wear modest dresses to the school-sponsored spring banquet]; 6) if we are gospel-centered we won’t talk about imperatives or moral exertion; “We know legalism (salvation by law keeping) and antinomianism (salvation without the need for law keeping) are both wrong, but antinomianism feels like a much safer danger” (19); 7) holiness is hard work and who likes hard work?; 8) many Christians have given up on sanctification; since we’re all hopeless sinners anyway why bother?

<sup>78</sup> This threefold outline comes from DeYoung, 31–61, 79–91.

what holiness looks like. First, holiness will involve conformation to and renewal in the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 12:2; Gal 4:19; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:16; Phil 3:10). Second, it will be seen in a life marked by virtue rather than vice (Eph 4:25–5:3; Col 3:5–9, 12–15). Third, holiness is related to right thinking (Rom 12:3; 15:5; Phil 1:9–10; 4:8). Fourth, a holy life is marked by obedience to God’s commands (John 14:23; 1 John 2:3). Finally, holiness shows itself in a clear conscience (Acts 24:16; Rom 14:23).

2. The Motivation for Obeying the Imperatives. One of the errors RG writers regularly point out is that performance-oriented Christians strive for holiness with wrong motives (e.g., pride, fear of judgment, desire to gain favor with God).<sup>79</sup> While this caution is helpful, Scripture gives a multitude of proper motives,<sup>80</sup> and I would like to consider the motives of rewards, God’s love for us, and pleasing God. First, the degree to which Christians obey corresponds with the rewards they will receive in glory.<sup>81</sup> This relates to the idea of different degrees of glory and happiness in eternity, i.e., glory will differ from saint to saint (1 Cor 3:14–15; 2 Cor 9:6; Luke 19:11–26). Second, Mark Jones helps us to consider the idea that the believer’s obedience relates to the “complacent” love of God such that “the more we are like God, the more love we shall have from him.”<sup>82</sup> Such verses as John 14:21–23; 15:10; Jude 21, all speak to the *increase* of God’s love for his children in the “context of ongoing communion with God and Christ.”<sup>83</sup> Third, while there are numerous RG quotes suggesting that we can never please God by

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<sup>79</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> DeYoung, *Holiness*, 57–60, gives a list of 40 proper motives with a corresponding verse or verses for each. He states, “As exhausting as this list might be, it could easily be doubled or tripled. God doesn’t command obedience ‘just cuz.’ He gives us dozens of specific reasons to be holy.”

<sup>81</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 71–76, provides a helpful discussion of this subject, using Edwards and Turretin as his primary resources.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 84–87. Jones discusses the distinction between the “benevolent” love of God, which is bestowed on the elect, apart from any virtue in them, and the “complacent” love of God, which is bestowed on those whom God approves because they obey his commands. This twofold distinction of God’s love is affirmed by “literally dozens of highly regarded Reformed theologians from the Reformation and post-Reformation” (85).

<sup>83</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 86.

means of our post-conversion works,<sup>84</sup> the NT makes it clear that we not only please God when we obey, but we are commanded to do so: 2 Corinthians 5:9 states, “So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” Likewise, 1 Thessalonians 4:1 reads, “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.” (See also John 14:21; Rom 8:8–9; 14:18; Phil 4:18; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4; 1 Tim 2:3; 5:4; Heb 11:5–6; 13:16, 21; 1 John 3:22; Rev 3:15–16.)<sup>85</sup>

3. The Effort Required by the Imperatives. We must work diligently in the pursuit of holiness. First, our effort must be Spirit-empowered in that the Spirit exposes sin so we can see it and avoid it (John 16:7–11); he illumines the Word so we can understand and apply it (1 Cor 2:6–16); and he takes the veil away so we can see the glory of Christ (John 16:14). Second, our effort must be gospel-driven in that the gospel encourages godliness out of a sense of gratitude for what Christ has done (Rom 12:1–2) and in that it aids our pursuit of holiness by telling us about who we are (Col 3:1–4). Third, our effort must be faith-fueled in that it rests on the promises God makes to his children (Matt 5:3–12).<sup>86</sup>

Third, in reading through all of this literature, I agree with Mark Jones regarding many subtle similarities between RG in our day and the full-blown antinomianism of the seventeenth century. Jones draws out five concerns that Puritan theologian Anthony Burgess (1600–1664) expressed in the antinomian controversy of his day.<sup>87</sup> And I believe that these same concerns ought to resonate with us as we interact with the various books, blogposts, and podcasts we see coming from RG today.

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<sup>84</sup> For example, Haskins et al, *Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest*, 125: “Paul never offers sanctification as the measuring stick of God’s pleasure toward us.”

<sup>85</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 92–95.

<sup>86</sup> DeYoung, *Holiness*, 81–88.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 114–18. Jones gives the following bibliographical information for Burgess’s book: Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae legis: or, A vindication of the morall law and the covenants, from the Errors of Papists, Arminians, Socinians, and more especially Antinomians* (London: T. Underhill, 1646).

1. We must be careful not to exalt preaching about grace that overshadows the centrality of Christ. “There is today a great deal of talk about ‘grace.’ It is described as scandalous, liberating, shocking, counterintuitive, unpredictable, dangerous, etc. But when an emphasis on grace eclipses a focus on Christ . . . then grace is not being preached.”<sup>88</sup>
2. Oftentimes Antinomians reject the accusation of Antinomianism in their writings, but in the end they are “loath to speak about the moral law in a positive sense,”<sup>89</sup> and they actually end up supporting antinomian ideas as they proceed.<sup>90</sup> Jones uses Tullian’s exegesis of Philippians 2:12–13 in *Jesus + Nothing* to illustrate this point: “Think of what Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.’ We’ve got work to do—but what exactly is it? Get better? Try harder? Pray more? Get more involved in church? Read the Bible longer? What *precisely* is Paul exhorting us to do? He goes on to explain: ‘For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (v. 13). God works *his* work in *you*, which is the work already accomplished by Christ. Our hard work, therefore, means coming to a greater understanding of his work.”<sup>91</sup> Jones comments, “How does this fit with Paul’s exhortation to work out our salvation with fear and trembling? Paul surely did not reduce Christian living to contemplating Christ.”<sup>92</sup>
3. There is a tendency for Antinomians to preach texts where Christ and his grace are present, but then avoid those texts where duties are commanded and God’s Law commended. The antidote for this tendency is why we must commend expositional preaching at our seminaries: preach the whole counsel of God! Jones insightfully notes, “Frequently, antinomians are

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<sup>88</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 114.

<sup>89</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 115.

<sup>90</sup> One example is Gerhard Forde, who is critiqued well by Jack Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of Law,” 164–69.

<sup>91</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing*, 96.

<sup>92</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 116.



in more serious error in what they fail to say than in what they do say.”<sup>93</sup>

4. Antinomians tend to speak as though they have discovered some grand new truth, some “better” way. “The rhetoric one often hears today has to do with ‘getting it.’ That someone ‘gets grace’ often really means that ‘it does not matter what we do’. Condescending talk abounds from the lips of modern-day antinomians who think they alone have understood what grace is.”<sup>94</sup>
5. The Antinomian tends to become very repetitious in his sermons, preaching grace and gospel, all the while thinking that the same point must be made in every sermon. Do you have problems in your marriage? Believe the gospel. Do you struggle with pornography? Believe the gospel. Do you have a worrying problem? Believe the gospel. Jones comments, “One of the dangers of antinomian preaching: it becomes boring. The same repetitive mantras are preached week after week, to the point that if you have heard one sermon, you have heard them all. . . . Christ should be in every sermon, as we see in apostolic example and teaching. Preaching the whole Christ prevents us from becoming monotonous in our so-called gospel summaries at the end of every sermon.”<sup>95</sup>

I do not intend to speak of Radical Grace teachers as heretics, but instead to spotlight the reality that misdirected interpretations of various biblical texts have caused an imbalance in understanding sanctification rightly. Silence in regard to holy living, honest repentance, and strenuous effort actually speaks, and it sounds eerily similar to Paul’s interlocutor in Romans 6:1 (“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”) and in Romans 6:15 (“Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”). May God help us to be balanced in our preaching and teaching, emphasizing both the indicatives and imperatives of Scripture and letting each passage speak for itself.

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<sup>93</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 117.

<sup>94</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 117.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 118.



## Catholicity and Intergenerational Worship

Terry L. Johnson<sup>1</sup>

If anyone qualifies as the godfather, or better, the midwife of contemporary Christian music, it would be Chuck Fromm. From 1975 to 2000 Fromm was the head of Maranatha Music in Costa Mesa, California, the birthplace and source of the contemporary genre in the early 1970's. He was in the middle of organizing and promoting the hugely popular Friday and Saturday night Christian concerts that were attracting thousands of young people in Southern California and Oregon, a number of which I attended while an undergraduate at the University of Southern California. In 1991 he founded and edited *Worship Leader* magazine, coining the phrase “worship leader” even as its subscription rate rose to 40,000.

His description of his conversion to contemporary music genre described in *Fuller Focus* magazine is fascinating.<sup>2</sup> A musically inclined young man, Fromm sang in his church youth choirs in the mid-1960's, and even formed a traveling singing group called “The New Life Singers.” One evening while his group was singing what had been marketed as “youth music,” he experienced an epiphany. The Christian rock band, “Love Song,” performed a new song at the rapidly growing Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, “in a vernacular of music that I understood from my culture,” he said. “They were speaking of something that was really going on, not something baked in a different universe and imported. That music—even before I thought about the lyrics—made everything I was doing prior to that inauthentic.”<sup>3</sup>

One cannot hear this testimony without sympathy. His experience connects with many of the members of the “boomer” generation. The environment of Moody-Sanke gospel songs, of Peterson, Gaither, and of George Beverly Shea solos, was to us another universe.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry L. Johnson is senior minister of Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia.

<sup>2</sup> “The Way We Were Led,” in *Fuller Focus* (Spring 2005, Vol. 13, No. 2), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Fromm, “The Way We Were Led,” 8.

Granted, baby-boomer generational hubris tends to see pre-boomer and post-boomer cultural preferences in these sorts of overwrought categories (“a different universe”), but he has a point. I too belonged to a traveling singing group (we were the “Young Life Singers”) which performed Otis Skillings’ “Life!” We dressed up in our yellow polo shirts and navy slacks, synchronized our hand and body motions, and sang, “Life! Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pa.” My buddies and I felt like dorks, but the trips were fun and the gospel was being presented, so we endured. But compared to what we were hearing on AM 93 KHJ every day, church music was from another planet.

Much as Fromm’s testimony resonates, it is also rich with irony. He seems not to recognize that the church music environment that was a “different universe” from what he calls “my culture,” was in fact a familiar and comfortable culture for many others. What he came to reject, many others continued to embrace and love. For some, their familiar and comfortable church culture had deep roots, reaching back through the Protestant Reformers to the early church. At the same time, the importation of his culture into the church was inevitably deeply alienating to those in the church for whom it was new and foreign. How many times have we heard older people say, “I do not recognize my church anymore”? After 40 years (or even 450 years) of relative sameness, they walked into their church service one Sunday, saw a “praise band” up front, heard strange music played with non-traditional instruments (electric guitars, drums, tambourines, etc.), and were profoundly disoriented and disturbed by the experience. If they dared to express concern, they were cautioned not to obstruct outreach to the young. The church, it was explained, was reaching the rising generation. They soon learned that the only people to which the church cared to minister the gospel were young people, or so it seemed. Apparently older people, who were put-off by the new, did not need gospel ministry. So, it was in with the youth culture, and out with whatever preceded it.

“Worship wars,” as they are called, are really culture wars. “Contemporary worship” is really a determination to prefer the taste preferences of a segment of the youth-oriented contemporary culture (typically anglo-contemporary, but sometimes Latino, African-American, Hip-Hop, Cowboy, skate-boarders, etc.) over an older church culture. Have the ecclesiastical ramifications of that determination been considered? Can the church avoid fragmentation and division

according to cultural preference if “authenticity” requires that “my culture” be the dominant form in which Christian devotion is expressed? What happens to Fromm’s baby boomer culture of soft-rock when it proves alien to a new generation of young people who insist on music and instrumentation, which, for them, is familiar and comfortable? What happens when Gen-X or Gen-I rejects contemporary Christian music as traditional, 1970’s stuff, and “inauthentic?” There are two options. The church can either reject the innovations of the new generation and establish Boomer-forms of contemporary Christian worship as the new orthodoxy; or, it can embrace each new wave of cultural change and commit the church to perpetual liturgical innovation, shaped, one should note, by the preferences and tastes generated by secular America’s popular culture and its profit-driven entertainment industry.

The problem in today’s worship wars is that the “what’s new” game has been played now for several generations. Much of the gospel song genre of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century sounds like carnival or ballpark music to young ears because it was generationally-targeted when it was introduced. Moody-Sankey & Co. swept away the metrical psalms and evangelical hymns (Watts, Wesley, Toplady, Newton, Doddridge, etc.) and the traditional music that preceded them. Gospel songs then gave-way to Peterson and Gaither, who then gave way to Maranatha Music and CCM. Multiple generations of Evangelicals, from around the turn of the century to the present, have lost touch with that older Protestant tradition.<sup>4</sup>

It is to this older tradition, captured in the traditional hymnal, Psalter, and historic orders of service, which we must return if we are to unify the generations at the hour of worship. This older tradition, reaching back to the Reformers, and behind them to the ancient church to which they appealed for their reforms, is *the church’s own liturgical culture*.<sup>5</sup> This older tradition belongs to no single age, ethnic, or interest group. It does not involve the imposition of the culture of one group over another, whether young or old, white or black, European or non-European, because it is its own culture. The hymnal,

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<sup>4</sup> See Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 846.

<sup>5</sup> “Divine Worship is a culture unlike any other,” says Timothy Quill, “and is, in fact, a counterculture” (“Liturgical Worship” in Matthew J. Pinson, *Perspectives on Christian Worship: Five Views* (United States: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 30.

Psalter, traditional orders, and, we would add, traditional instrumentation, constitute the historic worship culture of the church as it has slowly and organically evolved. It is the church's "canon," to which additions and alterations are made over time as worthy contributions (e.g., compositions) gain recognition. Embracing this older tradition can save us from the "liturgical Trotskyism" of continuous revolution to which our default-drive now commits us. Who knows what eccentricities shall unfold before our eyes in the years ahead if we do not consciously draw back from the philosophy that pegs worship practices to the rapidly mutating American popular culture, and instead anchor the church's public praise to Scripture and our historic ecclesiastical culture.

What is needed, more broadly, is a restored biblical ecclesiology, a constant theme in all of David Wells's work.<sup>6</sup> Undergirding his call to truth and virtue has been a subordinate call to a biblical doctrine of the church. "It is time to become Protestant once again," he insists.<sup>7</sup> Among the greatest strengths of traditional Protestant worship and ministry is that it is historically rooted. The whole catholic (small "c") tradition has influenced the shape of the ministry and worship of Reformed Protestantism. Another way of saying this is to say that the worship and ministry of Reformed Protestantism has taken ecclesiology seriously. Because it has, it can provide a pattern for the present and the future. This is of no small importance given that very little in the way of a doctrine of the church remains among evangelical Christians. Evangelicalism is parachurch, Wells says, "to the point where the local church, in biblical terms (has become) increasingly irrelevant . . . or, at best, a luxury. It has become more of an optional extra, less of a necessity."<sup>8</sup>

Historic Reformed Protestantism takes seriously the history and doctrine of the church. It honors the church local and universal,

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<sup>6</sup> See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 72–87; *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 196–209; *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 263–317; *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 1–58, 209–248.

<sup>7</sup> Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 220.

visible and invisible. It esteems the historic form of public ministry. It values catholicity. It respects the “communion of the saints,” past, present, and future. Decisions regarding worship practices typically have not been made in isolation from other churches or from the Christian tradition of worship. Adaptations normally have not been made quickly or idiosyncratically, but have been gradual, and made in consultation with the whole church across the ages. Those who are interested in liberating the church from unwarranted cultural influences should be particularly interested in historic Reformed ministry and worship. Traditional Reformed Protestantism resists the incursions of western pop-culture with its hyper-individualism, rootlessness, love of novelty, superficiality, and the cult of youth that have been so prominent in the shaping of contemporary worship.

What I hope to show in the following pages is that the principle of *catholicity* requires that we establish a single universal or common public service, that the principle of the *communion of the saints* requires that such a service gather together all the saints without regard for race, ethnicity, sex, culture, and especially for our purposes, age and generational differences. These, I hope to show, are the principles of the apostles, and should remain the ideals for us today.

## Catholicity

The advocates of youth-oriented “contemporary worship” are not urging a single thing because *there is no one contemporary culture*. Instead, they argue for a thousand times a thousand different approaches to worship and ministry, each catering to individual cultural preferences based on age, affinity, or ethnicity, and at the same time excluding all the rest. Sally Morgenthaler in her book *Worship Evangelism* finds it necessary to devote nearly forty pages to distinguishing the worship that appeals to “Boomers” to that which appeals to “Busters.”<sup>9</sup> Being “contemporary” isn’t enough. One must determine which contemporary constituency one wishes to reach and tailor one’s services to its tastes. Saddleback Church now conducts four services simultaneously on Sunday mornings: “traditional” Saddleback, rock,

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<sup>9</sup> Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 172–210.

gospel, and classic hymns and choruses. Cowboy churches now are not enough. There are urban cowboy churches and rural cowboy churches. We are experiencing, in the words of one commentary, a “hall of mirrors,” an “endless proliferation of new groups . . . based on nothing more substantial than catering to new styles.”<sup>10</sup> “How will we respond to the new tribalism of worship and music?” asks Michael S. Hamilton, in an article otherwise favorable to the new diversity in worship. “How can we keep our sectarian worship from becoming a sectarianism of the soul?”<sup>11</sup> “In today’s climate,” argues Gene E. Veith, “if a church seizes upon one particular style of popular music, then that will privilege those whose music is chosen and alienate everyone else.”<sup>12</sup> Call this trend the “ipodization” of public worship. The theory seems to be that the ideal public worship service is one that conforms completely to the participants’ cultural preferences. The perfect tool for fulfilling this ideal is the iPod and its successor iPhones. This technology makes it possible for each individual participant to dial-up exactly the songs and sermons and prayers that meet exactly his or her needs at exactly that particular moment—alone, self-absorbed, and isolated. What is the answer to this fragmenting of the church? A fresh appreciation of its catholicity.

Reformed Protestants have typically resisted surrendering the word “catholic” to the Roman Catholics. They have affirmed the importance of the church’s catholicity and apostolicity, though they have tended to define these doctrinally and spiritually rather than institutionally.<sup>13</sup>

Repeatedly the Apostle Paul appeals to the practice of the whole church when requiring a given reform. He strengthens his moral, theological, and biblical arguments with appeals to catholicity or universal practice. When he greets the church at Corinth, he does so with “all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Dieter & Valerie Zander, “The Evolution of Gen X-Ministry,” *Regeneration Quarterly*, 5.3, (1999), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” in *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Gene E. Veith, “Church Music and Contemporary Culture,” in *Modern Reformation*, November/December, 2002, 43.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion - Vol. 1 & 2*, in John T. McNeill (ed.) *The Library of Christian Classics*, Volume XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.i.2, 1013-14; IV.i.9, 1023ff.



Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). The weight of the whole church universal stands with the Apostle in this epistle. This is catholicity. What he writes he writes on behalf of “All (people) who in every place . . .” What he teaches them is taught “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor 4:17). Universality was regarded by the Apostles as a principle worth highlighting. Dealing directly with our theme of worship (e.g., prayer, the role of women in the Christian assembly, and the Lord’s Supper) he says, “we have no other practice, nor have *the churches of God*” (1 Cor 11:16). The practice of the early church is singular enough that the Apostle Paul can appeal to it. The “churches of God” were unified in their use of important forms of ministry. Respecting a whole range of issues touching the church’s practice of prayer, singing, prophesying (preaching), decency (decorum), orderliness, and the role of women, he underscores his writings with a catholic appeal: “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as *in all the churches of the saints*” (1 Cor 14:33).

The Apostles established a ministry common to the churches, a common worship, in which all the churches were expected to participate. The Apostle Paul expects the Corinthian church to conform to this orderly pattern found in “all the churches.” He does not merely appeal to scriptural or apostolic authority as he instructs the church. He buttresses his argument by appealing to universal or catholic practice. The whole weight of the church universal stands behind his exhortation. Underscoring elsewhere the importance of unity, the Apostle Paul cites baptism in addition to the above items: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling one Lord, one faith, one baptism . . .” (Eph 4:4, 5). Note that he assumes the positive value of uniformity of practice. The “churches of God” have one practice, or “one baptism,” and the churches of Ephesus and Corinth are expected to conform to that practice.

It is doubtful that the common practice of the churches of which the Apostle Paul speaks refers to that moment only, as though the standards to which they were to conform were always changing. Rather, it implies continuity not only from church to church but from one generation to the next. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Pastoral Epistles. The Apostle Paul is keenly aware of his impending death. He is being “poured out as a drink offering” (2 Tim 4:6). He aims to “set in order what remains,” that is, bring order to the church’s disorder, provide a pattern for its ongoing life and ministry (Titus 1:5).

What does he say? “Continue,” is his counsel. “Continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of.” Continue the apostolic pattern of ministry, “knowing from whom you have learned them” (2 Tim 3:14). Continue in the word-based, word-filled ministry of 2 Timothy 3:15ff. Continue in the “difficult times that will come.” Continue until the “last days” (2 Tim 3:1). The pattern of ministry in what we may call the “regular” times from which the Apostle was writing will continue to be the pattern of ministry through “difficult times” ahead right up to the end. This is catholicity of ministry. Continue to preach the Word (2 Tim 4:1ff). Continue to read the Word (1 Tim 4:13). Continue to pray with depth and breadth (1 Tim 2:1ff). These central elements, along with singing praise (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:15, 26) and administering the sacraments (1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:17–34) are forever normative for the ministry and worship of the church.

*Uniformity* in ministry is a virtue, and *conformity* at least at some important visible level is a requirement in the New Testament. It seems not to matter if a church is Greek (Corinth), or Asian (Ephesus), or Mid-Eastern (Jerusalem), or Latin (Rome). It is expected that the churches will not deviate from the apostolically established practice of the whole church. Idiosyncratic churches created to suit the taste and style preferences of specific ethnic groups or generations would seem not even to have been contemplated.

The Reformers understood the importance of the catholic tradition. They maintained continuity with the past, sought uniformity in the present, and instituted reforms that they hoped would endure, which future generations could embrace. So should we. They were not revolutionaries, as was the case with many anabaptist radicals. They were not revolutionaries in the sense in which Frank Viola and George Barna are in their book, *Pagan Christianity?*, a pretentious book in which the entire Christian tradition is rejected, from the church fathers, to the Middle Ages, to the Reformation, to post-Reformation Protestantism.<sup>14</sup> This is a form of radicalism unknown among Reformed Protestants. The Reformers respected historic practices. It is clear that both the Zurich and Strasbourg liturgies from which Calvin drew inspiration were “derived from the mass.”<sup>15</sup> H. G. Hageman says

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Explaining the Roots of Our Church Practices* (2000, Barna: Tyndal House Publishers Inc., 2008).

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Davies, (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 150.

of Bucer's service (Strasbourg, 1538), from which Calvin borrowed so much of his Genevan order, "His liturgy was still a recognizable evangelical version of the historic liturgy of western Christendom."<sup>16</sup> Calvin, for his part, "preserved the historic shape of the liturgy for us."<sup>17</sup>

However, the Reformers also sought to reform medieval novelties by Scripture and in light of the known practices of the church of the early centuries. Medieval tradition, which they knew well and from which they borrowed much, was reevaluated in light of Scripture and especially *patristic* tradition. Calvin's worship directory, for example, was entitled, *The Form of Church Prayers . . . According to the Custom of the Ancient Church* (1542). Calvin accused Cardinal Sadoletto of maliciously hiding the fact that "we agree more clearly with antiquity than all of you," and that the Reformers "ask for nothing else than that *the ancient face of the Church may be restored*."<sup>18</sup> He cites Augustine on nearly every page of the *Institutes* and frequently makes positive reference to Bernard of Clairvaux among other medieval churchmen. John Owen and the theologians of Protestant orthodoxy demonstrate a profound awareness of the Patristic, medieval, and contemporary Roman Catholic traditions.<sup>19</sup>

The principle of catholicity, seen in connection with the past, also can be seen in the Reformers' then present and future work. Calvin's *Form of Church Prayers*, bound together with the *Genevan Psalter*, quickly was translated into Dutch, German, English, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, and other languages. The considerable differences between Anglo, Romantic, Germanic, Slavic, and Celtic cultures were not seen as barriers to implementing a common worship. Why? Because reforms were theologically, not culturally, driven. Generational differences, again, seem not even to have been considered.

The influence of the *Westminster Directory* (1644) crossed denominational, cultural, and generational lines. It decisively shaped Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, and even Methodist worship

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<sup>16</sup> H. G. Hageman, *Pulpit & Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Hageman, *Pulpit & Table*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Cited by Douglas F. Kelly, "Catholicity of Calvin's Theology," in *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary*, David W. Hall (ed.) (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2010), 211, my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> See Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2007), 17-26.

for 250 years. As these denominational bodies moved around the world, their worship went unaltered with them. As the bold missionaries of the early modern era scattered around the globe, they took their *Prayer Books*, *Psalters*, and orders of service with them. Missionaries as diverse as Roman Catholic Matthew Ricci (1583–1610) and Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) were willing to adopt the fashion and manners of indigenous cultures. Ricci dressed as a Confucian scholar. However, they taught their converts to worship as Catholics, or Anglicans, or Presbyterians, or Baptists. In Ricci’s case, worshipping as a Roman Catholic meant a Latin mass! Yet he was among the most successful missionaries in the history of the church. “The Liturgy is cross cultural,” says Lutheran theologian Timothy Quill, and consequently may play a leading role in the church’s missionary work. Looking back further, to the missionary work of the early Christian centuries, he claims, “Those who argue for adapting new liturgies to meet the needs of the culture need to study more carefully the missiological methods of saints Cyril and Methodius,” he claims.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 3:6)

Our point is that both biblically and historically, a common, universal form of worship has been the ideal. We should continue to conduct services around which the various ethnicities, cultures, and generations can unite.

## **Communion of the Saints**

Consider the boast, “This is not your grandfather’s church,” announced by the leadership of one “conservative” denomination.<sup>21</sup> This is an arresting claim. Why is it not his church? Whose church is it? Is he not welcome? Should he not belong? The Apostles’ Creed

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<sup>20</sup> Timothy Quill, “Liturgical Worship” in Pinson, *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> “Kieschnick: LCMS Needs New Ways to Share Gospel,” *Reporter*, July 11, 2010, <https://reporter.lcms.org/2010/kieschnick-lcms-needs-new-ways-to-share-gospel/>.

affirms the “communion of the saints,” that is, the fellowship of all believers across all temporal or worldly categories. Has this article of faith, enshrined in Galatians 3:28, been abandoned?

The truth is that many churches today are practicing generational exclusion. Having abandoned the ideal of a common worship, they design their services assuming that the young must have their own distinctive worship forms, and do so without consideration of the older generations, even fully aware that older folks will be alienated by their innovations. Churches today, which recoil in horror at the deliberate racial segregation of the churches of previous generations, think nothing of justifying generational segregation today. It remains largely unrecognized by the advocates of diversity that only a common (and catholic) worship makes the communion of *all* the saints possible. Ironically, it is precisely the generational, ethnic and cultural diversity of the church that makes uniform forms of worship so important. All ages, races, and ethnic groups can gather together for worship *only if the church has a common worship*. John Owen defines the communion of the saints as union, both internal or spiritual, as well as “external and ecclesiastical, *in the same outward ordinances*.”<sup>22</sup> This need to share in “the same outward ordinances” is obvious if the whole church is to gather, and fellowship, or communion is to be realized.

## Homogeneous churches?

Current theory, however, runs in exactly the opposite direction. Donald McGavran and the church growth movement provided the philosophical justification for the “homogeneous unit,” that is, the building of churches in which members are ethnically, culturally, educationally, and racially similar.<sup>23</sup> The movement’s aim has been to remove sociological barriers to conversion, which were thought to play a crucial role in preventing church growth. The principle of homogeneity has been applied to the generations, as overwhelming numbers of churches have devised forms of worship that are thought to be

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<sup>22</sup> John Owen, “The Greater Catechism,” in William. H. Gould, *The Works of John Owen*, Volume 1 (1850–1853, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 492, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 198ff.

effective in attracting the young. The result in the modern church has been segregation by age. That which a church targets will be that of which it will consist.

Is it conceivable that the Apostles would establish churches according to race or ethnicity: one for whites, another for blacks, another for Hispanics, and another for Asians? Is it conceivable that they would establish churches for affinity groups: a church for cowboys, another for Hip-Hoppers, another for jazz lovers, and another for rockers? Is it conceivable that the Apostles would sanction establishing churches according to age: a church for the young, another for the elderly, another for families with children?

The apostolic and the post-apostolic church didn't design services to suit the cultural preferences, tastes, and styles of the various groups of converts, whether Greek, Roman, Asian, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, or African, whether young, middle-aged, or old. The use of 1 Corinthians 9:22, the *locus classicus* of the church growth movement to justify building homogenous churches through designer ministries, is unwarranted.

When music, language, and format are generationally or ethnically specific, it screams at all others groups, "this service is not for you." Say what one will, when WWII or post WWII "silent" generation believers are greeted by drums and electric guitar, they know immediately that they don't belong. The marketers of the church admit as much.

Protests notwithstanding, market-driven churches end up being composed of one "kind of person" to the exclusion in practice of every other kind of person. Homogenous churches are the result of homogenous forms of ministry. Is this what Jesus intended? Is this the apostolic vision for the church? Did the Apostles envision churches made up of one kind of person, united by age, race, ethnicity, or class? To ask the question is to answer it.

## **Biblical Data**

Historic Christian practice does not recognize the current and dominant understanding of contextualizing. Homogenous churches for homogeneous people is an anomaly in the history of the Christian church.

First, culturally specific worship and ministry is not the New Testament way. Rick Warren's attempts to enlist Jesus's priority of "the lost sheep of Israel" (e.g., Matt 15:22-28, 10:5-6) in his cause of "targeting specific kinds of people for evangelism" is bad ecclesiology and worse exegesis. Jesus limits his ministry to Israel for redemptive-historical purposes, not in pursuit of effective evangelistic strategy. Those limits were temporary, abrogated by the Great Commission (Matt 28:18ff; Acts 1:8ff), and had nothing to do with cultural preferences among the various groups of Gentiles.<sup>24</sup> Warren's philosophy confuses the church's evangelism and mission with its public worship and congregational life. We have just seen the Apostle Paul appealing to the Corinthian church on the basis of catholicity, that is, what was practiced in "all the churches" (1 Cor 1:2, 4:7, 11:16, 14:33). Significant uniformity of church practice was achieved in the New Testament era between churches that were Mid-Eastern, Asian, Greek, African, and Latin. In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew (Gal 3:28). In Christ the dividing wall has been broken down and Gentile and Jew have been reconciled (Eph 2:14-22). In Christ, as we have seen, there is but one baptism (Eph 4:4-5), and by implication one worship. In Christ, Greek and Jew worship together in a common service.

It is difficult to believe that the Apostles would have approved of the homogenous church as a goal of church life. It might happen as an accident of circumstances, but not a goal. The churches of the Apostles featured an extensive diversity. For example, the church in Jerusalem consisted of Hellenistic Jewish widows as well as Judean Jewish widows, who culturally were different enough that tensions developed between them (Acts 6:1-6). The Apostle Paul finds it necessary to address the discrimination of Jewish Christians against Gentile Christians (Gal 2:11-15). The churches of the Apostles featured the employed and unemployed (2 Thess 3:10-13), Jew and Greek, slave, master, and free, as well as male and female (Gal 3:28). The Apostles find themselves addressing matters of propriety regarding older men and younger men, older women and younger women (1 Tim 5:1, 2; Titus 2:1-8). They must deal with the conduct and concerns of singles and married (1 Cor 7), of the formerly married and families (1 Tim 5:3-16), of children and parents (Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21), of the rich and the rest

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<sup>24</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 158.

(1 Tim 6:17-19; Jas 2:1-10). As these epistles were being read, all the various classes of people were present. The young and the old, and even the children are expected to be present, listening to the apostle's instructions.

Apostolic churches were not homogenous units. They were generationally, ethnically, socially, culturally, and economically diverse. Commenting on three members of the Philippian church to whom we are introduced in Acts 16 (the wealthy Lydia from Asia Minor, the poor slave girl, probably a Greek or a foreigner, and the jailer, probably a retired Roman jailer, and a member of what we'd call the middle class), John Stott remarks, "It would be hard to imagine a more disparate group than the business woman, the slave girl, and the jailer. Racially, socially, and psychologically they were worlds apart. Yet all three were changed by the same gospel and were welcomed into the same church."<sup>25</sup> "Did the early church separate itself out into units of the like-minded in terms of ethnicity, class, and language," asks David Wells? "It did not," he answers forcefully.<sup>26</sup>

This kind of multi-cultural and multi-generational unity is possible when it is recognized that the church has its own biblical, catholic, and organically developing culture through which its form of worship and ministry is expressed. We don't claim to have all the answers to the difficult cultural questions that arise. However, rather

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<sup>25</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: the Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 268.

<sup>26</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 292. Wells continues: "Many of the problems which the early church faced arose from the fact that the first converts were *together* despite all of their diversity. From this point the gospel spread and its spread was both lateral and vertical, breaking down and leaping across the homogeneous units of race, class, and economic status of that world. It spread geographically from Palestine to Syria, and then on to Asia, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, and Spain. What was quite as significant is that it also spread vertically through all the layers of society. It touched slaves like Onesimus, those of rather ordinary birth like the pretentious Corinthians (1 Cor 1:26-29), those who were wealthy like John Mark's mother whose large house in Jerusalem was the first meeting place of Christians, and Lydia the trader. It spread to the well-connected like Manean, Herod the Tetrarch's foster brother; and to the powerful like the Ethiopian eunuch who served in a role comparable to the British Foreign Minister or the American Secretary to State. And in Paul's lifetime, the gospel entered Caesar's own household. What we see is the gospel traversing all socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic, and class barriers to draw God's people not into subsets of the like-minded who could be comfortable with each other, but into the richly diversified people of God" (292).



than dividing and excluding through new worship services that cater to particular group styles and tastes, we believe it is wiser for the church to maintain a significant measure of uniformity of worship, expressed in the forms of its own ecclesiastical heritage, through which the diversity of its peoples can unite. “Only a church which resists being merely of one generation (or ethnic culture, we would add) can be relevant to them all,” Gene Veith reminds us.<sup>27</sup> Only a church with a common and catholic worship can facilitate the communion of all the saints. We are indebted to David Wells for urging evangelicals to embrace a more serious and more thoroughly biblical ecclesiology. This renewed ecclesiology should begin with a renewed appreciation for catholicity of practices which will promote, as we have seen, a true communion of all the saints.

## Conclusions

What does our understanding of catholicity (a common or universal service) and the communion of the saints (gathering the whole congregation, young and old in that common service) mean for what goes on in that service? It means that nothing in particular is done to appease the style preferences of any one group in particular, or to appease smorgasbord-like the style preferences of all groups in general. Rather, the standard elements, filled with scriptural content, will be administered. The Word will be:

1. Read and preached – substantial portions of the Bible will be read and digestible portions expounded using standard English and biblical terminology, avoiding the slang and vocabulary of any particular sub-culture.
2. Prayed – a “full diet” of prayer will be a part of every service. using the biblical language of praise, confession of sin, thanksgiving, intercession, illumination, and blessing.

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<sup>27</sup> Gene E. Veith, “Through Generations,” *For the Life of the World* (March, 1998), Vol 2, No. 1, 9. “In the scramble for new, contemporary worship styles,” cautions Lutheran theologian Timothy Quill, “it is important to keep in mind that nothing is more relevant than that which is relevant for every generation” (Timothy Quill, “Liturgical Worship” in Pinson (ed), *Perspectives on Worship*, 32.

3. Sung – biblical hymns and metrical psalms will be sung using the repertoire found in a good, theologically sound, historically-rooted hymnal, and perhaps supplemented by a complete Psalter. A solid hymnal contains the music and lyrics developed by the catholic church over a period of 2000 years, with contributions from multiple continents and multiple nations, including both metrical psalms and biblical hymns.
4. Displayed – through the sacraments, simply administered.

To those for whom the church's historic liturgical culture is foreign, particularly the newly converted, we say what we might say to a first-time visitor to a baseball game—come and learn. Of course the game or the worship service seems odd. It takes time to understand what is going on. Baptisms are strange. The Lord's Supper and reading from a 2000-year-old book is strange. The sermon, the prayers, the music are all culturally foreign. Be patient, we counsel. Over time you will grow to love every element of public worship.

What about those reared in the church? They should be brought into the public services as soon as is reasonable, as soon as they can be present without disrupting the worship. They quickly will memorize the various fixed forms (e.g., Apostles Creed, Lord's Prayer, doxology, Ten Commandments). If family worship reinforces the elements of the public services, Christian children will grow up loving the hymnody, the orderliness, the reverence, and the rich content of Reformed catholic worship.

## Book Reviews

**Te-Li Lau. *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. 288 pages. \$27.99.**

When picking up a volume that seeks to analyze a biblical approach to “shame,” one might not expect to find a work that is (a) fluent in Hebrew, Greek, English, and Chinese, (b) competent in the disciplines of Pauline studies, philosophy, and ethics, and (c) conversant with the moral musings of the #MeToo movement. Nevertheless, such is what appears in Te-Li Lau’s *Defending Shame*. Lau, associate professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, defines shame as “the painful emotion that arises from an awareness that one has fallen short of some standard, ideal, or goal” (29). Lau argues that sin and shame are inseparably bound together in a post-Fall context (66). In opposition to the modern-day notion of shame being exclusively negative in its effect, Lau argues that the apostle Paul employs shame as a positive ethical tool to conform his communities to the likeness of Christ (10, 232).

Part One of Lau’s book presents ancient approaches to the idea of “shame” as found in Greco-Roman sources such as Socrates, Aristotle, and Stoicism, as well as in Jewish texts of the Old Testament and Jewish intertestamental literature. Part Two unpacks Pauline texts dealing with the theme of shame in the letters of Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Philemon, as Lau analyzes Paul’s use of shame as an ethical strategy unto Christlikeness. Part Three compares Paul’s posture toward shame with contemporary Chinese views and with modern-day America’s online “shaming culture.” Through the Holy Spirit’s power, Christians are to seek to honor God in their lives and to avoid his divine reproach, using the instrument of shame—ranging from mild rebuke to excommunication—as a tactic to guide Christian behavior (159, 232–33). Yet ironically, in doing so, believers might avoid shame before God (and God’s people) only to incur the undeserved shame of a hostile world around them.

The strongest aspect of Lau's book is his dismantling of twenty-first century America's faulty assumption that shame is always a demeaning tactic that results in loss to an individual's well-being. Lau flips that notion on its head as he rightly contends that shame, on the contrary, is designed by God as an instrument for moral formation. Lau rightly asserts, "The absence of shame is not, as some wrongly declare, self-esteem; it is *shamelessness*" (231, emphasis added). In other words, undergoing some sort of public humiliation is not a misfortune if it becomes a means to growth in one's character; rather, the real tragedy takes place when a person fails to recognize any sense of shame at all. In contrast to the modern assumption that praise of an individual is beneficial while shame is always detrimental, Lau notes that a human being's transgression of God's moral requirements should *necessarily* lead to discomfort. Thus, the apostle Paul at times uses shame as an instrument to highlight past sin in a backward-pointing way (121-22), as when he urges the Corinthian Christians to consider the unfavorable outcome of those who failed to examine themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:31). On other occasions Paul employs shame in a forward-pointing way (143), as when he insinuates that Philemon will experience shame if he fails to refresh Paul's heart by sending Onesimus back to him (Phlm 20-21).

A second aspect of Lau's work that deserves commendation is the strong connection he forges between Christ's shame—an undeserved shame—and the believer's shame due to union with Christ. Lau locates the uniqueness of the Christian view of shame in the fact that Christ is the ultimate one who bears the disrepute of sinners on the cross and endures the public humiliation of men, even while being honored by the Father (126-29). It is through undeserved shame, ironically, that Christ purchases redemption for his people. Sometimes exaltation in the sight of God means humiliation in the eyes of the world as best exemplified in the cross of Jesus Christ (126-29; Phil 2:6-11). The believer does not merely imitate Christ and follow him on his despised path, even though emulation does, of course, take place (129-31). More so, however, the believer lives a life of "shameful" servanthood because such is his very *identity*. The sufferings of Christ flow into the life of the believer. Paradoxically, Lau shows that it is not just deserved shame that has a role in moral formation, such as that which results from a failure to uphold a standard of godliness within a community.

Unjustified shame, too, such as that of worldly scorn, also has a sanctifying role in conforming the Christian to Christlikeness.

One point of critique of Lau's book is that his chief operating definition of shame is too subjective, being mainly an emotional response, a "painful emotion" (29). While shame often does have a subjective element to it, the Bible depicts shame as a state of being publicly disgraced or suffering a loss of status before God whether one "feels" that way or not (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-13). An individual, like the unrepentant Corinthian church member, might feel proud of his actions even while he objectively is out of good standing with God and his faith community. But even if this man does not emotionally perceive his actual spiritual state, he nevertheless is in a place of indignity and disgrace—concretely so. Lau needs to draw out this important point more clearly. Although Lau makes occasional statements about the objectivity of shame (13, 62, 153, etc.), his formal definition fails to include this vital aspect. The objective facet of shame seems to be underplayed throughout the book and needs a full synthesized treatment.

All in all, the breadth of Lau's scholarship is remarkable, as he seamlessly quotes from the likes of pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (33-36), the Jewish scribe ben Sira (80-84), and Chinese sages Confucius and Mencius (188-99), among others. Writing in a manner that is both scholarly and engaging, Lau displays courage as he pushes against the modern notion of shame as a tactic that necessarily demeans and demoralizes (222-30). Instead, the author argues that the painful emotion of having "fallen short" is often necessary for moral transformation. The author's focus on the ethical benefit of employing shame, as found in Paul's moral teaching, draws attention to a much-neglected theme in Pauline studies, especially in the Western world. Lau's book also provides a needed corrective for a more biblically-based pastoral practice.

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**Beth Allison Barr. *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021. 245 pp. \$19.99.**

Beth Allison Barr is a history professor at Baylor University who specializes in medieval studies. Admitting she is not a theologian, but rather a historian (205) (a fact mentioned dozens of times and virtually in every chapter), nevertheless, Barr believes her background in history places her in a position to clearly see what most Bible scholars and theologians have not, which is that biblical womanhood is not scriptural at all, but a plot to suppress women. Biblical womanhood, Barr states, has been built “stone by stone by stone throughout the centuries” (205) and is a capitulation to culture and sin rather than a biblical truth. Complementarianism is an interpretation of Scripture “that has been corrupted by our sinful human drive to dominate others and build hierarchies of power and oppression” (7), or so is Barr’s contention.

Some definitions are in order. As Barr uses the terms, biblical womanhood, patriarchy, and complementarianism are synonymous, all proclaiming that “God designed women primarily to be submissive wives, virtuous mothers, and joyful homemakers. God designed men to lead in the home as husbands and fathers, as well as in the church as pastors, elders, and deacons” (2). The submissive relationship of women to men is what Barr rejects and makes every effort to deconstruct. She does so primarily by attempting to demonstrate that biblical womanhood does not arise from Scripture but “from the changing circumstances of history . . . [and] like racism, patriarchy is a shapeshifter” (186). “Complementarianism,” she claimed, “is patriarchy, and patriarchy is about power. Neither has ever been about Jesus” (218).

Reared in the world of the Southern Baptists, Barr agreed with patriarchy for much of her life, but several factors began to unravel her views: her husband, a youth pastor, was fired from a Southern Baptist church for his non-complementarian stance (3). Additionally, scandals among Christian leaders, such as Paige Patterson (7–8, 26–27), Mark Driscoll (7–8), and Bill Gothard (11), combined with her studies of medieval history, led her to believe that patriarchy is a human construct, not a biblical teaching, built “brick by brick, century by century” (10). While Barr wrote that her present understandings were

drawn from her study of Scripture, the reality is that she leaned on her rather questionable interpretation of history (as this review will reveal). She insists that “historical evidence about the origins of patriarchy can move the conversation forward” (32).

The author often admits that patriarchy is ancient (21-25), but it is nevertheless the result of sin (25, 28) and paganism (28). She rejects the idea that complementarianism precedes the Fall. As a matter of fact, Eve’s rebellion was not in disobeying God but in “submitting to Adam in the place of God” (30). Apparently, her sin was loving her husband too much (44). Barr recognizes that patriarchy is found in Scripture but claims it is descriptive, not prescriptive (35). The only reason patriarchy is taught in the Bible is that Scripture was written in a patriarchal world (36); it “emerged,” she says, “alongside the emergence of agricultural communities” and is of human origin: the result of civilization itself (35). God’s people adopted this pagan construct in Old Testament times, and Paul canonized it.

Given such a presupposition, it is no wonder many of Barr’s students say, “I hate Paul” (39), yet she questions, “What if we have been reading Paul wrong” (41-42, 55). What if, instead of Paul sanctifying the Roman household codes found in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Ephesians 5, and 1 Timothy 3, these “texts of terror” were mentioned by Paul only to reject them? What if all of these passages were interpreted through the lens of Galatians 3:28 (36-37) and patriarchy is now to be opposed by Christians? After all, Jesus treated women with respect, allowing them to anoint him and setting them free from cultural restrictions (46-52). “What if Paul never said any of this” (56)? Barr assures her readers, “because I am a historian, I know there is more to Paul’s letters than what his words reveal” (56). From this platform, the author endeavors throughout the book to unveil her special, historian insights that would let her audience know what Paul “really meant.”

Barr’s argument is as follows: patriarchy is the result of the Fall and did not exist in the Garden. Cultural patriarchy has often been adopted by God’s people and has now been elevated by evangelicals since the Reformation to gospel truth. Christian patriarchy is no different from pagan patriarchy regardless of protests to the contrary by complementarians (32, 207). In addition, Scripture, rightly understood, does not endorse any form of patriarchy; its presence in the church today is not due to biblical exegesis but has been constructed

throughout the centuries by men who want to suppress women (171–72).

Moreover, patriarchy is akin to racism (33–34, 45, 186, 208), as well as white supremacy (208). How does Barr draw these conclusions? What is her line of argument? The remainder of this review will consider her reasoning.

### ***Women Leadership in Scripture***

Barr's thinking shifted concerning biblical womanhood when she discovered in Romans 16 a list of ten women who were recognized by Paul as prominent in the early church (64–65). Among the women listed was Phoebe who was a deacon (in the Greek the word could be translated either as a servant or deacon), and who read the letter to the Romans to her house church (for the record, the text does not mention Phoebe reading Romans, nor that she had a church in her house). Most New Testament scholarship rejects Phoebe as being an official deacon of the church at Cenchrea and would view her as a faithful helper. Junia is also mentioned in Romans 16 as outstanding among the apostles. Barr interpreted this phrase to mean Junia was a prominent apostle, but the Greek grammar of the text would indicate that she was simply well-known to the apostles. What Barr failed to recognize is that these women were honored as faithful servants of the Lord but never described as leaders, pastors, elders, or preachers within the church. Even if Phoebe was an official deacon, deacon means servant, not leader; and the idea that Junia was an apostle rests on little, if any, evidence.

Found within *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* are lists referencing many other outstanding women in Scripture as proof that the Bible supports women in spiritual authority over men and with the approval of God to preach. Examples would include Anna, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman (92), and Martha (90). Barr's methodology is to elevate any woman who is quoted in Scripture to the status of a preacher. For example, that Mary Magdalene announced the resurrection to the apostles apparently proves she was a preacher with authority; and that Jesus taught and interacted with women, such as Mary of Bethany and the Samaritan woman, proves the same. However, nowhere in Scripture are these women given the role of elder or



the ministry of preaching, and it does not take much observation to conclude that all the apostles were men, as were the Old Testament patriarchs. Men wrote all the books of the Bible. All elders in the New Testament church were men (cf. 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1). Men throughout Scripture led with spiritual authority and taught the Word. Because a woman was granted an audience with Jesus or testified to others about Christ, or had important roles in the church does not mean that she was an elder, preacher, or apostle. Barr's attempts to prove her bias do not align with Scripture.

### ***Distorted Translations***

The author searched in vain for biblical examples of women truly exercising authority in the church or the home. Consequently, to support her egalitarian thesis she had to turn to other means beginning with unsubstantiated accusations that most translations of Scriptures have conspired to hide the truth (which she as a historian has discovered) from the general public (50, 65, 69, 132, 137–39, 141–43). In particular, Barr identified the English Standard Version as a complementarian translation (51) specifically designed to “keep women out of leadership” (69). She claims the ESV was primarily a reaction to the Today's New International Version's gender-neutral translation (132), and “capitulates to non-Christian culture (patriarchy)” (143). One of the reasons most Christians do not accept egalitarianism is because translators conspired together to obscure the truth. How she knows the intention of the ESV translators and/or the discussions within the English Standard Version committee is never revealed, but she assured her readers that it is true. Barr is adamant that Scripture passages concerning women have been misinterpreted intentionally, and she is confident in her ability to correct these misguided translators.

### ***Denial of Inerrancy***

Barr insists, “patriarchy exists in the Bible because the Bible was written in a patriarchal world” (36). Evidence of Barr's rejection of inspiration of Scripture is implied throughout the book, but her complete repudiation of inerrancy is undeniable (187–91). Properly

understood inerrancy not only champions the accuracy and reliability of Scripture, but it also insists on a plain and literal interpretation of the Bible—what is often called grammatical-historical hermeneutics. It is because evangelicals embrace inerrancy, Barr insists, that they have “baptized patriarchy” (190). Because a plain reading of the New Testament, the author admits, teaches complementarianism, Barr must reject inerrancy for, “inerrancy creates an atmosphere of fear” (190) rather than a clear word from the Lord. And to add insult to injury Barr accuses complementarian theologians of the heresy of Arianism (191–97). Her thoughts on this subject are not worthy of comment, as she has waded into doctrinal considerations beyond her “paygrade,” but her point is that she believes evangelicals have “resurrected Arianism for the same reason that evangelicals turned to inerrancy:” to suppress women and support Christian patriarchy (195–96).

### ***Women in Church History***

Barr’s arguments rely heavily on anecdotal examples, myths, legends, and unbelievable stories, which is not the methodology expected of a scholar and university professor. She often recites unique illustrations and offers them as proof that patriarchy is harsh, unreasonable, and oppressive (e.g., 9, 18, 40, 175, 207). Anecdotes make for interesting accounts but do not serve as proof of anything. The author uses the same approach as she turns to her area of expertise: medieval church history.

Since so much of Barr’s thesis is dependent upon church history and, since she is a historical scholar, if she were to win her case it should be here. After all, she is not a theologian, a translator, or a biblical exegete, but she is a historian who promises to show complementarians that they have misunderstood the Bible because they do not know history. So, what is the reader given? Primarily fanciful, unreliable examples and stories of women in church history serve as Barr’s proof that women have ministered with authority and taught men in the past. For example, there was Margery Kempe (fifteenth century), who explained how Scripture did not apply to her, refused the “conjugal debt” to her husband, and followed supposed mystical promises of God (72–76). There was Saint Paula (fourth century), who abandoned

her children to follow God's call—leaving all three alone crying on the shore as she marched off to found a monastery (79). Saint Margaret of Antioch (fourth century) had a devilish creature—a dragon—eat her, but when she made the sign of the cross the dragon burst apart and set her free. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit descended from heaven like a dove to anoint her (79–81).

Barr also regurgitates an ancient myth of Martha of Bethany who encountered her own dragon, which she calmed by sprinkling holy water on it (83). Her sister Mary, who is identified by Barr as Mary Magdalene, was declared an apostle, preached openly, and performed miracles (82, 85–86). While these adventures of Mary and Martha are not recorded in Scripture and are discounted by most Christian scholars today, they were believed by some medieval Christians, and that is good enough for Barr. Many similar illustrations are used such as Clotilda, Genovefa, Brigit of Kildare (who according to legend was ordained a bishop), and Hildegard of Bingen (German mystic and Benedictine abbess) (88–90). Of course, one cannot ignore the best-known Roman Catholic mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena (97, 168). Barr continues with similar accounts throughout the book (see 116, 168–69, 179, 183–85, 213–14). Her historical evidence consistently relies on unverifiable stories and obvious myths emanating from the corrupt Roman Catholic medieval church. All the accounts involve extrabiblical events and women to whom are attributed fanciful miracles and visions that are purely legendary and mythical. This is the kind of historical evidence upon which Barr relies. The logic used by Barr is that if the medieval church believed these stories to be true and, in the process, adopted women leadership in the church, only stubborn patriarchy would deny such leadership now!

### ***Superiority of Medieval Church***

Having staked her case on the stories of medieval Christian women who supposedly had a voice equal to men within the Roman Catholic system, the next objective for Barr is to show the superiority of that system. While she claims to appreciate many of the theological changes the Reformers brought (107), she believes the Reformation returned the church to patriarchy. Barr posited the idea that women in medieval times found their voice—in essence—by becoming men (91),

and women found holiness through virginity and abstaining from the married state (152–53): “Medieval women gained spiritual authority by casting off their female roles and acting more like men” (183). However, when the Reformation reversed all this by eradicating monasteries, rejecting mysticism, returning to sola Scriptura, and by honoring marriage above self-chosen lifetime virginity (152–53), women lost their spiritual voice and authority. Women were removed from leadership and male headship became the norm (91), and the family became more important (153). The author laments the result: “Historically, women have always been subordinated to men, but now their subordination became embedded in the heart of evangelical faith” (154). “Before the Reformation, women could gain spiritual authority by rejecting their sexuality. Virginity empowered them . . .” (103), but “the Reformation . . . ushered in a ‘renewed patriarchalism’” (105), and women were once again oppressed. Barr even finds it regrettable that before the Reformation women sat on opposite sides of the church; now they had to sit with their families (125–26). She regards this as a move in the wrong direction and evidence of pagan-influenced patriarchy.

### ***Allegorization of Scripture***

Barr expends little time exegeting Scripture in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, but when she attempts to do so, she does not wrestle with the biblical text using a grammatical-historical hermeneutic; instead, she twists the meaning of Scripture through the use of allegorical interpretation. She admits, “Taken at face value, (a ‘plain and literal interpretation’), the household codes seem to sanctify the Roman patriarchal structure: the authority of the paterfamilias (husband/father) over women, children, and slaves” (46). But “when read rightly . . . Paul wasn’t imposing Roman patriarchy on Christians; Paul was using a Jesus remix to tell Christians how the gospel set them free” (47). In other words, Paul said the exact opposite of what a literal/normal reading of his words imply (55). In fact, Paul engaged in “refuting bad practices by quoting those bad practices and then correcting them” (61). Yet, even Barr is not certain that she interprets the writing of Paul correctly: “While I cannot guarantee this is what Paul was doing, it makes a lot of (historical) sense” (62). To Barr, history

determines the meaning of Scripture, but, given her examples of history, her understandings are suspect at every point.

For additional proof, Barr turns to medieval sermons which rely heavily on allegoricalism. For example, rejecting any attempt at a literal understanding of the text, one medieval preacher used 1 Timothy 2:15 (“But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint”) to “encourage all Christians to face the pain of repentance and penance so that they might be reborn into the joy of salvation” (119). It is through such clever manipulation Barr found a means to discount a normal, grammatical-historical interpretation of all the “household texts” and framed all instructions regarding women around Galatians 3:28 (36–37), which in context has nothing to do with ecclesiology or patriarchy and everything to do with soteriology and the Christian’s standing in Christ. In other words, Galatians 3:28 is a marvelous text explaining one’s position in Christ as believers and the spiritual equalities as found in Him, yet it has nothing to do with leadership roles in the church and the home.

## **Conclusion**

Beth Allison Barr despises all forms of patriarchy. In truth, evangelical complementarians promote patriarchy, but not a worldly, oppressive form. They, in fact, teach a biblical patriarchy/womanhood. However, it is a biblical womanhood (or patriarchy) that proclaims, with the Scriptures, that the husband leads his wife with love, modeling after the love of Christ for the church. Furthermore, biblical patriarchy teaches that men shepherd the church of Christ, modeling once again Christ’s shepherding of his people. There is a vast difference between the world’s pattern and the biblical form of patriarchy, but Barr refuses to see these differences and insists that biblical patriarchy is Satan’s greatest trick (173).

*The Making of Biblical Womanhood* is one of the most recent attempts to circumvent the clear teaching of Scriptures concerning the roles of men and women in the home and the church. Despite Barr’s repeated claim that she is a historical scholar capable of correcting the theologians who do not know church history, what she did was reveal just the opposite. As this reviewer began to read the book, he expected the

author to attempt to expose some historical mistakes and biases in an attempt to provide evidence that would prove power-hungry men who wanted to “keep women in their place” manufactured patriarchy. Instead, some of the most inferior attempts at scholarship he has ever read emerged. Scholars do not depend on anecdotes, legends, myths, fables, and conspiracy theories. They seek verifiable facts. Barr did not produce such evidence because she could not. Only the very gullible, or historically ignorant, should be persuaded by Barr’s arguments.

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**James M. Hamilton. *Psalms*. 2 vols. Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary. Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021. 1,312 pp. \$79.99.**

It is no secret that among evangelicals today the psalms are mostly ignored in corporate worship. Perhaps a line or two will be cited as a transition between songs; maybe a contemporary song will take a phrase from a psalm and repeat it over and over again. But not much more. Numerous factors contribute to the decline of psalm singing among Christians, but one central reason for contemporary neglect of the Psalter may be that most Christians today do not understand this God-inspired collection of songs, especially the intentional editorial organization of the 150 songs into five books in a particular order for a specific purpose. Pursuit of understanding the deliberate purpose and arrangement of the psalms among Christians was derailed in the twentieth century, largely as a result of Hermann Gunkel’s approach to the psalms that focused on their genre. This individualized—and, in many ways, *sterilized*—the psalms. However, study of the canonical shape of the Psalter has gained a sort of revival in OT scholarship, first spurred by Gerald Wilson’s 1985 dissertation and the subsequent work of Gordon Wenham.

It is into this renewed emphasis on the Psalter’s canonical organization that Jim Hamilton enters with his two-volume commentary on the Psalms. Hamilton’s goal is to interpret “the Psalter as a book found in the canon” (15). He believes that “the inspired text is the canonized text” (11) and “would thus attribute inspiration not only to the

individual authors of each psalm but also to the editor(s)/anthologist(s) who put the book of Psalms into its canonical form” (13). This means that in order to gain most from what God intends for us in the psalms, we must interpret each individual psalm in light of its place in the larger narrative. Hamilton places a significant weight on the use of chiasm as a structural device that helps to uncover the larger narrative shape as well as smaller sections within five books. “In this way,” Hamilton suggests, “chiasms become exegetically productive, showing the reader how the meaning of the whole communicates more than the sum of its individual parts” (53).

Furthermore, Hamilton is concerned that reading translations of the psalms often cause readers to miss “thematic and linguistic points of contact [that] create a wider web of meaning, linking one psalm to those that surround it, forging connections that make the individual psalms seem like different verses of the same song” (65). Therefore, Hamilton has supplied his own translations, intending to “make the link-words between psalms explicit in an effort to allow the author-intended innerbiblical resonance to reverberate in fulness” (64).

What results is a commentary on the psalms that resembles others in that each psalm is treated individually, but that is unlike most others in that Hamilton both interprets and explains each individual psalm within its place in the broader canonical shape. He suggests that Book 1 (Pss 1–41) traces David’s establishment as king, while Book 2 follows his bringing the ark to Jerusalem (Pss 42–50), sin with Bathsheba (Ps 51), consequences (Pss 52–60), and recovery (Pss 61–72). Book 3 (Pss 73–89) follows Solomon and subsequent kings along the downfall, destruction, and exile of God’s people. Book 4 (Pss 90–106) answers the uncertainty that God will remain faithful to David’s seed by reaffirming Yahweh’s reign and his steadfast faithfulness to his promises. Book 5 (Pss 107–150) anticipates the future reign of David’s heir forever, resulting in universal praise.

Another value in Hamilton’s treatment of the macro-structure of the psalms is its place in the broader narrative of Scripture’s storyline. Hamilton summarizes: “The Psalms speak the words of a loyal son recounting and responding to the promises of a loving Father” (2). He argues that this understanding of the psalms “makes many assumptions” rooted in the “wider canonical context” of the Bible’s overarching story: “God told Abraham that kings would come from him (Gen

17:6), and the biblical authors expected on to arise from the line of Braham through Judah to fulfill Gen 3:15 by crushing the head of the serpent and his seed (Num 23:21, 24; 24:7, 9, 17–19). This king was to be a man of Torah, making his own copy in his own hand that he would diligently study (Deut 17:14–20)” (2–3). This sets David’s role in the psalms in its larger context, which is tied into the story of redemption and the future Son of David who will fulfill God’s promises of a king.

I have personally been looking forward to this commentary since I was introduced to the canonical approach to psalms studies years ago in O. Palmer Robertson’s *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (P&R, 2015) and subsequently discovered Hamilton’s project. The commentary does not disappoint. Readers may quibble with how Hamilton situates individual psalms in the broader narrative and how he interprets the narrative itself, just as they might with interpretive decisions in any commentary. Additionally, considering chiasm to be *the central* structural key may at times seem stretched. However, Hamilton’s work is to be praised for its value and contribution to psalms studies, and this will be my go-to commentary for the Psalms in years ahead.

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**Michael Reeves. *Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021. 168 pp. \$15.78.**

Books on the Christian life, general spirituality, sanctification, or Christian living roll off the presses seemingly endlessly, but the quantity is typically inversely proportional to the quality. Writers like A. W. Tozer and C. S. Lewis are rare indeed. In the same vein, few are the writers who can tackle the topic of fearing God and manage to avoid the opposite ditches of sentimentalizing or heavy-handing the dread aspect of fearing God. Jerry Bridges, Al Martin, and a few others have made notable attempts, but the task is a large one: explain how the Christian is to live with both the goodness and greatness of God. Complex themes require incisive minds.



Having been impressed with Michael Reeves's *Delighting in the Trinity*, I was intrigued to see if he could bring the same care and skill to the topic of fearing God in *Rejoice and Tremble*. I was not disappointed.

Reeves tackles the topic by first considering our fear-ridden society, one that sees fear as wholly negative, and without a category for a healthy fear. He then begins the task of separating sinful fear from right fear, and shows that at the heart of sinful fear is not a healthy self-preservation, but *unbelief* that flees from God. Right fear of God is entirely compatible with joy, love, and awe, because of its favorable standing with God.

*Rejoice and Tremble* then explores the fear of God as a response to God's nature: first as Creator, and then as Father. Up to this point, Reeves echoes what many writers, particularly Puritans, have said on the fear of the Lord. But Reeves is at his best in his chapter "How to Grow in this Fear." Here Reeves explores how the gospel itself is the source of reconciling holiness and love, justice and mercy, power and tenderness. "But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared" (Ps 130:4). Only in the grace of forgiveness does a sinner come to fear God rightly, uniting both deep awe and filial devotion. Reeves does what few have done on this topic: explain how regeneration, justification, and sanctification are the true keys to a reverent love of God.

His final chapters extend the topic of fearing God to life in the church, and to life in eternity. In just 168 pages, Reeves manages a satisfyingly concise treatment of fearing God. The book's relative brevity precludes Reeves from delving into murkier ground, such as why Christians that profess to fear God express that fear in such opposite ways. Reeves does not explore what is at the heart of *irreverence* or why many "gospel-centered" Christians seem to arrive at almost different visions of who God is. But that is not what this book is about, for that would be an exploration of culture, anthropology, and church history. Reeves's central thesis is fundamentally correct: true faith in the saving work of Christ, when rightly understood, leads one to joyful awe before our Creator-Father.

While reading this book, I was struck by how it provides a counterbalance for the popular work *Gentle and Lowly*, by Dane Ortlund. *Gentle and Lowly* emphasizes the meekness of Christ's heart to the point that many have felt Ortlund's treatment is exaggerated and theologically unbalanced. If so, then *Rejoice and Tremble* is the book that

thoughtful Christians will find even-handed in its treatment of God's holiness and gracious love.

C. S. Lewis once said that conceptual analysis and felt experience are never simultaneous. He pointed out that the dilemma is

either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste—or, more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it. As thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand. The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think.<sup>1</sup>

Works on worship or spirituality suffer from this dilemma, because they must define, dissect, and analyze while trying to lead us into the experience of what they discuss. *Rejoice and Tremble* is a work that skillfully defines the fear of the Lord, but comes close to allowing us to enter that experience while reading it.

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**David Strain. *Expository Preaching*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2021. 111 pp. \$14.99.**

If you've been around evangelicalism for any length of time at all, you've likely witnessed a worship war or two either in person or from a safe distance. Typically, the struggle in such debates is precipitated by a faulty definition of worship or an unbiblical attempt to worship God. For instance, in *Expository Preaching*, David Strain in his book provides the following commonplace statement that floats around from church to church within evangelicalism:

This way of thinking is sometimes reflected in the words of the “worship leader” who begins the service, saying, “In a little while Pastor John will come and talk to us from the Bible. But

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 65–66.

first we are going to have a time of worship. Close your eyes and shut everyone out, It's just you and Jesus.!" (53)

This is diagnostic statement that reveals a serious deficiency regarding worship as a whole and specifically the preaching of the Bible. Stain's book is both informative and helpful to think through the issues of biblical preaching.

God has addressed his world, and specifically his people, in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, out of all of the ordinary means of grace that God's people enjoy through weekly worship, preaching stands as primary. David Strain explains, "It has been said that it takes a whole Bible to preach a whole Christ to make a whole Christian" (38). The blueprint of God does not include sappy-happy storytelling, pep-rally cheerleading, life-coaching, conversational counseling, or as David Strain describes, "peppy TED Talks on uplifting issues" (41). The plan for God's people is the faithful preaching of God's Word. Biblical preaching is verse-by-verse preaching, better titled *expository preaching*, the name given to this book.

As Strain points out, expository preaching is modeled throughout history, and it naturally models how one should read and study the Bible. A firm commitment to expository preaching guards the preacher from hobby horses, and most importantly, it directs the church toward Christ. Strain explains:

So why do we need our pastors to preach expositionally? We need them to because our great need as Christians is to hear from God. Nothing ensures that the message of the sermon conforms to the message of the text like careful exposition. (49)

Perhaps one of the strangest statements that can be made regarding the preaching of the Bible in our day is that preaching is worship. The overwhelming majority of evangelicalism views singing and music as worship, and preaching is in a completely different category altogether. This is a sad indictment of the lack of health regarding evangelicalism as a whole. David Strain explains at the opening of the second chapter by writing:

My contention is not only that preaching should derive its *warrant*, its authorization, from the *commands* of Scripture—the Bible clearly commands preaching, after all—but that preaching should also derive its *form*, its basic method and shape, from the *character* of Scripture. (34)

As Strain moves along through the book, he makes the case that preaching is not some esoteric communication that happens in the front of the service each week. The preacher must avoid the ditch of being a shallow, funny, ultra-relevant communicator, as well as the ditch of the complicated data dump commentary that insists on employing technical vocabulary consisting of multisyllabic words that only a small percentage of the church understands. Faithful expository preaching, as Strain explains, connects the preacher (as shepherd) and the people (as sheep), which enables fruitful discipleship as the Scriptures are faithfully expounded.

The strength of this book is that it is short and very accessible for the entire church. Far too often, books for preachers on the subject of preaching can be overly technical and out of reach for the common church member in the congregation. That's not the case with this book. In fact, it would be really good for church members to read this book in order to understand the importance of expository preaching and the foundational commitment that goes into the weekly work from the pulpit for the health and strength of the local church.

The old saying, “He who lives by the sword dies by the sword” carries quite a bit of weight when it comes to the associations and quotations of authors. When you walk into a man's library, you begin looking at his bookshelves to see who he is reading, because the men on the shelves will have a formidable impact on the man sitting in the office. I like to think of quotations as little bite-sized advertisements or commendations. Therefore, when we quote someone or a specific work in an article or book, it is important to remember that we have a stewardship opportunity that must be taken seriously as it pertains to discipleship. The quotations of men like Tim Keller are more of a distraction to the many good points that Strain makes in his book.

Perhaps one final critique would be the lack of work done on the definition of expository preaching at the beginning of the book. While Strain quotes David Helm, he doesn't spend much time fleshing

out that definition or expanding it in such a way that could be helpful to both preachers and average church members who read his book.

As a whole, I found David Strain's book refreshing and beneficial. I would encourage preachers and teachers of the Scriptures to read this short, accessible book, which can both encourage and correct at the same time. Often around G3 Ministries, you hear a statement about the importance of preaching repeated in workshops, sermons, and articles: "As the pulpit goes, so goes the church." If there was ever a time in the history of the church where we needed a revival of faithful preaching, this is the day. For that reason, I commend Strain's book on expository preaching to local churches.

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**Matt Rhodes. *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 255 pp. \$13.49.**

Matt Rhodes has served in North Africa since 2011 on a church-planting team. His book, *No Shortcut for Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions*, is published by Crossway in partnership with 9Marks. The book raises prickly questions about commonly accepted and often-lauded trends in modern missions. His concerns emanate from his study of Scripture as well as his experience on the foreign mission field.

Two novelties in Christian missions in the second half of the twentieth century collided and colluded to create the fundamental problem that Rhodes seeks to address in his book. First, when international air travel became accessible to middle-class America in the 1960s, short-term mission teams began traveling overseas on a regular basis, which exposed laymen to missions first-hand like never before. This, of course, had many benefits, but it also paved the way for a gradual amateurization of the missions force. The field seemed more accessible, and the idea that all one needed was a passion for the lost and a Bible to be a missionary began to take root.

Second, in the 1970s prominent missiologist Ralph Winter pioneered the concept of looking at the world as people groups instead of geopolitical states. Up to that point, Western Christians felt that the

world had mostly been reached because some semblance of gospel witness could be identified in each country. Winter pushed back on that false sense of accomplishment by arguing that assessing the evangelization of the world in this way was flawed. The real question, argued Winter, was whether or not all people groups had a gospel witness or not. The answer, it turned out, was alarming. Initial models showed that there were tens of thousands of people groups across the globe who had no gospel witness whatsoever. Many didn't have a single word of Scripture translated into their heart language.

As you might imagine, a byproduct of Winter's work was to create a sense of urgency to get the gospel to these people groups as soon as possible, which of course is appropriate. This sudden urgency, however, resulted in a downplaying of the importance of preparation for the mission field and an emphasis on getting workers to unreached people groups by the shortest route possible. The urgency of the need and the accessibility of the nations paved the way for a regrettable trajectory. Speed and pragmatism came to characterize the modern missions movement. The primary questions became, How can we get the most missionaries to the field in the shortest amount of time? And what strategies are producing the most professions of faith and new churches quickest?

Rhodes wants us to ask different questions. How can we adequately and biblically prepare those who are called to the mission field? Which missionary methods are faithful to the Scriptures? Rhodes contends that when we approach the missionary endeavor with a full commitment to the Scriptures and eschew the temptation to be driven by speed and pragmatism, then we will see fruit that lasts. Rhodes is right. He's right first and foremost because the evangelization of the world was commanded, described, and delineated in the Scriptures. In other words, churches, missionaries, and agencies have no right to commandeer Christ's commission. He's also right because the result of the last sixty years of mission work is now measurable, and it is lacking.

Rhodes exposes the issues in modern missions, but he doesn't leave us without a way forward. He gives a prescription for correcting our course. I think missionaries will find the chapter entitled "A Long-Term Path for Missionaries" particularly helpful. Here he describes ten milestones that every missionary ought to pursue. Sending churches will gain wisdom from the chapter "Equipping and Sending"

as they consider how to faithfully steward those who are called by God to go to the nations. All believers will benefit from reading this book as they seek to participate in the Great Commission, whether they are holding the rope or going down into the pit themselves.

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**Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong. *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. 350 pp. \$44.99.**

Lester Ruth (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is Research Professor of Christian Worship at Duke Divinity School in Durham, NC, and Lim Swee Hong (PhD, Drew University) is Deer Park Associate Professor of Sacred Music at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario. This joint venture by Ruth and Lim combines their expertise to live up to all that its title promises, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church*. Their history explores the ideas (theologies), people, and practices that lie behind what most of North America's Protestant churches call worship today. One could almost make a primer on the subject from their footnotes alone as they include a trove of references to articles, books, conference notes, cassette tapes, VHS recordings, personal interviews, and more. Ruth and Lim clearly did their homework. Above the footnotes, Ruth and Lim recount how two rivers of history merged into one (their metaphor) to make for what they have termed *Contemporary Praise & Worship*. Part 1 of the book tells the history of Praise & Worship in four chapters, and Part 2 uses three chapters to tell the history behind contemporary music.

Giving a caricature of each history, the first had a theology of obeying the command to praise God (Heb 13:15) in order for him to come down and inhabit their praises (Ps 22:3b), just as God once inhabited the tabernacles of Moses and David. This theology began in seed form with Reg Layzell in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, and through his influence upon the Latter Rain movement that began

in 1948, his theology would eventually spread through a growing network of people, publications, and conferences. Though continuationist from the outset (expecting sign-gifts to occur once God's presence finally came down to inhabit the praises of His people—something that the people or at least “priestly” worship leaders were to sense somehow), this theology leaned heavily on Scripture. David was the prototypical worshiper, and congregations expected expressions of worship in his psalms and others to be seen in the church today.

For the second history (contemporary worship), Ruth and Lim begin with an interesting overview of North American expressions of pragmatism before 1965. Camp meetings, the “new measures” of Charles Finney, and the Salvation Army's use of novelty in America—these “subterranean stirrings” and methods like them eventually saw a river of pragmatism take their place. The theology for this pragmatism is represented by 1 Corinthians 9:22. From this verse, if the overarching purpose of the church was to reach all men with the gospel, then it should adapt and use novel means to reach them all. Success would be seen in the numbers. As marketing and advertising developed, so also did the church marketing movement, and 1 Corinthians 9:22 became the justification for not the individual but the church as a whole to evangelize all men, specifically through its worship services. In becoming “all things to all men,” churches were to figure out all the things that all contemporary men were and tailor their worship services accordingly in order to rejuvenate their declining numbers. Successful parachurch ministries that targeted youth were the gateway to using novel forms of worship in the churches, and this novelty included dramas, movie clips, rock music, and more.

The authors point out how both histories developed side-by-side, sometimes overlapped, and eventually merged in the mid-1990s. The “infrastructure” eventually became one for both movements—technology, shared music through Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), and formal programs at institutions to train “worship leaders.” The field between the rivers disappeared as they grew and became one. The book ends with a helpful three-page appendix that summarizes the two movements according to their time periods in parallel columns.

This book is not an easy-chair read for someone looking for an introduction on worship in North American Protestant churches. It is, however, an excellent resource for anyone looking for an in-depth



history of the beliefs, key figures, operations, and practices behind the worship of most North American churches today. Whether teaching undergraduate or graduate students, professors would benefit their students by assigning this book as required reading. Pastors unfamiliar with the history behind today's mainstream worship would do well to read this book as well. Cessationist pastors who hold to the regulative principle will find their convictions strengthened by examining the outcome of a Pentecostal or pragmatic theology of worship.

Having given this book a recommendation, a couple of caveats are in order. First, as objective as Ruth and Lim hope to be (xiv), their rivers of history become rather broad at points. Egalitarianism, continuationism, ecumenicism, and liberalism fill the waters at points and will leave a conservative reader wondering what similarities he has with some of the fish that they describe.

That being said, second, the hermeneutics of *Praise & Worship* are suspect at best. To claim that two verses (Heb 13:15 with Ps 22:3b) together give the formula whereby God will inhabit (spatially?) a congregation's praises denies God's omnipresence and the Christian's ability to worship God in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:24). By making the church into a spiritualized tabernacle of Moses or David and introducing worship leaders as "priestly" mediators who help bring down the presence of God, this theology borders on taking Christians back into the Law and diminishes the glory of the one High Priest who gladly welcomes all who draw near to Him by faith. Finally, as Ruth and Lim occasionally admit, it is debatable that the pragmatism of contemporary worship was truly *theologically* driven. More likely, its pragmatism drove its theology. One verse (1 Cor 9:22) excused all sorts of novelty, and, when joined to the church marketing movement, ironically became the means of targeting select groups within American society instead of trying to reach every tribe and language and people and nation.

Whatever their prior theological commitments may be, readers will find Ruth and Lim to be excellent guides through the historical rivers of *Contemporary Praise & Worship*.

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**Nathan Busenitz and James Coates. *God vs. Government: Taking a Biblical Stand When Christ & Compliance Collide*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2022. 206 pp. \$17.99.**

Almost no Western churches were prepared for the COVID lockdowns. Churches scrambled logistically—but even more so theologically. Because we had never before been confronted by government orders not to meet, most of us had not given adequate thought to whether we should comply with such policies. *God vs. Government* attempts to shore up this theological and practical deficiency. The brief book is divided into two main sections. The first (about 110 pages) is historical, as Busenitz and Coates recount the decisions of their respective churches (Grace Community Church of Los Angeles and GraceLife Church of Edmonton) to meet in defiance of local COVID restrictions.

Each church faced enormous pressure to remain closed. Grace was repeatedly assessed fines. The city of Los Angeles revoked the church's lease on a parking lot the church had used for forty-five years. Grace pursued a variety of legal responses to these citations, eventually being vindicated and having their legal fees covered by the city.

The government's treatment of Grace Community Church, appalling as it might be, seems merely nuisance compared to what GraceLife endured. After multiple weeks of being monitored and warned by Alberta health officials, Coates eventually submitted to imprisonment for over a month rather than committing to not meeting. The government physically barred the church from its own building, erecting temporary fencing around its property. The people of GraceLife resorted to repeatedly changing the locations of their Sunday gatherings to avoid scrutiny from health officials.

Neither ministry made a hasty decision to violate shutdown orders. Although the travails of both churches gained international media attention, the authors remind us that both churches refrained from meeting altogether for months (from mid-March until July 26) before reopening.

The second section of the book (about 80 pages) is more directly an argument for the decisions made by these assemblies. The first two chapters are short essays by Busenitz, followed by chapters that are adaptations of two sermons by Coates and one by Busenitz.

Busenitz's first two chapters are excellent, organizing and clarifying the biblical principles in play. Happily, Busenitz does not gut the submission texts by pretending that they apply only in cases in which a government is acting righteously. He offers repeated reminders that the actual government in power when Paul and Peter urged submission was often outrageously evil and oppressive to Christianity. That said, these submission passages "should be understood in light of the men who wrote them. Their meaning must be consistent with the examples of their authors" (128). The same apostles who commanded obedience also preached in open contradiction to prohibitions and escaped from prison—the latter surely being no small matter. The second of his chapters attempts to catalog biblical examples of civil disobedience, again grouping them into categories. He then offers practical instruction for how these examples might inform our present choices.

Coates's first sermon chapter works through texts about the necessity of the gathering of the church. There is much good here, but there is room for further exposition of the theology of our physical bodies. While there is a sense in which fellowship "is the one element of gathering that most obviously cannot be fulfilled virtually" (157), we should highlight the difference between embodied versus virtual preaching, praying, singing, and so forth. His second sermon is directed to government: a reminder to governing authorities of the God-giveness of their power and therefore of the righteous limits of that power.

The volume concludes with Busenitz's exegesis of the most well-known verse on Christian faithfulness in the face of government opposition, Peter's pronouncement that "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

One of the central arguments employed by both men is that the government and church have distinct spheres of authority. In the interest of clarity, we would do well to keep that argument separate from any judgments about the seriousness of the pandemic itself. The primary argument for maintaining the church's gathering is that we do not recognize the validity of any government command that forbids the church to assemble for worship. As a matter of principle, we simply do not believe that such an instruction is a legitimate order from the government—full stop.

Once we affirm that, the question of whether a church should or should not meet on a given Sunday (or season) becomes a *prudential* question. In a weather emergency, for instance, the government might restrict all travel on the roads. As a matter of principle, we must assert that if the church refrains from meeting, it is its own prudential decision; we do not acknowledge the authority of the state to make that determination on behalf of the church.

But once we reserve that judgment for ourselves as the church, at that point we need to be able to articulate how we calculate the risks of meeting (whether that threat is meteorological or viral). Throughout *God and Government*, both authors offer their judgment that the threat of COVID has been greatly exaggerated. That may be a reasonable position, but we must be clear that that is not *why* we think that the government's restrictions on churches were unjustified. Blurring rationales here (as the "Dear Fellow Albertans" statement does) is unhelpful.

One further critique worth suggesting here is what seems an unexamined embrace of public media to voice objections to government policies. If our goal when compelled by government is to remain faithful to God's commands while not signaling revolution or rebellion, our use of media (whether social media, or in the case of these churches, interviews on TV and radio) demands further scrutiny.

As the COVID pandemic ends, we are now in a position to evaluate the principles on which we make our decisions without the immediate pressure of deciding what we will do *this upcoming Sunday*. We should take advantage of the circumstances by shoring up this aspect of our theology, and this work by Busenitz and Coates is a useful contribution to that task.

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