

# Christ, the Only Mediator

By Michael L. Gowens

*1 Tim 2:5 – “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;”*

Most discussions of the 1832 separation within Baptist ranks focus on the practical issues dividing the two camps, i.e. mission societies, Sunday Schools, and various parachurch organizations. It is true that the Black Rock Address said very little about doctrine. Its focus was primarily practical. I suggest, however, that beneath the legitimate complaints they highlighted concerning some of the practical innovations of their day, a deeper theological chasm was developing. Successive history reveals that this underlying doctrinal disagreement concerned what is known as the “external means of grace” question.<sup>1</sup>

The primary issue at stake might be defined by the question, “*Does God employ the use of external means in the eternal salvation of sinners? Is grace mediated to the sinner through human agency? Does the church play an instrumental role in eternal salvation?*” Those answering in the affirmative were loosely and informally termed “means” Baptists, and those responding in the negative were labeled “anti-means” Baptists.

Of course, a label can be misleading, for it never tells the whole story. I don’t particularly like the “anti-means” label, for it suggests an impression that is not entirely accurate. The Bible clearly teaches, for instance, that “means” are involved in Christian discipleship: “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*” (Jno. 17:17). I could not in good conscience, therefore, wear the label “anti-means”

without the caveat that Scripture does teach that means are employed in a certain sense.

The shortcomings of the label “anti-means” notwithstanding, it still expresses a fundamental point of distinction between Primitive Baptist theology and popular ideas. We believe this issue is crucial, not peripheral, to the integrity of the gospel. *Is the Lord Jesus Christ the one and only mediator (i.e. means, medium, instrument) of salvation, or is salvation mediated*

The logic behind the “external means of grace” position is expressed by Cyprian’s famous dictum, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – there is no salvation outside the church.

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after Black Rock, Elders Gilbert Beebe and Samuel Trott, signers of the Black Rock Address, wrote about the “means of grace” question in Beebe’s periodical entitled *Signs of the Times*.

*through the agency of gospel preaching, the sinner's exercise of faith and repentance, or participation in the sacraments? Is Christ or the "church" the medium of eternal life?* That was the root theological issue behind the Primitive/Missionary division, and it is still a question of no small importance to Christian orthodoxy.

### **Historical Roots of the Debate**

This debate over whether or not the church functions in a redemptive or pastoral role goes back as far as the third century. Cyprian's famous dictum, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – "There is no salvation outside the church" – identifies the logical basis of the "means of grace" position. Those who argue that eternal life is mediated through the Christian gospel and/or Christian ordinances are reasoning from the premise that the church is a redemptive institution.

This statement by the ante-Nicene "father" has gained general acceptance in both Catholic and Protestant circles since he first penned it some 1750 years ago. It expresses the idea that the "church", through Word and/or Sacrament, mediates—as the means or instrument—God's grace in salvation.

Historically, the phrase "means of grace" (*media gratiae*) is common to both sacerdotal traditions (such as Catholicism, Anglicanism, Episcopalianism), who emphasize the Sacramental acts as more or less salvific (that is, affecting salvation), and evangelical traditions (such as Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and other Reformed traditions), who emphasize the preaching of the Word as the instrument of salvation. Though the debate over which media should have priority continues between the two schools of thought, i.e. the Word or the Sacraments, and though various subsets within certain traditions may lean more to one side or the other, e. g. evangelical Anglicans or Lutherans emphasizing consubstantiation, they share a common conviction that salvation is mediated through the "church", beyond which, there is no salvation. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

But is the "church", through her various activities, the mediator (i.e. the medium or instrument) of salvation? Is the mass of the religious world, both Catholic and Protestant alike, correct to assume that salvation is mediated ecclesiastically? Is the role of the "church", in other words, instrumental in applying the redemptive work of Christ to individual sinners? In a word, does God channel the grace of eternal salvation through human instruments?

## The Predominance of this Concept in Religious Circles

Most professing Christians say “yes”. Consider a few quotes. On November 7, 1739, John Wesley, an Anglican and father of Methodism, wrote: “...*there are means of grace, that is, outward ordinances, whereby the inward grace of God is ordinarily conveyed to man; whereby the faith that brings salvation is conveyed to them who before had it not.*”

Article V of the Lutheran “Augsburg Confession” affirms the same: “*Through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justified those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.*”

The Heidelberg Catechism, a document of the Protestant Reformed denomination, connects the “means of grace” with “justification by faith”. In a sermon on Question 65 in that Catechism<sup>2</sup>, Herman Hoeksema claims, “*This divine work of faith in the heart of the child of God is wrought through means. God works saving faith in the heart of his people **mediately**... [emphasis original] Without the use of the means of grace no one is ever saved, outside of those infants that are taken away by death before they can reveal any conscious activity of saving faith.*”

Those who subscribe to the position that the “means of grace” are salvific also endorse the idea of the “free offer” of the gospel. The Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church states, “*We **reject** the teaching that God does not offer, convey, and seal the spiritual blessings that Jesus Christ has won only through the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, but also directly and without the means of grace, alleging that God does not need a vehicle to convey His grace to sinners*” [emphasis added]. Luther's Small Catechism agrees: “*By the Means of Grace are meant those things by which God offers and gives His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation*”

### Baptist Dissenters

Baptists have historically disagreed with Cyprian's dictum. They insist that the Lord Jesus Christ, not the “church”, is Himself the “one Mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5)—the only means by which the salvific benefits of the covenant of redemption are dispensed. They understand the instrumental role ascribed in the

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<sup>2</sup> Question 65 in the Heidelberg Catechism reads: “*Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed? Answer: From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.*”

Bible to the Word and Sacraments<sup>3</sup> to be a disciplinary (that is, in respect to discipleship), not salvific (that is, in respect to salvation), role—viewing these “means” as pastoral resources for the nurture of disciples, not instruments by which the merits of Christ are applied to individual sinners. They do not believe that “grace”<sup>4</sup> is applied through the “church” and its various functions, but directly and immediately (that is, without the use of means or media) by the Holy Spirit. They affirm that Christ actually procured salvation by His death, so that the gospel is a declaration (or proclamation) of a specific and objective fact, not a general invitation or free offer. Good works give evidence of grace—they are not conditions to final salvation.

### **Andrew Fuller’s Influence on the Baptists**

Of course, this conscientious objection to the concept of “salvation by human means” has put Baptists in an unpopular minority and is largely responsible for the perennial stigma cast upon them by Catholics and Protestants alike. They have been labeled “hyper-Calvinists”, “quietists”, and “antinomians”.

Sometimes, the pressure to conform to more popular standards has spawned controversy among the Baptists themselves. Hassell speaks of John Brine and John Gill, two eminent Baptist ministers of the 1700’s, who rejected Andrew Fuller’s emphasis on the universal and free offer of the gospel, focusing in their preaching instead “on the Divine purposes, and on the Bible fact that salvation is of the Lord.” Consequently, Gill and Brine were stigmatized as “selfish, hardening, refrigerant, soporific, hyper-Calvinistic, Antinomian” and blamed for the growing “indifference [among the churches] to the means of grace”.<sup>5</sup>

Hassell proceeds to state that after Gill’s death in 1771:

“[Fuller] began to ponder upon the expediency of making a change in Baptist tactics, and offering salvation freely to all sinners without distinction...[He wrote his views] in an essay entitled ‘The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation’...This publication involved him in a bitter controversy of twenty years with some of his Baptist brethren, including Mr. Abraham Booth...but it is stated that ‘the ability and force of Mr. Fuller’s pamphlet ultimately prevailed,’ and his views were adopted by the majority of those professing the Baptist name. These views, Mr. Fuller says, were different from those held by the Baptists during the most of the eighteenth century, but were like those entertained by Bunyan and the other old Baptist writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries...”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A term Baptists avoided because of the influence of Roman Catholic sacerdotalism, preferring instead the Biblical term “ordinances”.

<sup>4</sup> In the context of this discussion, the term “grace” is defined in a formal sense, i.e. as a synonym for eternal salvation.

<sup>5</sup> Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, pp. 337-338.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 340-341.

On October 2, 1792, Fuller was instrumental in the formation of the first Baptist Missionary Society at Kettering, England, serving as its secretary until his death. Under Fuller's influence, the momentum of this shift in theological paradigms soon spread to the New World, but not without opposition.

In the 1820's, while serving the church in Lebanon, Ohio, Elder Wilson Thompson published two books, "opposing Fullerism"—*Simple Truth* and *Triumphs of Truth*. Sylvester Hassell said that these works "brought upon himself [Thompson] much persecution".<sup>7</sup> He summarizes Elder Thompson's convictions about the "means" question as follows:

"In regard to the use and effect of the preached gospel, Elder Thompson held, with the majority of Old School Baptists, that it is not the means of imparting spiritual life to the dead sinner; that as no means can be used to give life to one literally dead, even so no means can be used to give eternal life to those who are dead in sins; that, as all temporal means are used to feed, nourish and strengthen living subjects, and not dead ones, so the preaching of the gospel is the medium through which God is pleased to instruct, feed and comfort His renewed children, and not by which he gives life to the dead sinner whom the Spirit alone can quicken; that the gospel is the proclamation of good tidings of great joy to those who have a hearing ear and an understanding heart to receive it, and to these it is the power of God unto salvation, saving them from the false doctrines of men, and feeding and making them strong in the truth."<sup>8</sup>

Controversy is frequently the fire that refines theological precision, and Thompson spoke very precisely. He wrote the following in his 1825 work entitled *Triumphs of Truth*:

"The prisoner in the dungeon can only know that he is justified by the judge in court by some messenger who may be sent to him, with the tidings of it; and however long he may disbelieve the message, it cannot make it untrue, because the fact does not depend for its truth upon the prisoner's faith, but is a truth before he believes it, as certainly as afterwards, and his faith adds nothing to the truth of the fact, but only to his comfort in the enjoyment of a knowledge of the fact. So justification is a fact before faith, and faith adds nothing to it, but only believes the fact as it is declared in the gospel..."<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Thompson's distinctions are more antiquated than 1825, but he wrote more distinctly than Baptists had written for some time previous because of the resurgent threat that the "means" theory now posed to orthodoxy. He was by no means, however, the first to make such distinctions. In 1647, for instance, Samuel Richardson published an essay entitled "Justification by Christ Alone" in which he argues against the concept that any aspect of eternal salvation, be it legal or vital, is by external means. Richardson wrote to affirm "that we are justified by Christ alone and not by our believing" and to set forth "the true place of faith in salvation as an

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<sup>7</sup> Hassell, p. 633.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 634.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Triumphs of Truth*, pp. 187, 190.

evidence of interest in Christ but not a joint-partner with Christ”. To the potential objection some would make to his position, namely, that “God has decreed the means as well as the end, and faith is one of the means,” Richardson says:

“We grant God has decreed the end and the means, and whatsoever God has decreed shall unavoidably come to pass. But we deny that faith is any means of our Redemption, Justification, or Salvation. Nothing but the Lord Jesus Christ is the means of our salvation. There are means that are necessary to the revealing and enjoying the comfort of it, as the Holy Spirit and ministers to reveal it and faith to receive it; also, there be fruits and effects of the love of God, as faith, love, and obedience to Christ...yet these are no means of our salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

The controversy continued between the “means” and “anti-means” schools throughout the nineteenth century, spawning debates on the topic, “Who are the original Baptists?”.<sup>11</sup> Elder Thomas P. Dudley, pastor of Bryan Station Church, near Lexington, Kentucky, from 1825 to 1880, complains that missionary societies were unknown in Baptist circles prior to that day, “yet their advocates presume to tell us they are Old School Baptists”.<sup>12</sup> In the kind of unambiguous candor that seemed to characterize the pioneer preachers of yesteryear, Dudley writes:

“Experience and observation of more than fifty years have satisfied me that where Andrew Fuller’s system, attempting to harmonize Divine sovereignty and human free agency, a general atonement and special application, salvation by works and salvation by grace, prevails, it has only widened the flood-gates of error, making the preacher the *instrument*, and the preached gospel the *means*, of the eternal salvation of our apostate world. I, however, have not so learned Christ. [emphasis original]”<sup>13</sup>

In the footnote to this quote, Hassell further quotes David Benedict, the New School Baptist historian:

“Our old ministers of the eighteenth century would have denounced as unsound in the faith, as Arminians, the great mass of our community of the present day, both in Europe and America, Fuller and Hall among the rest.”<sup>14</sup>

## **A Primitive Baptist Apologetic**

Today, Primitive Baptists are virtually a lone voice in their insistence that the “external means of grace” position is fraught with inconsistencies. Do we deny that the Bible teaches “means” for discipleship? No, we affirm that it does, but deny that

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Richardson, “Justification by Christ Alone”, [www.mountzionpbc.org](http://www.mountzionpbc.org)

<sup>11</sup>For four days in July, 1887, Elder Lemuel Potter, representing the Old School Baptists, and Elder W. P. Throgmorton, representing the Missionary Baptists, debated at Fulton, Kentucky, the question, “Who Are The Primitive Baptists?”, both men arguing that their respective groups held to the original Baptist position on the “means” question.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 557.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 558.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 558

it teaches that “grace”, i.e. the salvific benefits of redemption, is communicated to individual sinners by any other agency than the direct work of the Holy Spirit (Jno. 6:45).

What do Primitive Baptists believe regarding the means of salvation? We believe that Christ himself, through His work on the cross, is the “one Mediator between God and men”. Salvation is mediated through Christ alone.

When the Lord Jesus laid down His life on the cross, He fully secured the salvation of His elect. “*It is finished*” was the triumphant cry (Jno. 19:30). He did not merely make men savable, in lieu of the individual’s subsequent response to the gospel or participation in the ordinances. Instead, He actually procured release from Divine wrath on behalf of all His people<sup>15</sup>. Christ, through His sufferings and death, “obtained eternal redemption for us” (Heb. 9:12). The legal benefits of his atoning death are then personally and vitally applied to every elect in regeneration by the sovereign and direct work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:4-6; Titus 3:3-6; Col. 2:11-14). All for whom Christ died will be effectually called from death in sin to life in Christ (compare Jno. 10:15 and 10:27-28), being drawn to Him in vital union (Jno. 6:44).

The bridge between God and man, then, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It is not truth about Christ or concerning his death that bridges the gap between an offended God and offending sinners, but His actual work on the cross. Christianity is not the one mediator between God and men; rather, the man Christ Jesus is.

This popular tendency to confuse the actual work of Christ on the cross with the revelation of that fact in the gospel arises from the failure to recognize that the Bible makes distinctions between the legal, vital, and practical (i.e. ethical) phases of salvation. Allow me to illustrate by posing a question.

What initial thought suggests itself to your mind when you hear the verse, “*This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life: and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life*” (1 Jno. 5:11-12)? What does it mean to “have the Son”? I suppose that when many Bible interpreters hear this verse, they automatically assume that the condition described as “having the Son” means “having the truth about the Son”. But the text does not say that. It does not even imply the idea of “possessing Christian orthodoxy”. The subject under consideration is the possession of *Christ*, not the possession of *Christianity*. I assert the text means that every person who “possesses the Son” vitally, i.e. in terms of a relational union with Christ, is in possession of eternal life.

Many, however, cannot conceive of any way that a person may “possess Christ” apart from an intellectual or creedal sense. So far as they are concerned, only the

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of “salvation” suggests the image of “rescue from danger”.

person whose thinking is orthodox and whose creed is correct is truly in possession of eternal life.

But that failure to distinguish between what is *vital and relational* (i.e. that which pertains to “life”) and what is *academic and creedal* (i.e. that which pertains to “knowledge, awareness, and belief”) inevitably complicates the issue. In the first place, it raises the question, “Just how much orthodoxy is necessary to final salvation?” How much Christian truth is enough? Does a person simply have to believe in the deity of Christ, or does he also have to embrace and affirm the substitutionary nature of the atonement in order to be finally saved? If orthodoxy is defined by correct views concerning both the Person and the Work of Christ, then must he further believe in particular redemption and the finished work of Christ in order to be saved? In other words, will an Arminian gospel save a person? What level of creedal accuracy is sufficient to measure whether or not someone “has the Son”?

Christ  
Himself, not  
Christianity,  
is the one  
Mediator  
between God  
and men.

If a person defines “the gospel” as Paul defined it (i.e. a message embracing both the Person and the Work of Christ – 1 Cor. 1:23a; 2:2b; 15:1ff), then, of course, the view that salvation is mediated through the instrument of man’s act of believing would necessarily limit the number of those who are truly saved only to people who embrace orthodox views about both the Person and the Work of Christ. Can it be said that a person who believed in “general atonement”<sup>16</sup>, for instance, truly believes “the gospel”? Is it enough to say—in lieu of Paul’s definition of the gospel—that someone is truly saved because he is orthodox concerning the person of Christ even though his views concerning the work of Christ are unbiblical? Just how much “Christianity” is enough to mediate salvation?

Furthermore, the position affirming that salvation is mediated through Christianity (or, as Cyprian affirmed, by means of the Church) narrows the scope of salvation to the present dispensation. If there is no salvation outside the parameters of the Word or Sacrament, then how were people saved who lived prior to the New Covenant? When did Joseph or Joshua or Jeremiah hear the Christian evangel or receive baptism and the Lord’s Supper?

Some have attempted to resolve this predicament by suggesting that God’s elect who lived prior to the advent of Christ were saved by the degree of light they had

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<sup>16</sup> ‘General Atonement’ is the idea that Christ died for every person who has lived, lives now, or will live in the future and that by his death, he made salvation possible to all, contingent on the individual’s response.

from either general revelation in nature or special revelation in the law. However, this argument raises even further questions, the most obvious of which is, “Is the light of natural revelation sufficient to save anyone?” Further, if others were saved by the light of special revelation in the law, how does such a prospect square with Paul’s insistence that the law could not give life (Gal. 3:21)? The position that Christianity, whether through the preaching of the gospel or the receiving of the ordinances, is the medium (or means) of salvation must necessarily answer the question, “How were men saved prior to the age of the Church?”.

Yet again, the “means of grace” view would deny salvation to everyone who is unable to process propositional truth. If the mind must receive and affirm the basic facts of the gospel message as the instrument of personal salvation, then how might those who are cognitively incapacitated to process rational thought be saved?

Those who affirm the “external means of grace” position tend to explain these cases in terms of “exceptions to the rule”. Deceased infants, people with Alzheimer’s Disease, Down’s Syndrome, or some form of brain injury, are extraordinary cases and God has provided an exception (so they say) for them. But I wonder how such an argument squares with John 3:8, a verse that plainly teaches that everyone who is born again is born again the same way. I suggest that *every* sinner that is saved, whether he possesses intellectual capacity or not (and whatever his age or level of personal maturity) is an *extraordinary* case of God’s amazing grace. Only the doctrine of salvation by grace alone is sufficient to cover every set of circumstances. Once that paradigm is abandoned for the idea that salvation is mediated through special revelation, exceptions must be made for people who lived in another dispensation or whose circumstances are not conducive to hearing and receiving the gospel.

Our insistence that the saving work of Jesus Christ is directly applied by the sovereign and immediate work of the Holy Spirit begs the question, “How, then, should such passages that speak of human instrumentality and the use of means be interpreted?” I answer, they should be interpreted in terms of means by which the child of God is equipped to live the life of Christian discipleship. Allow me to explain.

Scripture plainly teaches that people are brought to believe in Christ through the agency of gospel preaching: “*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed?*” (1 Cor. 3:5); “*Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word*” (Jno. 17:20; cf. Eph. 1:13; Jno. 1:7). We do not deny that the child of God is brought to *evangelical* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ by means of the preaching of the gospel. It is the gospel that spells out the details of our Lord’s identity as the Son of God, the incarnation,

virgin birth, vicarious death, bodily resurrection, glorious ascension, heavenly session, and triumphant return. These great facts are not known apart from God's special revelation in the gospel.

That gospel proclamation, moreover, corresponds to and resonates with the "law written in the heart" of the child of God. Notice this dynamic of both an *internal* and an *external* witness in 1 John 5:10: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath *the witness in himself*: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not *the record that God gave of his Son*" [emphasis mine].

But this gospel and man's believing response to it is not the means by which an individual becomes a child of God. It is the means by which a child of God becomes a disciple<sup>17</sup> of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel, as Paul asserts in 2 Timothy 1:10, "brings life and immortality *to light*" [emphasis mine], not to reality. The gospel is designed as the means of information and education, not the means of saving grace. It is the means of turning men from "darkness to light" (Acts 26:18)—Biblical metaphors employed to represent the concepts of ignorance and understanding, respectively—not "death to life". Yes, God's word (that is, His verbal revelation) is able to make a man "wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), so that we can say without equivocation that it is the means of wisdom concerning salvation, but not the means of salvation itself.

Further, we unhesitatingly affirm that belief in the Lord Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel is the *ultimate* evidence that an individual has been born again (Jno. 1:11-13; 1 Jno. 5:1; Jno. 5:24) and that he/she is numbered among God's elect (1 Ths. 1:4). But it is not the *only* evidence of new birth or election. In fact, Romans 2:14 indicates that ethical holiness is an evidence of new birth. Romans 7:14ff indicates that the internal warfare between the flesh and the spirit is an evidence of grace. Peter learned that people in every nation who "fear God" and "work righteousness", even beyond the parameters of the special revelation given in the Abrahamic covenant, give evidence that God has done a work of vital cleansing (Acts 10:35).

Furthermore, the Bible indicates that a child of God may be confused in his mind concerning the facts of the gospel and his "faith" [that is, his understanding of gospel truth] overthrown, though he belongs to God in a relationship of covenant union: "...saying that the resurrection is past already and overthrow the faith of some; nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his, and Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:18-19). The salvation of the sinner is not predicated on individual belief, but Divine faithfulness (2 Tim. 2:13).

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<sup>17</sup> The word "disciple" means *learner, student, follower*.

We maintain that salvation was actually secured at the cross and is mediated directly to the individual by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. It is a work “not made with hands” (Col. 2:11; cf. Eph. 2:11).

That phrase is a single word in Greek—*acheiropoieton*. The word literally means “without human agency.” Where ever it is used in Scripture, *acheiropoieton* refers to something that man did not manufacture. It is the same word employed by Jesus in Mark 14:58 when he spoke of destroying the temple made by the hands of men and building another that was not made by man. It is also employed in 2 Corinthians 5:1 to describe the glorified body and Hebrews 9:11 and 24 to speak of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ and heaven itself, respectively, as the realities to which the Old Testament Tabernacle and the “Holy of Holies” pointed as types. Furthermore, the word is used in Acts 7:40-41, 48-50 to describe the dwelling place of God. The preponderance of Biblical evidence indicates that just as heaven itself, the incarnation and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the glorified bodies of the saints are products of a Divine work without the instrumentality of human effort and assistance, so the inward work of grace in the heart of a sinner is a work in which no human means are employed.

It is only by understanding the need to distinguish between sonship and discipleship, then, that consistency in Biblical interpretation may be achieved. Because we approach the Bible with a presupposition for the unity of Scripture, i.e. the conviction that its various parts fit together to make a single, coherent and consistent message, we understand that the discipline of Biblical exegesis must always occur in the context of systematic theology. Sonship—the work by which a sinner is brought into union with Christ—is an immediate work of Divine grace. Discipleship—the act by which the child of God enjoys communion with Christ and grows toward Christ-likeness—potentially involves human means.

With such a systematic theological grid in place, then, we avoid the all-too-common conundrum expressed by those who would marry Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility in eternal salvation. The doctrine of justification with its various parts (by “blood” [Rom. 5:9], “grace” [Rom. 3:24], “faith” [Rom. 3:28], and “works” [Jas. 2:21]), for instance, does not present the same kind of confusion to us that it did to Martin Luther. Luther concluded that the book of James was uninspired (and therefore, mistakenly included in the New Testament canon) because he could not reconcile him with Paul. Likewise, the majority of modern theologians who emphasize the slogan “justification by faith *alone*”, essentially subordinate the references in Romans 5:9 and Romans 3:24 to man’s act of believing as the means by which the atoning death of Christ is applied to the individual. In contrast, we understand that the death of Christ *alone* is the medium

by which sinners are declared just, and that the proclamation of that objective fact in the gospel brings the believer subjective peace and assurance in his conscience.

Neither are Primitive Baptists stumped by the apparent contradictions associated with the Bible doctrine of sanctification. Verses that say that we “are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10) and that sanctification is “by the truth; for [His] word is truth” (Jno. 17:17) do not pose a logical contradiction, for the Bible doctrine of sanctification is presented as a truth with more than one phase.

The two phases of sanctification—the positional and the practical—are summarized in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “...to them that *are sanctified* [*hagiazō*] in Christ Jesus, called *to be saints* [*hagios*].” The first reference speaks of *definitive* sanctification; the second of *ethical* sanctification. Paul’s point is that these believers at Corinth had already been positionally sanctified through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, they were called to be in daily, practical behavior what they already were in a positional sense before God.

The verb “are sanctified” is in the Greek aorist tense. It speaks of a past, completed action with ongoing results. The aorist describes punctiliar or “snapshot” action—a once-for-all, instantaneous event. The same verb tense is employed whenever the fact of Christ’s atoning death is in view, for He alone is our “sanctification” (1 Cor. 1:30): “*For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one...*” (Heb. 2:11); “*By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*” (Heb. 10:10); “*For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified*” (Heb. 10:14; cf. v. 29). The aorist is also employed to speak of the application of redemption to the individual’s heart in regeneration, i.e. vital sanctification: “*And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Cor. 6:11).

But those who have been made holy in a positional sense are further “called to be holy” in an ethical or behavioral sense. These who “are sanctified” by Christ are now “called to be saints” by the gospel. They are called, in other words, to be in practice what they already are in position: “*But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation* [lit. behavior]” (1 Pet. 1:15). This call to ethical holiness, unlike the definitive work by which a person is made holy, is communicated by means of God’s word: “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*” (Jno. 17:17). It is as a person hears and obeys the word of God that he is able more and more to “put off the old man” and to “put on the new man” in personal conduct and behavior (cf. Eph. 4:22ff). Sanctification in this practical sense does not involve an actual change of nature (for that has already taken place

in regeneration when the new man was “created in...true holiness”— Eph. 4:24), but a change of behavior—ethical renewal, if you please. The new man that God has created in the heart must now be “put on” in personal conduct. Peter’s metaphor for this dynamic of ethical progress toward spiritual maturity is “growth in grace” (2 Pet. 3:18). And it is a process of growth contingent on the reception of and response to the word (1 Pet. 2:2).

Of course, every one of God’s elect was sanctified by Christ on the cross, for He alone is the mediator of sanctifying grace. But common sense and personal observation reveal the fact that there are varying degrees of conformity to the holy character of Christ in their personal conduct. Some, like Abraham and Paul, grow to maturity and produce much fruit to His glory. Others, like Lot and the Rich Young Ruler, make little or even no visible progress<sup>18</sup> in the disciplines of Christian knowledge (orthodoxy) and duty (orthopraxy). Though every heaven-born soul experiences a change in terms of death to the love of sin (for regeneration necessarily produces an ethical change [2 Cor. 5:17; see also cf. Rom. 2:14 and Acts 10:35 and note that the change of nature is defined in ethical terms]), yet every regenerate person does not progress to the same point of spiritual maturity. The reason is because the degree of ethical sanctification in a regenerate person’s life depends on the degree to which he makes use of the means God has provided for discipleship.

If an elect infant died at the same moment as a godly, spiritually mature Christian, they would enter the presence of God simultaneously, for both were sanctified by Jesus Christ at the cross. The godly Christian, however, gave greater glory to Christ in this life, for his opportunities for spiritual growth and Christian service were greater than the little child’s opportunities. Likewise, children of God living in the gospel dispensation have greater privileges and light, and consequently, greater potential for service than those who lived prior to the coming of Christ (Mt. 13:17; Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:9-12). Our opportunities and obligations for glorifying God and growing to spiritual maturity, therefore, are greater than theirs. But though the means available for worship and service differ, the same grace mediated by Christ alone saves both them and us.

First Corinthians 1:2 implies that it is appropriate to make such distinctions between the legal and practical phases of the doctrine. No, Primitive Baptists are not “Absoluters”, denying that the Bible teaches human agency and responsibility. Neither are they “Arminians”, asserting that God saves sinners by human instrumentality. Rather, they affirm that Christ alone, through His sufferings and death applied by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, is the only

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, a deceased infant who does not live long enough to grow to spiritual maturity.

mediator (or means) of grace, and that human instruments are employed by God only in terms of discipleship.

## Summary

I maintain that, in the final analysis, there is really no *theoretical* difference between Catholicism, Protestantism, or modern Baptists in terms of how a sinner is saved—all affirm Cyprian’s dictum, “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”. Yes, superficial differences exist – some stress baptism, the Eucharist, and the Rosary, and others a confessional response to the gospel – but fundamentally, all agree that salvation is applied either through the ecclesiastical means of Word or Sacrament. Only Primitive Baptists continue to argue for a Christocentric<sup>19</sup> (in contrast to an ecclesiastical) soteriology.<sup>20</sup> Only they, among professing Christians, reject Cyprian’s dictum, preferring instead the formula, “*extra Christo, nulla salus*”—“There is no salvation outside of Christ”.

Granted, we are outnumbered on this issue, and sometimes it is terribly awkward to speak a language that few Christians understand. But can we, in good conscience, compromise at this point? Our Baptist predecessors considered a concession on the “external means of grace” question a compromise to the integrity of the gospel. I do as well, for this issue is essential, not peripheral, to “the faith once delivered to the saints”. Though men will necessarily label and stereotype the view that I hold, I cannot in good conscience attribute to man’s act of believing, baptism, repentance, or receipt of the Lord’s supper the glory that is due to Christ alone, for He is the one Mediator between God and men.

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<sup>19</sup> Note I did not say “Christological”, a term that necessarily refers to the “doctrine” of Christ, but “Christocentric”, a term that indicates our conviction that Christ Himself and His meritorious work on the cross is the means by which sinners are actually saved. In other words, Christianity is not determinative of eternal salvation—Christ is!

<sup>20</sup> It is inaccurate to confuse our view with the ongoing debate known as the “exclusivism vs. inclusivism” debate. This popular debate among evangelical scholars concerns the question “Will anyone outside the Christian community be finally saved?” The “restrictivist” school answers “No, God only saves people through Christianity”. The “inclusivist” camp (led by Clark Pinnock) says “Yes, God can save people through any religion—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.”. Our view is that both schools of thought argue from a faulty premise since both assume that salvation is mediated through religion (or revelation).

