

# Temporal “Salvation” A Bogus or Biblical Concept?

By Michael L. Gowens

“Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world... ” Galatians 1:4

Stretch your mental muscles for a moment. Is there a difference between reality and a person’s *perception* of that reality? If I fail to perceive the reality, does my subjective failure to understand what is real affect whether or not it *is* real?

Let me be a little more specific. Does the objective *fact* of redemption by Christ depend on man’s subjective *perception* or understanding of that fact? If so, then wouldn’t it be true that perception determines reality?<sup>1</sup>

The Bible teaches both that God has redeemed sinners and that He has *revealed* redemption in the gospel (Eph. 1:7-8). My question is, “Does a person’s ability to understand the message of the gospel *determine* whether or not he is really redeemed? Does perception determine reality?”

I maintain that the gospel is a declaration of something that is a reality. By its very nature, the gospel dispenses information— indeed, “good” news of the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. I insist, therefore, that the gospel and man’s subjective response to it is *not* God’s vehicle for making salvation an objective reality. Christ’s death alone is the means of redemption. Through His finished work on the cross, redemption has been accomplished for all of the elect. If I am correct that perception does not determine reality, then what is God’s purpose in revealing the fact of redemption in the gospel, if it is not to make salvation a reality? His purpose in reporting the good news of redemption accomplished is to call upon those He has redeemed to respond in grateful and believing obedience so that He might be glorified even now. In other words, the gospel informs the mind of the objective fact of redemption so that the believer may render the worship and service to God in this present life that He so justly deserves. Yes, the

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<sup>1</sup> The view that something is only real if one perceives it to be real is known as *existentialism*. My favorite illustration of existentialism is from the cartoon in which the coyote chases the roadrunner and accidentally overruns the edge of the cliff. Strangely, however, he doesn’t fall until—what? He doesn’t fall until he looks down and *perceives* no ground beneath his feet. At once, when he understands there is nothing beneath his feet, he creates his own reality by his perception. Wile E. Coyote is the quintessential existentialist.

true gospel does indeed “save” the believer, but this “deliverance” does not have eternal consequence. It is a deliverance, as the Galatians 1:4 says, “from this present evil world.” In no uncertain terms, Galatians 1:4 teaches that there is not only an eternal but also a present, or if you please, a temporal, benefit in the cross of Christ.

## Look Past the Label to the Concept

Labels tend to prejudice, and prejudice tends to blindness. Recently, I have witnessed the validity of this principle on different occasions in which people have said to me, “I do not believe in ‘time salvation’. The very term is odious to me.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, I concede that the “label” is unfortunate, for it is not a Biblical term. The terms “Divine sovereignty”, “total depravity”, and “trinity”, by the way, are not Biblical terms either, but no true Bible believer would deny that Scripture teaches these concepts. This visceral antagonism to the label of “time salvation” is intense enough, however, to close the minds of those who dislike it to every legitimate argument for it as a Biblical concept. Indeed, labels tend to prejudice, and prejudice tends to blindness.

When someone denies that Scripture teaches such a thing as “temporal salvation”, I generally respond, “If you discount the validity of this concept, then, of necessity, everything must have eternal consequence and everything must determine eternal destiny. Such a view compels you to believe that right now counts forever— that every word I speak and every thought I have and the way I raise my children and spend my money and service my car and treat my pets will somehow affect my salvation. If right now counts forever, then what other conclusion is possible?” Seldom does my detractor appreciate such a statement of the obvious, but logic demands it. Once a person disavows the fundamental practice of categorizing doctrine into its

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<sup>2</sup> The primary subject of these recent discussions centers around John Calvin’s view of “Saving Faith.” The discussions arose as a result of a friend’s insistence that “God uses the gospel minister as His instrument in the eternal salvation of the elect”, that “repentance and faith are conditions to eternal salvation”, and that “a certain amount of Christian orthodoxy is necessary to final salvation.” I understand the emotive dislike for the term “Time Salvation”, for I react similarly to the unbiblical label “Saving Faith”. I argue, however, for the importance of getting past the hurdle of the “labels” in order to consider the concepts. It is my opinion that the heart of this controversy is rooted in a dislike of the doctrine of a “temporal” salvation, that is, *the idea that some passages of Scripture should be interpreted in primarily experiential, as opposed to eternal, terms*. My argument is that if one jettisons the habit of interpreting Scripture in context, he will inevitably adopt a self-contradictory position.

different phases,<sup>3</sup> he will necessarily and inevitably embrace contrary theological positions as equally true. Deny the validity of the discipline of “rightly dividing the word of truth” and Bible doctrine becomes self-contradictory. Such fine distinctions are crucial to a coherent hermeneutic. Let me explain.

## The Interpreter’s Challenge

The goal of the Bible interpreter is to interpret God’s word so that it fits together consistently and uniformly. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul stresses the importance of “rightly dividing the word of truth.” That clause is a tentmaker’s expression meaning “to cut straight”. Like a tentmaker who cuts two pieces of canvass so that they may be sewn together, the student of Scripture faces the challenge of interpreting the Bible with a view toward consistency.

Sadly, many Bible students reject this discipline. Some, having no concept of systematic theology, never even consider how the position they take on a certain verse of Scripture might harmonize with other passages. Others ignore context, taking instead the popular definition of a word and inserting that definition every place the word is found in the Bible. They decry the very idea that a doctrine may have various categories, aspects, or phases.

But every key word of Christianity is used in a variety of contexts in the Bible. For example, the Bible teaches the doctrine of Justification. The person who refuses to “rightly divide” the subject, however, will be confounded when he reads in one place that we are justified by grace (Rom. 3:24) and in another that Abraham was justified by works (Jas. 2:24), seeing that Romans 11:3 says that grace and works are mutually exclusive. His confusion will be compounded even further when he reads that the publicans and sinners “justified God” (Lk. 7:29). No, I’m not trying to be clever, but to illustrate the need to determine the particular nuance of the doctrine of Justification in each context.

The doctrine of Sanctification is no exception. The Bible says both that sinners were “sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10) and that they are “sanctified by [God’s] word” (Jno. 17:17). Which is it? The death of Christ or the word of truth? Again, this subject is complicated by Peter’s command to “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts” (1 Pet. 3:15). Surely, any fair-minded person

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<sup>3</sup> e. g. Scripture depicts the subject of “spiritual union”, for instance, in several categories, such as a *covenant* union with Christ [Eph. 1:4], a *legal* union at the cross [Rom. 6:6-8], a *vital* union in regeneration [2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:5-6], a *practical* union in discipleship [Col. 2:6-7], and a *perfect* union in glorification [Jno. 17:24].

can see that Bible terms frequently appear in various contexts. The context, then, not the dictionary, must determine the interpretation.

The practice of “plugging in” the popular definition of a word when it is found in various contexts, furthermore, produces an absurdity. Take, for instance, the word “perish.” Does “perish” always mean “eternally perish”?<sup>4</sup> Should it be always interpreted by the popular definition? When Jesus said to his disciples, “Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3), does he mean that repentance is a condition to eternal salvation? Many Bible students would say “yes”. But, doesn’t the word “likewise” suggest the thought that context will define the meaning of the word “perish”? In context, Jesus speaks of the slaughter of Galileans under Pilate and of the physical death of eighteen people on whom the tower of Siloam fell. The nature of the “perishing” under consideration in the context is certainly physical, not eternal, death. If “perish” must always be interpreted to speak of an “eternal” perishing, then, I ask in all due respect, was Peter praying for eternal salvation when he cried to Jesus in the midst of the storm, “Lord, save or I perish”? Was Esther afraid of eternal punishment as she resolved to approach the king unsummoned, saying, “If I perish, I perish”? And does one believer’s abuse of Christian liberty threaten the eternal welfare of a person with a weak conscience, for Paul warned that “through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died” (1 Cor. 8:11)? Obviously, once a Bible student rejects the interpreter’s discipline of “rightly dividing” Scripture, he does not simplify but complicates and confounds the plain sense of the text.

Perhaps the premier illustration of this principle is the use of the verb “to save” in Scripture. The individual who assumes that the word “salvation” always refers to deliverance from eternal punishment faces an embarrassing hurdle when he attempts to reconcile the verse that says salvation is by God’s grace, not man’s works (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; 2 Tim. 1:9), with the verse that says “Save yourselves from this untoward generation” (Acts 2:40), with the further text “Woman shall be saved in childbearing” (1 Tim. 2:15). If the verb “to save” is interpreted in terms of

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, someone might ask, “Do you think ‘perish’ ever means ‘eternally perish’?” I answer, “Yes, without a doubt.” John regularly uses the term in its ultimate sense in his gospel. I fear, however, that the *angst* of many against the view that some passages have a temporal, rather than an eternal, application is a reaction against the extremes and excesses to which some have taken this idea. Yes, my view is open to abuse, especially the abuse of the “no-hell” heresy. We’ll discuss this momentarily. But it is always a mistake to assume a reactionary posture to the abuse of a concept. Yes, “perish” does indeed sometimes mean “perish eternally”. But it does not always mean that. My point is that context, not the popular definition of the religious world, must govern each particular passage.

its popular usage, then 1 Timothy 2:15 makes childbirth a condition to eternal salvation. Though there is a group in Utah that teaches such a thing, I don't know of many professing Christians who would endorse the notion. In fact, the verb "to save" generally conveys the thought of "deliverance". Sometimes, it is employed to speak of deliverance from physical or moral danger. Sometimes, it is used in reference to deliverance from the unbelief of wicked men. Sometimes, it speaks of deliverance from the intellectual bondage of false teaching. And, yes, sometimes the verb speaks of deliverance in this ultimate sense, from the penalty, the power, or the presence of sin. It is interesting to note that the Bible uses the verb "to save" in a tripartite way: we "have been" saved (in the past tense), "are being" saved (in the present tense), and "shall yet be" saved (in the future tense). See Titus 2:11-14, 2 Corinthians 1:10, Hebrews 9:24-28, etc. for illustrations of this three-fold use of the concept of "salvation".

Clearly there are passages in which an "eternal" interpretation of the verb "to save" confounds the truth of unconditional salvation. Consider, for instance, 1 Corinthians 15:3 where Paul conditions salvation on whether or not the believer keeps the gospel in memory: "By which also you are saved, *if* you keep in memory what I've preached unto you." If Paul is thinking about "salvation" with eternal consequence, then, pray tell, how does his conditional "if" square with his claim that "God hath saved us, not according to our works" (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5; Eph. 2:9). I know of no way to reconcile such a potentially glaring contradiction except to interpret his use of the verb "to save" in this passage as a deliverance with present, not eternal, ramifications.

Consider also the reference in James 5:19-20. James is speaking to "brethren", not unbelievers. He asserts that a "brother" can "err from the truth". He further affirms that another believer may be the instrument of his "conversion". When one "converts the sinner from the error of his way," he "saves a soul [lit. a life] from death" and "hides [lit. prevents] a multitude of sins." If the references to "salvation", "conversion", and "death" are interpreted in an eternal context— that is, in regard to ultimate deliverance from eternal punishment— then, of necessity, we face the uncomfortable dilemma of explaining how a "brother" who was once saved might lose his eternal salvation so that he needs conversion and salvation again. An understanding that James is thinking in terms of time, not eternity, however, removes the possibility of an interpretive dilemma.

Am I simply playing verbal gymnastics by insisting that context must govern the meaning of a particular verse? No. The habit of seeking

the particular nuance of these important terms is exactly what Paul means when he exhorts Timothy to "rightly divide the word of truth".

## A 'Primitive Baptist' Grid?

In the discussions referenced above, the complaint was raised that I tend to interpret the Bible through a preconceived 'Primitive Baptist' grid. My friends mean that it appears to them that I take a distinctively Primitive Baptist mindset— a way of thinking that distinguishes between 'sonship' and 'discipleship', or between that which has eternal consequence and that which has only temporal ramifications— and impose it on the text. Well, I admit that I do believe that making such distinctions are both valid and essential to accurate Biblical interpretation (I'll present a case for my conviction momentarily). But I insist that this practice of making such fine distinctions is not a grid for interpretation imposed on the text from without, but ***a grid that arises from the text itself***. Let me illustrate.

One of the primary topics of our recent discussion is Paul's doctrine of "Justification by Faith" in Romans and Galatians. My friends argue, consistent with Calvin's view of "Saving Faith", that it is "through our faith in Christ [that] the righteousness of Christ is credited to our eternal bank account". By "our faith in Christ", they mean our act of believing in Jesus Christ through the gospel. This position, then, makes evangelical or gospel faith necessary to eternal salvation. I argue, however, that the context of the discussion *prohibits* an "eternal" interpretation. Consider this compelling fact.

When Paul discusses the subject of Justification by Faith in Romans and Galatians, he does so through the grid of the Abrahamic, ***not the Everlasting***, Covenant. Of all the covenants in Scripture, only two are ancient enough to take into consideration the "eternal" destiny of all men -- the Adamic (made with the "First" man shortly after his creation) and the Everlasting (made with the "Second" Man, before the foundation of the world). The Abrahamic Covenant was not inaugurated until *circa* 2000 A.M. If it has eternal consequence, then those who lived during the 2000 years previous to its inauguration could not have been included; consequently, they are either abandoned to eternal destruction or saved by a different method.<sup>5</sup>

The Abrahamic Covenant, together with the Noahic, Davidic, and Mosaic -- i.e. all covenants made with men in time -- "reveal" aspects

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, this dilemma is the catalyst for the soteriological discontinuity of dispensationalism.

and features of these two "eternal" Covenants (that is, the Adamic & Redemptive), but do not "determine" destiny. It is significant to note the different grids Paul employs in Romans 4 and Romans 5. When he discusses the objective FACT of redemption, he does so in terms of these two "eternal" Covenants (see Romans 5:12-20 where he states that the first Adam "made [men] sinners" [the Adamic Covenant], but the second Man, the Lord Jesus Christ "made [men] righteous" [the Covenant of Redemption]). But when he discusses the REVELATION of redemption and the believer's subjective and experiential awareness of this fact, he does so in terms of the Abrahamic Covenant.

How does it all fit together. Paul teaches that all of the elect have been "made" righteous by Christ's imputed righteousness at the cross (Rom. 3:24). Furthermore, God "declares" those Christ has "made" righteous to be righteous in the gospel (Rom. 1:17). Still further, those who believe that gospel give evidence that they are righteous, for faith is counted for righteousness.

The failure to understand Paul's use of the concept of "covenant" as the hermeneutical grid in Romans inevitably leads to the fallacy of making man's cognitive understanding and acceptance of the gospel the cause of his eternal salvation. I cannot accept such a view, for reality is never determined by perception. I am not a philosophical existentialist. Just as Jesus did not *become* the Son of God when He was "*declared to be* the Son of God with power" in the resurrection (Rom. 1:4), neither is the believer's faith in Christ *conditional to, but evidential of*, eternal salvation.

This is not a 'Primitive Baptist' grid, then, at all. It is rather a paradigm for interpretation that has basis in the text itself. Primitive Baptists, recognizing the logical contradictions of the view that makes man's faith both the *cause* and the *effect* of his salvation, insist on this distinction between eternity and time because the Scripture itself presents both the objective and the subjective dimensions of truth.

I proceed, then, to offer a rational and dispassionate defense of the premise that *there are blessings, deliverances, and comforts experienced by God's obedient children in this life that will be forfeited by their disobedience, and that these blessings and comforts arising from man's obedience have no eternal consequence, i.e. do not determine destiny as conditions of final salvation, but are evidences of a gracious state.* This is the classical view that Primitive Baptists have labeled "time salvation." I will attempt to establish the validity of this premise, first, by proposing various *arguments*; second, by cautioning against a couple of *abuses*; third, by offering several *answers* to potential questions; and finally, by making a few *applications*.

## Arguments

I believe that Scripture distinguishes between the *fact* of salvation and the *perception* of it. If the interpreter fails to recognize that Bible writers weave a constant vein of experiential application into the texts, he will inevitably confuse the *subjective awareness* of what Christ has done with the *objective fact*— the *knowledge* of salvation with the *reality* of it. The shortcomings of the label of "time salvation" notwithstanding, this is the reason Primitive Baptists insist on maintaining the concept. I will now cite seven apologetic arguments for the validity of this concept of "temporal salvation".

### 1. ***This concept is consistent with the numerous Biblical references that speak of this "present" life and the benefits to be enjoyed by God's people "now".***

- A. *Psalm 73:24-25: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel [present], and afterward receive me to glory [future]. Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none on earth that I desire beside thee."* In this passage, Asaph focuses not only on the life to come, but on the present benefits of God's word and present joys of God's presence.
- B. *Galatians 1:4: "Who gave himself for us that he might deliver us from this present evil world."* It is significant that Paul begins his defense against legalism by emphasizing the concept of a temporal salvation— i.e. a deliverance from this present evil world. Inevitably, the view that denies this concept repeats the Galatian heresy of turning the gospel of grace into the law.
- C. *Acts 2:40: "And with many other words did he testify and exhort saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation."* Peter did not call his hearers to save themselves from eternal punishment, but from the perversions of the world. They could indeed "save themselves", in this temporal sense, by obeying the gospel call.
- D. *1 Peter 3:21: "The like figure whereunto baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ."* In language that would be difficult to misunderstand, Peter says that there is a "now salvation" in baptism. He qualifies the kind of "saving" in the parenthetical clause "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh", that is, baptism does not remove indwelling sin, "but the answer of a good conscience toward

God”, that is, baptism delivers a burdened subject by giving an existential sense of peace and assurance.

- E. *Galatians 2:20*: “... and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me”. Paul’s present life was a life of faith. Note his focus is on the “now-ness” of his existence.
- F. *1 Peter 4:17*: “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” Peter’s point, in context, is that the time for judgment is now for the righteous– the whole of this present life is a time of suffering and being purified. Whereas the wicked will escape judgment until their day of reckoning, the people of God are chastened with frequent afflictions in this life (see also Luke 16:25; Is. 10:12; Jer. 25:29).
- G. To this agree the words of Romans 8:18 in which Paul speaks of “the sufferings of this present time” in contrast to “the glory that shall be revealed”, Hebrews 12:11 in which the writer speaks of a “present chastening”, 1 Peter 1:6 in which the saints are said to be “in heaviness now, for a season” though they anticipate their eternal inheritance at the Savior’s return, and 1 Peter 1:8 in which they continue to live by faith though Christ is unseen now.
- H. Jesus teaches that now is the time of absence (Jno. 13:36) and the time of sorrow (Jno. 16:22). Paul teaches that now is the time of mitigation but then shall be a time of fruition: “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now we know in part, but then shall we know even also as we are known” (1 Cor. 13:13).
- I. *Hebrews 2:8*: “For in that He hath put all in subjection under him; he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.” The writer clearly distinguishes between the objective fact of Christ’s mediatorial authority and our subjective awareness of that fact. Now, that is, in this present world, it is not yet visibly apparent that He is Lord of all.
- J. *2 Peter 3:18b*: “... to whom be glory both now and forever... ”. Peter is concerned about the glory of Christ in both this world and the next.
- K. *1 Timothy 4:8*: “... but godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” Notice Paul’s carefulness to highlight both the present and the future dimensions of our existence. Notice also that he employs

the present participle “having”, a word that means “possessing”. His point is clear. The person whose aim in life is devotion toward God (i.e. godliness) possesses God’s gracious promise of blessing now, and gives evidence of God’s promise of eternal blessedness later.

- L. *2 Corinthians 1:10*: “Who hath delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver, and in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us.” Paul expresses his confidence in the God who had delivered him in the past, and who would deliver him in the future, as the God who does deliver in the present.

The preponderance of Biblical evidence cited above is so thoroughly compelling that it seems to me that the individual who denies the concept of a timely deliverance for the believer is arguing against the obvious and wresting the clear and apparent sense of Holy Scripture.

## 2. ***This concept reconciles the tension of contrary Biblical principles and promotes consistency in Biblical interpretation.***

Consider the fact that the Bible speaks of both ***unilateral (i.e. one-sided) and bilateral (i.e. two-sided) covenants***. Can it be possible that both types of covenants have eternal consequence? Absolutely not. How can eternal salvation both depend *totally* on God and depend *partially* on man at the same time? Either salvation is of the Lord or it is a cooperative work between God and the sinner, but it cannot be both.

Further, the Bible employs both ***unconditional and conditional language***. In one text we are told that salvation is “ordered in all things and sure”; in another that a person is saved “if [he] keeps in memory what was preached” (2 Sam. 23:5; 1 Cor. 15:2). How can the same object be both unconditional and conditional simultaneously? How can it both depend on man and not depend on man at the same time? Obviously, the only legitimate way of interpreting these kinds of apparently contrary ideas is to understand that not every “salvation” verse is talking about salvation in the ultimate sense.

The denial of the concept of a “salvation” with timely consequences and an attempt to interpret every Scripture in the light of “eternal” salvation produces inevitable contradictions. The story is told, for instance, that C. H. Spurgeon claimed that the gates of heaven will read on the front side, “Whosoever will, let him come” and on the back side, “For whom He did foreknow, them he also did predestinate...” Well, in all due respect to the memory of that pious man, I must admit that such

a statement trips my mental circuit breakers. I agree with the minister who replied: "It would take two people to believe what he believed."

Similarly, this penchant for framing every Bible reference in an eternal context (that is, as something that affects or determines final destiny) leads to logical absurdities like the assumption, "The Bible teaches that both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are involved in man's salvation." I recently heard a popular Bible teacher say, "Don't even try to understand it; just accept it." Again, I must admit that my brain cannot compute such a notion, and since I do not believe that the Eternal Logos is illogical, I cannot simply "accept it".

I agree that the Bible teaches both Divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but deny that both are involved in man's eternal salvation. The challenge facing the Biblical interpreter, I say again, is to reconcile the two contrary concepts by "rightly dividing the word of truth." Understanding the difference between "sonship" and "discipleship" provides the grid for consistency in Biblical interpretation.

Consider, for instance, that **God's children are "many"** (Jno. 14:2; Mt. 26:28; Heb. 9:28), but his **true followers on the narrow way of Christian discipleship are "few"** (Mt. 7:13-14). The only way to reconcile the tension between the two is to recognize a distinction between regeneration and gospel conversion. First Timothy 4:10 explicitly affirms the two categories, stating that Jesus is "the Savior of all men, especially those that believe". If all the saved will necessarily believe the true gospel, then why is Paul's distinction in the text even necessary?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I do believe that all who are regenerated will and do have faith, but deny that the "faith" -- that is, the believing response to God -- is *in all cases* "cognitive" or "informed" faith -- for cognitive faith necessarily depends on hearing the rational proclamation of the gospel; rather, I do not hesitate to affirm that it is, *in all cases*, below the level of consciousness -- Lazarus-like, the sinner responds believingly to Christ in response to His Divine fiat in regeneration, being made willing in the day of His power, believing according to the working of His mighty power, and coming to Christ in "vital" relationship (Ps. 110:3; Eph. 2:8; Eph. 1:19; Jno. 6:37, 44). Cognitive faith is indeed present in *some*, but the gift of faith is present in *all* of God's children; hence, I concur that no one goes to heaven without faith, but deny that no one goes to heaven without rational knowledge of the truth. A teaching does indeed take place in the new birth, for God teaches the heart directly and immediately to know Him (Jno. 6:65). Cognitive faith, however, must necessarily come after this initial work of grace in the soul, for it depends on the instrumentality of the preached word. Obviously, if such cognitive (or evangelical) faith is necessary to eternal salvation, then every infant who dies in infancy and every individual without average mental capacities would miss salvation. But my position -- i.e. the position that defines "saving faith" (if I *must* use the term) as that faith that is given to the soul in the work of regeneration -- is adequate to include every potential case in which a person is in need of salvation. By the same token, I do believe that the ultimate *evidence* that a person possesses salvation is an evangelical faith in the Lord Jesus Christ -- a faith that expresses itself in voluntary obedience to Christ. Where such faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is present, a person gives indisputable evidence of salvation.

It is critical to proper Biblical interpretation to recognize the difference between **monergism** and **synergism**. Salvation for heaven is clearly *monergistic* -- i.e. the work of One. It is a work of free and sovereign grace from start to finish. Man is the passive beneficiary, not the active participant, of God's gift of life. The Christian life, however, is clearly *synergistic* -- i.e. the work of more than one. "We are laborers together with God" says the apostle. He exhorts the Philippians to "work out [their] own salvation... for it is God that worketh in you..." (Phi. 2:12-13). Christian discipleship is a partnership -- a team effort in which God works and man works. Eternal salvation, on the contrary, is a solo flight in which God alone is active.

If a person once abandons the legitimacy of making such distinctions, how can he consistently subscribe to salvation by grace alone? Such is the slippery slope that results from the hermeneutical bias that attempts to always interpret the verb "to save" in objective terms, and refuses to consider that there is such a thing as an experimental application of the concept in the New Testament.

Does Scripture, in fact, apply truth experientially? Yes, indeed. Consider, for instance, the publican in Luke 18 -- a passage in which the Lord Jesus, Himself, defined the doctrine of "justification by faith".<sup>7</sup> Did the publican go to the temple to pray in a state of spiritual death and return a regenerate man? No, he went a burdened sinner who needed assurance, and he went home "justified by faith", that is, with peace in his conscience that God had propitiated and pardoned his sins by His free and amazing grace (Lk. 18:9-14). Indeed, the very purpose of the gospel is to deliver such burdened souls from the pain of a guilty conscience. Like Bunyan's pilgrim, the believer experiences relief and blessed assurance when, by faith, he looks to the cross and the burden falls from his back. Try to tell such a person that there is no present salvation in the gospel message and he will know at once that you are a stranger to true Christian experience.

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<sup>7</sup> The passage begins with the question, "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find *faith* on the earth" and ends with the affirmation, "This man went down to his house *justified* rather than the other." It is significant that in the only place the Lord Jesus Christ personally spoke of "justification by faith", he framed the doctrine in experiential, not eternal terms. Justification by faith concerns the assurance of, not the application of, redemption. It is a "blessedness" (that is, a blessed or happy frame) that comes on believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews (Rom. 4:6-9). The cross was "the work of righteousness" which made "peace"; the report of the cross [i.e. the gospel] brings "the effect of righteousness, [which is] quietness and assurance forever" (Is. 33:17-18).

### 3. ***This concept agrees with God's chief end in creating the universe.***<sup>8</sup>

God does everything (whether in creation, providence, redemption, or judgment) with a supreme self-regard to the glory of His own name (Pro. 16:4). In fact, the glory of God was the motivation for the first of all His decrees – the decision to create the universe. Revelation 4:11 says, “... for Thy pleasure, they are and were created.”

Glory is a composite attribute of God. J. I. Packer defines “the glory of God’ as God in self-display. In His decision to create, God purposed to make a theatre in which He might display His glory, that is, all of His attributes, to the end that He might be glorified by His creatures. *I argue that God's purpose to be glorified in the realm of time precedes (so far as man can attribute sequence to an Eternal Being who transcends chronology) even His purpose to redeem fallen sinners.* Allow me to explain.

The order or sequence of the Divine decrees is the subject under consideration when theologians discuss *supra-* vs. *infra-lapsarianism*. These big words simply answer the question, “Which decree came first – Redemption or the Fall of Man?” The *supra-lapsarian* position says that God first decreed to redeem sinners and in order to set the stage for redemption, He decreed the Fall. This view, the classic position of Reformed Theology, is known as “double predestination” or the doctrine of reprobation. I reject it simply because it makes God the author of sin and His eternal decree, rather than man’s wicked works, the cause of final condemnation.<sup>9</sup> The *infra-lapsarian* position says that God first decreed to permit (not cause) the Fall of man and foreseeing man’s fallenness, decreed the remedy of redemption. Romans 9:22-23 supports the *infra-lapsarian* position, for Paul employs the passive indicative when he speaks of the plight of the wicked– “the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction”<sup>10</sup>– but the active indicative when speaking of the privilege of the righteous– “which He had afore prepared unto glory”.

I’ve digressed just a bit in order to frame a powerful point. Romans 9:22-23 indicates that God’s motive in dealing with both the wicked and

His elect is the display of His attributes. His goal, says Paul, is to “make known” (or reveal) His wrath, power, and the riches of His glory. Why does He seek to display His Divine attributes? So that He might be glorified for who He is.

But redemption was necessary because the entrance of sin marred God’s original intent to be glorified in creation: “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Even before God determined to redeem fallen sinners for His own glory, in other words, He had determined to create the universe for His own glory. *In a word, the realm of time was made not for the purpose of determining destiny, but for the glory of God.* My point is simply that the realm of time is not an afterthought; rather, it is integral to God’s passion for His own glory.

Foreseeing the way that sin would sabotage His purpose to be glorified in the world He had made, God formulated a plan by which He would be glorified both in this world and the next. He would not only redeem a people for His name, but would also reveal redemption so that He might be worshiped and praised right now.

Breaking this down into its respective parts, the logic of the argument goes like this:

- A. First, God determined to make a world for His glory (Rev. 4:11)
- B. Second, foreseeing sin’s entrance into that world, God made a covenant in which He determined to save a portion of fallen humanity *for His glory* (Eph. 1:4-6)
- C. Third, God actually created the world and *revealed Himself generally in nature* (Ps. 19:1ff).
- D. Fourth, Adam sinned and the consequences of rebellion permeated creation so that man glorified Him not as God (Rom. 1:18ff).
- E. Fifth, God took Abraham from idolatry and “created” a nation who would be *dedicated to His glory* (Is. 43:1, 7, 15, 21). To Abraham and the Jewish people, God *revealed himself specially* so that they might worship and serve Him in the earth.
- F. Through Abraham, further, God promised to send the Redeemer, Abraham’s seed, through whom God’s eternal purpose would be executed, *insuring His glory for all eternity*.
- G. Through Jesus Christ, further, the Father’s eternal purpose was revealed to “all nations” *for God’s glory in the church through all ages*. He “manifested [the Father’s] name to the men given to him out of the world”.
- H. Now, following in the steps of that same faith of our father Abraham, believer’s hear God’s special revelation in the gospel and worship and serve the true God in the New Covenant. This is the message of

<sup>8</sup> This is a technical, but, I believe, very compelling argument. I am basically arguing that God’s interests are not restricted to the next world alone, but also to this world.

<sup>9</sup> There are really only three basic views regarding the condemnation of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous. The “free-will” view says that both condemnation and salvation is man’s choice. The “*supra-lapsarian*” view says that both condemnation and salvation is God’s choice. The “*infra-lapsarian*” view says that condemnation is man’s choice but salvation is God’s choice. I opt for the third position. The wicked will be judged on the basis of their works, but the righteous will be saved on the basis of God’s grace.

<sup>10</sup> Note that he simply states that they are “fitted to destruction”. Paul does not say that “God” fitted them to destruction. When speaking of the righteous, however, he plainly says that “God” prepared them to glory before the foundation of the world.

Romans— namely, that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed so that the just may live, right now (cf. Gal. 2:20 – “the life I now live in the flesh...”) by faith.

In a word, God’s purpose in creating— whether a world, a nation, or the new creation— is to reveal Himself as glorious so that He might, in turn, be glorified. That goal— that He might be glorified— is achieved not only in redemption but also in the revelation of His wonderful works to men in time. All mankind exists for Him right now. The view that rejects an emphasis on the realm of time, inevitably minimizes God’s concern for His own glory in the world. The view that makes the present life conditional to one’s future happiness likewise threatens God’s glory by mistaking the law for the gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ has purchased a family who will praise Him by and by. That is a fact. You and I fulfill the purpose of our existence when we praise and honor Him right now, for the glory of God is the chief end of man. How thankful we should be that God has not only accomplished redemption for us but has also “abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence having made known unto us the mystery of His will” (Eph. 1:7-8). This leads to the next argument...

#### **4. This concept promotes a high view of the church in the Divine economy.**

Primitive Baptists have historically maintained a high and robust ecclesiology (or doctrine of the church). In fact, some would say “too high”, but I disagree. The growing popularity of dispensationalism with its inherent tendency to belittle the importance of “the Church Age” has exercised a negative influence, in my opinion, on contemporary attitudes toward the church.

The church was not an afterthought in God’s program— a spare tire to be used until the kingdom could be established. Rather, it was God’s plan from the beginning to call out (*ekklesia*) a people for His name (Acts 15:13-18). When God initially made covenant with Abraham, he indicated that the benefits of that covenant would be international in scope, not restricted to the Jewish people – “... in thee and in thy seed shall *all the families* of the earth be blessed”.

In language that must have sounded very strange to the Jews, the prophet Isaiah anticipates the day when “the Gentiles [would] come to [the Jews] light” and “the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee” (Is. 60:3, 5; see also 9:1-2; 11:10; 49:6, 22-23; 42:1,4,6; 56:6-8; 62:2; 65:1 [cf. Rom. 9:25-33; 10:20]). Now, Paul says, the “blessing of Abraham has come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ” (Gal. 3:14) and they have received

“the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14; cf. Mt. 8:11-12; Acts 2:38-41). The New Testament teaches, then, that, instead of the popular notion that the church is peripheral to Israel in God’s plan, the church is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are the true “circumcision who worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phi. 3:3). To the church, Peter applied the language of God to Old Testament Israel: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Those who walk according to the rule of the new creature are “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). Those who “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” are identified as the remnant of the “woman’s seed” (Rev. 12:17).

It is no wonder, then, that Paul concludes Ephesians 3— a chapter devoted to defining God’s grace in giving gospel privileges to the Gentiles— with the benediction, “Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 3:21). The Lord Jesus Christ established His church for the very purpose that God would be glorified in the theater of this present world.

No, the church is not cosmetic in God’s plan. It is God’s “building project” in the earth for His own praise and honor in human history (1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:19-22).

#### **5. This concept is a corollary to the truth that believer’s experience timely judgments for disobedience, though they are never in danger of eternal judgment.**

A good question to ask those who dismiss as invalid the concept of a temporal salvation is: “Do you believe that the child of God ever incurs judgments in this life— judgments that do not have eternal consequence?” Even the most superficial and cursory reading of the Bible indicates “the Lord shall judge His people” (Heb. 10:30; Ps. 50:4-15).<sup>11</sup>

If, then, there are timely judgments for our disobedience, does it not seem reasonable that the “flip-side” is also true— namely, that there are timely deliverances promised to the obedient? Isaiah 1:18 puts it

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<sup>11</sup> It is significant to note the difference in Psalm 50 between God’s judgment of “his people” (vs. 1-15) and His judgment of “the wicked” (vs. 16-22). To “His people” he says, “I will not reprove thee” (v. 8a), meaning, “I will not enter into a covenant lawsuit against you”. But to “the wicked” he says, “I will reprove thee” (v. 21b). The judgment of God’s people, in contrast to His judgment on the wicked, is not a judgment of eternal consequence.



succinctly: “If ye be willing and obedient ye shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword.”

Of course, the child of God is never in danger of eternal judgment, for Jesus Christ has already been judged in his place: “If His children forsake my laws and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. **Nevertheless** my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from Him nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips” (Ps. 89:30-34; cf. 1 Jno. 4:17-18). The believer has no cause to fear God’s judicial gavel, for he incurs judgments in relation to God as Father, not as Judge. The Father’s timely judgments toward His children are corrective chastisements, not punitive judgments.

Even so, God’s rewards and blessings in obedience have temporal, not eternal, ramifications. Jesus said, “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me [that is, in a manifest sense]; and he that loveth me shall be loved by my Father [again, in a manifest sense, as he proceeds to explain], and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him” (Jno. 14:21). God promises to those who separate themselves from the world that He will “be a Father unto them and they shall be [His] sons and daughters” (2 Cor. 6:17-18). Again, He means that He will manifest Himself to them as a Father, not that their sonship (or relationship to God) is conditioned on their obedience.

#### **6. *This concept provides a framework for understanding the constant vein of application in the epistles***

Bible writers never proclaim truth abstractly. A constant vein of practical application pervades their letters. They are never content simply to state that something is true. Rather, they relentlessly bring truth to bear on the lives of their readers, forcing them to ask the question, “What does this mean to me at this point in my personal history? How does this truth challenge my thinking? What changes are in order?” The eternal truths of God’s word, in other words, are intended to exercise a transforming influence on the believer’s life right now.

Consider, for instance, Paul’s tactic in Romans 8— a “rhapsody”, as Charles Hodge called it, “of Christian assurance”. The theme of Romans 8 is “Divine Sovereignty”. Paul insists that God is both sovereign over sin (i.e. His sovereign grace) and over suffering (i.e. His sovereign providence). Throughout the chapter, he affirms the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Then, he applies these great

truths to his readers: “What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth...” etc. These truths, Paul argues, are intended to be used to foster assurance in the hearts of believers right now. Even though the fact of Christ’s death, love, and justifying grace have secured for us eternal happiness, the revelation of these truths is meant for the present comfort of God’s suffering children.

The New Testament contains extensive material concerning the believer’s daily life and behavior. There are lengthy passages concerning subjects like marriage, child training, the role of government, sexual purity, interpersonal relationships, spiritual gifts, godly attitudes, and Christian ethics. Are we to conclude that these practical instructions determine eternal life, or are they intended as temporal directives for godly living in this world? Obviously, God has given His people a book that is sufficient for “life and godliness” even now.

#### **7. *This concept provides a context for interpreting the exhortatory and evangelistic notes in the Christian gospel without contradicting the message of salvation by grace alone.***

The charge is frequently raised, “If the gospel is intended for the temporal benefit of God’s children, instead of as the instrument of their eternal salvation, then such a view necessarily discourages evangelism and exhortations to repentance.” In fact, many are perplexed that someone who believes as I do would even be concerned about preaching the gospel.<sup>12</sup> But far from destroying zeal for evangelism, I insist that an understanding that the gospel does indeed exercise a “saving power” (Rom. 1:16) in the life of the believer provides the only context in which true evangelism may occur.

The Bible contains numerous exhortations. “Come out from among them and be ye separate” is a call to repentance (2 Cor. 6:16). “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” is a call to faith (Acts 16:31). “Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts” is an exhortation to respond to God’s word.

Indeed, exhortatory preaching is not only appropriate, but indigenous to the nature of the gospel. I long to see people repent of their sins and turn to Christ, confessing that their trust is in His merit alone. I have a burning passion to make “disciples”, to baptize them in the name

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<sup>12</sup> One man wrote, “If you don’t really think that God uses your ministry for any eternal purpose, then you probably won’t be very passionate about ministry. I certainly doubt that you will have the strength to persevere in the face of severe persecution.”

of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, then to disciple the disciples in the life of the church– “... teaching [lit. discipling] them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you... ” (Mt. 28:19-20). I do indeed yearn to see Christ’s cause and kingdom expanded and His little “sheep” brought into the gospel fold. I desire to be used by God to “open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith” in Christ Jesus (Acts 26:18). And I do, in fact, feel a responsibility to call upon men to “repent and believe the gospel”.

But I understand that the gospel call is a *call to service*, not a call to life. Man’s will is involved in the gospel call– “Today, *if you will hear* His voice... ” – but God’s will is determinative in the effectual call– “The dead *shall hear* the voice of the Son of God... ” Only God’s Divine fiat gives life, but the gospel informs the mind and shines the light of revelation on the life that God has given (2 Tim. 1:9-10).

Those who respond to the gospel call give evidence of eternal life– “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 Jno. 5:1; cf. 1 Ths. 1:4). They also find, through that gospel, a delivering power for their present experience. Because the truth has made me free, I am constrained by gratitude for His grace to attempt to bring its liberating influence to others and to call upon them to bow the knee of submission to Christ as Lord.

Does this gospel, in fact, save the believer now? If you doubt it, attend a funeral service some time. I’ve watched families march into the chapel hopeless and grief-stricken. They wondered if there was any reason yet to live. Then, as the minister proceeded to proclaim the good news– that Christ had voluntarily divested Himself of His Divine prerogatives, assumed human nature, and subjected Himself to the most ignominious kind of death imaginable - the death of the cross; that He bore the sins and sorrows of all His people to the cross and died in their place, as the sinner’s Substitute, satisfying God’s justice and fulfilling God’s holy law for them; that He rose victoriously from death and lives, never to die again; that at this moment He lives as our Great High Priest, making intercession for us; that He has promised His perpetual presence to His children and His sufficient grace for all their trials; that he can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord; and that one happy day, He will return to gather the entire redeemed family to Himself in a world that knows no sorrow or sad ‘farewell’– I’ve watched as light returned to their eyes and hope to their hearts. The new spring in their step as they

exited the sad place bespoke a new reason to live. Because He lives, they can face tomorrow. Indeed, the gospel saves the believer now.

## Abuses

A legitimate criticism of this view of a temporal “salvation” is that it is vulnerable to excesses and extremes in Biblical interpretation. I agree with the critique and proceed to highlight two particular areas of abuse by way of warning.

### **1. *This concept is vulnerable to antinomianism.***

The term “antinomian” means “against law”. As a theological label, the word is less than flattering. The charge that someone is an “antinomian” means that he/she believes that grace is a license to sin and that there are no restraints or restrictions on a person’s freedom in Christ.

The opposite of an “antinomian” is a “legalist”, another less than flattering label. The “legalist” believes that a life of law-keeping is the condition of final salvation. He/she imposes many restrictions and restraints to the gospel lest freedom lead to sin.

Historically, Christian people have found it no small feat to navigate the narrow path of discipleship without falling into the ditch of antinomianism, on the one side, and legalism, on the other. When people accuse those who believe in a temporal salvation of promoting antinomianism, though, it is usually because of a disproportionate emphasis on “the disobedient child of God.”

Now, is it possible that a child of God may be disobedient to God? Well, both Holy Scripture and personal experience answer “yes.” The Holy Spirit tells us that Lot was a “righteous” man (2 Pet. 2:9), but one would never know it by reading his Old Testament narrative. The portrait that emerges in Genesis is of a compromiser who chose the best land for himself, flirted with the wicked city of Sodom, offered his own daughters to the men of that city in order to protect his guests, and seemed to his children as one that mocked (i.e. a hypocrite). Had the Holy Spirit not specifically said that Lot was a “just” man, most people would have judged him to be wicked.

We must be careful, though, lest we make cases like Lot’s the rule. I am reasonably certain that the Holy Spirit put his case in the Bible to remind us that we are not the final arbiters of whether or not someone is “saved”. Cases like his are meant to remind us of how amazing is the grace of God and of how wrong we are to sit around and try to

determine who's saved and who isn't.<sup>13</sup> The Lord knoweth them that are his.

I do not believe that cases like Lot or the Rich Young Ruler supercede the preponderance of Biblical evidence regarding the radical change that takes place when a person is born again. Scripture teaches that regeneration changes a person. When God writes his law in the heart, a transformation occurs in the life (2 Cor. 5:17; Phi. 1:6).

How should we define the change that occurs? I believe it is primarily an ethical (or behavioral) change. Romans 7 describes the internal warfare between the "flesh" and the "spirit"— a conflict that occurs at the emotive, not necessarily the intellectual, level. Paul felt these two competing "laws" vying for attention to govern his behavior.

Romans 2:14-15 further defines the fruit of regeneration in terms of ethical godliness: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing them witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or excusing one another." Notice that the conduct of these people was governed, not by an external word that they heard with their ears and processed through their minds, but an internal principle written in the heart.

In my book titled *Basic Bible Doctrines*, I state that the "regenerate person will continue in *some* degree of faith and holiness for the Lord continues his work in the soul" (Phi. 2:13). I footnoted the word "some" and explained further:

"Notice that I emphasize the word 'some.' The degree of faith and holiness is arguable. But the alternative— i.e. that they will continue in *no* degree of faith and holiness— is, in my opinion, unthinkable. I tend to define the issue in ethical and moral terms, not necessarily in terms of doctrinal orthodoxy."

I am as concerned as some of my brethren at the creeping antinomianism that has plagued our people. But I must admit that I am also concerned at the subtle danger that legalism poses to God's wonderful grace. I cannot survive long in an environment in which people are constantly judging my salvation by the degree of sanctification I manifest. Painful personal experience has made me gunshy of those who would judge my liberty by their conscience. Nevertheless, let us be careful that we handle Scripture with integrity

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<sup>13</sup> When I encounter someone who is stuck in the mode of judging other people's salvation, I tend to think, "I'm just glad that he/she doesn't have the final word concerning my case."

lest we repeat the old "hollow log" distortion that a person may be born again and show no sign of it. That is certainly not true.

## 2. *This concept is vulnerable to universalism, or the "no-hell" heresy.*

Closely tied to the previous abuse is the false notion that everything is limited to this temporal world. Unfortunately, some brethren over the years have so distorted the concept of a temporal application of truth that they have utterly rejected the doctrines of a final bodily resurrection, last judgment, and the eternal punishment of the wicked.

To apply all "judgment" passages to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is interpretively (well) mistaken (if not downright dishonest). If hell is the grave, then the Rich Man in Luke 16 was buried alive, for "in hell he lifted up his eyes and saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom". The resurrection is not past already, nor is every rotten sinner just a disobedient child of God

Yes, sadly, these excesses rally from time to time within the circles of those who understand that it is appropriate to interpret some passages in temporal, as opposed to eternal, terms. Indeed, this view is susceptible to abuse. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. But so is every doctrine subject to abuse. *The abuse of a principle is not necessarily a valid reason for its rejection.* I fear that some who once professed this view but now reject it are simply reacting in the extreme to these abuses. Others are embarrassed, I think, by the relative absence of this emphasis in traditional "Calvinistic" literature and circles of influence. Whatever the motive, the disregard of this distinction between sonship and discipleship will necessarily produce a doctrine of salvation that confounds evidences and conditions and makes man's cognitive understanding of the gospel a vital link in the chain of his eternal salvation.

## Answers

One of the questions I am asked when I insist on the validity of this concept is, "If this is true and it is appropriate to interpret Scripture in the consideration that the gospel is for believers now, where is the historical precedent for your view? Why don't any of the Confessions of faith support your view?"

I will try to answer in a couple of ways. First, I think it is possible that the need to make these fine distinctions arose as the "Christian" community became increasingly splintered and variant views were proliferated. Controversy tends to refine theological precision.

Secondly, I think it is also possible that literary documentation of this position is scarce because the majority of Christian literature from

antiquity comes from the institutionalized church. In his excellent chapter entitled “Pastoral Ministry in History”,<sup>14</sup> Professor James Stitzinger writes, “Many church historians have dismissed as heretics those churches that opposed the institutionalized church— a campaign often called ‘The Free Church Movement’. Though some of these groups struggled with doctrinal purity, a closer look reveals that the heretical label in most cases was primarily due to their un-willingness to be loyal to the received tradition of the fathers, not to significant doctrinal weakness. *A thorough investigation of these independents is difficult, because, for the most part, only the works of those who wrote against them have survived...* Such groups include the Montanists (ca. A.D. 156), Novatians (ca. A.D. 250), and Donatists (ca. A.D. 311).” [emphasis mine]

Later, Stitzinger editorializes: “Much true biblical ministry in recent years occurs in smaller denominations or churches that have continued the Free Church tradition. *The nature of such ministry is obscure and often difficult to identify because of a lack of adequate documentation.*”<sup>15</sup> [emphasis mine].

What about the credal or confessional statements to which Primitive Baptists have subscribed? Why do they all tend to favor the Reformed doctrine of *sola fide*? In his well-documented and compellingly researched book titled *Welsh Succession of Primitive Baptist Faith and Practice*, Elder Michael Ivey frames the context in which Baptist confessions were drafted. The Fulton Confession of 1900 is taken verbatim (with explanatory footnotes) from the Philadelphia Confession of 1742. The Philadelphia was drafted from the London Confession of 1689. The 1689 London Confession was drafted almost verbatim from the Westminster Confession of Presbyterians. Ivey presents a cogent case for the fact that the London brethren sought religious toleration from a body politic that favored Presbyterianism, and drafted a document that was virtually identical to the Westminster for the sake of religious expediency.<sup>16</sup> This certainly explains why the Fulton Confession of Primitive Baptists conveys the tone of the Magisterial Reformation, instead of the more accepted Baptist tone of the Welsh Midland Confession of 1655.

Personally speaking, I could not categorically endorse any uninspired document as the authority over my faith. All uninspired documents, even the Confessions with which I substantially agree, are

prone to error. Hence, it is my conviction that credal statements must be subordinate to the right of private judgment concerning the meaning of Scripture in matters of faith and life. The role of confessional documents, in other words, is primarily an apologetic, not a judicatory, role.

My interpretation of “justification by faith” in experiential, as opposed to eternal, terms does find some support in George Ella’s helpful biography on *John Gill*.<sup>17</sup> Though he was called a “hyper-calvinist” and an “antinomian”, Gill battled the ‘duty-faith’<sup>18</sup> idea the bulk of his ministry. Ella quotes Gill:

“Those places of scripture which speak of justification by or through faith, do not militate against, nor disprove justification before faith... For if there was no justification before faith, there can be none by it, *without making faith the cause or condition of it.*”<sup>19</sup> [emphasis mine]

And again:

“Faith is the *sense, perception, and evidence* of our justification...”<sup>20</sup> [emphasis mine]

And again:

“I assert that there is no *knowledge* of justification, no *comfort* from it, nor any *claim of interest* in it, until a man believes... no man is *evidently and declaratively* justified until he believes.”<sup>21</sup> [emphasis mine]

These statements are very similar to my conviction that justification by faith is concerned with the believer’s own experience of grace, something primarily subjective and existential.<sup>22</sup> Ella also quotes from John Bunyan’s book *The Pharisee and the Publican*:

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<sup>17</sup> I hesitated to include this point because just as soon as I name someone in support of my position, any who might take issue with my views may find two quotes by the same man for the alternate position. Nevertheless, I include the quotes in order to suggest that some do get it right every once in awhile. ⚡

<sup>18</sup> Ella writes, “A Hyper-Calvinist, Gill’s critics say, does not believe that God calls indiscriminately all who hear about Christ to believe in him. They say this because they believe that man is obliged as a matter of duty to trust in Christ as a condition of salvation, or, as they put it, to trust savingly in Christ... This idea of saving faith... reached its fullest expression in 1785 with the publication of Andrew Fuller’s notorious book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.” The debate engendered by the book, Ella writes, “tore Baptist churches apart”.

<sup>19</sup> George Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth*, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 167-8.

<sup>22</sup> “ In *Gleanings of Primitive Baptist Writings (Volume I)*, Elder Robert Green writes about experimental religion and what I believe the Bible means when it talks about “justification by faith”. As you read, consider the experience he describes in the light of the Publican who went down to his house justified: “When a man is born again, he is given eyes to see spiritual truth, which he did not have before. The truth that is closest to him, even in his very heart, is his wretched sinfulness. If that man then comes under the sound of faithful,

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<sup>14</sup> *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, John MacArthur, ed., p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the London brethren were dishonest. No doubt, they agreed substantially with the content of the Westminster, but the question still remains why they did not compose their own but virtually copied the Presbyterian document.

“A man may be justified before God, even when himself knoweth nothing thereof (Is. 40:2; Mt. 9:2), and so when, and while he hath not Faith about it, but is ungodly.”

Ella adds, “Bunyan distinguishes between being justified in the divine decree, which he calls ‘justification before God’... and ‘Justification to the Understanding and Conscience’, referring to the approbation of faith... In fact this was the established view of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival marred only by the denial of this teaching by Baxter at its beginning and Fuller’s metaphorical reinterpretation toward its end.”<sup>23</sup> [emphasis mine] Again, this is basically the distinction I make between the legal fact of Christ’s imputed righteousness and the personal appropriation of that fact in the believer’s conscience— between, that is to say, the reality and the perception of reality.

Finally, in answer to the question of historical precedent for my convictions, I refer the reader to the late Elder Charles H. Waters sermons, edited by R. H. Pittman. In a message entitled “Believers Justified Through Christ” preached in May 1915, Dr. Waters quotes Acts 13:39 and says, “It does not say all who will believe, will get to be justified by their belief... But “all that believe ARE justified”... Your believing is evidence to you.”<sup>24</sup>

The “Appendix” to Dr. Waters book contains his testimony at the trial concerning the legal ownership of the church property in Luray, Virginia. The litigation arose as a result of a doctrinal dispute necessitated by the influence of a preacher named Mr. Ed Burnam. Burnam insisted that God uses means in the eternal salvation of sinners, claiming that his position was the original position of the church. Dr. Waters was called to testify as a contestant to Burnam’s claim. What follows are brief excerpts from his testimony:

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powerful gospel preaching, declaring the holiness and justice of God, the inevitable effect is a feeling of condemnation. Now assuming that this feeling of condemnation comes powerfully to the conscience of the awakened sinner, with the accompanying feeling of horror and desperation, the logical next step is that the man will begin scrambling to find some way—any way—to remedy the situation, and until Grace is revealed to him, the only thing he knows to do is to sew fig leaves—to resort to his own efforts. If he is under severe condemnation of soul, it cannot be assumed that he will just sit casually as he perceives hell looming under him. Since the feeling of condemnation is so strong, the effort at self-justification will likewise be determined. There is no justification by the works of the law, however, and in time the sinner discovers that the fig leaves will not hide him from the wrath of God, and finds his case is now hopeless. Despair sets in. He has tried everything, resorted to his very best efforts, only to avail nothing. Then, when Christ is finally revealed to his heart, it is not difficult to imagine what a time of rejoicing and heavenly relief is then experienced! This...[is] called [an] experience of grace...” (p. 25).

<sup>23</sup> Ella, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> *A Book of Sermons*, p. 128.

Q. Upon what grounds did that division [i.e. Baptist division of 1832] take place?

A. *Upon the ground of practicing conditionalism where thy pretend to hold unconditional salvation...*

Q. Was there any subsequent division in the Old School Baptist church?

A. *As there was a large number who went off upon these Arminian doctrines in the beginning, so there was, at intervals along during the history of the Baptists, individuals who would arise, not being satisfied with the teachings of the Old Baptists, and repeat history... in their desire for progress in the direction of humanly devised means and instrumentalities, to increase, what they term, salvation of the people.*

Q. Do you know whether in this section of Virginia there was such a division?

A. *There were men among us who were held in restraint and did not give an outbreak, did not separate themselves from us and were not cut off, but were tolerated along until there came an influx from the West, principally headed by Ed Burnam, who insisted on the very same propositions of progress and getting the Old Baptists out of their ruts... and then when we had begged them, labored with them, to let these questions alone which were liable to make discord and disruption in the ranks, they refused to do it; and finally, they being in practice, identical with what was then known as the Missionary Baptists, we had to declare non-fellowship for them.*

Q. What [was] the faith and practice and doctrine of [the Mt. Carmel church in Luray] during the time you preached there?

A. *Their doctrine was that God used no means or instrumentalities whatever in the regeneration of the sinner...*

Q. Now on the other hand, what is the belief of Mr. Burnam and the people who follow his teachings?

A. *It is a matter of record that they have asked the question in print, “Can it be proven that any man was ever saved without hearing the gospel?” That is answer enough.*

Q. Doctor, Mr. Burnam has testified in this case that you denied that faith was necessary to salvation, and that your contention along that line was the starting of the anti-means party. Will you please state whether or not that is true, and whether or not you believe that one may be saved in heaven without faith in Christ?

A. *No man, woman or child has ever been saved or will be saved in heaven without being in the faith of God’s elect.*

Q. Did you ever state in written debate with Elder Burnam that one may be saved without faith in Christ?

*A. Elder Burnam took the position that believing was living spiritually; that is, that there is no distinction between a child of God being alive... and his believing in Jesus Christ as his saviour. I objected to that position. I contended that that would cut out all infants; it would cut out all idiots; that an individual might be quickened into spiritual life, as unquestionably John the Baptist was, in his mother's womb... So, in the sense of faith being simply belief, they were without believing in that sense of faith; but cannot be saved without being in the faith of God's children. And I want to further state that that is the position of the Old Baptists now, and has been, according to their history, in all generations.”<sup>25</sup>*

Though I would invariably express myself a bit differently concerning God's gift of faith to all of His people (see footnote 6), yet I unashamedly echo Dr. Water's conviction against the use of means in the eternal salvation of His children. Where Scripture describes the use of means or instrumentalities, it speaks in terms of living the Christian life (something temporal) and enjoying daily fellowship with the Lord, not in terms of eternal salvation.

## **Applications**

Is the idea of a temporal “salvation”, then, a bogus or a biblical concept? I insist that it is thoroughly Biblical. In fact, I admit to the need for God's deliverance in my own life every day.

I want to be saved from false teachers and wordly philosophy. I want to be saved from sexual temptation, marital infidelity, and moral impropriety. I need salvation every day from depression, fear, anxiety, discouragement, sinful anger, jealousy, pride, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, covetousness, and love for the world. I need God's daily deliverance lest I fall to Satan's deception and give him the advantage in my life. I want my marriage to be saved from divorce and my children to be saved from danger both on a physical and a moral level. I want to be saved from despair and suicide, cynicism and callousness, bitterness, resentment, and non-forgiveness. I need salvation from humanism, secularism, materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, pluralism, syncretism, and the wisdom of this world. I want deliverance from the fear of man and from a seared conscience. I want to be saved from every attitude, behavior, or erroneous belief that might jeopardize my home in the church and the fellowship of my brethren.

To those who cannot understand my confession of need for daily deliverance, I can only reply that it is evident that we speak a different

language. This is my experience and I believe it resonates with the teaching of God's word. The word of God and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ are the resources God has provided for such daily deliverances in the lives of His people. How thankful we should be that the God who secured our eternal felicity has not abandoned his children in this present evil world!

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 166-176.