

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

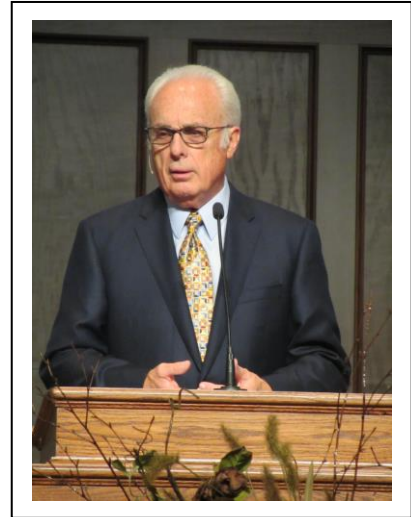
## Soteriology: The Doctrine of Salvation

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### Introduction to Soteriology

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In coming to the doctrine of soteriology, the student of Scripture arrives at the pinnacle of Christian theology, for the themes and topics addressed in the study of salvation run to the very heart of the gospel and to the center of redemptive history. As has been demonstrated in chapter 6, man has utterly failed in his charge to rule over creation as God's representative on earth. He has sinned against God in Adam's disobedience and fallen from the original state of blessed fellowship he experienced in the garden. As a result, all of Adam's descendants are conceived in sin, born enemies of God, and doomed to perish eternally in hell.



And yet God is a Savior who has acted in saving grace to redeem from sin and death those who would believe. His plan of redemption began in eternity past, as God the Father set his electing love on undeserving sinners, determining to rescue them from the fall and the deserved consequences of their disobedience. The Father carried out this plan by sending the Son to accomplish redemption for those he had chosen, and then by sending the Spirit to apply redemption to those he had chosen. Thus, while the Father's plan of redemption was discussed in chapter 3, this chapter follows a Trinitarian form by examining the Son's accomplishment and the Spirit's application of redemption, shedding light on the following doctrines: atonement, calling and regeneration, repentance and faith, union with Christ, justification, adoption, sanctification, the perseverance of the saints, and glorification.

### The Accomplishment of Redemption

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul tells us that the very heart of the gospel is "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). As has been demonstrated in chapter 6, man's depravity has established the *need* for salvation. And as has been observed in chapter 3, the Father's unconditional election has formed the *plan* of salvation. But it is the atonement of God the Son that *has accomplished* that redemption

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in space and time. The distinctive teaching of biblical Christianity is that God himself has made full atonement for sinners—and he accomplished this by the substitutionary sacrifice of his own Son on the cross, apart from any contribution from sinners. If we are going to be fundamentally committed to the gospel, we must devote ourselves to an accurate, robust, biblical understanding of the atonement.

## THE PLAN OF SALVATION AND THE MISSION OF THE SON

2

In chapter 3, we examined the biblical teaching concerning the Father's plan of redemption—his intention to rescue his creatures from sin and death and to restore them to a right relationship with himself. The triune God devised an eternal plan in which man's salvation would be accomplished by the Son, and in which the benefits secured by the Son's redemptive work would be applied by the Holy Spirit. The second member of the Trinity would be born by the Holy Spirit as the God-man (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35), live a life of perfect obedience to the Father in the power of the Spirit (Matt. 3:15; Rom. 5:18–19), lay down his life as a sacrifice for the sins of his people (John 10:14–15; Hebrews 9–10; Rev. 5:9), and rise again as the firstfruits and guarantee of their resurrection (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:22–23, 42–57). It is essential to understand that the Son's redemptive mission is birthed out of this Trinitarian plan of salvation. The atonement he accomplished is inextricably rooted in the Father's purpose to save his chosen. Christ was not haphazardly embarking on a mission of his own devising (John 6:38) but was acting in strict accordance with the specific plan devised in the eternal councils of the Trinity.

Several passages of Scripture testify to this pretemporal, determinate plan of salvation. In the first place, many passages identify the Son's atoning work as divinely predetermined (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; Eph. 3:11; cf. 1:9, 11; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:20). In addition, the mission of the Son is often spoken of as a matter of obedience to the Father's will, indicating both that the Father had made his will known to the Son in a prior agreement and that Jesus was acting consistently with this prior directive from his Father (John 10:18; 17:4–5; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:7). Third, we see the reality of this agreement in the Father's promise to reward the Son once he completed his work (Ps. 2:7–8; Isa. 53:10–12; cf. Phil. 2:9–11). Finally, perhaps the most significant aspect of the eternal plan of salvation is that the Father gives specific individuals to the Son on whose behalf he is to accomplish redemption. That is to say, the Father commissions the Son to be the representative and substitutionary sacrifice for a particular people—namely, all and only those whom the Father has chosen for salvation. Several comments from Jesus in the Gospel of John bear this out, as he speaks of accomplishing salvation for the people whom the Father has given him (John 6:37–40; 10:14–15, 29; 17:1–3, 6, 9, 24). This eternal, intra-Trinitarian plan of salvation shapes and conditions every aspect of the Son's mission as

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he undertakes to accomplish redemption. The atonement accomplishes the eternal purpose of the triune God.

## THE CAUSE OF THE ATONEMENT

The triune God's motivation for devising this plan of redemption is twofold. In the first place, the love of God is the cause of the atonement. Some misunderstand the atonement as a loving Son overcoming an angry and wrathful Father, conceiving of the Father's love as the consequence rather than the cause of the atonement. But the Father does not love his people strictly on the grounds that Jesus died for them; rather, Jesus died for God's people because the Father loved them (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9–10). In other words, the plan of redemption is born out of the good pleasure of the Father's free and sovereign electing love (Eph. 1:4–5, 9). It is because the Lord "set his love on ... and chose" his people (Deut. 7:7) that he has decreed to accomplish their redemption by the atoning work of Christ.

In addition to his love, God's justice also is a cause of Christ's atonement. Once the triune God had decreed in his love to reconcile to himself those he had chosen, it was necessary that he decree to accomplish this in a way that was consistent with his justice. For God to reconcile guilty sinners to himself, sin must be punished, the broken law must be satisfied, and God's wrath must be justly assuaged. All these objectives are met in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law (Matt. 3:15; Rom. 5:18–19; Gal. 4:4–5), paid sin's penalty (1 Pet. 2:24), and extinguished God's wrath (Heb. 2:17) on behalf of the elect. As Paul says, the Father put the Son forward "as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness" (Rom. 3:25 NKJV). Sin is not overlooked but is punished in Christ, and therefore God "show[s] his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

## THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

Scripture employs several themes to describe what Christ accomplished on the cross. The work of Christ was a work of substitutionary sacrifice, in which the Savior bore the penalty of sin in the place of sinners (1 Pet. 2:24); it is a work of propitiation, in which God's wrath against sin is fully satisfied and exhausted in the person of our substitute (Rom. 3:25); it is a work of reconciliation, in which the alienation between man and God is overcome and peace is made (Col. 1:20, 22); it is a work of redemption, in which those enslaved to sin are ransomed by the price of the Lamb's precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18–19); and it is a work of conquest, in which sin, death, and Satan are defeated by the power of

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NKJV New King James Version

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a victorious Savior (Heb. 2:14–15). Each of these themes is worthy of study and will be the subject of this section’s discussion.

## *The Obedience of Christ*

However, there is a unifying principle in Scripture that encompasses the many facets of Christ’s atonement: obedience. There are three senses in which obedience encapsulates the whole of the substitutionary work of Christ. First, Scripture characterizes Christ’s work as obedience to the divine plan of salvation, as discussed above (John 6:38; cf. 12:49; John 10:17–18; 14:31; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:7, 9).

Second, such obedience was necessary for Christ to be a suitable substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. In the Old Testament, if the penalty for sinners was to be executed on a substitute, that substitute was required to be without any spot or defect (Ex. 12:5; Lev. 22:20–21; cf. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 22:18–25). The same principle extends to Christ’s atoning sacrifice, he who is our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. Isa. 53:7; John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18–19; Rev. 5:12) and the fulfillment of the Levitical sacrifices (Heb. 9:23). For Christ to have been a fitting substitute to bear the punishment for sin in the place of sinners, he himself had to be sinless—holy, innocent, undefiled, and separate from sinners (Heb. 7:26). For this reason, Scripture links the life of Christ, in which “he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8), with his fitness to become “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9; cf. 2:18; 4:15).

Finally, it was necessary for Christ to be obedient to the law of God in order to provide the righteousness that is the ground of justification. God’s law consisted of two key aspects: prescriptive commands that required full obedience, and penal sanctions for the breaking of those commands. Sinful man has fallen short of both, and so Christ had to remedy both. On the cross, he “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23)—that is, by bearing God’s wrath in our place. But he also lived a life of perfect obedience to provide the righteousness that is credited to us through faith (Rom. 4:3–5; Phil. 3:9). For this reason, Paul contrasts the first Adam with Christ, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:22, 45), saying, “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19; cf. Gal. 4:4–5). Adam’s sin provides an actual, lived-out record of human disobedience, which, counted to be ours through our union with him, becomes the basis on which God justly constitutes all people guilty (Rom. 5:12). In the same way, Christ’s vicarious obedience provides the actual, lived-out record of human righteousness, which, counted to be ours through our union with him, becomes the basis on which God justly constitutes guilty sinners righteous (1 Cor. 1:30; cf. Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor.

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5:21). This means the Lord Jesus Christ did more than just die for our sins; he also lived to fulfill our righteousness (Matt. 3:15).<sup>1</sup>

## *Penal Substitution*

Beyond the general heading of obedience to the Father, the most fundamental description one can ascribe to the atonement is that it is a work of penal substitution. That is to say, on the cross, Jesus suffered the penalty for the sins of his people (*penal*) as a substitute for them (*substitution*). Man's depravity leaves him unable to pay the penalty for his sin. However, God in his love has appointed the Lord Jesus Christ to stand in the place of sinners to bear their sin, guilt, and punishment and thereby satisfy God's wrath on their behalf.

For this reason, Isaiah characterizes the suffering servant as the one who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4), who "bore the sin of many" (Isa. 53:12). "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6), and so "he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11). Thus, when Jesus comes into the world, John the Baptist announces him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)—that is, by taking sin on himself. The apostle Paul declares that "for our sake [the Father] made [Jesus] to be sin" (2 Cor. 5:21a) in the same sense that he makes us to become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21b): by imputation—that is, by counting our guilt to be his. The curse of the law that we were under was borne by Christ, who became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). The apostle Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." Then, quoting Isaiah's account of the suffering servant, he adds, "By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Heb. 9:28). The Lord Jesus Christ bore the punishment of the sins of his people and thereby brought them blessing: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace" (Isa. 53:5).

In addition to these clear statements, the New Testament attaches the concept of penal substitution to the cross of Christ by using four Greek prepositions that all have a substitutionary force: *peri* ("for," 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 4:10); *dia* ("because of," "for the sake of," 2 Cor. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11); *anti* ("in place of," "instead of," Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45); and *hyper* ("on behalf of," Luke 22:19–20; John 10:11, 15; Rom. 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:14; Heb. 2:9).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on what is traditionally called the active obedience of Christ, see "The Ground of Justification: Imputed Righteousness" (p. 328, below). For a fuller treatment, see John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, gen. eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 520–22, 614–18.



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Penal-substitutionary atonement is woven into the fabric of new covenant revelation from beginning to end, because it is the very heart of the gospel message. In free and willing obedience to his Father, the Lord Jesus Christ has stood in the stead of sinners, has died as a sacrifice for their sin and guilt, has propitiated the Father's wrath toward them, has reconciled them to the God for whom they were created, has redeemed them out of the bondage of sin and death, and has conquered the rule of sin and Satan in their lives. Each of those themes—sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, redemption, and conquest—is a different facet of Christ's substitutionary work and deserves further examination.

**Sacrifice.** Drawing from the Old Testament's prescriptions for sacrificial worship to God, the New Testament explicitly identifies the death of Christ as a sacrifice for sins, the fulfillment of the Passover (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. Exodus 12) and the Levitical sacrifices (Heb. 9:23, 26; cf. Leviticus 16). The Passover meal was the setting of Jesus's Last Supper with his disciples, wherein he instituted the new covenant, declaring that his body would be broken and his blood poured out for them (Matt. 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–20). In this way he declared that his death would be the fulfillment of the feast of the Passover, the lamb slain as a substitutionary sacrifice for the redemption of his people (John 1:29; cf. 1:36; 1 Pet. 1:18–19). Just as the blood of the slain lamb protected Israel from the execution of God's judgment, so also the blood of the slain Lamb, Jesus, protects his people from the Father's wrath against their sin.

Similarly, just as the high priest entered beyond the veil into the Most Holy Place, so also Christ is the Great High Priest (cf. Heb. 3:1; 4:15; 7:26; 8:1) who has entered beyond the veil of the heavenly tabernacle (his own flesh, Heb. 10:20), into the very presence of God. And while the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificial goat on the mercy seat to make atonement, the Lord Jesus sprinkled his own blood (Heb. 9:21–22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2), and inasmuch as his blood is infinitely more valuable than that of goats and calves, he thus secured an eternal redemption. He is therefore the fulfillment of both the high priest and the sacrifice; he is both offerer and offering, for he "offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb. 9:14; cf. Eph. 5:2; Heb. 7:27; 9:23, 26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14). Further, he is also the fulfillment of the mercy seat, where the blood was sprinkled and wrath was averted (Rom. 3:25). Finally, Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the scapegoat as well, the one on whom all our iniquity is laid (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). As the midday sun was shrouded in darkness, the Father was, as it were, laying his hands on the head of the Son and confessing over him the sins of his people, and banishing him from his presence (Heb. 13:12; cf. Matt. 27:46). "Outside the camp," away from the presence of the Lord and of his people, was where the sacrifices were to be disposed of (Lev. 4:12, 21; 6:11; 8:17; 9:11; 16:27; cf. Heb. 13:11). It was that lonely place where the leper was isolated to bear his shame (Lev. 13:46) and where the blasphemer was to be stoned (Lev. 24:14, 23). It was

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to that place of shame and isolation that the Son of God was banished so that we might be welcomed into the holy presence of God.

**Propitiation.** By receiving the full exercise of the Father’s wrath against the sins of his people, Christ satisfied God’s righteous anger against sin and thus turned away his wrath from us who, had it not been for our substitute, were bound to suffer it for ourselves. This is what the New Testament identifies as propitiation (Rom. 3:24–25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Some, however, have argued that “propitiation” is the wrong translation for this particular Greek term (*hilasmos, hilaskomai*). Rather than a sacrifice that turns away God’s wrath, they have argued that it speaks of expiation, the cancellation or removal of sin. But there is clear biblical justification for reading *hilaskomai* as a wrath-averting sacrifice.

The Greek *hilaskomai* word group also translates the Hebrew term *kaphar*, which often means to satisfy the wrath of God. Three passages illustrate this clearly. First, when Israel committed its first act of brazen idolatry with the golden calf, God responded in wrath (Ex. 32:10). The next day, however, Moses sought to turn away God’s wrath from the people: “perhaps I can make atonement for [Heb. *kaphar*; Gk. *exilaskomai* (Septuagint)] your sin” (Ex. 32:30). Second, when the people had committed sexual immorality with Moabite women and had begun worshiping the gods of Moab, the Lord again responded in wrath (Num. 25:3), manifested in a plague (Num. 25:8–9). Phinehas, one of the priests, was so incensed by such brazen rebellion that he killed the idolaters with a spear, with the result that the plague was checked (Num. 25:7–8). The Lord praised Phinehas for his righteous indignation, saying, “Phinehas ... has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel... he was jealous for his God and *made atonement for* [Heb. *kaphar*; Gk. *exilaskomai* (Septuagint)] the people of Israel” (Num. 25:11–13). Once again, propitiation is synonymous with making atonement. Third, in response to the people’s mutiny against Moses and Aaron, the Lord’s wrath was kindled against Israel, again in the form of a plague (Num. 16:45, 48–49). Moses told Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for [Heb. *kaphar*; Gk. *exilaskomai* (Septuagint)] them, for *wrath* has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun” (Num. 16:46). Aaron did as Moses said: “And he put on the incense and made atonement for [Heb. *kaphar*; Gk. *exilaskomai* (Septuagint)] the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped” (Num. 16:47–48). Once again, a clear parallelism emerges between making atonement and turning away God’s wrath against sin as exercised in the form of a plague.

Therefore, when the New Testament writers use the Greek *hilaskomai* word group—that is, the same word group used to translate the Hebrew *kaphar* in the Septuagint—it is reasonable to expect that it denotes propitiation just as it did in the Old Testament, especially given the contexts in which the term is used. For example, the first use of

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“propitiation” in the New Testament comes in Romans 3:25, after Paul has spent two chapters detailing how the wrath of God is kindled against the sin of all mankind (Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5). The thread of divine wrath has been so woven through this opening section of the letter that the reader almost expects to be confronted with how God will provide for its abatement. We see precisely that in Romans 3:21–26: God has put forward his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, “as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:25). God has satisfied his wrath against sin by the sprinkling of the blood of the spotless Lamb on the mercy seat of the heavenly altar (Heb. 9:11–15, 23–24). He has punished the sins of his people in a substitute, and thus his wrath has been turned away from them.

The significance of propitiation, then, is that it identifies Christ’s work as a wrath-bearing sacrifice. Sin may not merely be overlooked but must be punished, whether in the sinner in hell or in Christ the substitute on the cross. All the wrath that God would have exercised on elect sinners in the eternal torments of hell was poured out fully on our substitute in those three terrible hours on Calvary. Because of this, there is no longer any wrath left for Christ’s people. God is propitious toward them, for their sin has been paid for.

**Reconciliation.** Man’s sin has not only incurred guilt and aroused the wrath of God but has also alienated man from God (e.g., Gen. 3:8, 22–24; Isa. 59:2). God has become man’s enemy (Rom. 5:10), and the mind of man is “hostile” toward God (Rom. 8:7). For this reason, Scripture also speaks of the atonement as a work of reconciliation, whereby the ground of the enmity between God and men—namely, the guilt of sin and the punishment of God’s wrath—is removed and dealt with, thus accomplishing peace (Rom. 5:10–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–19; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20–22).

Several characteristics of the doctrine of reconciliation emerge from these texts. First, reconciliation is a work of God, accomplished in the person of Christ through the efficacy of his blood (2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:20). Man does not effect this reconciliation by doing something to remove God’s hostility toward his sin. Rather, sinners passively receive reconciliation as a gift through the work of Christ (Rom. 5:11). Second, Scripture presents reconciliation as a finished work accomplished by Christ’s sacrifice. Each of the above passages indicates that reconciliation occurred in the past through the once-for-all death of Christ. Third, reconciliation is fundamentally forensic. This is demonstrated by the parallelism in Romans 5, where the phrase “we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” is parallel to “we have now been justified by his blood” in the immediately preceding verse (Rom. 5:9–10). Since justification is forensic and is parallel with

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)



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reconciliation, it is likely that reconciliation also ought to be understood in forensic terms. Paul removes all doubt in 2 Corinthians 5:19 when he explicitly identifies the work of reconciliation as God's "not counting [the world's] trespasses against them." "Counting" comes from the Greek word *logizomai*, the New Testament's most common term for "imputation" (e.g., Rom. 4:1–25). By imputing our sins to Christ our scapegoat, by exercising his wrath on him as our substitute, and by imputing Christ's righteousness to us (2 Cor. 5:21), God has removed the ground of his enmity against us, namely, the guilt of sin. As propitiation is the removal of God's wrath against sinners, so reconciliation is the removal of God's enmity against sinners.

Because of Christ's atonement, sinners once separated from God may be restored to loving fellowship with him whom they were created to know and worship: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18).

**Redemption.** Christ's atonement is also characterized as redemption, that by which man is redeemed from the bondage of sin and the law through the payment of Christ's shed blood as a ransom.

When an Israelite had become so poor that he had to sell himself into slavery, God's law made provision for his family to redeem him out of slavery by paying a price (Lev. 25:47–55). In a similar way, sinners are in bondage to sin (Rom. 6:6), and Christ has redeemed them by the ransom price of his life (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; cf. 1 Tim. 2:6). For this reason, Paul can exhort believers to glorify God in their body, for "you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20; cf. 7:23). Believers have been "ransomed [NASB: "redeemed"] ... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:18–19). Here contrasted with silver and gold, the blood of Christ is explicitly identified as the price by which redemption is purchased. Thus, when the apostle John describes creatures in heaven worshiping the ascended Christ, he notes that they praise him for his atoning work (Rev. 5:9; cf. Acts 20:28). Christ's people—that is, those "who follow the Lamb wherever he goes"—are therefore called the "redeemed" (Rev. 14:3–4), the purchased ones, for they "have redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7; cf. Col. 1:14). Christ redeems sinners from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13; cf. 4:4–5), from the penalty and power of sin (Rom. 6:18, 22; Titus 2:14; Heb. 9:15), and eventually from the presence of sin (Rom. 8:23; cf. Luke 21:28; Eph. 4:30).

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., "for example")

NASB *New American Standard Bible*

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**Conquest.** In paying the penalty of sin and freeing his people from sin and death, Jesus also accomplished a victory of conquest over Satan and the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Since “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2), overcoming the penalty and power of sin in the lives of his people is to triumph over Satan (Matt. 12:29; cf. Luke 11:21–22). By his redemptive work on the cross, Christ dealt the decisive death blow to Satan and his kingdom of darkness, realizing—that is, inaugurating even if not yet consummating—the purpose for which he came into the world: “to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8; cf. John 12:31; 16:11). When he forgave us “all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands,” setting it aside by “nailing it to the cross,” he removed the ground of Satan’s accusations against us (Col. 2:13–14). Therefore, Paul writes, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col. 2:15). Through the paradoxical triumph of his death, Jesus “destroy[ed] the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver[ed] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:14–15). And on the third day, Jesus displayed his conquest over the power of sin and death by rising from the grave. It was impossible for him to be held in death’s clutches (Acts 2:24), for, having defeated death, “the keys of Death and Hades” belong to him (Rev. 1:17–18).

**Summary.** Such, then, is the character of the penal-substitutionary atonement of Christ. The guilt of our sin demanded the penalty of death, and so the Lamb of God was slain as an expiatory sacrifice on our behalf. The wrath of God was kindled against our sin, and so Christ was set forth as a propitiation to bear that wrath in our place. The pollution of our sin alienated us from God and aroused his holy enmity against us, and so by atoning for sin Christ has reconciled God to man. Obedient to sin, man was in bondage to sin through the law that exposed sin in our lives, and so Christ has paid the ransom price of his precious blood to God the Father in order to redeem us from such slavery. In doing so, he has plundered Satan’s house, conquering death and its captain by the exercise of his own power.

## THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE ATONEMENT<sup>2</sup>

If there is one description to be applied to the nature of Christ’s penal-substitutionary atonement, it is that it is a perfectly sufficient sacrifice. Several features establish its perfect sufficiency.

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<sup>2</sup> This section follows John Murray’s helpful presentation in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 51–58.

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In the first place, it is an objective atonement—a work accomplished independent of and apart from those who will eventually partake of its benefits. No cooperating work or response to grace adds to or energizes this ground of our salvation. To be sure, those who subjectively experience the benefits of the atonement must respond in repentance and faith, but such responses belong to the *application* of redemption—not its *accomplishment*—and are themselves purchased by the perfect work that Christ has wrought. “It is finished!” was the triumphant cry from the cross, not “It has begun.” As with the Father’s work of election, which depends “not of him who wills or runs” (Rom. 9:16 ESV mg.), and with the Spirit’s work of application, in which he blows where he wishes (John 3:8), so it is with the Son’s work of redemption. Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9), and therefore, it has been perfectly accomplished *by* him, two thousand years ago, external to those who will reap its divine blessings.

Second, the sufficiency of the atonement is established by its finality. It is a single, finished, unrepeatable work. The Roman Catholic Church teaches precisely the opposite, demeaning the sufficiency of Christ’s work by proposing to repeat his sacrifice in the ceremony of the Mass.<sup>3</sup> This is in explicit contrast with the consistent testimony of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 7:26–28; 9:11–12, 25–28; 10:10–14). These passages explicitly deny

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ESV English Standard Version

mg. marginal reading (in Scripture citations)

<sup>3</sup> “In the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacrifice of the Cross the Sacrificial Gift and the Primary Sacrificing Priest are identical; only the nature and the mode of the offering are different.... According to the Thomistic view, *in every Mass Christ also performs an actual immediate sacrificial activity*, which, however, must not be conceived as a totality of many successive acts but as one single uninterrupted sacrificial act of the Transfigured Christ. The purpose of this Sacrifice is the same in the Sacrifice of the Mass as in the Sacrifice of the Cross; primarily the glorification of God, secondarily *atonement*, thanksgiving, and appeal” (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch, 4th ed. [Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1974], 408, emphasis added). Just as striking is the following statement from Roman Catholic priest John O’Brien: “When the priest pronounces the tremendous words of consecration, he reaches up into the heavens, brings Christ down from His throne, and places Him upon our altar to be offered up again as the Victim for the sins of man.... While the Blessed Virgin was the human agency by which Christ became incarnate a single time, the priest brings Christ down from heaven, and renders Him present on our altar as the eternal Victim for the sins of man—not once but a thousand times! The priest speaks and lo! Christ, the eternal and omnipotent God, bows His head in humble obedience to the priest’s command” (*The Faith of Millions: The Credentials of the Catholic Religion*, rev. ed. [Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1974], 256).

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that Christ was to offer himself repeatedly (Heb. 9:25). To suggest such a thing is to impugn the character of Christ himself, for it was the weakness of the high priests that demanded their repeated offerings (Heb. 7:28). Yet there is no such weakness in our High Priest; he is the eternally perfect Son—holy, innocent, undefiled, and separate from sinners (Heb. 7:26). And inasmuch as the Son of God himself is intrinsically worthy, his was a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23; cf. 8:6), of such a character as to perfect—for all time—those for whom it was offered (Heb. 10:14). Can there be any greater violence done to these texts than to suggest that Christ’s sacrifice has to be repeated? Such perverse doctrine drains the cross of its very saving power, for “where there is forgiveness of these [sins], there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb. 10:18; cf. Rom. 6:10). If there remains an offering to be given, there has been no forgiveness of sins.

Finally, the sufficiency of the atonement is established by its efficacy. That is to say, by dying on the cross, Christ has *actually* saved his people. He came not to make salvation hypothetical, possible, or merely available but to actually “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). He came not to make men redeemable but to redeem them. He died not potentially but actually, and so he made not a provisional atonement but an actual one. As the Lord of glory prepared to yield up his spirit to the care of the Father, conscious that he had accomplished the work he came to do, he declared: “It is finished” (John 19:30). Redemption had been accomplished. Our High Priest had actually made purification for sins, and, his work completed, he sat down (Heb. 1:3). The Good Shepherd had actually taken away the sins of his sheep (1 John 3:5) by bearing them in his own body (1 Pet. 2:24). He had actually extinguished the full exercise of the Father’s wrath (Rom. 3:25), having actually become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) and thus exhaustively paying the full penalty for our sins. In so doing, he actually purchased the redemption of his people by the ransom price of his own blood (Acts 20:28; Rev. 5:9). Each of these passages is a statement of efficacious accomplishment. To artificially insert the concept of provisionality or potentiality into any of those texts is to force one’s theology on the plain meaning of Scripture.

In fact, this element of efficacy has been inherent in the biblical conception of atonement from its beginning in the Levitical law (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 12:8; 14:20, 53; 19:22). When the priest made atonement, he actually atoned, and that atonement brought about its intended effect of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the same Greek

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this is not to say that sins were forgiven other than through the atonement of Christ, for all the old covenant sacrifices looked forward to and derived their efficacy from Christ’s final sacrifice (Rom. 3:24–26; Heb. 9:11–10:18). Nevertheless, on the basis of the work of Christ, God graciously allowed himself to be temporarily propitiated by the sacrifices he prescribed to Israel.

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word group (*hilaskomai, hilasmos, hilastērion*) that was used to translate *kaphar* in the Septuagint appears in the New Testament to describe the atoning work of Messiah, the reader naturally understands that same efficacy to inhere in the concept of Christ's atonement. Jesus's death did not make sins forgivable; it accomplished forgiveness. His atonement was not hypothetical, potential, or provisional; it was an efficacious atonement.<sup>5</sup>

## THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

Having understood the glorious nature of Christ's atoning work, it is now necessary to answer the question of its extent. For whom did Christ die? On whose behalf did Christ offer himself as a penal-substitutionary sacrifice? For whom did he propitiate the wrath of his Father? Whom did Christ reconcile to God and redeem out of slavery to sin and Satan?

The answers given to this vital question typically fall into two general categories. The universalist school of thought answers that Christ has paid for the sins of every person who has ever lived without exception. This is often called *general, unlimited, or universal atonement*.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, *particularists* teach that Christ died as a substitute for the elect alone—for only those particular individuals whom the Father chose in eternity past and gave to the Son. While this position has long been known as *limited atonement*—that

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<sup>5</sup> None of this is to suggest that the elect were justified or granted saving faith and repentance at the time of Christ's death in the first century. Nor is it to suggest that anyone is saved apart from faith. To assume so is to confuse the accomplishment of redemption with its application. Rather, to speak of definite atonement and accomplished salvation is to say that Christ has endured all the punishment of, paid the full penalty for, and satisfied the whole of God's wrath against the sins of his people. It is to say that he has done everything necessary to completely secure the salvation of those for whom he died—to render certain and definite the application of salvation's benefits to all those for whom Christ purchased them. It is, finally, to say that nothing can be added to Christ's work in order to invest it with power or efficacy but that because our substitute has actually borne the full penalty of sin's condemnation, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

<sup>6</sup> Though *universalist* is a common designation for those who believe that all people without exception will finally be saved, that is not how it is intended here. In the discussion of the extent of the atonement, the term refers to those who believe that the atonement has a universal extent—i.e., that Christ died for all without exception—even though not all without exception will be saved. This includes Arminians, Amyraldians, and hypothetical universalists.



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Christ's atonement is limited to the elect—many proponents have found such a label to be easily misunderstood and have preferred *definite atonement* or *particular redemption*. Throughout the discussion of soteriology in the present volume, particular redemption has been affirmed. In this section it will be defended from Scripture.

In undertaking this discussion, we must understand the precise question under consideration. Asking the question, For whom did Christ die?, is not asking, To whom should the gospel be preached? Both particularists and universalists readily acknowledge that the gospel ought to be proclaimed to all people without exception; Christ genuinely offers himself as Savior to anyone who would turn from his or her sins and trust in him for righteousness. Neither is it to ask, For the forgiveness of whose sins is Christ's work sufficient? Both sides agree that, had God chosen to save more sinners than he actually has, Christ would not have had to suffer any more than he did in order to save them. Nor is the question, Who will finally be saved? Both particularists and universalists stipulate that the benefits of Christ's salvation will be applied only to those who repent and believe in him. Thus, both particularists and universalists can subscribe to the popular dictum that the atonement is "sufficient for all, yet efficient for only the elect." This is also not a dispute over whether any nonsaving benefits resulting from the atonement accrue to the nonelect. If God had not intended to save sinners through Christ's atonement, it is likely that he would have immediately visited justice on sinful man as he did on the fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4). Yet because God intended to save his people through Christ in the fullness of time, even those whom he will not ultimately save will have enjoyed the benefits of common grace, divine forbearance, and a temporary reprieve from divine judgment. Therefore, to avoid unnecessary confusion and contention, it ought to be acknowledged that one's position on the extent of the atonement does not necessarily affect one's answer to these other questions. Instead, the question is, In whose place did Christ stand as a substitutionary sacrifice when he bore the full fury of his Father's righteous wrath against sin? The answer is, only those who will never bear that wrath themselves, namely, the elect alone.

Another reason this discussion often leads to frustration relates to methodology. Too often, universalists cite a number of proof texts containing the words "all" or "world" and consider the matter closed, declaring the particularist interpretation a violation of the "plain reading" of the text. Yet such an approach fails to take into account the context of these isolated texts along with the rest of the teaching of Scripture and thus demonstrates that what is often claimed to be the "plain reading" is nothing more than a superficial reading.

Numerous passages of Scripture contain universalistic language while they do not speak of every individual without exception. For example, Romans 5:18 says, "Therefore, as one

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trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.” The so-called “plain reading” of this text would seem to require that the two phrases “all men” be interpreted identically in both halves of the verse. Such a position, however, leads either to affirming the doctrine of universal salvation or to denying the doctrine of original sin. All without exception are condemned in Adam (Rom. 5:12), yet not all indiscriminately receive justification and life (Matt. 7:13, 22–23; Rev. 21:8). In Romans 5:12–21, Paul is contrasting Adam and Christ as the two representative heads of humanity, which sheds light on his intent in 5:18. Just as Adam’s actions affect all those who are in him, so also Christ’s actions affect all those who are in him. Thus, considering the context can correct a superficial reading of an isolated passage of Scripture.

In other instances, universal language is simply a convention of common speech. When the Pharisees said of Jesus, “Look, the world has gone after him” (John 12:19), they did not mean that everyone alive on the earth at that time had begun to follow Christ. When Paul said, “All things are lawful for me” (1 Cor. 6:12; cf. 10:23), he did not mean that he was at liberty to do anything and everything without exception, for he acknowledged that he was not without law but was “under the law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). Therefore, the presence of universal language should not automatically be read to mean “all without exception.” Like anything else, universal language needs to be properly interpreted according to its context and in accordance with the entirety of biblical teaching.

Rather than volleying proof texts back and forth, it is essential to consider the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the *nature* of Christ’s mission to accomplish redemption. The Bible’s teaching on the nature of the atonement has significant bearing on the proper understanding of its extent. Several lines of scriptural evidence must be considered to support the particularist view of the atonement.

## *Trinitarian Particularism*

The beginning of this chapter set forth the biblical teaching concerning the divine plan of salvation and its relationship to the Son’s mission. It was demonstrated that the decision for the Son to take on human flesh and rescue sinners from death and judgment was made not unilaterally but in accordance with an agreed-upon Trinitarian plan. In perfect unity, the Father commissioned the Son to go in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to save sinners. The Father sent the Son for a specific purpose, to accomplish a particular mission (see John 4:34; cf. 6:38; 10:17–18; 17:4; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:7). Whatever the Son intended to accomplish on his saving mission, it was precisely that purpose for which the Father had sent him. There is a perfect unity of purpose and intention in the saving will of the Father and the saving will of the Son.

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However, the Father has not chosen everyone for salvation (Rom. 8:29–30, 33; 9:22–23; Eph. 1:4–5). If the Father’s election is particular and not universal, and if the Father and the Son are perfectly united in their saving will and purpose, it is impossible that the Son’s atonement should be universal and not particular.<sup>7</sup> Yet this is the unavoidable conclusion of those who deny particular redemption. Said another way, if the atonement is universal, then either election is also universal, or the Father and Son are at cross-purposes with one another. However, Scripture refutes both notions. The saving will of the Father is expressed in his particular election (that he has chosen some, not all, to be saved), and the Son has come to do the will of his Father who sent him.

What is that will? Jesus explicitly explained, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of *all that he has given me*, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39). There exists a group of chosen individuals whom the Father has given the Son, and it is on *their* behalf that he accomplishes his redemptive work. They are all those who will eventually come to him (6:37) and believe (John 6:40) because they have been effectually drawn by the Father (6:44, 55–65); they are the sheep for whom the Son lays down his life (10:14–15, 27) and to whom he gives eternal life (6:40; 10:28; 17:2). Christ says plainly, “Yours they were, [Father,] and you gave them to me” (17:6; cf. 17:9, 24), and he clearly distinguishes them from the rest of the world (17:9). These individuals who belonged to the Father before the foundation of the world can be none other than the elect whom he has chosen for salvation. It is therefore these, and these alone, whom the Father gives to the Son, and thus it is these, and these alone, for whom the Son accomplishes redemption.

Therefore, it is not surprising to read of the many ways in which Scripture identifies a *particular* people as the beneficiaries of Christ’s work on the cross. He has given his life as a ransom for *many* (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; cf. Isa. 53:12; Matt. 26:28), not for all. He is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his *sheep* (John 10:11–15), not for the goats who are not his (cf. John 10:26). He is the lover of the brethren who lays down his life for his *friends* (John 15:13). He is the great Redeemer, who with his own blood purchased the *church* of God (Acts 20:28). He is the bridegroom of the *church* (Rev. 19:7; cf. John 3:29), whom he loved and for whom he gave himself up (Eph. 5:25). He was delivered over for the *elect* (Rom. 8:32–33), for whom he continues to intercede (Rom. 8:34; cf. John 17:9).

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<sup>7</sup> As Robert L. Reymond writes, “It is unthinkable to believe that Christ would say: ‘I recognize, Father, that your election and your salvific intentions terminate upon only a portion of mankind, but because my love is more inclusive and expansive than yours, I am not satisfied to die only for those you have elected. I am going to die for everyone’ ” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010], 678).

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And he is the sanctifier of “a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).<sup>8</sup>

By virtue of their own unity of essence, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfectly united with respect to their saving will and purpose. Christ was sent by the authority of the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit to save no more and no fewer people than the Father chose and the Spirit regenerates (cf. Eph. 1:3–14). The Father has elected some, not all; the Spirit regenerates some, not all. To suggest that Christ has atoned for all, not some, is to put the persons of the Trinity entirely at odds with one another; it is to be forced to say that the will of the Son is not the will of the Father and the Spirit. This not only threatens the consubstantiality of the persons of the Trinity, but it flatly contradicts Christ’s own explicit statements that he had undertaken his saving mission precisely to do the will of his Father. As the Father has given to the Son a particular people out of the world, it is for these—his sheep, his own, the church—that Christ lays down his life. Unity in the Trinity demands a particular atonement.

## *Efficacious Atonement*

Perhaps the most common argument from those who hold to some form of an unlimited atonement is that Christ died for all without exception in a *provisional* sense. Christ died to *provide* salvation for all yet not to infallibly secure it for anyone in particular. He has died *potentially* for all, it is said, such that the potential exists for anyone to have the benefits of his sacrifice applied to him or her through repentance and faith. The key to the universalist’s argument is to cast Christ’s atonement as intrinsically ineffectual.

However, as argued above, the attribute of efficacy is inherent in and essential to the biblical concept of atonement. To review, Scripture teaches that Christ has actually—not potentially, provisionally, or hypothetically, but actually—accomplished the salvation of his people by virtue of his work on the cross. It is nearly tautologous to say that when

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<sup>8</sup> Some contend that even though Christ has died for his sheep, it does not follow that he did not also die for the goats. But there is evidence that these particularizing designations are necessarily exclusive. First, Paul identifies those for whom the Father gave up his Son as “God’s elect” (Rom. 8:32–33)—a category that necessarily excludes those not chosen. Second, since Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15), just moments before he declares to the Pharisees, “You are not among my sheep” (John 10:26), it is legitimate to infer that he did not lay down his life for those Pharisees. Third, Paul makes Christ’s sacrificial love for the church the pattern for the husband’s love for his wife (Eph. 5:25–27), and husbands ought to love their wives in a way that is special and different from the way they love all others. In these cases, emphasis on the elect does imply exclusion of the nonelect.

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Scripture states that our substitute “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24), it means he *actually*, not potentially, bore our sins in his body on the tree. When Scripture says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5), it would be exegetically monstrous to conclude that he was only potentially pierced or potentially crushed—that his chastisement brought only a potential peace or that his wounds brought only potential healing. That would be to artificially inject the concept of *potentiality* into texts that speak of efficacious, objective accomplishment. Rather, Christ was *actually* pierced, crushed, chastised, and wounded, and therefore he accomplished actual peace and actual healing. Scripture does not say, “By his wounds, you were made healable.” It does not say, “By his wounds, you were put into a state in which you *might* be healed if you fulfill certain conditions that activate the hypothetically universal scope of Christ’s wounds.”<sup>9</sup> The text simply says, “By his wounds you have been healed.” That is, Christ’s objective, substitutionary suffering and death actually accomplished the spiritual healing of those for whom he died—those who, because of the intrinsic worth and efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, “not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved.”<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament consistently portrays the efficacy of the atonement: Jesus actually expiated our sins (1 John 3:5), actually propitiated the Father’s wrath against us (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17–18), actually reconciled God to us (Col. 1:22), and actually purchased our redemption (Acts 20:28; Rev. 5:9). He came not to make salvation possible or to make men savable; he came to decisively save his people (Matt. 1:21). In his atoning work, Christ did not provide a hypothetical salvation but rather infallibly secured the salvation of those for whom he died by actually bearing their punishment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Borrowing language from Carl R. Trueman, “Definite Atonement View,” in *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: 3 Views*, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoberger (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Particular Redemption,” in *The New Park Street Pulpit* (London: Alabaster & Passmore, 1856), 4:135.

<sup>11</sup> J. I. Packer writes poignantly, “Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for his own chosen people. His precious blood really does ‘save us all’; the intended effects of his self-offering do in fact follow, just because the cross was what it was. Its saving power does not depend on faith being added *to* it; its saving power is such that faith flows *from* it. The cross *secured* the full salvation of all for whom Christ died” (“Saved by His Precious Blood: An Introduction to John Owen’s *The*



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Since, then, Christ's atonement is inherently efficacious, and since it is agreed that not all will finally be saved, the extent of the atonement must be limited. The only other option is to suggest that God demands the payment of sin's penalty first from Christ on the cross and then again from the unbelieving sinner in hell. But such double jeopardy is wholly inconsistent with the justice of God. If there is wrath left to pour out on the unbelieving sinner, then that wrath was not satisfied by the substitutionary work of Christ. If there is a penalty left for the sinner to pay in hell, then that penalty was not paid by Christ on the cross. That leaves only two options: either (1) Christ's sacrifice was impotent and ineffective, or (2) Christ's powerful and efficacious sacrifice was accomplished for a specific number of persons. Since the former is blasphemous and explicitly contrary to Scripture, we are constrained to embrace the latter. Because Christ actually satisfied all of the Father's wrath against the sins of those for whom he substituted, one cannot affirm a universal atonement while also denying universal salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, then, we find that both sides limit the atonement: the particularist limits its extent, while the universalist limits its efficacy. But an inefficacious atonement—aside from contradicting Scripture—fundamentally undermines the gospel itself, for an inefficacious atonement is no atonement at all. An atonement that is inefficacious is an atonement that does not atone.<sup>13</sup>

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*Death of Death in the Death of Christ,*” in J. I. Packer and Mark Dever et al., *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007], 123, emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Again, Packer argues, “If we are going to affirm penal substitution for all without exception we must either infer universal salvation or else, to evade this inference, deny the saving efficacy of the substitution for anyone; and if we are going to affirm penal substitution as an effective saving act of God, we must either infer universal salvation or else, to evade this inference, restrict the scope of the substitution, making it a substitution for some, not all” (“What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” in *In My Place Condemned He Stood*, 90–91).

<sup>13</sup> Therefore, we must conclude with Spurgeon that the universalist may keep his ineffectual atonement: “The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, ‘No, certainly not.’ We ask them the next question—Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer, ‘No.’ They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say, ‘No; Christ has died so that any man may be saved if’—and then follow certain conditions of salvation. We say, then, we will just go back to the old statement—Christ did not die so as beyond a doubt to secure the salvation of anybody, did He? You must say ‘No’; you are obliged to say so.... Now, who is it that

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## *The Unity of the High Priestly Work of Christ*

Borrowing the conceptual framework of the Old Testament sacrificial system, Scripture frequently speaks of Christ as the Great High Priest of his people (Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14–15; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:19–20; 8:1–6; 9:11–12, 25). Therefore, except for where the New Testament explicitly contrasts Christ’s priestly ministry with that of the Old Testament priests (e.g., Heb. 7:27), there is a basic continuity between them. The work of the Levitical priests thus sheds light on the extent of the atonement in the inseparable unity between the priest’s work of sacrifice and his work of intercession.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to slay one goat as a sacrifice for the sins of the people of Israel (Lev. 16:9). Yet the sacrificial death was not the end of the priest’s work. After slaying the goat, he was required to “bring its blood inside the veil” into the Most Holy Place, and “sprinkl[e] it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat” (Lev. 16:15; cf. 16:18–19). It is this twofold work—both the slaughter of the goat and the intercessory sprinkling of its blood—that accomplished atonement for Israel’s sins. This was the case not only for the Day of Atonement but also for all the sacrifices that required the death of animals. The priest was first to slay the animal and then to “offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar” (Lev. 1:5 NASB; cf. 1:11; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:6–7, 17–18, 25, 30, 34; 5:9; 7:2; 17:6).

The observation we must make from these rituals is that the scope of the priest’s sacrifice is identical to the scope of his intercession. The high priest never sacrifices the goat on behalf of everyone throughout the Gentile world and then sprinkles its blood only on behalf of Israel. No, the sacrifice and the intercession were two sides of the same atoning coin, both done on behalf of Israel alone.

The same principle applies to the unity of the twofold High Priestly ministry of Christ. The author of Hebrews depicts Christ as our Great High Priest who both offered himself as the perfect sacrifice and entered into the Most Holy Place to intercede for his people

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limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ’s death; we say, ‘No, my dear sir, it is you that do it.’ We say Christ so died that He infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it” (“Particular Redemption,” 4:135).

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

NASB *New American Standard Bible*

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(Heb. 9:24). In other words, Christ's sacrificial offering of himself is inextricably linked to his intercessory work on behalf of his people in the presence of God (Heb. 4:14–15; 7:25; 1 John 2:1). That is, Christ intercedes for everyone for whom he died, and he died for everyone for whom he intercedes (cf. Rom. 8:29–39, esp. vv. 32–34).

Therefore, the key question is, does Christ intercede before the Father on behalf of all people without exception or on behalf of the elect alone? Surely it is the latter. Is Christ praying to the Father for the salvation and blessing of the nonelect—a request that the Father, because he does not intend to save the nonelect, will refuse his Son? Are the persons of the Trinity so divided? Here again the doctrine of unlimited atonement would drive a wedge between the will of the Father and the will of the Son, which has disastrous implications for biblical Trinitarianism. Further, Christ himself answers this question in the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. Here the Great High Priest is interceding before the Father on behalf of those for whom he will soon offer himself as a sacrifice, and he explicitly says, “I am praying for *them*. I am *not* praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:9). Jesus offers his High Priestly intercession only to those whom the Father has given him (cf. John 6:37, 39, 44, 65; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 20, 24)—namely, the “elect” of Romans 8:33.

Since the priestly work of sacrifice and intercession are inextricably linked, and since it is unthinkable that Christ would refuse to intercede for those for whom he shed his precious blood, we must conclude that the extent of the atonement—like the extent of Christ's intercession—is limited to the elect.

## *The Argument of Romans 8:29–39*

In Romans 8:29–39, Paul speaks explicitly of the extent of the atonement in verse 32 when he says that the Father did not spare his Son but gave him up “for us all.” Who is the “us all” for whom Christ was given up to death? Paul answers this question in a number of ways. First, if we look for an antecedent to “for us all” (8:32), we find another “us” in verse 31, referring to those whom God is *for*. Continuing our search for an antecedent, we find that those whom God is *for* are those whom he foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (8:29–30). Moving forward, we learn that those for whom Christ was delivered over are those to whom God will graciously give all the saving benefits purchased by Christ's death, for “how will he not also with him graciously give us all things” (8:32)? Romans 8:33 then explicitly identifies these people as “God's elect” and those whom he justifies, and verse 34 identifies them as those for whom Christ intercedes.

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esp. especially

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Finally, those for whom Christ died are those who can never be separated from the love of Christ (vv. 35–39).

Several conclusions should be drawn from these observations. First, since the nonelect do not receive all the saving benefits of God’s grace as promised in Romans 8:32 (particularly being rescued from eternal punishment), they are not part of the “us all” for whom Christ was delivered over. Second, since Paul identifies the “us all” for whom Christ was delivered over to be “God’s elect” in 8:33, Christ was not delivered over for those who are nonelect. Third, since all for whom Christ was delivered over will also be the beneficiaries of his intercessory ministry at the Father’s right hand, and since Christ does not intercede on behalf of the nonelect, they are not included in the “us all” for whom Christ was delivered over. Fourth, since all for whom Christ was delivered over can never be separated from the love of Christ, and since the nonelect will in fact be separated from the love of Christ in eternal punishment, they are not included in the “us all” for whom Christ was delivered over. The extent of Christ’s atonement is once again shown to be necessarily limited to the elect.

## *Making Sense of Universalistic Texts*

The preceding positive arguments are sufficient to establish particular redemption as a biblical doctrine. However, the most common objection against limiting the extent of the atonement comes from several passages of Scripture that seem to explicitly contradict it by using universalistic language in relation to Christ’s death: “For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16); Christ Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for *all*” (1 Tim. 2:6); and so on. Therefore, in order for the case for particular redemption to stand, these universalistic texts must be explained in a way that (1) harmonizes with the precepts of particular redemption and (2) is consistent with contextual, grammatical-historical interpretation.

Three categories of texts are usually presented in response to the above argumentation for particular redemption. First are texts which speak of Christ dying for “all.” Second are texts which speak of Christ dying for “the world.” Third are texts which seem to indicate that Christ has died for those who will finally perish. The following section will address each of the three categories, giving a key example of each.<sup>14</sup>

**Christ Died for All.** First are texts which speak of Christ dying for “all.” Universalists often appeal to such texts and simply assert that “all” must always mean “all people without exception.” To be sure, there are instances where that is the case: all people

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<sup>14</sup> For a more extensive discussion that addresses more texts, see MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pp. 554–65.

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without exception “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23; yet even here there is one exception—the Lord Jesus Christ). But there are several passages of Scripture where “all” simply cannot mean “all without exception” (e.g., Matt. 10:22; John 18:20; Rom. 5:18; 11:32). Paul himself limits universalistic language when he comments on Psalm 8:6 in 1 Corinthians 15:27: “But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.” That is, in this case, “all things” does not mean “all things without exception.” Therefore, “all” is not a self-defining expression. While in some contexts it may legitimately be understood to speak of every person who has ever lived (i.e., all without exception), in other contexts it may legitimately be understood to speak of all kinds of people throughout the world (i.e., all without distinction). The determining factor of the proper sense of “all” is not one’s *a priori* assumptions but rather the context of the particular passage in which the word occurs. When those passages are subjected to the scrutiny of contextual exegesis, it becomes clear that none of them supports an unlimited atonement.

One of the most popular texts marshaled in support of an unlimited atonement is 1 Timothy 2:3–6, which speaks of “God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” This appears to many to teach a universal (all) atonement. However, this passage must be read in its context. When Paul wrote 1 Timothy, certain persons were teaching a “different doctrine” (1:3), “swerving” from sound teaching and wandering into “vain discussion” (1:6). These false teachers had ambitions to be “teachers of the law” (1:7), and their speculation regarding genealogies (1:4) and forbidding of marriage and certain foods (4:1–3) indicates that their false doctrine consisted of an exclusive Jewish elitism. Paul’s universalistic statements throughout the letter (cf. 1 Tim. 2:2, 4, 6; 4:10) make perfect sense in light of the context of this elitist false teaching. He is not teaching that Christ died for all without exception but rather that, contrary to this false teaching, Christ died for all without distinction.<sup>15</sup> This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that he urges prayers to be made “for all people”

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

<sup>15</sup> Even I. Howard Marshall, who held to an unlimited atonement, wrote, “This universalistic thrust is most probably a corrective response to an exclusive elitist understanding of salvation connected with the false teaching.... The context shows that the inclusion of Gentiles alongside Jews in salvation is the primary issue here” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, in collaboration with Philip H. Towner, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006], 420, 427).



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(1 Tim. 2:1), by which he means not every individual throughout the entire world by name (for such would be impossible) but rather all kinds of people: “for kings and all who are in high positions” (2:2). Also, immediately after the passage in question, Paul speaks of his apostolic appointment as a teacher of the Gentiles (2:7), indicating further that his intent is to speak of all without distinction (i.e., not just Jews but Gentiles also). Finally, it must be remembered that the ransom Jesus paid was not a potential ransom but an actual and efficacious one. If we accept the universalist interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:6, we must either (1) embrace universal final salvation or (2) denigrate the efficacy of the atonement. Instead, the particularist interpretation makes the best sense of the totality of the biblical data. Paul uses the word “all” to refer to all kinds of people in order to undermine a heretical Jewish elitism that had taken hold at Ephesus.

**Christ Died for the World.** In addition to passages which speak of Christ dying for “all,” texts that say Christ died for “the world” or “the whole world” are also often appealed to in support of an unlimited atonement. But in the same way, they must also be interpreted according to their context. In the cases in which such passages are describing the extent of the atonement, they are properly interpreted to mean “all without distinction” rather than “all without exception.” Two examples will suffice.

Perhaps the most common text brought in support of universal atonement is John 3:16. Universalists claim that, by giving his only Son over to a substitutionary and sacrificial death, God has expressed his love for the entire world, which they believe refers to every individual who will have ever lived. However, nothing in the passage demands that “world” be interpreted to mean “all without exception.” In fact, there is good reason to understand it as “all without distinction.” In particular, Jesus is discussing salvation with Nicodemus, “a man of the Pharisees ... [and] a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1). The Pharisees, like virtually all Israel in Jesus’s day, regarded Gentiles as unclean and alienated from the covenant promises of God. As Jesus discusses salvation with this ruler of the Jews, he explains that God’s love extends not only to Israel but also to men and women throughout the whole world—Gentiles as well as Jews. Further, one must note Jesus’s own particularism in this very verse. Christ has been given up so that whoever *believes* (Gk. *pas ho pisteuōn*, lit., “all the believing ones”) should not perish but have eternal life. Jesus clearly limits the scope of his atoning death to those who will eventually believe in him for salvation.

The universalist alternative would create numerous problems. For instance, if Christ had been sent to atone for every individual without exception, would that not have included

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i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

lit. literally

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those sinners who had already died and were paying for their sins in hell? But for what reason? To give them an opportunity to repent? Yet such an opportunity had passed, for they had already been undergoing divine judgment (cf. Heb. 9:27). An even greater problem would be that, by saying that Christ atoned for people who will finally perish in hell, the universalist necessarily limits the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. If Christ can atone for someone's sins and that person can still go to hell, then something other than Christ's atonement is ultimately responsible for salvation.

Similar issues are at play in 1 John 2:2. John writes, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Here we have a statement of the nature of the atonement (propitiation), followed by a statement of the scope or extent of that work (the whole world). A superficial reading of the text at first seems to leave the reader in tension, because propitiation—that is, the actual satisfaction of God's wrath against sin—for all without exception would demand universal final salvation. Yet again, because Scripture teaches that not all will finally be saved (Matt. 7:13, 23; 25:31–46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 21:8), such an interpretation is untenable.

At this point there are two options. First, the universalist accepts the superficial interpretation of "whole world" to mean "all without exception" and therefore modifies the propitiatory *nature* of the atonement to mean "a potential propitiation." Such an interpretive move, however, militates against everything Scripture teaches concerning the efficacious nature of propitiation. There is no exegetical basis for such an interpretation. Alternatively, the particularist interprets the nature of propitiation in accordance with the rest of biblical teaching and seeks a way to understand "whole world" that both avoids doing violence to the grammar, context, and authorial intent of 1 John 1–2 and averts the problematic implications of universalism. Such a way is available. It is to understand "the whole world" to refer to "all without distinction" rather than "all without exception." This option fits better lexically because it respects the Bible's uniform definition of *hilasmos* as the efficacious satisfaction of wrath. It also fits better contextually, for John is writing to churches being harassed by the false teaching of sinless perfectionism (1 John 1:6–10), likely linked to an incipient Gnosticism promising that the key to spiritual victory was found in a secret knowledge that only the Gnostics possessed. Thus, when John writes of the scope of the Savior's accomplishment, he repudiates all vestiges of exclusivism: Christ is not the propitiation for our sins only, whether Jews rather than Gentiles, Gnostics rather than other Christians, or believers in Asia Minor rather than believers throughout the rest of the world. No, he is the propitiation for the sins of God's people scattered throughout the entire world.

Such an interpretation is only confirmed by the syntactical parallel in John 11:49–52. There John reports Caiaphas's prophecy concerning the death of Christ—that one man

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would die for the people (11:50). John then comments, “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:51–52). Note the parallelism:

John 11:51–52: ... that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

1 John 2:2: He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Thus, this other comment from John’s pen would support interpreting “the whole world” in 1 John 2:2 to mean “all without distinction,” namely, the children of God who are scattered abroad throughout the whole world (cf. John 10:16). Indeed, in Revelation 5:9 John also writes explicitly of Christ’s particular atonement, which he describes as being for all without distinction, for the saints sing, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” John does not say that the Lamb ransomed every tribe and language and people and nation, which would fit the universalist interpretation, but that he ransomed people *from* every tribe and language and people and nation—that is, not all without exception but all without distinction.

With regard to 1 John 2:2, then, the particularist interpretation of “the whole world” fits the language, context, and authorial intent of the passage; does not contradict any other passage of Scripture; parallels other passages John wrote; and avoids the undesirable interpretive conclusions of either universal final salvation or an inefficacious propitiation, one or the other of which is unavoidable in the universalist interpretation. Thus, the particularist interpretation is both biblically and theologically preferable.

**Christ Died for Some Who Will Finally Perish.** A final set of texts are those which suggest that some of those who are the objects of Christ’s death may finally perish for their sins in hell. If Scripture teaches that some of those for whom Jesus died will eventually pay for their own sins, it becomes plain that Jesus’s death was not in fact efficacious. In that case, it would not be inconsistent to say that Jesus died for all without exception even though not all without exception are saved.

However, the authors of Scripture often refer to those who eventually show themselves to be false brethren as if they were genuine believers. This is often called “the judgment of charity.” That is, such people represented themselves as truly belonging to the covenant community and thus were regarded and spoken of as true believers while they

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remained in the church (e.g., John 12:4; Heb. 3:12–4:7). Their eventual departure from the covenant community, however, demonstrated that they never truly belonged to Christ, for nothing can separate the true believer from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35–39; cf. John 10:27–30; Phil. 1:6). Thus, while the abuse of Christian liberty has the potential to “grieve” (Rom. 14:15) and “wound [the] conscience” of (1 Cor. 8:12) the weaker brother, a true brother for whom Christ died will never finally be lost. If such a person does fall away from the faith, they reveal themselves to have never truly been a brother in the first place (1 John 2:19).

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Related to this is Peter’s comment concerning the false teachers in 2 Peter 2:1. Here Peter indicates that the false teachers were “bought” or “redeemed” (Gk. *agorazō*) by the “Master” (Gk. *despotēs*) and yet will nevertheless face eternal destruction. Thus, universalists argue that Christ the Master died for all without exception, even purchasing the false teachers, but that because they are never truly saved, they will not finally partake of the saving benefits of Christ’s death.

However, at least five considerations prompt us to reject this interpretation. First, in all but one instance in the New Testament (Jude 4), the word “Master” (Gk. *despotēs*) is used to indicate not the Son but the Father. Thus, Christ’s redeeming work on the cross is likely not in view here. Second, *agorazō* is likely being used in a non-salvific sense, since it is never used in a salvific sense without being accompanied by a word for “price” (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Rev. 5:9; 14:3, 4).<sup>16</sup> Third, Peter is clearly alluding to Deuteronomy 32:6, which says, “Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you” (NASB). The language of “denying the Master who bought them” serves to identify the false teachers of Peter’s day with the false prophets of Israel. Fourth, it is likely that Peter is granting, for the sake of argument, the premise that the false teachers are true believers. In other words, as Thomas Schreiner says, “It *appeared as if* the Lord had purchased the false teachers with his blood [2 Pet. 2:1], though they actually did not truly belong to the Lord.”<sup>17</sup> Peter is thus sarcastically saying, “These who claim to be redeemed deny by their deeds and their doctrine the Master whom they claim has bought them. They are no better than the false prophets of Israel.” Fifth, if taken to its logical conclusion, the universalist interpretation

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

<sup>16</sup> Gary D. Long, *Definite Atonement* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 72.  
NASB *New American Standard Bible*

<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “‘Problematic Texts’ for Definite Atonement in the Pastoral and General Epistles,” in David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 390.

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denies not only an efficacious redemption—which Scripture explicitly affirms (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14)—but also the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, that is, that one who is truly redeemed cannot be lost (John 10:27–30; Rom. 8:31–39; 1 John 2:19).

## *Summary*

In summary, though several texts of Scripture employ universalistic language with respect to the scope of Christ’s death, none of those texts stands under exegetical scrutiny as support for an unlimited atonement. Rather, when interpreted in context, passages that refer to Christ’s death for “all” and for “the world” are used to speak of all without distinction, not all without exception, and passages that might seem to indicate that those for whom Christ died can finally perish in their sins are shown to teach no such thing.

Because Scripture reveals (1) that the three persons of the Trinity are entirely united in their saving will and purpose, (2) that atonement is never potential or provisional but always actual and efficacious, (3) that Christ’s High Priestly ministry of sacrifice is coextensive with his High Priestly ministry of intercession, (4) that several passages of Scripture speak of Christ’s atoning work in particularistic terms, and (5) that no passage of Scripture teaches that Christ atoned for all without exception, therefore Scripture teaches that the extent of Christ’s atonement is not universal but is limited to the elect alone.

## RESURRECTION, ASCENSION, AND INTERCESSION

Christ’s intercessory work was not exhausted at the cross. He was not only “delivered up for our trespasses”; he was also “raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Further, he also ascended to the right hand of the Father to rule over all things (Eph. 1:20–23), in which place believers are said to be seated with him (Eph. 2:6). Because he ascended, he sent the Holy Spirit to permanently indwell every member of his church (John 14:16–17; 16:7) and to empower us for holiness and service. Further still, he presently intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25), praying for our greatest spiritual benefit, defending us against our Accuser, sanctifying our prayers, and ministering to us in our times of need (cf. Heb. 4:16).<sup>18</sup>

The culmination of our study of the accomplishment of redemption must be to worship the triune God for the work of the Son. Accurate theology must always issue in transcendent doxology (see the song of the saints and angels in Rev. 5:9–13).

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<sup>18</sup> For more on Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and present intercession, see chap. 4, “God the Son.”



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## The Application of Redemption

Because of the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work, if a believer is asked *when* God saved him, there is a sense in which he ought to reply, "Two thousand years ago." And yet no one comes into this world saved. We are all brought forth in iniquity (Ps. 51:5), dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3), and enemies of God (Rom. 5:10; 8:7–8). Though all the blessings of salvation were purchased once for all at the cross, the people of God do not enjoy the benefits of Christ's work until the Holy Spirit *applies* those blessings to individual believers—until they are born of the Spirit unto repentance and faith, are united to Christ, and are thereby justified, adopted, and set apart for a life of holiness and service to God. It is for this reason that we must distinguish between the accomplishment of redemption and the application of redemption.

In the wisdom of God, the Holy Spirit does not immediately apply to the believer all the fullness of the benefits secured by Christ's work. Instead, these blessings are imparted to us progressively, in stages. Further, even those aspects of salvation that are applied simultaneously are nevertheless to be properly distinguished from one another. For instance, although we are justified and adopted in the same moment, both justification and adoption are unique blessings. Collapsing one of them into the other robs each of its distinctive glory. Like a precious diamond, the glory of the application of redemption is multifaceted and is fully comprehended only as each individual facet contributes to the brilliance of the whole. Thus, the study of soteriology is concerned to explore the distinctiveness of each aspect of the application of redemption.

### THE ORDER OF SALVATION

Not only are these aspects of salvation distinct from one another, but they are also logically, and sometimes chronologically, related to one another. The *ordo salutis*, or "order of salvation," aims to define these logical and chronological relationships between the various stages of the application of redemption.<sup>19</sup> Some have questioned whether it is proper even to attempt such a thing, since the Bible does not provide an explicit *ordo salutis*. Yet there is a significant scriptural basis for recognizing an order to salvation (e.g., John 1:12–13; Rom. 8:29–30). To suggest that glorification is anything but the last step in the application of redemption, or to suggest that faith is given subsequent to justification,

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to recognize this distinction between logical and chronological order. Certain blessings may be granted simultaneously (e.g., regeneration and faith), while nevertheless maintaining a definite order of cause and effect between the two (e.g., regeneration is the cause, not the consequence, of faith).  
e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., "for example")

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would be to violate the plain sense of several passages (glorification: Rom. 8:23; Phil. 3:20–21; justification: Rom. 3:28; 5:1). Therefore, to speak of logical order or priority is not unnaturally foist “human logic” on the text of Scripture. Instead, it is to read out of the text the divine logic and order that the Spirit of God himself has plainly revealed. This is the goal of a biblical *ordo salutis*.

## **The Ordo Salutis and Romans 8:29–30**

The clearest single text that speaks to the order of salvation is Romans 8:29–30. There Paul writes, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” As we examine this text, we will discover the beginnings of an *ordo salutis*.

First, though foreknowledge and predestination do not belong to the application of redemption, they nevertheless fit naturally into a definite order. Even the prefixes of both words—“fore-” and “pre-” —show that foreknowledge and predestination are antecedent to the later aspects of redemption (see also Eph. 1:4–5; 1 Pet. 1:20). Thus, the eternal counsel of the Trinity, in which the Father set his electing love on those whom he meant to save, anchors all the saving activity that takes place in the accomplishment and application of redemption.

Second, Paul lists glorification last in this sequence. It is the final feature in the application of redemption, as it describes the eradication of sin and infirmity from our present bodies, truly and consummately saving us from sin and all its effects (Rom. 8:19–25; 1 Cor. 15:50–57; Phil. 3:20–21). Therefore, no matter how any other elements of salvation relate to one another, it is certain that glorification must be last in the *ordo salutis*. Calling and justification must precede glorification.

What, then, is the relationship between calling and justification? In the first place, it is to be observed that the calling Paul has in view here is the effectual call of God that results in salvation (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:9, 24, 26; 2 Tim. 1:9; 2 Pet. 1:3, 10; cf. John 11:43–44) rather than a general calling that may be rejected (e.g., Matt. 22:14; Acts 7:51). This is so because he says that all those who are thus called are also justified and glorified (Rom. 8:30). No one who hears this calling fails to receive the saving blessings of justification and glorification. Second, given that Paul lists foreknowledge and predestination first and glorification last, it is sound to conclude that he has a definite order in mind as he enumerates these various

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

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aspects of salvation. Thus, because he lists calling before justification, it is proper to understand that calling precedes justification. Therefore, the order of the application of redemption as presented in Romans 8:30 is effectual call, justification, and then glorification.

## *The Ordo Salutis and Other New Testament Texts*

Romans 8:29–30 does not exhaustively treat every aspect of the application of redemption. There is no mention of regeneration, faith, or sanctification, among other saving benefits. To understand where these other doctrines fit in the order of salvation, we must examine the rest of the New Testament.

It may be easiest to place the gift of faith in the order of salvation, since Scripture is clear that faith is the condition of justification. Sinners are said to be justified “by faith” (Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 3:24), “through faith” (Gal. 2:16), and “on faith” (Phil. 3:9). A sinner will not be declared righteous in God’s sight unless he believes, and it is only through the instrumentality of faith that he will lay hold of the righteousness of God in Christ. Thus, it is proper to place faith before justification, and because faith is itself the instrumental cause of justification, nothing ought to come between them. Therefore, we may add faith to our *ordo salutis* as follows: effectual call, faith, justification, and then glorification.

Further, we must also consider that saving faith is always a repentant faith, for the faith that turns to Christ for salvation necessarily turns away from sin and self-righteousness (Acts 26:17–18; 1 Thess. 1:9). This is why the gospel is preached as a call to both repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15; Acts 20:21), for one cannot exist without the other. Repentance is so vital to saving faith that the apostle James says that to sever them is to kill faith, for faith without works (i.e., “fruits in keeping with repentance,” Luke 3:8) is dead (James 2:17, 26). Such is no true and saving faith but is utterly useless (James 2:20). The repentance that saves is a believing repentance, and the faith that saves is a repentant faith (cf. Matt. 4:17; Luke 24:47; John 3:16; 20:31). They are two sides of the same coin, and together they constitute conversion (cf. Acts 15:3). And because one must logically turn *from* something before he can turn *to* something else, repentance is placed before faith. Therefore, our order stands as follows: effectual call, conversion (repentance and faith), justification, and then glorification.

Significant disagreement surrounds the relationship between regeneration and faith, yet Scripture seems to clearly present faith as the consequence of the new birth. In the first place, because the natural man is dead in sin (Eph. 2:1–3) and thus unable to understand and accept the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14), he is absolutely incapable of faith

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i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

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until the Spirit quickens spiritual life in him (John 6:65). Second, Jesus declares that the new birth is the prerequisite for seeing (John 3:3) and entering (John 3:5) the kingdom of God. Seeing the kingdom is undoubtedly a figure of speech for exercising saving faith (cf. Heb. 11:1), and it cannot be disputed that one enters the kingdom at conversion (i.e., when the sinner repents and believes the gospel). It follows, then, that the new birth is logically prior to faith. Third, the apostle John says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (1 John 5:1). The verb tenses in this verse are significant. John declares that everyone who presently believes in Jesus *has been* born of God. The very same relationship (as evidenced by identical grammatical constructions) exists between the new birth and the practice of righteousness (1 John 2:29), love (1 John 4:7), and overcoming the world (1 John 5:4). Yet none of these precedes—and still less, causes—regeneration. Finally, there is good reason to believe that calling and regeneration speak of two aspects of the same reality, namely, the summons to spiritual life on the one hand and the impartation of spiritual life on the other.<sup>20</sup> If calling and regeneration can be thus identified with one another, it is understandable that when Paul speaks of calling in Romans 8:30, he does not need to include regeneration, for he conceives of them as one and the same act. Since it has already been demonstrated that faith is subsequent to calling, it is sound to conclude that while they are temporally simultaneous, regeneration logically precedes and gives birth to faith. Therefore, we may continue building our *ordo salutis*: effectual call/regeneration, conversion (repentance and faith), justification, and then glorification.

At this point the remaining aspects of the application of redemption are relatively easy to place. As with justification, believers are said to lay hold of the grace of adoption by faith (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26). This is good cause for considering justification and adoption to be contemporaneous blessings. However, it is proper that adoption should logically follow justification, for believers could not be justly given the legal rights of life in the family of God while they remained destitute of a right standing before him. God must first declare us righteous before welcoming us into the family of the One “whose name is

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i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

<sup>20</sup> In 2 Cor. 4:6, Paul compares the creation of the world by God’s word (cf. Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6) to the regeneration of the sinner by God’s word (cf. James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23, 25).

When speaking of the creation of the world, we do not distinguish God’s command to create from his act of creation. He literally spoke the universe into existence. We ought to take the same approach to the creation of spiritual life in the sinner. The call itself creates the life that it commands. Thus the effectual call ought to be identified with regeneration. For an excellent defense of this view, see appendix 3 of Matthew Barrett, *Reclaiming Monergism: The Case for Sovereign Grace in Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013).

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Holy” (Isa. 57:15). Further, the faith by which we lay hold of justification and adoption is a faith that continuously works through love (Gal. 5:6). While regeneration, conversion, justification, and adoption all occur instantaneously, sanctification is a progressive process that takes place throughout the Christian life (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, sanctification is subsequent to adoption but prior to glorification. The sanctification process is marked by the believer’s persevering in faith (Matt. 24:13) and growing in the assurance of salvation (2 Pet. 1:10; 1 John 5:13).

Therefore, based on the foregoing biblical analysis, we find Scripture to provide the following *ordo salutis*:

1. foreknowledge/predestination/election (God’s choice of some unto salvation)
2. effectual call/regeneration (the new birth)
3. conversion (repentance and faith)
4. justification (declaration of right legal standing)
5. adoption (being placed into the family of God)
6. sanctification (progressive growth in holiness)
7. perseverance (remaining in Christ)
8. glorification (receiving a resurrection body)

We turn now to a more thorough discussion of these doctrines concerning the application of redemption.

## THE EXTERNAL CALL: GOSPEL PROCLAMATION

When Paul speaks of the doctrine of divine calling in Romans 8:30, he has in mind God’s effectual call, or regeneration, whereby God sovereignly summons the sinner out of spiritual death and into spiritual life. In fact, when the New Testament Epistles speak of divine calling, in every case they are referring to this internal, effectual call. The Gospels speak of another call, however, often termed the external call, the general call, or the gospel call. This refers to the verbal proclamation of the gospel by which all sinners are called to turn from their sin and trust in Christ for salvation (Matt. 22:14).

In other words, there is a distinction between the call of God (the internal call) and the call of the preacher (the external call). The internal call is given only to the elect and always brings the sinner to salvation. By contrast, the external call is given to all people without distinction and is often rejected. Because of this, the external call does not properly belong to the *ordo salutis*, for the saving benefits of Christ’s redemption are always and only effectually applied to the elect. Nevertheless, because the external call



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of the gospel is the means by which God issues the effectual call of regeneration, it is a requisite component in the study of the application of redemption.

## *The Necessity of the External Call*

Romans 10:13 declares that the external call is essential for the sinner to be able to “call” on the Lord for salvation:

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:13–17)

This text clearly indicates that proclaiming the message of the gospel is absolutely imperative to people being saved. Sin has penetrated to the core of man’s being, so that he is a sinner not only by choice but also by nature (cf. Rom. 8:7; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:3; 4:17–18). God’s revelation of himself in the natural world (Rom. 1:19–20) is sufficient to render all inexcusably guilty before God and to convict men of their sinfulness and the coming judgment both temporally (1:21–31) and eternally (1:32). The solution to the damning spiritual condition of mankind is not found, however, in natural revelation, nor by the sinner looking within himself or to his own resources. For salvation to come to anyone, the gospel message of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the Son of God, sent from heaven to save sinners by grace through faith apart from works, must be proclaimed to them. The word of truth is the means by which God brings about the new birth (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23, 25). For this reason, the gospel is hailed as “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16–17). It is by the foolishness of the message preached that God is pleased to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18–21). Therefore, we must send preachers of the gospel.

## *The Elements of the External Call*

Since the external call of the gospel is essential for salvation, we must understand what constitutes that call. At least three elements must be communicated in the proclamation of the gospel. First, the gospel preacher must explain the facts of God’s holiness, man’s sinfulness, and the work of Christ in accomplishing redemption. God is the Creator of all things (Ps. 24:1), and as his creature, man is accountable to God, his Judge. God is

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perfectly holy (Matt. 5:48); he is the essence of all that is good—so much so that he can have absolutely no fellowship with anyone who falls short of moral perfection (1 John 1:5; cf. James 2:10). And yet Scripture declares that all people have sinned against God by breaking his law and therefore fall short of the perfect standard of righteousness that is required for fellowship with him (Rom. 3:23). The verdict pronounced over the whole of mankind is, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10), and the resulting sentence is death: “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Because sin against an infinitely holy God demands an infinite punishment, this death is not merely physical or temporal but also spiritual and eternal. The just punishment for all sin is hell: conscious torment forever, away from the saving presence of the Lord (Matt. 13:50; 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:11).

It is into this miserable state of affairs that God steps forth in sovereign grace. While man was helpless under the weight of sin, with no way to pay its penalty and escape its results (Rom. 5:6), God the Son became a man to live the perfectly righteous life that the sons of Adam had failed to live and to die a substitutionary death in the place of his people (Rom. 5:6, 8), absorbing in his own person the full penalty of the Father’s wrath against their sin (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). After dying in the stead of sinners, he was buried, and on the third day, he rose from the dead in triumph over sin and death (Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:4; Heb. 2:14–18) and ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven (Eph. 1:20–23). Unless a preacher accurately explains man’s predicament in sin and Christ’s incarnation, substitutionary atonement, and resurrection, the gospel has not been preached.

While believing these facts of the gospel is essential to salvation, it is not sufficient; indeed, even the demons believe true facts about God and his gospel (James 2:19). For a sinner to have a saving interest in Christ, he must respond to these facts by turning from sin and trusting in Christ for righteousness. Therefore, a second essential element of the external call is the preacher’s earnest call for the sinner to repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15; Acts 20:21; cf. 1 Thess. 1:9). That is to say, a biblical gospel presentation calls sinners to (1) acknowledge their sin and guilt before God (Luke 15:18), (2) abandon all hope of attaining forgiveness by good works (Heb. 6:1), (3) forsake their life ruled by sin and self (Isa. 55:7; Luke 9:23), and (4) put all their trust in the righteousness of Christ alone for being accepted by and reconciled to God (Rom. 10:4, 9; Phil. 3:4–9). Only by repentant faith may a sinner subjectively lay hold of the benefits objectively purchased by Christ. Further, this call to repent and believe is to be delivered with the utmost urgency. Preachers must not present Christ to the sinner in a cold and disinterested manner; rather, driven by the fear of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:11), they are to earnestly persuade and implore men to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

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A third necessary element of the external call is the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. As we call sinners to repentance and faith, we must present to them the incomparable blessings promised to those who are obedient to the gospel call (John 3:16; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 13:38–39). Ultimately, the greatest promise of the gospel is that sinners once alienated from God can be reconciled to a right relationship with him (Eph. 2:18; 1 Pet. 3:18)—even to become his child (John 1:12). Therefore, a God-centered gospel presentation will not only proclaim the magnificent promises of forgiveness and eternal life but will also declare that eternal life consists in the knowledge of and communion with the triune God (John 17:3) and will present him, the Giver, as the gospel’s greatest gift.

## *The Characteristics of the External Call*

The external call to salvation as presented in the gospel is marked by several key characteristics. First, it is a general, or universal, call. That is, the good news of repentance and faith for the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all people without exception. Whereas the internal call of regeneration is given only to the elect, the external call of the gospel is to be preached indiscriminately to elect and reprobate alike. God represents himself as earnestly desiring that the wicked should repent (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; cf. 2 Cor. 5:20), and in accordance with that desire, he exuberantly calls all people to himself (Isa. 55:1, 3). He entreats sinners to seek him and is eager to have compassion on them and to forgive them (Isa. 55:6–7). Without discrimination he commands “all the ends of the earth” to turn to him and be saved (Isa. 45:22). The Lord Jesus preached the gospel even to those who rejected him (Matt. 22:2–14; Luke 14:16–24), inviting everyone who was weary to find rest in him (Matt. 11:28–30). This universality is represented in the church’s Great Commission, to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19; cf. Luke 24:47) and to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15 NKJV). Thus, it is no surprise to see this universality modeled in apostolic preaching, as Paul declared to the philosophers on Mars Hill that God “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Indeed, the universality of the gospel call cannot be denied.

A second characteristic of the external call is that it is a sincere, bona fide offer. Some object that because God intends only to save those whom he has chosen, the indiscriminate call of the gospel cannot be genuine on God’s part. This is nothing less than a blasphemous accusation from those who have exalted their own reasoning above God’s revelation. God does call all to repentance, and he represents himself as sincerely desiring the repentance of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23; cf. 18:32; 33:11). Can anyone doubt the sincerity of the God who says, “Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would

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walk in my ways!” (Ps. 81:13; cf. Rom. 10:21)? While it may be difficult to understand how statements of compassion toward the nonelect can be reconciled with the doctrines of sovereign election and particular redemption, it is not an option to conclude that God does not mean what he says!<sup>21</sup> The God who “has mercy on whomever he wills” and “hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:18) is the God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. To reason that the former is incompatible with the latter is not an option for the Bible-believing Christian.

The offer of salvation communicated in the external call of the gospel is conditioned on repentance and faith. For it to be a genuine, well-meant offer on God’s part, he simply has to be sincerely disposed to provide the promised blessings upon the satisfaction of the offer’s conditions. And this is precisely the case; if anyone repents and trusts in Christ, God *will* forgive and save him. However, such repentance and faith are impossible for the natural man (Rom. 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14). Apart from regenerating grace, no man will ever repent and believe. Thus, in the case of the nonelect, the conditions of the offer will never be met. To suggest that God’s offer is insincere—indeed, that he feigns sincerity—because he does not provide the necessary grace to overcome man’s depravity is to suppose that God is obligated to give grace to all. To such a notion the Lord himself responds, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (Matt. 20:15). The potter has the right over the clay “to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use” (Rom. 9:21). God is not obligated to give grace to anyone, let alone everyone. The deficiency in the gospel call lies in man’s depravity, not in any supposed parsimony in God’s grace. To suggest such a thing approaches the highest strains of blasphemy.

Finally, a third characteristic of the external call is that, in and of itself, it is not efficacious. Unlike the effectual call, the external call can be resisted. Jesus makes this distinction in his conclusion to the parable of the wedding banquet: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). That is, many are invited to partake in the feast of the blessings of

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<sup>21</sup> As Berkhof comments, “The external calling is a calling in good faith, a calling that is seriously meant. It is not an invitation coupled with the hope that it will not be accepted. When God calls the sinner to accept Christ by faith, He earnestly desires this; and when He promises those who repent and believe eternal life, His promise is dependable. This follows from the very nature, from the veracity, of God. It is blasphemous to think that God would be guilty of equivocation and deception, that He would say one thing and mean another, that He would earnestly plead with the sinner to repent and believe unto salvation, and at the same time not desire it in any sense of the word” (*Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. [1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996], 462).

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eternal life, yet because the Father has chosen only some and not all, few are effectually called. Therefore, many who are invited reject the external call. Any instance in which the gospel is preached and rejected is evidence for the inherent inefficacy of the external call (e.g., John 3:18; 6:64; 12:37; Acts 7:51; 17:32). It is for this very reason that the external call is insufficient for salvation.

## THE INTERNAL CALL: REGENERATION

Because of the deficiencies of the external call, sinners stand in need of a sovereignly efficacious call, inherently powerful to overcome the effects of depravity and to bring them to repentance and saving faith. In his natural state, man is a spiritual corpse (Eph. 2:1), entirely unresponsive to the spiritual truth proclaimed in the gospel. For this reason, the natural man will always reject the gospel, for the things of the Spirit of God “are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Scripture says the natural man is spiritually blind, and so he does not see the glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. Rom. 1:21–22; Eph. 4:17–18). He is also spiritually deaf; he cannot perceive the truth announced in the gospel of grace (Isa. 6:9–10; Matt. 13:15; John 8:43). Still further, man’s will and affections are entirely disordered by sin (Jer. 17:9), for his heart is a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26), cold and unresponsive to the meaning and glory of divinely revealed truth.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, *made us alive* together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4–5). In the exercise of his sovereign pleasure, God issues an effectual call in the heart of the elect. He powerfully summons the sinner out of his spiritual death and blindness and, by virtue of the creative power of his word, imparts new spiritual life to him—giving him a new heart, along with eyes to see and ears to hear, and thus enabling him to repent and believe in Christ for salvation (Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:24; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Pet. 1:3). He effectually calls his people “out of darkness” and “into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9), “to himself” (Acts 2:39), into fellowship with his Son (1 Cor. 1:9) so that they belong to Christ (Rom. 1:6), and “into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12). This is the divine miracle of regeneration, or the new birth.

### *The Author of Regeneration*

The author of this radical change of man’s nature cannot be man himself but rather must be the Creator of all life, including eternal life—God alone. Unlike other aspects of the

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)



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application of redemption, in regeneration man is entirely passive; God is the sole active agent in bringing about the creative miracle of the new birth.

It is significant that Scripture uses the imagery of being born again to describe this work of regeneration (John 3:3–8; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; 1 John 3:9). In the physical realm, a child makes no contribution to his conception or birth. He is entirely dependent on the will of his parents to be brought into being. In the same way, Jesus chooses this analogy to teach that dead and depraved sinners cannot contribute to their rebirth unto spiritual life but are entirely dependent on the sovereign will of God for regeneration. He declares, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Sin has so infected and corrupted mankind that nothing less than the wholesale renovation of the soul is required for salvation. When Nicodemus asks how this can happen, Jesus does not give him a list of religious duties by which he can cooperate with God’s grace. Instead, he points to the sovereign will of God and declares, “The wind blows where it wishes” (John 3:8). As John Murray observes, “The wind is not at our beck and call; neither is the regenerative operation of the Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Sinful mankind cannot induce this new birth.

Aside from this vivid imagery, Scripture explicitly affirms that regeneration is an act of God alone. Those who are born again are born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). This truth precludes human effort from having any bearing on regeneration. No heritage or ancestral lineage, no man-made religion or sacramental system, and not even the decision of man’s will can produce regeneration. The children of God are born *of God*. So far from depending on man’s will, sinners are brought forth unto spiritual life by the exercise of *God’s* will (James 1:18). While man was utterly helpless to bring himself to life, “God ... made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4–5; cf. Col. 2:13). According to the Father’s great mercy, “he has caused us to be born again” (1 Pet. 1:3).

The monergistic<sup>23</sup> work of God in regeneration is displayed perhaps most clearly in Ezekiel 36:25–27, in which God promises a day when he would bring regeneration to his

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<sup>22</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> *Monergism* is a word derived from the Greek *monos*, meaning “one,” and *ergos*, meaning “work.” It speaks of there being one agent at work. Theologians have employed this term to describe the view of regeneration argued for here, namely, that God is the sole agent at work in regeneration, while man is entirely passive. *Synergism*, on the other hand, speaks of “working together” and describes a view of regeneration in which man cooperates with God in regeneration. Wesleyan theologian and synergist John Miley wrote, “Regeneration is not an absolute work of the Spirit.... There are

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people, removing their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh. In just these three verses, God uses the phrase “I will” six times, insisting that this spiritual heart transplant is entirely his work. In the next chapter, God illustrates his own sovereignty and man’s helplessness by picturing the future regeneration of Israel as his breathing life into a valley full of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–11). The natural man is no more able to bring himself to life than a pile of dead and dry bones could bring themselves to life. God then declares, “Behold, *I will* open your graves and raise you from your graves.... And *I will* put my Spirit within you, and you shall live” (Ezek. 37:12, 14).

These passages in Ezekiel point to the Holy Spirit’s role in regeneration. While many texts explicitly name the person of the Father as the agent of regeneration (James 1:17–18; 1 Pet. 1:3; cf. Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9), Scripture also indicates that the Holy Spirit participates in this work. Jesus says that to be born again is to be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5, 6, 8; cf. 6:63). The apostle Paul says that Christ saves us by “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). We may conclude, therefore, that while the Father is the ultimate agent of regeneration, summoning us out of death and into life, the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause of regeneration, carrying out the will of the Father by giving us spiritual life.

## *The Nature of Regeneration*

The Greek term for “regeneration” (*palingenesia*) appears only twice in the New Testament. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus uses the word to refer to the renovation of the creation that will begin in the millennial kingdom and will come to consummation in the new heavens and the new earth. In Titus 3:5, Paul says, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” Here we learn that regeneration is characterized by both washing and renewal. These concepts are also present in John 3:5, where Jesus describes the new birth as being “born of water and the Spirit,” a reference to Ezekiel 36:25–26, which metaphorically describes regeneration as being sprinkled with

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prerequisites which cannot be met without our own free agency. There must be an earnest turning of the soul to God, deep repentance for sin, and a true faith in Christ. Such are the requirements of our own agency. There is no regeneration for us without them” (*Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. [New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892], 2:336). Such teaching is entirely contradictory to Scripture’s emphasis on God’s activity and man’s helplessness with respect to regeneration. For a masterful defense of monergistic regeneration, see Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013).

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clean water and being given a new heart. Thus, regeneration speaks of a cleansing from sin and a creation of spiritual life. It is a purifying renovation.

This divine impartation of spiritual life is a fundamental re-creation of the whole person. Paul plainly states, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). It is not merely the sinner’s spirit or soul that is a new creation, but he himself, as a whole person, is a new creation. Just as man’s depravity is total—that is, just as sin has so pervaded man’s nature as to leave no part of him untouched by sin’s corruption—so also does regeneration reach to the totality of man. The Holy Spirit opens the blind eyes of the mind (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Eph. 1:18), replacing, as it were, the mind of the flesh with the mind of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5–9)—indeed, with the mind of Christ himself (1 Cor. 2:16)—so that the regenerate man understands all the things that he once could not understand (1 Cor. 2:15; cf. 1 John 2:20, 27). The Spirit removes the sinner’s heart of stone and implants in him a heart of flesh capable of perceiving and loving spiritual truth (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; cf. Deut. 30:6). The affections are thus renewed after the likeness of Christ, so that the new man hates sin (Matt. 5:4), loves righteousness (Matt. 5:6; John 3:21), thirsts for the God whom he once abhorred (Pss. 27:4; 42:1–2), and loves and rejoices in the Christ whom he once regarded as foolish (1 Pet. 1:8; cf. 2 Cor. 5:16). With renewed affections, the sinner’s will is finally freed from the bondage of sin unto the liberty of righteousness. He now wants what God wants (Ps. 40:8), for the Spirit of God is at work within him “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13; cf. Ezek. 36:27). Once bound in sin and spiritual death, man’s mind, heart, and will are now renewed unto life. The regenerated sinner is truly a “new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24).

Perhaps the most vivid picture of regeneration comes in 2 Corinthians 4. Paul describes the state of the natural man when he says, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). To be spiritually dead (cf. Eph. 2:1) is to be devoid of the spiritual life that allows one to see the true value of the glory of Christ revealed in the gospel. The essence of spiritual death is spiritual blindness. Man’s spiritual perception is so disordered by sin that he has no taste for what is objectively delightful (i.e., the gospel of the glory of Christ) but is infatuated with what is objectively repulsive and disgusting (i.e., sin and the glory of self). The unregenerate man pursues what is worthless because he is blind to its detriment, and he refuses what is most precious because he is blind to its value. Thus, when the objective beauty of Christ is held forth in

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i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

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the gospel message, the unregenerate man sees no glory in him, and therefore, left to himself, he will ever and always choose to reject the gospel.

What, then, is the remedy for such a miserable condition? There is no hope in man's enslaved will but only in the sovereign grace and life-giving power of God. Paul answers that the remedy for man's spiritual blindness is monergistic regeneration: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Paul compares regeneration to God's original creation of the world. In the beginning, God spoke the universe into existence from nothing (Pss. 33:6; 148:5): "And God *said*, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3), instantly "call[ing] into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). In regeneration, God speaks the command into darkened and dead hearts—"Let there be light"—and instantaneously births in us the light of eternal spiritual life where it had not existed.<sup>24</sup> He shines the light of life into the blind heart. He gives us new spiritual eyes so that we finally see sin for what it is—in all its objective ugliness—and so finally see Christ for who he is—in all his objective beauty and glory. And when sinners finally have functioning spiritual eyes and the light necessary to see things as they actually are, they turn away in disgust from the filth of sin (repentance) and eagerly embrace the Christ whose glory they can at last see (faith).

It is for this reason that theologians speak of the regenerating grace of God as irresistible.<sup>25</sup> It is not that God's grace can never be resisted (Acts 7:51); rather, in the irresistible grace of regeneration, God overcomes man's natural resistance to the gospel by shining light into his heart and opening his eyes to the glory of Jesus. Irresistible grace, then, does not mean that man is coerced or forced into repentance and faith; his will is not violated. Rather, this grace *frees* man's will; it opens our eyes so we can accurately compare the glory of sin to the glory of Christ. It is impossible that anyone with restored spiritual sight through regeneration should see sin and Christ side by side and do anything but turn from sin and embrace Christ in saving faith. Thus, in regeneration man's will is not violated but transformed. As the Westminster Confession states, we come to him "most

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<sup>24</sup> Thus, the effectual call of regeneration creates the very life that it commands. John Murray explains, "The summons is invested with the efficacy by which we are delivered to the destination intended—we are effectively ushered into the fellowship of Christ. There is something determinate about God's call; by his sovereign power and grace it cannot fail of accomplishment" (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 91).

<sup>25</sup> *Irresistible grace* is the *I* in the acronym TULIP, which summarizes the doctrines of grace. The other letters stand for *total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, and perseverance of the saints*.

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freely, being made willing by His grace.”<sup>26</sup> In the final analysis, regenerating grace is irresistible because *Christ* is irresistible, for regenerating grace opens our spiritual eyes to his irresistibility.

## *The Means of Regeneration*<sup>27</sup>

As the Father is the ultimate agent of regeneration and the Spirit is the efficient cause of regeneration, Scripture identifies the Word of God itself—specifically the gospel message—as the instrumental cause, or means, of regeneration (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23–25; cf. 2 Thess. 2:14). It is by means of the preached gospel that the Spirit of God powerfully works to open the eyes of our hearts to the glory of Christ. While the external call is insufficient for regeneration, it is absolutely necessary, for the external call of gospel preaching is the vehicle for the internal call of regeneration. There is no faith without the preached word (Rom. 10:17).

This rules out as unbiblical any sacramental view of regeneration. Though proponents of baptismal regeneration appeal to John 3:5 to teach that the new birth is mediated through baptism, there are several reasons why we ought not to understand “born of water” to refer to Christian baptism. First, Jesus does not mention baptism anywhere in this interaction with Nicodemus but does repeatedly emphasize the necessity of faith for salvation (John 3:15, 16, 18, 36). If baptism were the instrument of the new birth, it is difficult to explain why Jesus would limit its mention to one oblique reference. Second, baptismal regeneration contradicts Jesus’s statement in John 3:8 that, with respect to the new birth, the Spirit is like the wind that blows where it wishes. Such language pictures the sovereign freedom of the Spirit, an image that is incongruous with tying regeneration to a ritual, physical act of human will. John Piper aptly observes that in that case “the wind would be confined by the sacrament.”<sup>28</sup> Third, Jesus expects Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, to understand his teaching on the new birth (John 3:10). However, Christian baptism did not yet exist at that time. It makes little sense to admonish Nicodemus for failing to understand a practice that had not yet been instituted.

One would, however, expect Jesus to admonish Nicodemus for failing to understand Old Testament teaching on the subject, and in fact, that is the most likely explanation for his

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<sup>26</sup> Westminster Confession (1646), in Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (1877; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 624–25.

<sup>27</sup> Portions of this section are adapted from John MacArthur, *John 1–11*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), 104–5. Used by permission of Moody Publishers.

<sup>28</sup> John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 39.



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words. The Old Testament often employs the imagery of water and Spirit to symbolize spiritual cleansing and renewal, never baptism (cf. Num. 19:17–19; Isa. 4:4; 32:15; 44:3; 55:1; Joel 2:28–29; Zech. 13:1). In Ezekiel’s prophecy of the new covenant, he famously speaks of both water and the Spirit in the context of regeneration:

I will *sprinkle clean water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will *cleanse* you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *And I will put my Spirit within you*, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27)

When Jesus spoke of being born of water and the Spirit, he was declaring that regeneration was a truth revealed throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 11:18–20) and thus a truth with which Nicodemus should have been familiar. Against this Old Testament backdrop, Christ’s point was unmistakable: without the spiritual washing of the soul—a cleansing accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) and solely by means of the word of the gospel (Eph. 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:23–25)—no one can enter God’s kingdom.<sup>29</sup> Given this proper understanding of John 3:5, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is shown to be without biblical basis. The gospel itself is the sole instrument of the new birth.

## *The Relationship of Regeneration to Faith*

One of the most common questions related to evangelical soteriology concerns the relationship between regeneration and faith. Which produces which? Does man’s act of faith bring about the Spirit’s work of regeneration, or does the Spirit’s work of regeneration bring about man’s act of faith? In numerous ways, Scripture answers in favor of the latter: regeneration is the cause, not the consequence, of saving faith.

At the outset, we must observe that regeneration and faith are distinguished not in terms of time but in terms of logical causality. Some reject the notion that regeneration causes faith because they want to avoid saying that someone might be regenerated *without* saving faith. But this is to confuse logical order with chronological order. From a temporal perspective, regeneration and faith occur simultaneously. Nevertheless, though two events may occur at the same time, one may still cause the other. To illustrate this,

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

<sup>29</sup> For a thorough examination of various interpretations for “born of water,” see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 191–96.

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consider once again the imagery of 2 Corinthians 4. Paul pictures regeneration as the opening of blind eyes and faith as the spiritual perception of Christ's glory (cf. John 3:3; Heb. 11:1). Now, no time passes between a man's opening his eyes and his perception of light; they are simultaneous. However, his perception of light is causally dependent on opening his eyes. Seeing does not cause him to open his eyes; his sight is the *consequence* of his eyes being opened. In the same way, though they occur in the exact same instant, the sinner's faith does not cause his regeneration; rather, the opening of the spiritual eyes in regeneration is the cause of the spiritual sight of faith.

Further, the Bible's teaching concerning the natural man's spiritual inability precludes any concept of synergism in regeneration. In his state of spiritual death (Eph. 2:1–3), man is incapable even of understanding the things of the Spirit, let alone receiving them (1 Cor. 2:14). The sinner's mind is so hostile to God that he is literally unable to submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7), and thus he cannot please God in any sense (Rom. 8:8), including the exercise of faith (Heb. 11:6). Man is blind to the value of God's glory revealed in Christ and is hopelessly enamored with sin, despite its worthlessness. To suggest that a sinner in such a state could, apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, summon from within his own deadness the saving faith that God declares to be his sovereign gift (Eph. 2:8) is to wholly underestimate the miserable nature of man's depravity. Instead, Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44), and, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father" (John 6:65). Coming to Jesus is a synonym for believing in Jesus—for it is this kind of coming that results in salvation (John 5:40)—and the "drawing" of John 6:44 is the gift spoken of in John 6:65, both referring to the effectual, irresistible call of God in regeneration. Therefore, Jesus is teaching that, because of the sinner's depravity, no one can come to him in saving faith unless the Father grants the gift of being effectually drawn in regeneration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Some synergists object that it is inconsistent to describe the Father's drawing as effectual, since drawing connotes persuasion rather than determination. They often argue that "drawing" does not mean "dragging." Interestingly, the Greek word *helkō*, translated "draws" in John 6:44, often refers to a decisive, effectual movement like dragging. Other New Testament occurrences of *helkō* refer to fishermen hauling in a fishing net (John 21:6, 11), a soldier drawing his sword from its sheath in the midst of battle (John 18:10), angry men dragging a foreigner before their court (Acts 16:19), and a mob dragging a suspected traitor out of their city with the intent to kill him (Acts 21:30). Far from an ineffectual wooing, the Father's drawing in John 6:44 is the decisive, effectual calling of regeneration.

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The apostle John also comments explicitly on the relationship between regeneration and faith. In 1 John 5:1, he writes, “Everyone who believes [presently] that Jesus is the Christ has been [antecedently] born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.” The present participle “believes” indicates present continuous action, while the perfect passive indicative “has been born” speaks of a past action whose results continue into the present time.<sup>31</sup> In other words, everyone who presently believes that Jesus is the Christ *has been* born of God. John thus represents faith as the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.

This reading of the grammar of 1 John 5:1 is confirmed by examining a selection of grammatical parallels in the same letter. There are two other instances in which John employs a present active participle in concert with a perfect passive indicative to illustrate the relationship between the new birth and its concomitants:

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices [presently] righteousness has been born of him [antecedently]. (1 John 2:29)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves [presently] has been born of God [antecedently] and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Both of these passages consist of precisely the same grammatical construction that appears in 1 John 5:1. In 1 John 2:29, John teaches that a habitual pattern of practiced righteousness is an indication of the new birth. Now, the causal relationship between the practice of righteousness and the new birth is not that man is born again as a result of doing good works! Paul patently contradicts such a thought in Titus 3:5, explicitly denying that the new birth comes on the basis of righteous deeds. No, the impartation of new spiritual life in regeneration is the cause of an ongoing practice of good deeds (cf. Eph. 2:10). In 1 John 4:7, John singles out a particular good work: everyone who loves has been born of God. Here again, the relationship between love and regeneration is evident: love does not cause the new birth but is the consequence of it. To suggest otherwise would undermine the gospel of salvation by grace alone. Therefore, if we must conclude that practicing righteousness (1 John 2:29) and loving the brethren (1 John 4:7) are consequences, not causes, of regeneration, we cannot conclude otherwise than that faith is also a consequence of regeneration, since 1 John 2:29; 4:7, and 5:1 are grammatically identical.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 573.

<sup>32</sup> First John 5:4 is also noteworthy. Though the grammatical construction is not identical, it is nevertheless similar. Here John speaks of the new birth in the perfect

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Given the clarity of the biblical pictures of regeneration, the implications of man's total depravity, and the explicit comments of Jesus and the apostle John, the student of Scripture must conclude that, while regeneration and faith are experienced simultaneously, regeneration logically precedes faith and is its cause. Sinners do not believe in Christ in order to be born again but rather are born again unto believing.

## *The Results of Regeneration*

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The divine life birthed in the soul at regeneration does not lie stagnant after the moment of conversion. In God's bountiful grace, the Spirit continues to progressively strengthen that holy disposition born in regeneration throughout the believer's life. That is to say, regeneration results in sanctification. While a full discussion of sanctification comes later, it is worthwhile to mention several aspects of sanctification that Scripture identifies as results of the new birth.

First, the regenerated believer necessarily makes a practice of righteousness. As the apostle John says, "Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him" (1 John 2:29). The dominating tenor of the believer's life is one of increasing holiness (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 2:10; 4:24). To put it negatively, "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). Man's nature has been fundamentally changed from death in sin to life in Christ (Rom. 6:11), and he thus does not make a practice of sinning. This does not mean that the child of God has ceased entirely from sin at the moment of regeneration (Rom. 7:14–25; 8:12–13), but the believer's life is characterized by putting away patterns of sin and putting on patterns of righteousness (Eph. 4:22–24). Those who profess to be saved but do not progress in cultivating patterns of life in obedience to Christ's commands can have no assurance that they are children of God. Since the new birth is the work of the Spirit (Titus 3:5, see above), those who are born again necessarily bear the fruit of the Spirit and are increasingly characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23).

Second, the regenerate life is marked by overcoming the evil influences of this world system (1 John 5:4). The world is full of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:15–17), all of which are tools of Satan, in whose power the whole

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tense ("everyone who has been born of God") and of a concomitant of the new birth in the present tense ("overcomes the world"). Again, the causal relationship between the two is clear: one does not overcome the world in order to be born again, but rather one overcomes the world as a consequence of being born again. In the next sentence, John identifies the victory that overcomes the world: our faith. Once again, faith is identified as the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.

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world lies (1 John 5:19). He wields these tools as instruments of temptation in the lives of professing believers, earnestly desiring to cause shipwreck of their faith and thus besmirch the name of Christ (1 Tim. 1:19; cf. James 2:17). Yet John declares that the regenerate child of God overcomes these pressures and temptations through a persevering faith that walks in obedience to the Lord. The believer never finally and decisively yields to Satan's temptations, because Christ protects him (1 John 5:18). Believers need not ever live in fear of losing their salvation, for persevering faith is the heritage of those truly born from above.

Third, the child of God obeys willingly and delightfully; for him, "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Self-righteous moralists may, by strong willpower, be able to bring their behavior into conformity with the external standards of God's Word (cf. Matt. 15:8), but they find such a task burdensome. They cannot exclaim, "O how I love your law!" (Ps. 119:97), and "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8). It requires a new nature, re-created in the likeness of God (Eph. 4:24), to delight in obedience. By God's grace, this is the birthright of every true child of God. The regenerated believer is not enslaved to do the duty he hates; rather, by virtue of the Spirit's work, his heart is liberated to love the law he is commanded to follow (Rom. 6:11–22).

Finally, the child of God loves his fellow believers and lives to sacrificially serve them. John writes, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). God himself is love (1 John 4:8, 16); it is his very nature. Those who are begotten of God share in his nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and therefore will reflect his nature by serving and benefitting others (1 John 3:16–18). Those who are truly born again manifest an evident love for the church, for the child of God loves the children of God (1 John 5:1) and is devoted to meeting the needs of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

## CONVERSION

When God shines the light of regeneration into the sinner's heart, he opens the person's spiritual eyes so that he can see the bankruptcy of sin and the worthiness of Christ (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:6), who is perfectly suited to forgive our sins and provide the righteousness we need for eternal life. Finally furnished with the ability to perceive reality as it is, the newly reborn soul necessarily and immediately turns away in revulsion from sin and eagerly runs to embrace Christ. That turning from sin and unbelief is *repentance*, and the eager embrace of Christ as Savior from sin and as Lord over one's life is *faith*. Together, repentance and faith make up the single act of *conversion*.



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It should be apparent that repentance and faith are intimately related and even inseparable from each other—truly two sides of the same coin. In the first place, it is only reasonable; one cannot turn away from something without turning toward something else. But the inseparability of repentance and faith is also a theological necessity. To the regenerate heart, the beauty of Christ's glory is irresistibly compelling, and it outshines the false glories of sin just as the brilliance of the noonday sun renders the stars invisible. To suggest that one might embrace Christ without also decisively purposing to repudiate sin is to suggest that sin is more objectively desirable to the regenerated heart than Christ is. On the contrary, to the newly awakened sinner, Christ is an inestimably valuable treasure, and to gain him, one delightfully forsakes everything (Matt. 13:44–46; Phil. 3:8). Thus, the faith that saves is a repentant faith, just as the repentance that saves is a believing repentance. For this reason, the gospel call to salvation is a summons to both repent and believe (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21; 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9). In true conversion, there is always a turning *from* sin (repentance) and a simultaneous turning *to* God in Christ (faith). It is impossible that one should occur without the other.

Nevertheless, though they are simultaneous actions, in each instance in which they are named together, the New Testament lists repentance first (Mark 1:15; Acts 19:4; 20:21; Heb. 6:1), indicating a logical priority. For this reason, we will treat repentance first and then faith.

## *Repentance*

Biblical repentance is not a mere change of thinking, though it does involve an intellectual acknowledgment of sin and a change of attitude toward it. Neither is it merely shame or sorrow for sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse. True biblical repentance is also a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead. Thus, genuine repentance involves the mind, the heart, and the will.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Geerhardus Vos writes, “Of the three words that are used in the Greek Gospels to describe the process, one emphasizes the emotional element of regret, sorrow over the past evil course of life, *metamelomai*; Matt. 21:29–32; a second expresses reversal of the entire mental attitude, *metanoëō*, Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32; 15:7, 10; the third denotes a change in the direction of life, one goal being substituted for another, *epistréphomai*; Matt. 13:15 (and parallels); Luke 17:4; 22:32. Repentance is not limited to any single faculty of the mind: it engages the entire man, intellect, will and affections” (*The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* [1903; repr., Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972], 92–93).

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Intellectually, repentance begins with a recognition of sin. We must apprehend the truly wicked nature of sin and as a result humbly acknowledge that we are sinners who have broken God's law, have fallen short of his glory, and therefore stand guilty before him. To experience the intellectual aspect of repentance is to declare with Job, "I have uttered what I did not understand" (Job 42:3; cf. 42:6), and to confess as did David, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13; cf. Ps. 51:3–4). It is to humbly confess one's need for grace and mercy and to ask for forgiveness (Ps. 51:1–2).

Emotionally, genuine repentance is marked by a sincere sorrow, remorse, and even mourning over one's sin (cf. Matt. 5:4). Old Testament saints would often act out their sorrowful repentance by smiting their thigh (Jer. 31:19), sitting on an ash heap (Job 42:6), and donning sackcloth and ashes (Jonah 3:5–6; cf. Matt. 11:21). This true, repentant sorrow is distinct from what Paul calls "worldly grief," which produces death (2 Cor. 7:10; cf. Matt. 19:22; 27:3–5). Nevertheless, while sorrow should not be equated strictly with repentance, it is a necessary component of it and is often a powerful impulse to genuinely turning away from sin. As Paul says, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret" (2 Cor. 7:10). Thus, true repentance will always include at least some element of contrition—not sorrow for getting caught, nor sadness because of the consequences, but a spirit broken by the sense of having sinned against God and a longing to be restored to fellowship with him (Ps. 51:12, 17).

Finally, repentance involves a change of direction, a transformation of the will. Far from being only a change of mind, repentance constitutes a determination to abandon stubborn disobedience and surrender the will to Christ. The wicked forsakes his evil thoughts (Isa. 55:7); turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness (Ezek. 33:19); and turns from his wicked way (Jonah 3:10; cf. 2 Chron. 7:14). Repentance is a resolute disowning of oneself and one's sinful way of life and an embrace of Christ for justifying and sanctifying righteousness. As such, while repentance is not to be strictly defined as a change in behavior, a changed life *is* the fruit that genuine repentance will inevitably bear (Isa. 1:16–17; Luke 3:8–14; Acts 26:20). Though sinners are not saved *by* good works, they are saved *for* good works (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14; 3:8). A person who has genuinely repented will stop doing evil and will begin to live righteously. Where there is no observable difference in conduct, there can be no confidence that repentance has taken place (Matt. 3:8; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:17).<sup>34</sup>

In summary, then, the Scriptures teach that repentance begins with the sinner's humble acknowledgment of his sin and need for forgiveness. Understanding the offensiveness of

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<sup>34</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus: What Is Authentic Faith?*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 180, 182.

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his sin before God produces great mourning, sorrow, and even shame and humiliation. His disgust with himself and his unrighteousness leads him to repudiate his wickedness and to decisively turn away from his life of sin. As he turns from his former way of life, he turns to trust and serve the God who is worthy of all worship. In Christ he finds forgiveness and is restored to fellowship with his Creator. Finally, he does not regard that forgiveness as the final step but lovingly, from the heart, purposes to live in obedience to the revealed will of God, empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit. The evidence of his inward repentance is thus manifested in his external deeds.

Repentance is an essential element of conversion and is therefore an indispensable element of the gospel message. Not only is repentance mentioned alongside faith in the proclamation of the gospel (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21; Heb. 6:1), but also many biblical texts call for repentance alone to lay hold of salvation (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 13:3, 5; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30). This does not contradict the truth that faith is the sole instrument of justification. Rather, it illustrates that the relationship between repentance and faith is so intimate that the mention of the one implies the other—that one cannot turn from sin without turning to Christ in faith, and vice versa. Scripture is unmistakably clear: repentance is not an optional element but is an essential component of the true gospel. Those who insist that it is possible to savingly trust in Christ without repenting of sin—to believe in Jesus as Savior but not submit to him as Lord—find themselves in direct contradiction to the gospel according to Jesus and the apostles.<sup>35</sup>

## *Faith*

Whereas repentance is the act of turning *away* from sin, faith is the soul's turn *to* God and trusting in Christ for forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life. As the miracle of the new birth banishes the blindness of spiritual death, the eyes of the sinner's re-created heart look on the glory of Jesus and delight to find in him an utterly sufficient Savior, perfectly suited to cleanse from sin, provide perfect righteousness, and satisfy the soul. Beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), the sinner embraces Jesus with all his heart, entrusting and committing himself to all that Christ is. Therefore, saving faith is a fundamental commitment of the whole person to the whole Christ; with his mind, heart, and will, the believer embraces Jesus as Savior, Advocate, Provider, Sustainer, Counselor, and Lord God.

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<sup>35</sup> For a thorough discussion of the controversy over "Lordship salvation," as well as a thorough refutation of so-called "free grace" theology, see John MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*; and MacArthur, *The Gospel according to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith* (1993; repr., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000).

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Like repentance, then, saving faith consists of intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements: knowledge (Lat. *notitia*), assent (Lat. *assensus*), and trust (Lat. *fiducia*), respectively. The mind embraces knowledge, a recognition and understanding of the truth concerning the person and work of Christ. The heart gives assent, or the settled confidence and affirmation that Christ's salvation is suitable to one's spiritual need. The will responds with trust, the personal commitment to and appropriation of Christ as the only hope for eternal salvation.<sup>36</sup> Each of these components requires further elaboration.

**Knowledge.** The most basic element of faith is knowledge. Contemporary thought conceives of faith as the opposite of knowledge—that faith is what takes over when one does not have sufficient knowledge. However, the biblical conception of faith is not an existential leap in the dark or a sentimental, wish-upon-a-star kind of hope. So far from being an alternative to knowledge, true faith is based on knowledge; it has its sure and solid foundation in the knowledge of divinely revealed truth.

Scripture testifies to this in a number of ways. First, the Bible often represents the knowledge of particular truths as the causal ground of faith. For example, faith in Christ for salvation is grounded on “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 2:16 NASB). It is *because we know* that works do not justify that we believe in Christ for salvation. Similarly, Paul grounds the believer's faith in his future resurrection on the knowledge of Christ's resurrection: “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing [i.e., “because we know”<sup>37</sup>] that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again” (Rom. 6:8–9 NASB; cf. 2 Cor. 4:13–14; 1 Pet. 5:9). These passages make plain that biblical faith and knowledge of the truth are not enemies but that the latter is the ground of the former.

Second, Scripture often employs the phrase “believe that ...” followed by propositional truth claims that identify the content of saving faith.<sup>38</sup> One must believe that Jesus is God (John 8:24; 13:19; cf. Ex. 3:14) and is one with the Father (John 14:10–11); that he is the

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Lat. Latin

Lat. Latin

Lat. Latin

<sup>36</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to the Apostles*, 27.

NASB New American Standard Bible

i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

<sup>37</sup> The participle *eidotes* (lit., “knowing”) here bears a causal force: “because we know.”

See Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 631.

NASB New American Standard Bible

<sup>38</sup> Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 727.

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Messiah and Son of God (John 11:27; 20:31; 1 John 5:1, 5) who was sent from the Father (John 11:42; 16:27, 30; 17:8, 21); that he died for sins and rose from the grave (1 Thess. 4:14; cf. Rom. 10:9); that God exists and “rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6); and that sinners are saved by grace through faith alone (Acts 15:11; cf. 15:9). Since saving faith comes from hearing the gospel message concerning Christ (Rom. 10:17), knowledge of the divinely revealed facts of God’s holiness, sin’s penalty, Christ’s identity, and what he has accomplished for sinners is the very ground of saving faith.

Clearly, then, true faith has objective substance. Believing is not a mindless leap in the dark or an ethereal kind of trust apart from knowledge. The truth of the gospel message as revealed in Christ and in Scripture provides a factual, historical, intellectual basis for our faith. We do not believe according to our subjective whims; we believe the truth (2 Thess. 2:11–12; cf. John 8:46; 1 Tim. 4:3). Faith that is not grounded in this objective, propositional truth is no faith at all.<sup>39</sup>

**Assent.** While knowing the facts is *necessary* to faith, it is not *sufficient*. It is entirely possible to know the truth without believing or embracing it. Many students of Scripture intellectually grasp its great truths yet reject them as false. Many understand the truths of the gospel while failing to repent and trust in Christ. For this reason, faith is said to have an emotional element as well as an intellectual element. Faith not only knows the truth but also assents to and wholeheartedly embraces the truth as it is revealed in Scripture. The truth is known and believed.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of this heartfelt assent as a component of faith when he defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Assurance refers to a foundation, the ground on which something is built. Faith is here described as a supernatural certainty—a God-wrought conviction about the truth of the Bible’s promises and the trustworthiness of Christ. What cannot be seen with the physical eyes is unveiled for the spiritual eyes by faith. Later in the chapter, we learn that Moses’s faith consisted of the resolute conviction that the riches of Christ’s glory were more valuable than the treasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:24–27). He did not just intellectually apprehend that Christ was more precious; he was persuaded in the depths of his heart that it was true. It was Paul’s resolute, faith-filled conviction of the sovereignty of Christ that fueled his endurance through the most intense suffering, for he said, “I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim. 1:12).

With respect to conversion, then, the one who possesses saving faith wholeheartedly embraces the truth concerning his own sinfulness and Christ’s suitability to save him.

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<sup>39</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to the Apostles*, 29–30.



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The newly awakened believer becomes absolutely convinced that he is helpless to address the inevitable misery of his spiritual condition, and he looks on Christ with the certain conviction that Christ's sufficiency is the perfect answer to his spiritual bankruptcy. By this faith the sinner is made well (cf. Mark 10:46–52).

**Trust.** Further still, there is more to faith than merely knowing and embracing the truth. James tells us that the demons know and believe the truth of monotheism (James 2:19). Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a teacher sent from God (John 3:2). Agrippa believed that the Old Testament spoke truth (Acts 26:27). Judas was convinced that Jesus was the Christ (Matt. 27:3–5). Yet none of these possessed saving faith. Faith begins with knowledge and assent, but it does not stop until it reaches the will's utter reliance on Christ for one's personal salvation.<sup>40</sup> It moves beyond "believing *that*" and arrives at "believing *in*"; it moves beyond mentally assenting to truth *about* Christ and arrives at personally trusting *in* Christ and depending *on* him for forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God.

The apostle Paul narrates his own conversion story in Philippians 3. He characterizes the true Christian as one who puts no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3), one who does not look within himself—to his inherited privileges or religious accomplishments—to acquire the righteousness that God requires. In his life as a Pharisee, Paul had indeed put full confidence in his flesh—in his heritage, social standing, religious ritualism, traditionalism, devotion, and sincerity, and even in the external observance of God's commands (Phil. 3:4–6). He trusted in these fleshly credentials to lift him up to reach the standard of God's righteousness. But that error disappeared after he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. When God opened the eyes of Paul's heart in regeneration, all the self-righteousness that Paul had counted on to be gain he came to regard as loss (Phil. 3:7). He counted it all rubbish in order to "gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil. 3:8–9 NKJV). He had turned from depending on himself for righteousness to trusting in Christ alone for righteousness (cf. Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 5:21).

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<sup>40</sup> As John Murray insightfully notes, "Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and it is conviction passing into confidence. Faith cannot stop short of self-commitment to Christ, a transference of reliance upon ourselves and all human resources to reliance upon Christ alone for salvation. It is a receiving and resting upon him" (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 111).

NKJV New King James Version

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Not only does the one with saving faith trust in Christ for righteousness, he also receives Christ as treasure. Paul regarded knowing Jesus personally to be of such surpassing value that he was willing to lose everything in his life to gain him (Phil. 3:8). Jesus himself spoke of conversion as finding a treasure (Matt. 13:44–46). The man whose heart has been awakened in regeneration is like a man who stumbles onto a priceless buried treasure. And because of the surpassing value of the treasure that is Christ Jesus, the sinner willingly forsakes everything he has so he can lay hold of the Savior whom he regards as supremely precious (Luke 9:23; 14:26–33; cf. Matt. 10:37–39). These texts caution the student of Scripture against conceiving of saving faith as that which merely uses Christ to escape punishment. Saving faith is preeminently an eager embrace of a *person*—a wholehearted, delightful reception of Christ for the fullness of who he is, namely, the source of all righteousness, life, and satisfaction for the newborn soul (Matt. 5:6; John 4:13–14; 6:35).

Finally, in this volitional aspect of faith, one not only trusts in Christ but also entrusts oneself *to* Christ, for believing in a person necessarily involves a personal commitment. The one who trusts Christ places himself in the custody of Christ for both life and death. The believer relies on the Lord's counsel, trusts in his goodness, and entrusts himself for time and eternity to his guardianship. Saving faith, then, is the sinner, in the whole of his being, embracing all of Christ. That is why Scripture often uses such metaphors for faith as looking to Jesus (John 3:14–15; cf. Num. 21:9), eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:50–58; cf. 4:14), receiving him (John 1:12), and coming to him (Matt. 11:28; John 5:40; 6:35, 37, 44, 65; 7:37–38). One demonstrates his faith that bread satisfies hunger not merely by confessing, "Bread satisfies!" but by eating the bread. In the same way, one demonstrates his faith in Christ not merely by saying, "I believe!" but by coming to Christ, receiving all that he is, and entrusting to him all that the believer is. In summary, faith is leaning wholly on Christ—for redemption, for righteousness, for counsel, for fellowship, for sustenance, for direction, for help, for his lordship, and for all in life that can truly satisfy.

This means that true, saving faith necessarily works itself out in loving obedience (cf. Gal. 5:6). The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is dedicated to illustrating this sole principle. After defining the nature of true faith in the opening verses, the author scans the whole of redemptive history to demonstrate that faith *works*. Faith offers (Heb. 11:4), walks (11:5), builds (11:7), blesses (11:20–21), hides (11:23), leaves (11:24–27), conquers (11:30), and more. In short, faith obeys. It compels one to act in accordance with the truth that he professes to believe. At conversion, saving faith does nothing but passively receive the provision of Christ. Yet true faith never remains passive; it immediately goes to work—not as a means of earning divine favor but as a consequence of having received the grace of God that works mightily within us (Col. 1:29). As we work out our salvation with fear

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and trembling, it is God who works in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).<sup>41</sup>

## *Gifts That Keep On Giving*

Two other features of repentance and faith must not go without mention. First, both repentance and faith are sovereign gifts of God himself. While it is true that repentant faith is held out to sinners as their responsibility and the condition for their justification, the corruption of their mind, affections, and will makes it impossible for them to truly repent and believe. It is only by the sovereign work of the Spirit in regeneration, renewing our heart and opening our spiritual eyes, that we are enabled to turn from sin and self and trust in Christ alone for righteousness. For this reason, Scripture speaks of repentant faith not as a sovereign decision of the human will but as that which is supernaturally granted as a gift of God's grace. Both repentance (Acts 5:31; Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25) and faith (Acts 18:27; Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 1:29) are sovereign gifts from God.

Second, as a divine gift, the repentant faith that saves could never be transient or temporary. It has an abiding quality that guarantees it will endure to the end, so that repentance and faith characterize the lifestyle of the true Christian. Thus, when Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive a brother who sins against him (Matt. 18:21), Jesus responded, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3–4). The principle is that one ought to repent as often as one sins. In his letters to the churches of Asia, Christ instructed believers (i.e., "those whom I love") at the church of Laodicea to "be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19), which shows that repentance is not just a one-time event at conversion but is expected even of true Christians. The Lord also taught his disciples to be in the habit of praying for forgiveness (Matt. 6:12), which necessarily requires ongoing repentance. The apostle John

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<sup>41</sup> MacArthur explains, "Does this mix faith and works, as some are fond of saying? Not at all. Let there be no confusion on this point. Faith is an *internal* reality with *external* consequences. When we say that faith encompasses obedience, we are speaking of the God-given *attitude* of obedience, not trying to make *works* a part of the definition of faith. God makes the believing heart an obedient heart; that is, a heart eager to obey. Faith itself is complete before one work of obedience ever issues forth. "But make no mistake—real faith will always produce righteous works. Faith is the root; works are the fruit. Because God Himself is the vinedresser, fruit is guaranteed. That's why whenever Scripture gives examples of faith—as here in Hebrews 11—faith inevitably is seen as obedient, working, and active" (*Gospel according to the Apostles*, 34). i.e. *id est* (Lat., "that is")

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similarly states, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The present tense of “confess” indicates ongoing activity. Thus, believers show that they are the ones God has forgiven and cleansed because they are continually confessing their sins. In sum, though justification frees the believer from the penalty of sin, the presence of sin remains in his unredeemed flesh. Therefore, because he continues to sin against God and others, he must continue to repent. In a believer’s life, a spirit of repentance must be as indwelling as is his remaining sin.

The same is true of faith.<sup>42</sup> The familiar words of Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous shall live by his faith” (cf. Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38), speak not of a momentary act of believing but of a living, enduring trust in God. Hebrews 3:14 emphasizes the permanence of genuine faith. Its very durability is proof of its reality: “We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” The faith that God gives can never evaporate, and the work of salvation cannot ultimately be thwarted (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:22–23).<sup>43</sup> The apostle Paul summarizes the totality of the Christian life when he declares, “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20; cf. Heb. 10:39). The Christian’s life is to be distinguished by daily confession of, mourning over, and turning from sin, as well as by a persevering faith in the person of Christ and the promises of God.

## UNION WITH CHRIST

One of the most precious truths in all Scripture is the doctrine of the believer’s union with the Lord Jesus Christ. The concept of being united to Christ speaks of the most vital spiritual intimacy that one can imagine between the Lord and his people. While Christ relates to believers as Lord, Master, Savior, and Teacher, they are not merely associated with Christ as the object of his saving grace and love. It is not that Christians merely worship Jesus, obey him, or pray to him, though surely those privileges would be enough. Rather, they are so intimately identified with him and he with them that Scripture says they are united—he is in them and they are in him. The Lord and his people share a common spiritual life, such that the apostle Paul could say that our life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), that Christ is himself our life (Col. 3:4), and that Christ lives in us (Gal. 2:20). United to his people in this way, Christ acts as their representative and substitute; that is, that which Christ has accomplished on behalf of his people God reckons to their account, just as if they had done it themselves. Because of union with

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<sup>42</sup> This paragraph is adapted from John MacArthur, “The Lordship Controversy,” *Grace to You*, accessed April 14, 2016, <http://www.gtycanada.org/Resources/Articles/A293>.

<sup>43</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*, 189.

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Christ, believers have been crucified with him (Gal. 2:20), have died with him (Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:20), have been buried with him (Rom. 6:3–4), have been raised with him (Eph. 2:5–6; Col. 3:1), and have even been enthroned in heaven with him (Eph. 2:6). He is thus the Mediator of all the benefits of salvation, for God our Father “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*” (Eph. 1:3 NASB).

Such intimate spiritual union is unique to Christianity. In no other religion is the object of worship said to become the life of the worshiper. Muslims do not speak of being in Allah or in Muhammad; Buddhists never say that they are in Buddha. They may follow the teachings of their respective leaders, but Christians alone are said to be *in Christ*, united to him as their representative, substitute, and Mediator.

This concept of union with Christ is as pervasive as it is precious. Most commonly represented by the tiny preposition “in,” the believer’s union with Christ permeates the New Testament. Believers are often said to be “in Christ” (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17), “in the Lord” (Rom. 16:11), and “in him” (1 John 5:20). Similarly, Christ is also said to be in his people (Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 3:17), a notion that Paul defines as the very “hope of glory” itself (Col. 1:27). Sometimes both of these aspects of union with Christ are presented in the same text, only further emphasizing the intimacy of the mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer (e.g., John 6:56; 15:4; 1 John 4:13). Clearly, the importance of the believer’s union with Christ cannot be overstated.

## *Union with Christ and Soteriology*

How the doctrine of union with Christ relates to the rest of soteriology has long been a matter of discussion. That is because it is not merely another phase in the application of redemption, like regeneration, faith, or justification. Instead, union with Christ is the matrix out of which all other soteriological doctrines flow. Indeed, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:3, our union with Christ is the source of every spiritual blessing we receive—from the Father’s election in eternity past, to the Son’s redemptive life, death, burial, and resurrection, all the way to the glorification of the saints with Christ in heaven. For this reason, the great theologian John Murray called the believer’s union with Christ “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”<sup>44</sup> It is the unifying principle of all soteriology, spanning from eternity past to eternity future.

In the first place, the Father’s election is rooted in Christ. Paul says, “[The Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). He also tells us in 2

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

<sup>44</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161.



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Timothy 1:9 that God gave us grace “in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” Though the Father’s work of election occurred before we even existed, his choice to save his people is nevertheless in Christ. This means there was never a time when God contemplated his elect apart from their vital union to Christ.

Second, Scripture teaches that God reckoned the elect to be united with Christ throughout every act of the Son’s accomplishment of redemption. It is in him we have redemption and forgiveness (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). We are united to him in his perfect life of obedience. As he “fulfill[ed] all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15), so also those united to him are clothed in his righteousness (Gal. 3:27), that is, they are credited with his obedience (Rom. 5:19; cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 15:22). This union was also the ground on which our sin could be justly imputed to Christ. The Father counts the elect to have lived Jesus’s life because he counts Jesus to have lived our lives and thus he punished him accordingly (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). That is why we are said to have “died with Christ” (Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:20; cf. Col. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:11), “our old self [having been] crucified with him” (Rom. 6:6). Not only this, but we were “buried with him” (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), raised from the dead with him (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12; 3:1), and even “seated ... with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). His life is our life, his punishment our punishment, his death our death, his resurrection our resurrection, his righteousness our righteousness, his ascension and glorification our ascension and glorification. In summary, though we had not yet been born, God nevertheless counted his people to be in union with their Savior throughout the accomplishment of his redemptive work. Christ did not live, die, and rise again for a faceless, nameless group; redemption was remarkably personal, as the body was always reckoned to be united to the head (Eph. 5:23, 25).

Third, just as the plan and accomplishment of redemption occur in Christ, so too does the application of redemption. Believers are born again unto saving faith in union with Christ. Paul describes the believer’s regeneration when he says that they have been “made ... alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5) and are “created in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:10). If anyone is united to Christ, he is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), which is another way of saying that one is born again in union with Christ. This impartation of new spiritual life issues immediately in repentant faith, the instrument by which one subjectively appropriates all the spiritual blessings planned by the Father and purchased by the Son (Gal. 2:20). United to Christ by faith, believers lay hold of Christ’s righteousness (Phil. 3:9) and so are justified in him (Gal. 2:17), for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Thus declared righteous in Christ, believers are adopted into the family of God through Christ (Eph. 1:5; cf. Gal. 3:26) and are sanctified in him for holiness and service to God (1 Cor. 1:2).

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Union with Christ is also the source of the believer's progressive sanctification and perseverance. Christ is called our sanctification because our sanctification flows from him (1 Cor. 1:30). We bring forth the fruit of righteousness only as we stay connected to our vine (John 15:4–5). The members of the body grow into maturity as they receive the communication of life from their head (Eph. 4:15–16). Thus, believers "[died] to the Law through the body of Christ," because it is only as they are "joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead," that they might walk in his resurrection life and thereby "bear fruit for God" (Rom. 7:4 NASB; cf. 6:4–11). Increasing in holiness is impossible apart from union with Christ. Further, it is on the basis of this union that true believers always persevere until the end (John 10:27–28), for while they are in Christ nothing can separate them from the Father's love (Rom. 8:38–39). Indeed, not even death severs this union, for Christians who die are called the "dead in Christ" (1 Thess. 4:14, 16).

Finally, it is on the basis of union with Christ that believers will be raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits of our resurrection, as Paul comforts the Corinthians: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:20–22). Paul reasons elsewhere, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:5; cf. 8:17).

It is plain, therefore, that the believer's union with Christ encompasses every step of salvation, from election in eternity past to glorification in eternity future. Those whom God has chosen, whom Christ has purchased, and to whom the Spirit gives life are never contemplated apart from their union with Christ. And yet this union is not actualized in the sinner's experience before his conversion, for the apostle Paul speaks of a time when believers were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). He continues, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). That is to say, the sinner passes from separation to union with Christ when he becomes a partaker in the gospel purchased by Jesus's blood, the benefits of which he lays hold of by faith alone (Rom. 3:25; 4:24; Gal. 3:24). It is for this reason that we treat union with Christ at this point in discussing the application of redemption.

## *The Nature of the Believer's Union with Christ*

What exactly does it mean that believers are united to Christ? Scripture answers by illustrating the intimacy of this union with a number of metaphors. By understanding

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these metaphors, we can reach sound biblical conclusions concerning the nature of our union with Christ.

First, Scripture uses the picture of a building and its foundation. Paul speaks of the church as God's household, a spiritual building laid on the foundation of the divine revelation communicated by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19–22). Just as every stone in a literal building is cut precisely to fit snugly, strongly, and beautifully with every other part and to rest perfectly on the foundation, so also does the unity and stability of the church depend on Christ, her foundation. It is only by being built on and permanently united to Christ, the cornerstone, that believers find their spiritual existence, support, and security to be well-founded.

Second, the believer's union with Christ is pictured as the union between the vine and its branches (John 15:4–5). Just as the branches depend on the vine for life, strength, and sustenance, so also does the believer depend on union with Christ for all spiritual nourishment and growth. Apart from Christ the vine, we the branches can bear no fruit; we are entirely useless, destitute of any spiritual vitality unless we remain connected to our vine.

Third, Scripture also uses the metaphor of marriage to portray the union between Christ and his church. The church is often pictured as Christ's bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7; 21:9), and Christ as the husband and head of the church (Eph. 5:22–33). In Ephesians 5, Paul based all his instructions for the husband-wife relationship on the relationship between Christ and *his* bride. At the end of this discussion, Paul declares of marriage, "This mystery is profound; and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). The parable of marriage illustrates that the believer's union with Christ is intimate, organic (one-flesh), legal, and unbreakable.

Fourth, perhaps the greatest metaphor given to illustrate union with Christ is the union of head and body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12–13, 27; Eph. 1:22–23). Also pictured in the marriage text of Ephesians 5, Paul says, "Christ is the head of the church, his body" (Eph. 5:23). The one who nourishes and cherishes his own body loves *himself* (Eph. 5:28–30), because there is such an intimate union between the head and the body. Believers' bodies are members of Christ's own body, so much so that to unite oneself to a prostitute is to unite Christ to a prostitute (1 Cor. 6:15–16). Thus, what happens to the head happens to the body, and what happens to the body happens to the head. This metaphor lays the groundwork for understanding the *legal and representational nature* of the believer's union with Christ, where Christ obeys (Rom. 5:18–19; cf. 1 Cor. 1:30), dies (Col. 2:20), rises (Col. 3:1), and ascends (Eph. 2:6) in their place, such that they are reckoned to have done all those things. Because this union is a legal union—that is, because Christ is the representative head of his people—there is no element of Christ's earthly life, death,

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burial, resurrection, and ascension in which the believer does not partake, on account of being in him.

In summary, then, we can speak of at least five characteristics of the believer's union with Christ. First, it is an organic union. That is to say, Christ and believers form one body, of which he is the head and they are the members. Thus, what is true of the head is true of the body. Second, it is a legal union, fitting Christ to be the representative head of his people and fitting them to be the beneficiary of his substitutionary work of salvation. Third, it is a vital union, in which all spiritual life and vitality flows from the vine to the branches, such that the life of Christ becomes the dominating and animating principle of believers' lives (Gal. 2:20). Fourth, it may be called a spiritual union, not only because spiritual life is communicated to and strengthened within the believer but also because this union has its source in and is mediated by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:13; John 14:16–18). Finally, it is a permanent union that can never be severed, as nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in—that is, which is ours in union with—Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 8:38–39).

## *Implications of the Believer's Union with Christ*

The foregoing study provides a number of implications with respect to the believer's union with Christ. First, since the Son is united to the Father and to the Spirit, believers, by their participation in Christ, are also made one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus thus prays that the unity of the church would reflect the unity he shares with his Father (John 17:21). Therefore, we are said to be in the Father (1 Thess. 1:1) and the Father in us (1 John 4:15). Similarly, believers are said to be in the Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and the Spirit in us (2 Tim. 1:14). In an unspeakable mystery, we who were once separated, alienated, and without God in the world are swept up into the divine life of the triune God himself (2 Pet. 1:4). This is great cause for worship.

Second, those who are one with Christ are also one with everyone else who is one with Christ. This speaks of the fundamental unity of all believers in Christ. Christians do not have a merely *personal* relationship with Jesus, but rather a *corporate* relationship with him as well, for we are united to all who are united to him. We are the unified members of his body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:26; Eph. 5:23), the living stones in the spiritual house built on Christ the foundation (Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5). To suggest that one can be united to Jesus apart from his church is to tear the head from the body. There is no union with Christ that does not issue in fellowship with his church (1 Cor. 1:9; cf. 1 John 1:3). Indeed, the unity of the Trinity is the ground of Jesus's prayer for the unity of the church (John 17:21). What a motivation for diligently pursuing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace among all believers (Eph. 4:3)!

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Finally, we must grasp the significance that every spiritual benefit received in salvation comes only through Christ. As John Owen wrote, this union “is the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our *union* with Christ. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our perseverance, our fruitfulness, our resurrection, our glory.”<sup>45</sup> It is only as we share in Christ that we have a share in what is his. No spiritual blessing in all the world is found anywhere but in Jesus. Therefore, if we are to have an interest in Christ’s blessings, we must have an interest in his person. The gifts are wrapped up only in the Giver.

## JUSTIFICATION

In the previous section, we examined how the believer’s union with Christ is the fountain out of which every spiritual blessing flows. The immediate result of that union is God’s free gift of justification, by which he declares believers to be righteous because of their union with the Righteous One, the Lord Jesus. The application of redemption continues to unfold. In regeneration, God performs that divine operation in the sinner’s soul whereby he births new spiritual life in him. In conversion, God grants the necessary gifts of repentance and faith by which we are united to Christ and lay hold of the blessings of salvation. Then, in justification, God legally declares that we are no longer deemed guilty under the divine law but are forgiven and counted righteous in God’s sight.

In justification, God provides the answer to mankind’s most basic theological and religious question: How can sinners come to be in a right relationship with the holy God of the universe? In every age of human history, religion has answered that we can get to heaven by being good people. The various religious systems of the world concoct lists of rituals and ceremonies that must be performed to achieve a measure of righteousness that might avail in the courtroom of God. However, the answer that Jesus gave was that if man is to enter heaven, he needs a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of even the most religiously devout people in the world (Matt. 5:20). In fact, he needs to be perfect, just as God is perfect (Matt. 5:48). If man is to be reconciled to God, he does not just need to be a good person; he needs to be a perfect person. He needs a perfect righteousness, for God himself is perfect and requires perfection.

At the very outset, then, it is necessary to understand that salvation is a matter of righteousness. People are condemned to eternal spiritual death because they lack the righteousness that a perfectly holy God possesses and requires for fellowship with him. And the only way sinners can ever be reconciled to God is by being given the righteousness that belongs to God himself. The gospel saves because God gives his very

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<sup>45</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 21 in *Works of John Owen* (1648; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 150, italics original.



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own righteousness to man (Rom. 1:16–17; 3:20–26; 10:3–4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:21; 3:21–24; Phil. 3:9). Because of this, the doctrine of justification flows from the very heart of the gospel and the soul of Christianity itself. It is, as Martin Luther said, the article by which the church stands or falls,<sup>46</sup> for it concerns the only way sinful man can be declared righteous in God’s sight.<sup>47</sup>

Man’s answer to this fundamental question is to try to order his life by some moral or ritualistic standard; if he does that successfully, he can contribute something to his salvation and thus achieve a righteousness acceptable to his god. Yet the Bible consistently denies that anyone can be justified by his own works. Rather, salvation is God’s righteousness imputed to the believer by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Take a moment to read the following passages: Romans 3:21–28; Galatians 2:16; and Galatians 3:21–26, where the distinction between faith and works is clearest.

These texts demonstrate that there are only two religions: the religion of human achievement, by which man works to contribute to his own righteousness; and the religion of divine accomplishment, whereby God accomplishes righteousness by the holy life and substitutionary death of the Son of God and then freely gives that righteousness as a gift through faith alone. The religion of human achievement encompasses every other religious system in the history of mankind—from the pursuit of nirvana in Buddhism, to the five pillars of Islam, to the sacraments and acts of penance of Roman Catholicism. Biblical Christianity is the lone religion of divine accomplishment. Because Christians are justified by faith alone, their standing before God is not in any way related to personal merit. Good works and practical holiness are not the grounds for acceptance with God. God receives as righteous those who believe, not because of any good thing he sees in them—not even because of his own sanctifying work in their lives—but solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which is graciously reckoned to their account through

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<sup>46</sup> “Because if this article [i.e., justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses” (Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Weimar, Germany: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993], 40:3.352.3).

<sup>47</sup> To the English reader, the intimate relationship between “righteousness” and “justification” may not be as obvious as it would have been to a Greek reader. In the original language of the New Testament, the words “righteous,” “righteousness,” “justify,” and “justification” all come from the same root word and appear in the following respective forms: *dikaios*, *dikaiosynē*, *dikaioō*, and *dikaiōsis* (and in Hebrew: *tsaddiq*, *tsedeq/tsedaqah*, *tsadoq/tsadeq*). To be justified, then, simply means to be declared righteous in the sight of God, as will be developed more fully below.

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faith alone. As Paul says, “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, we may define justification as that instantaneous act of God whereby, as a gift of his grace, he imputes to a believing sinner the full and perfect righteousness of Christ through faith alone and legally declares him perfectly righteous in his sight, forgiving the sinner of all unrighteousness and thus delivering him from all condemnation.<sup>49</sup> We will unpack the elements of that definition throughout the rest of this section.

## *The Nature of Justification: A Legal Declaration*

Before examining any particular aspect of justification, we must be clear about what the Bible teaches concerning the nature of justification itself. Justification is a legal, or forensic, declaration of righteousness, not an actual impartation or infusion of righteousness. It describes what God *declares* about the believer, not what he *does to change* the believer. In fact, justification itself effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner’s nature or character.<sup>50</sup> It is an instantaneous change of one’s status before God, not a gradual transformation that takes place within the one who is justified.<sup>51</sup>

Legal declarations like this are fairly common in everyday life. When a jury foreman announces to the court that a defendant is not guilty, the legal status of the defendant changes instantly. Seconds before, the law regarded him as “the accused,” innocent until proven guilty. But as a result of the foreman’s verdict, he is not guilty in the eyes of the law. Yet the jury’s verdict does not *make* the man not guilty; his own actions are the basis of his guilt or innocence. Neither does it declare his life free from any and all evil. The foreman’s announcement simply declares the defendant’s status before the law. In a similar way, the justification spoken of in Scripture is God’s divine verdict of “not guilty—fully righteous” pronounced on the sinner. In the case of justification, it is not that the accused is innocent but that another has paid in full the penalty for his crimes.

Disagreement over the nature of justification is a key issue that divides biblical Christianity from Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholic theology teaches that justification is not merely forensic but transformative. In other words, according to Roman Catholic teaching, “to justify” does not mean “to *declare* righteous” but “to *make* righteous.” Now, it is true that the saving grace of God is transformative; those who are declared righteous in conversion will be progressively made righteous throughout the course of their

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<sup>48</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to the Apostles*, 69–70.

<sup>49</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*, 196.

<sup>50</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to the Apostles*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*, 196.

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Christian lives. However, this progressive transformation defines the reality not of biblical justification but of sanctification. By failing to distinguish these two intimately related yet nevertheless distinct applications of redemption, Roman Catholicism collapses sanctification into justification. The inevitable consequence is that the believer's own imperfect righteousness replaces the perfect righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of justification. The result is "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law," which, as Paul says in Philippians 3:9, is not the saving righteousness of God. Failing to understand the nature of justification as a legal declaration and instead mischaracterizing it as a transformative process destroys the very foundation of the gospel.

Scripture itself testifies to this truth, for the biblical writers often use the terms for justification and righteousness in a way that must be declarative rather than transformative.<sup>52</sup> In the Old Testament, the word is often used in judicial contexts (Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:31–32; Job 9:15; Isa. 43:9, 26; Jer. 12:1). Once again, judges do not *make* people righteous or wicked. They do not infuse righteousness or wickedness into the character of a person. Instead, they merely declare a defendant to be either righteous or guilty. Indeed, God declares, "he who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 17:15; cf. Isa. 5:23). If justification were transformative, how could it be said that making a wicked person righteous is an abomination? Transforming the character of a wicked person and infusing him with righteousness would be a righteous act! Thus, a transformative understanding of justification violates the sense of these texts. To justify the wicked is not to make him righteous but to declare him righteous when he is not.

Further, justification is shown to be declarative and not transformative in those instances in which God is the one said to be justified. In Luke 7:29 the people are said to have "declared God just" (KJV, "justified God"). If the sense of justification were transformative, this would mean the people effected a positive moral transformation in

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<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that Scripture never uses these terms in an ethical sense (see, e.g., Ps. 11:7; 1 Tim. 6:11). However, as Thomas Schreiner notes, "The ethical use of the term in some contexts doesn't necessitate the conclusion that the term isn't forensic in other ... texts" (*Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters*, The Five Solas [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015], 158n1). The question is, in those key texts that describe the saving righteousness of God granted to sinners, does context support a forensic understanding of justification? We answer in the affirmative.

KJV King James Version

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God, which is nothing short of blasphemy. The ESV properly brings out the sense in the translation: “declared ... just.” That is, God’s righteousness was vindicated and demonstrated (cf. Rom. 3:26).

In addition, justification is often clearly contrasted with condemnation (Rom. 5:18; 8:33–34; 2 Cor. 3:9; cf. Job 9:20; Ps. 94:21; Prov. 17:15). But to condemn someone does not mean to make someone wicked; it means to render a verdict and declare that he is wicked. For the parallel between justification and condemnation to hold, we must also understand that justification does not mean to make righteous but to declare righteous.

Therefore, when we turn to texts that speak of God justifying the believer in a salvific sense (e.g., Rom. 3:20–28; 4:4–5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 21–26; 5:4), we ought to understand them to be referring to God’s instantaneous declaration that the sinner is in a right standing before him. These passages teach that God declares the believer to be righteous as a gift of his grace, which the believer receives by faith alone apart from works.

## *The Ground of Justification: Imputed Righteousness*

But how is such a declaration by God just? Proverbs 17:15 says, “He who justifies the wicked ... [is] an abomination to the Lord.” And yet we are told in Romans 4:5 that God justifies the *ungodly*. How can God declare to be righteous those who are actually guilty, and not participate in something abominable? The answer to that question is the doctrine of imputation, wherein sinners who are unrighteous are counted to be righteous on the basis of Christ’s work. This is a twofold act; God imputes—that is, counts, credits, or reckons—our sin to Christ and punishes him in our place, and he imputes Christ’s righteousness to us and grants us eternal life in him.

**Forgiveness of Sins: The Imputation of Our Sin to Christ.** First, God imputes our sin to Christ: “For our sake he [the Father] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). Now, in what sense did the Father “make” the Son “sin” on our behalf? In only one sense: the Father counted Jesus to have committed all the sins of all those who would ever repent and believe in him. He did not actually make Jesus a sinner; it would be blasphemous to suggest that the God-man was actually made a sinner, for God cannot sin. Instead, the Father judicially reckoned Christ to have committed the sins of those for whom he died. Just as the scapegoat bore the guilt of Israel when Aaron confessed the people’s sins over its head (Lev. 16:21), so “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6), such that Christ actually “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Isa. 53:4–6). And just as the blood of the goat of the sin offering was sprinkled on the

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ESV English Standard Version  
e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

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mercy seat to propitiate God's wrath (Lev. 16:15), so also was Christ "put forward as a propitiation by his blood" (Rom. 3:25).<sup>53</sup> Though innumerable sinners will escape divine punishment, no sin will ever go unpunished, for every sin of the elect has been reckoned to Christ and has been punished in him on the cross. In this way, divine justice is fully satisfied. Sin has not been merely swept under the rug; it has been justly punished in a substitute. This is the gospel through which God demonstrates his righteousness, "so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

Therefore, because the believer's sins have been imputed to and punished in Christ, they are not counted against him but are forgiven and covered (Rom. 4:7–8). Therefore, the justified believer faces no condemnation (Rom. 8:1, 33–34) but enjoys peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and the sure hope of eternal life (Rom. 8:30; Titus 3:7).

**Provision of Righteousness: The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness to Us.** But the forgiveness of sins does not exhaust God's work in justification. In fact, if the only benefit believers received in justification were the forgiveness of our sins, we could not be saved. The old Sunday school definition of justification—"just as if I'd never sinned"—is inadequate, because salvation is not merely a matter of sinlessness but of righteousness (Matt. 5:20, 48). The law of God consists in both positive demands and penal sanctions. That is, it requires both (1) that God's creatures perform certain duties suitable to his righteousness and (2) that they undergo a certain punishment if they fail to perform those duties. Man has failed to do both. We do not live lives of perfect righteousness, walking in obedience to God in all things, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Nor could we pay the penalty that our disobedience demands without perishing eternally in hell. Therefore, if we are to be saved, our substitute must not only pay our penalty by absorbing the wrath of God against our sin but must also obey all the positive demands of the law that were required of us.

This twofold nature of Christ's substitutionary work is sometimes referred to as his *passive obedience* and *active obedience*.<sup>54</sup> Without the positive provision of righteousness,

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<sup>53</sup> The word for mercy seat in Leviticus 16:15 is the same as the word for propitiation in Romans 3:25: *hilastērion*.

<sup>54</sup> John Murray explains, "The law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words,



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mere forgiveness would leave us in a state of innocence or moral neutrality, as Adam was before the fall—reckoned as never having sinned but as never having obeyed either. For this reason, Scripture speaks of the justified sinner being counted righteous in addition to being forgiven. The apostle Paul states, “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:4–5; cf. Gen. 15:6; Isa. 61:10).

In the next chapter, Paul identifies the righteousness that is imputed to believers to be Christ’s own righteousness. In Romans 5:12–19, Paul compares and contrasts the two representative heads of humanity: (1) Adam and (2) Christ, the “last Adam” (see 1 Cor. 15:45). His argument climaxes in Romans 5:18–19:

Therefore, as through the one man’s [Adam’s] trespass there resulted condemnation to all men, so also through the one man’s [Christ’s] righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were constituted sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be constituted righteous. (author’s trans.)<sup>55</sup>

Paul’s main argument is as follows: Adam disobeyed God, and his disobedience was counted for condemnation to all who were in him. In the same way, Christ obeyed God, and his obedience was counted for righteousness to all who are in him. So, far from being a “legal fiction,” both the imputation of sin and the imputation of righteousness have a basis in the actual, lived-out actions of Adam and Christ.

In justification, then, God not only satisfies the penal demands of the law by imputing our sin to Christ and punishing him in our place; he also satisfies the positive demands of the law by imputing Christ’s righteousness to us. We thus “become” the righteousness of God in Christ in the same way Christ was “made” sin for us: by judicial reckoning, that is, by imputation (2 Cor. 5:21). In justification, the perfect righteousness that God requires (Matt. 5:20, 48) is not worked in us in a transformative sense but is credited to us through our union with Christ, the Righteous One, who has fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf (Matt. 3:15; Rom. 10:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:27). When we are “found in him,” we do not have a righteousness of our own derived through commandment keeping; rather, we

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he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God’s law. The passive obedience refers to the former and the active obedience to the latter” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 21–22).

<sup>55</sup> For an explanation of this translation, see MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, p. 617nn140–41.

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lay hold of the external righteousness of God that comes through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:9).<sup>56</sup>

In summary, in Christ we have a substitute who has both paid our penalty *and* achieved our righteousness. Christ accomplished forgiveness by atoning for our sins on the cross. Just as our sins were reckoned to *his* account, in the same manner his righteousness is counted as *ours*. His perfect righteousness is thus the ground on which we stand before God. Sinners are not justified because of some good thing in them; God can declare us righteous—he can justify the ungodly and yet remain just—because he graciously imputes to us the perfect righteousness of his own dear Son. Thus, the sole ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ counted to be ours as a gift by grace alone (cf. Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:7).

## *The Means of Justification: Faith Alone*

Christ's accomplishment of redemption occurred two thousand years ago, apart from any human influence. But how can the objective work of Christ be applied to me personally? By what means can my sins be imputed to Christ and his righteousness be imputed to me? The answer Scripture consistently gives is that we are justified through faith alone, apart from works. Faith unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his punishment counts for our punishment and his righteousness counts for our righteousness.

The clearest exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith alone comes in Paul's letters, especially the book of Romans (3:22–28; 5:1; 9:30; 10:4, 6, 10) and Galatians (2:16; 3:22, 24, 26). Take time to read each of those referenced verses. You will discover that one must despair of being declared righteous through his own works and trust in Christ alone for righteousness.

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<sup>56</sup> Some theologians object that because Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God,” he therefore does not refer to the obedience of Christ. But compare 2 Pet. 1:1: “the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Further, the righteousness imputed to believers is the righteousness of God *precisely because* it is the righteousness of Christ (cf. Rom. 1:17; 3:21–22; 10:3–4). As Murray argues, “It is the righteousness of the God-man, a righteousness which measures up to the requirements of our sinful and sin-cursed situation, a righteousness which meets all the demands of a complete and irrevocable justification, and a righteousness fulfilling all these demands because it is a righteousness of divine property and character, a righteousness undefiled and inviolable” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 128).

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Although Jesus never formally explained the doctrine of justification (as Paul does in Romans and Galatians), the doctrine of *sola fide* underlies and permeates all his gospel preaching. For example, in John 5:24 Jesus declared, “Whoever hears my word ... has passed from death to life.” Without undergoing any sacrament or ritual, and without any waiting period or purgatory, the believer passes from death to life. The thief on the cross is another example. On the most meager evidence of his faith, Jesus told him he would be in heaven that very day (Luke 23:43). No sacrament or work was required for him to procure salvation.

But the one occasion where Jesus actually declared someone “justified” provides the best insight into the way he taught the doctrine. In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus tells a parable of a revered Pharisee who trusts in his own good deeds for his righteousness, in contrast to a despised tax collector who looked entirely outside of himself to God for forgiveness. In a shocking twist, Jesus declares that the believing tax collector went to his house justified, while the working Pharisee remained dead in his sins. The tax collector sought God’s favor not on the basis of anything that he had done—not even anything that God had accomplished in him—but only because of what God had accomplished on his behalf. He knew he owed an impossible debt that he knew he could not pay—that his best works were sin—and so he did not offer to do anything for God but looked for God to do for him what he could not do for himself. He went away without performing any works of penance, sacraments, or rituals, and yet was declared righteous. Apart from any works whatsoever, he was justified by means of faith alone.

Perhaps the clearest affirmation of justification by faith alone comes in Romans 4, as Paul turns to God’s dealings with Abraham to illustrate that his gospel has ancient roots. In verse 3, he cites Genesis 15:6, noting that God imputed righteousness to Abraham by means of Abraham’s faith. His works had absolutely nothing to do with it, for Paul goes on to say, “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who *does not work* but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:4–5). Here Paul explicitly negates the teaching that works constitute any part of the ground of justification. If we were to perform any good work for our salvation, the righteousness that would result could never properly be called a gift. The worker earns wages. But the recipient of salvation is “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24), and a gift can only be given apart from any work. The glorious consequence of this precious doctrine is that salvation is totally free. With an empty hand, the sinner lays hold of the righteousness of Christ through faith alone.

It is important to state that faith in Christ is not the *ground* of the believer’s righteousness but merely the *means*, or instrument, through which we receive righteousness. This is an important distinction, because many people rest their hope for heaven on the fact that

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they had the good sense to believe the gospel. But such an understanding undermines the truth that we are saved by grace alone. Righteousness cannot be based on my faith without that righteousness becoming “a righteousness of my own” (Phil. 3:9). If saving righteousness is grounded on the sinner doing anything—even believing—it is no longer an alien righteousness given as a gift and therefore cannot be the righteousness of God that is required for salvation. In that case, faith would be made into a work, and “grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6). God’s holiness is so magnificently perfect that all our righteousness must be a free gift of his sovereign grace, because we could never earn it. Thus, God declares sinners righteous not because their faith has earned them righteousness but because Christ has earned righteousness, which God grants as a gift by the means of faith.<sup>57</sup> So far from being the currency by which we purchase salvation from God, faith is uniquely suited to grace (Rom. 4:16) because it is nothing more than the outstretched arm and the empty hand that confesses, “I have nothing! I am bankrupt of any spiritual resources or ability! Lord, I receive your gift of salvation in Christ.”

## *The Result of Justification: Good Works*

Perhaps the most common objection to the doctrine of *sola fide* is the accusation that the apostle James explicitly contradicts it. How can James’s comment, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24), be reconciled with the doctrine of justification by faith alone? The answer is that James uses the word “justified” in a different sense than Paul uses it in the above texts. In particular, James speaks of justification in the sense of “vindication” or “the demonstration of righteousness.”

Scripture often uses the word “justification” in this sense. For example, we read in a confession of the early church that Christ “was manifested in the flesh” and “vindicated

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<sup>57</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield’s famous remarks are worthy of wholehearted affirmation: “The *saving power* of faith resides ... not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests. It is never on account of its formal nature as a psychic act that faith is conceived in Scripture to be saving,—as if this frame of mind or attitude of heart were itself a virtue with claims on God for reward.... It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ.... It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; ... we could not more radically misconceive [the biblical concept of faith] than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ himself” (*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 2, *Biblical Doctrines* [1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000], 504, italics original).

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[KJV: “justified”] by the Spirit” (1 Tim. 3:16; cf. Luke 10:29). Certainly, the Lord Jesus stood in no need of forensic justification, of being legally declared righteous. Rather, this passage speaks of the Spirit’s vindication of Christ by the many miracles he performed (Acts 2:22), as well as the ultimate vindication of the resurrection (Rom. 1:4). In the same way, James uses the term “justified” in the sense of “vindicated” or “demonstrated.”

The context of James 2 also makes this clear. James is commenting on Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac according to God’s commandment (2:21; cf. Gen. 22:1–14), an event that took place many years after it was declared that Abraham “believed [in] the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). In contrast, when Paul desires to illustrate the truth of the imputation of righteousness through faith alone apart from works (Rom. 4:6), he chooses this earlier instance in Abraham’s life before there was even any law for him to follow (Rom. 4:9–13). James, however, is not speaking of forensic justification and the imputation of righteousness. He is not teaching that good works are the ground of our salvation. Rather, he is speaking about good works that are the necessary evidence of our salvation. Abraham’s faith, which was credited to him as righteousness apart from anything he had done, was vindicated by his works. In other words, Abraham’s works demonstrated that his faith was true faith and not dead faith (cf. James 2:17, 26). True faith is shown by its works (James 2:18), but those works are the evidence and result of our justification and initial sanctification, not the ground of our justification.

Far from refuting the doctrine of *sola fide* in favor of the legalists, James’s argument actually provides a defense of the doctrine from the attack of the opposite error: antinomianism—the teaching which denies that sanctification is the necessary fruit of justification. Whereas legalism undermines the gospel by insisting that we must add our obedience to Christ’s work in order to be justified, antinomianism perverts the gospel by subtracting from the efficacy of Christ’s work, denying that those who receive Christ as Savior must also submit to him as Lord. James absolutely demolishes that proposition. He explains that the “faith” of professing Christians who fail to make progress in practical holiness, but continue to walk in patterns of unrighteousness, is no true and saving faith at all. Their faith is dead (James 2:17, 26), demonic (2:19), and useless (2:20), and identifies them as the self-deceived whom Jesus has never known (Matt. 7:21–23).

In fact, John Calvin, the great Reformer and believer in *sola fide*, stood on the teaching of James 2 when he wrote, “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, salvation is not a *result* of good works (Eph. 2:9),

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KJV King James Version

<sup>58</sup> From Calvin’s “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote” (1547), quoted in Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 62.



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but salvation does necessarily *result in* good works. This is the very purpose of our salvation: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Christ gave himself for us not only to forensically redeem us from all lawlessness but also to “purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Those who deny that good works are the necessary fruit of the justification received through faith alone make out the Lord Jesus Christ to be half a Savior—one who saves from sin’s penalty but not from its power. Yet Scripture teaches that we are united with Christ not only in his death but also in his resurrection, the necessary result of which is a holy life (Rom. 6:3–6; 2 Cor. 5:14–15). All true Christians have been “set free” from sin’s bondage and have become “slaves to God,” resulting in sanctification (Rom. 6:1–14, 22). Therefore, while it is faith alone that saves, the faith that saves is never alone but will always be accompanied by the fruit of righteousness (Phil. 1:11) wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (Gal. 5:22–25; cf. John 15:8).<sup>59</sup>

## *Concluding Remarks Regarding Justification*

In summary, justification is that aspect of the application of redemption in which God legally declares the sinner to be righteous in his sight. The ground of this declaration is the righteousness of Christ that he accomplished in the sinner’s stead by (1) dying to provide forgiveness of sin and by (2) walking in perfect obedience to his Father in order to provide the righteousness required for fellowship with God. By grace alone, God imputes our sin to Christ so that he might truly bear our punishment, and he imputes Christ’s righteousness to us so that we might stand before him in perfect holiness. This imputation is mediated through faith alone apart from any work on the sinner’s part. Good works must follow justification, but they are the evidence—not the ground—of true and saving faith.

The doctrine of justification runs to the very heart of the gospel. It offers the only hope of salvation to guilty sinners, who, apart from Christ, have no hope of a restored relationship with the holy God of the universe, yet who, in him, are clothed with the perfect righteousness that God requires. The good news of the gospel is that this blessing is offered freely to all who would receive it, apart from any works, through faith alone. The doctrine of justification is the very foundation of the gospel promise of John 3:16, that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should

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<sup>59</sup> For a more detailed biblical case against antinomianism, especially as represented in the “No Lordship” doctrine of Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie, see John MacArthur, *Gospel according to Jesus*; and MacArthur, *Gospel according to the Apostles*.

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not perish but have eternal life”; and of Romans 8:1, that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

## ADOPTION

While it may seem impossible to improve upon such gifts as regeneration, conversion, union, and justification, the Word of God speaks of yet another spiritual blessing in the application of redemption: the Father’s adoption of believers as his children.<sup>60</sup>

The concept of adoption is familiar to us because it remains common in today’s world, and it is a rare case when the story of any particular adoption fails to warm the heart. Through the intervention of a compassionate benefactor, adopted children are welcomed into the loving home of a new family eager to provide protection, instruction, and the hope of a future. The New Testament builds on this blessing of human adoption by using it as an analogy to describe God’s fatherly love for us. We were spiritual orphans under the cruel oppression of sin and Satan. By nature, we were “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), “sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2; 5:6), and even children of the Devil himself (John 8:44). Our only home was this sin-cursed world that is fast passing away (1 John 2:17). Our only guardian was the avowed enemy of our souls (1 Pet. 5:8). Our only future was the terrifying expectation of hell’s judgment (Heb. 10:27).

But God, eager to display the glory of his grace, intervened on our behalf:

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<sup>60</sup> The background for the New Testament concept of adoption comes from the practice of adoption in ancient Rome, conveniently outlined in John MacArthur, *Slave: The Hidden Truth about Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 155–57: “The adoption process consisted of several specific legal procedures. The first step completely terminated the adopted child’s social relationship and legal connection to his natural family. The second step made him a permanent member of his new family. Additionally, any previous financial obligations were eradicated, as if they had never existed. In order for the transaction to be legally formalized, the presence of seven reputable witnesses was required. If necessary, their testimony would refute any potential challenge to the adoption after the father had died. “Once the adoption was complete, the new son or daughter was then completely under both the care and control of the new father. The previous father no longer had any authority over his former child. In Roman households, the authority of the *paterfamilias* (‘father of the family’) was final and absolute. And that authority extended to those adopted into the household, starting at the moment of their adoption.”

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In love he predestined us for adoption ... as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:4–6)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4–5)

The eternal Son of God was forsaken by his Father so that we might be welcomed as sons. At great cost to himself, God took every legal measure to rescue us from sin and make us part of his family. As planned in eternity past, the Son purchased believers at Calvary, and they finally lay hold of the blessing of adoption at the time of conversion, “for,” says the apostle Paul, “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Gal. 3:26; cf. John 1:12). In adoption, God legally places regenerated and justified sinners into his family, so that they become sons and daughters of God and thus enjoy all the rights and privileges of one who is a member of God’s eternal family.

## *The Unique Blessing of Adoption*

Though it has often been confused with regeneration or viewed as just another aspect of justification, the spiritual blessing of adoption is a unique privilege in God’s economy of redemption. We think of becoming God’s children as a result of regeneration—being born again. But adoption speaks of being born into a family. Though regeneration and adoption are intimately related, Scripture nevertheless distinguishes these two blessings with respect to the author, nature, and means of each, as seen in table 7.1.

*Table 7.1 Regeneration versus Adoption in Scripture*

	<b>Regeneration</b>	<b>Adoption</b>
<b>Author</b>	Holy Spirit (John 3:5–6, 8; 6:63)	The Father (Eph. 1:5)
<b>Nature</b>	Transformative (Ezek. 36:26–27; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17)	Legal (John 1:12)
<b>Means</b>	Word of God (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23–25)	Faith (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26)

Further, adoption should not be viewed as just a subset of the work of justification. Though both justification and adoption are declarative acts mediated through faith, they are distinct blessings. Justification is the legal declaration that one is righteous with

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respect to the demands of God's law. Adoption, however, is the legal declaration by the divine Judge that the justified one has been made a member of the divine Judge's family.

It is an unspeakable blessing to be granted new spiritual life in regeneration. So also is it a remarkable privilege to be freed from the penalty of sin and declared righteous in Christ. If the bestowal of God's gifts stopped at regeneration and justification, no one would question his goodness or regard his grace as deficient. But in an extravagant expression of love, God adopts believers into his family, so that we relate to him not only as the Giver of spiritual life and the provider of legal righteousness but also as our loving and compassionate Father. For this reason, adoption has rightly been designated "the highest privilege that the gospel offers"<sup>61</sup> and "the apex of grace and privilege" that "stagger[s] imagination because of its amazing condescension and love."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as the apostle John considered the reality of the believer's adoption, he was compelled to let out yet another apostolic burst of praise: "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1 NIV). How great indeed!

## "Universal Fatherhood of God"?

The notion that believers *become* the children of God at the time of conversion deals the deathblow to the doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God—the liberal Protestant teaching that all human beings are God's children by default. It is true that Scripture sometimes speaks of God's fatherhood in universal terms. One example of this is Acts 17:28–29. However, the context of this statement clearly indicates that Paul was speaking of the reality that God is the Creator of all mankind and thus is the universal Father only in that sense. He is "the Father of spirits" (Heb. 12:9), who "gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25), and he "made from one man every nation of mankind" (Acts 17:26). Thus, "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that God is the common Creator of all human beings does not mean that all are his children in the relational sense indicated by the doctrine of adoption. Jesus himself speaks most severely on this issue, noting that all unbelievers are children of

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<sup>61</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 206.

<sup>62</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 134.

NIV New International Version

<sup>63</sup> This may also be Malachi's intent when he rebukes the sinful priests of his day, asking, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" (Mal. 2:10).

However, given his reference to "the covenant of our fathers" at the end of the verse, it is more likely that Malachi is referring to God's fatherhood of Israel as a covenant nation (cf. Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1).

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Satan himself. He clearly distinguishes between his Father and the Pharisees' father (John 8:38), denies that God is their Father (John 8:42), and explicitly declares, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). The apostle John comments on this distinction between the children of God and the children of the Devil, noting that the latter are those who do not practice righteousness (1 John 3:10). Scripture differentiates between the children of the flesh and the children of God (Rom. 9:8), the children of the slave woman and the children of the free woman (Gal. 4:22–31), and the children of light and the children of darkness (Eph. 5:8). These passages militate against any understanding of the universal fatherhood of God. Indeed, rather than being sons of God, natural humanity is described as "the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2; 5:6). So far from relating naturally to God as children, all fallen human beings are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Unless something drastic happens—indeed, nothing less radical than being made alive from the dead (Eph. 2:4–5)—man in his natural condition will not know the blessings of a loving Father but rather will experience the wrath of a righteous Judge. It is only to those who receive Jesus and believe in his name that authority is given to become children of God (John 1:12), for all of God's adoptive children are "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26 NASB) as a result of his work of redemption (Gal. 4:5).

Therefore, rather than an *essential* fatherhood of God or a universal *creative* fatherhood of God, these passages on adoption speak of the *redemptive* fatherhood of God, in which justified sinners become sons and daughters of the Father with all the rights and privileges that a member of his family enjoys.

## *The Privileges of Adoption*

What, then, are those rights and privileges to be enjoyed by members of the family of God? The chief blessing of our adoption is that the Holy Spirit himself takes up permanent residence in our hearts, freeing us from sin and fostering our fellowship with God (Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6–7). Though we were enslaved to sin and idolatry (Gal. 4:8), the Spirit of adoption has liberated us from our slavery into "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17). We are no longer slaves of a master but permanent sons of our Father (John 8:35), and the Spirit himself bears witness in our hearts to assure us that this new relationship is genuine. So intimate is our bond with the God of the universe that the Spirit compels us to cry out to him with childlike affection, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). An informal Aramaic term for "father," *Abba* signifies the most endearing tenderness and intimacy between a father and a son. Aside from these two passages, "Abba" occurs only one other time in the New Testament: on the lips of Jesus himself during the darkest hour of his earthly sojourn. In Gethsemane,

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as the Son poured out his heart to the Father, pleading that the cup of divine wrath be removed from him, he called to him as “Abba” (Mark 14:36). It is nothing short of staggering to think that we who were once alienated from God because of our sin (Eph. 4:18) have been given the privilege of crying out to the Father in the very same way that his beloved Son did. The glory of that thought is exceeded only by the reality that his cry of “Abba” was ignored so that ours would be heard.

Because we can relate to God as our Father, we share in the richness of his loving compassion, protection, provision, and beneficence. His disposition to us is as a father to his children, eager to display kindness and to act in our greatest interests (Ps. 103:13). That disposition to compassion is illustrated by the Lord himself, who asks,

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11–13)

Not only will God give us his Spirit, but as the parallel passage puts it, God will also give us the “good things” for which we ask him (Matt. 7:11). Because of this, we have no need to become anxious about our daily necessities, for the Father is happy to provide these for us (Luke 12:29–30). Immediately after these consolations from our Lord, he comforts us with the Father’s beneficence in what may be the most tender words he ever spoke: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). God is not merely a distant, disinterested-though-generous benefactor. As a father delights to bless his children with an inheritance, it is his good pleasure—he eagerly delights—to make us sharers in the fullness of the kingdom itself.

Implied in this eagerness of God to bless his adopted children is the reality that we may approach the Lord of glory in prayer. As Jesus said, our Father is ready to give good gifts “to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13), and he provides for the necessities of life as we seek first his kingdom (Luke 12:30–31), which is done preeminently through prayer. For this reason, when the Lord taught his disciples to pray to God, he instructed them to address him saying, “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). What a privilege it is to approach the throne of grace with the confidence that the sovereign Lord is our heavenly Father, eager to hear our requests and bless us from his bounty!

Another privilege of our adoption as sons is the loving, fatherly discipline we receive from God. The author of Hebrews counsels us, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:5–6; cf. Prov. 3:11–12). When we depart from God’s will and engage in sinful thoughts and actions, he will

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providentially order various hardships and afflictions in our lives to warn us of sin's consequences, to lead us to repentance, and to cultivate greater spiritual maturity in us (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:10–12; 1 Cor. 11:30). The author of Hebrews goes on to explain that when we experience this discipline, “God is treating [us] as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, ... then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:7–8). Indeed, when God withdraws his discipline, it is the severest indication of his judgment, as he is giving people over to their sin and its consequences (Rom. 1:25–28). In the human realm, Scripture says that parents who withhold discipline from their children hate them (Prov. 13:24) and desire their death (Prov. 19:18). Thus, for God to discipline us as his children is sure testimony of his earnest love and sincere desire for our greatest benefit. As the author of Hebrews continues, “he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). Though in the moment “all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, ... later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11). When we consider that there is a “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), we are compelled to treasure the loving discipline of our Father, for it fits us for fellowship with him. What a privilege that the God of the heavens has taken a personal interest in our spiritual welfare—not only to declare us righteous but also to work practical righteousness in us by his great grace!

Still another privilege of our adoption into God's family is the unity we enjoy with our brothers and sisters in Christ. The church is not merely a social club or a political organization knit together by common interests or shared hobbies. Rather, we are objectively united to one another as members of the same family. No wonder the early believers addressed one another as brothers and sisters (e.g., Acts 1:15–16; Rom. 12:1; 16:14; Phil. 4:1; 1 Tim. 5:1–2; cf. Matt. 12:46–50). A family is not merely a group of people with some shared interests and a subjective appreciation for one another. Instead, brothers and sisters are bound together by something much deeper—by the objective union that results from the love shared by their parents. And while brothers and sisters may not always relate to one another on the best terms, no amount of discord or conflict can break the objective bond that they share. The same is true within the family of God. Tensions and disagreements may arise between us and our brothers and sisters in Christ. But just as nothing can separate us from the loving union that we share with Christ individually (Rom. 8:38–39), nor can anything separate us from the union we share with one another corporately. It is on the basis of this objective union that we pursue “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). As long as Christians do that, we will never

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

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be alone. We will always belong to one another. Because of the adopting grace of our Father, we face life's darkest trials alongside our brothers and sisters as the family of God.

In addition to all these privileges that we enjoy in the present time, our adoption as children of God also guarantees us a share in the future inheritance of eternal life. Paul writes that if we are adopted children, we must also necessarily be heirs. We are no longer slaves but sons, "and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal. 4:7)—indeed, "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). In human relations, sons and daughters inherit the estate of their parents at the time of their passing. All that belonged to the parents is bequeathed to the children as they carry on the family legacy. In a similar way, though by nature we had no rightful claim to all the riches of the kingdom of God, by grace we have become God's adopted children and have thus become legal heirs of "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for us (1 Pet. 1:4). So genuine is our inheritance that we are described as fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Everything that Christ will receive by divine right as the natural Son of God, we will receive by divine grace as adoptive children of God.<sup>64</sup> Because Christ is God's Son, all that the Father has belongs to him. And because we are in Christ, everything that is Christ's is ours, "whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future" (1 Cor. 3:22–23)—all things belong to the children of God. The redeemed are sure to enjoy all the blessings of heaven in God's presence, for he promises that "he who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (Rev. 21:7 NASB). Chief among these heavenly blessings is the promise of a glorified body after the likeness of Christ's resurrection body, free from all sin and infirmity (1 Cor. 15:23, 42–44; Phil. 3:20–21). While in the "house" of our present body we groan under the effects of sin's curse (2 Cor. 5:2 NASB), we look forward to the consummation of our adoption as sons and daughters of God, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23).

This glorification has, in a sense, begun in this present life in the form of progressive sanctification, yet another privilege of our adoption. Just as children imitate their father, so also are we exhorted to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1). One of the richest blessings of God's grace in salvation is that he attaches his name to his people. He graciously pursues the welfare of his people with the same zeal with which he upholds the honor of his reputation, because they bear his name (cf. Josh. 7:9; 1 Sam. 12:22; Jer. 14:7, 9; Dan. 9:17–18). As children of God, we bear the "family name" of God, and as Isaiah says, his name is Holy (Isa. 57:15; cf. 1 Chron. 29:16; Ps. 33:21; Isa. 47:4; Luke 1:49). Thus the apostle Peter exhorts us, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to

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<sup>64</sup> John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 445.

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the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' " (1 Pet. 1:14–16). If we call on this holy One as Father, we ought to live lives that resemble his holiness (1 Pet. 1:17), conducting ourselves as "blameless and innocent, *children of God* without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation" (Phil. 2:15).

The conclusion to the study of the doctrine of adoption must be a call to holiness. God's promise to us is, "I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me" (2 Cor. 6:18). If we enjoy such an exalted position as children adopted into the family of God, enjoying all the rights and privileges as sons and daughters of the Almighty himself, we must respond as Paul instructs in the next verse: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Therefore, we now turn our attention to the doctrine of sanctification.

## SANCTIFICATION

Thus far in this study of the application of redemption, we have considered those benefits purchased by the work of Christ that the Spirit applies immediately to believers at the inception of the Christian life. At regeneration, the sinner is made alive, granted repentance and faith, united to Christ, declared righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, and adopted into the family of God. However, the blessing of sanctification is a benefit of the application of redemption that, though it begins at regeneration, is applied throughout the entirety of the Christian's life. In sanctification, God, working especially by the Holy Spirit, separates the believer unto himself (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2) and makes him increasingly holy, progressively transforming him into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18) by subduing the power of sin in his life and enabling him to bear the fruit of obedience in his life.

### *The Relationship between Justification and Sanctification*

Sanctification is intimately connected to justification but is not to be confused with or collapsed into justification, as in Roman Catholic theology. Justification is the once-for-all judicial declaration of righteousness that defines man's legal standing before God. Sanctification is a gradual, ongoing transformation of his nature. In justification, Christ has secured forensic righteousness *for* the believer; in sanctification, the Spirit progressively works practical righteousness *in* the believer. Justification concerns the

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*imputation* of righteousness, whereas sanctification concerns the *impartation* of righteousness. To confuse the two is to fundamentally undermine the gospel.<sup>65</sup>

## **Positional (Definitive) Sanctification**

Though sanctification is primarily understood to be a process in which the believer is conformed into the image of Christ (e.g., Scripture speaks of believers as “those who *are being* sanctified,” Heb. 10:14), that process has a definite beginning at regeneration. The present-tense aspect of sanctification is often called progressive sanctification, whereas the past-tense aspect may be called either initial, positional, or definitive sanctification.

As discussed earlier, regeneration is not only the impartation of spiritual life but is also a definitive cleansing from sin.<sup>66</sup> That is why Paul designates regeneration as not only a renewal but a washing as well (Titus 3:5). Thus, when the Spirit imparts spiritual life, opening the sinner’s eyes to the filth of sin and the glory of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:4, 6), man’s nature is sanctified—definitively transformed into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The holy disposition that is strengthened throughout the believer’s progressive sanctification is that same holy disposition that is born in the believer at regeneration. In this sense, regeneration is the beginning of sanctification.

For this reason, the New Testament often employs the terminology of sanctification in the past tense, characterizing the Christian as one who has been initially sanctified by God (Acts 20:32; 26:18; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11). Both the Old and New Testaments identify all of God’s people as saints—literally, “the holy ones” (e.g., Pss. 16:3; 34:9; Dan. 7:18–27; Matt. 27:52; Acts 9:13, 32, 41; Rom. 1:7; 8:27; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; 6:18; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; Jude 3; Rev. 19:8). So far from identifying a spiritually elite people on the basis of their personal merits, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches, what makes a believer a saint is not his practical righteousness but his positional righteousness. All believers are saints because they have been set apart by a holy God and have been united to the holy Lord Jesus. They have been initially, or positionally, sanctified.

The most significant reality in definitive sanctification is that, through union with Christ, the believer is set free from the dominion of sin. While justification and imputed

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<sup>65</sup> For more on the relationship between justification and sanctification, see “The Nature of Justification: A Legal Declaration” (p. 326), and “The Result of Justification: Good Works” (p. 333).

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)

<sup>66</sup> See “The Nature of Regeneration” (p. 304) and the discussion of Ezek. 36:25–27 and John 3:5 in “The Means of Regeneration” (p. 307).

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., “for example”)



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righteousness grant the Christian freedom from sin's penalty, initial sanctification grants him freedom from sin's power. This is precisely Paul's point in Romans 6:1–7:6, where he states that believers have died to sin through union with Christ, so that they would no longer be enslaved to sin. As a result, sin's legal right to rule over believers has been broken. Though once enslaved to sin, believers possess Christ's resurrection power to resist temptation, mortify sin, and pursue increasing holiness. Therefore, though the believer may struggle mightily with sin, he must never grow comfortable with sin in his life. To do so is to make peace with a dethroned enemy—to submit to a ruler who has been conquered.

This freedom from the dominion of sin is the necessary foundation for all progress in progressive sanctification. Believers can obey the imperatives of Romans 6:12–13 only because of the indicative reality of freedom from sin announced in Romans 6:11 and 14. This indicative-imperative paradigm is the difference between biblical ethics and the moralism of legalistic religion or naturalistic philosophy. It is only because of union with Christ in his death and resurrection that the believer can make any progress in practical holiness (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:12). Therefore, any attempt at self-improvement apart from God's grace is a man-made counterfeit of sanctification. It finds no favor with God and must ultimately prove ineffective (Rom. 8:8; 14:23; Heb. 11:6). The Christian pursues practical holiness not to enter a relationship with God or to earn his love, but because he is already God's child and a recipient of his love in Christ. Thus, it is necessary to fight sin in the strength and in the freedom of that gracious reality. Believers in Christ can be victorious over sin only because—and must be victorious over sin precisely because—Christ has conquered sin in them by his death and resurrection.

## *Progressive Sanctification*

However, this decisive victory over the dominion of sin does not leave the believer totally purified. Though the penalty of sin is paid for and the power of sin is broken, the presence of sin still remains in the believer's flesh and therefore must continually be put to death. Thus, the sanctification that begins definitively at regeneration necessarily continues throughout the entirety of the Christian life. This continuous aspect of sanctification is called progressive sanctification.

The progressive nature of sanctification is substantiated by Scripture's numerous calls to holiness in the present tense, indicating ongoing, continuous action (Rom. 8:13; 12:2; Heb. 12:14). Further, several passages explicitly assert the progressive nature of sanctification (Phil. 1:9; 3:12–14; Col. 3:9–10; 1 Thess. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18). Most clearly, Paul states that as believers behold the glory of Christ with the eyes of the heart, they are thereby “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Believers are not conformed to the image of Christ in an instant; they experience a

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progressive transformation into his image by degrees. Thus, the Holy Spirit's work in believers will cause them to increase in sanctification throughout their Christian lives.

## *Perfected Sanctification*

Just as sanctification has a definitive beginning at regeneration and increases throughout one's life, it will also be brought to completion at the end of the believer's life. To the degree that we behold Christ's glory in this life, to that degree are we sanctified (2 Cor. 3:18). However, because we see him imperfectly (1 Cor. 13:12), perfected sanctification awaits the day when we will see him face-to-face. As the apostle John says, "But we know that when he appears we shall be like him, *because* we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Contrary to the doctrine of *perfectionism*, sanctification can never be completed in this life. Though Scripture often exhorts believers to holiness in language that sounds very absolute (e.g., Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:15–16), we ought not assume that a commandment to perfection implies our ability to be perfect. Scripture explicitly contradicts the assumption that the existence of a command necessarily implies man's ability to obey. For example, Jesus teaches that the moral inability to produce good fruit absolves the unbeliever neither of his responsibility to do so nor of the certain consequences of failing to do so (Matt. 7:18–19). Further, all people everywhere are held responsible to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 17:30; cf. Mark 1:15)—the very thing Scripture elsewhere declares they are unable to do (Rom. 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14).

Perfectionists also appeal to other passages which speak of complete sanctification (1 Thess. 5:23), perfection and completion (Col. 1:28; James 1:4), and the inability to sin (1 John 3:6, 9). But these are misinterpretations. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, complete sanctification refers to sanctification in the entirety of man's nature, which Paul mentions explicitly in the next phrase ("your whole spirit and soul and body"). He is praying that God would sustain their faith throughout their life and finally bring his sanctifying work to completion, perfecting both the spirit/soul and the body at the return of Christ (cf. Phil. 3:21). Passages speaking of "perfection" refer not to total sanctification but to spiritual maturity, as the word is often translated elsewhere (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:6; Heb. 5:14). John's statements are rightly understood only when one properly translates the present tense of the verb. Rather than teaching that Christians never commit any acts of sin, he is teaching that no true believer continues in an unbroken lifestyle or pattern of sinning as he did in his unregenerate state. Indeed, John's other comments from the same letter emphatically exclude any notion of sinless perfection in this life (e.g., 1 John 1:8). James comments that

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., "for example")

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“we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2), and as we daily commit sin, the Lord Jesus instructs us to daily pray for forgiveness (Matt. 6:11–12; cf. 1 John 1:9). Far from seeking to attain spiritual perfection in this life, all believers ought to cry with Paul,

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14)*

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Then, in a display of apostolic irony, he adds the exhortation, “Let those of us who are mature”—the same word translated elsewhere as *perfect*—“think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you” (Phil. 3:15). Those who are “perfect” (i.e., truly spiritually mature) are those who realize they are not perfect and who acknowledge the constant need for actively pursuing personal holiness.

## *The Character of Progressive Sanctification*<sup>67</sup>

So much of the confusion over how to properly and successfully pursue sanctification comes from fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of sanctification. Followers of Christ, therefore, must understand the character of this holiness that they are commanded to pursue. While several passages of Scripture must be consulted to clarify this truth, two foundational texts stand out as especially pertinent:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil. 2:12–13)

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

These and other texts establish several conclusions concerning the nature, author, means, and dynamics of progressive sanctification.

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i.e. *id est* (Lat., “that is”)

<sup>67</sup> Much of this section is adapted from Michael Riccardi, *Sanctification: The Christian’s Pursuit of God-Given Holiness* (Sun Valley, CA: Grace Books, 2015). Used by permission of Grace Books.

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**The Nature of Sanctification.** Sanctification is fundamentally a supernatural work of God performed in the inner nature of man. Paul declares that God is at work *in* believers that they may not only work for his good pleasure but even will for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). That is to say, God works for the believer to sanctify not merely his external actions but also his internal desires. Further, Paul speaks of sanctification as the believer's "being transformed" into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), a term that describes an inward change in fundamental character (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 3:16). Commenting on Paul's exhortations for believers to be renewed in the spirit of their minds (Eph. 4:23), Charles Hodge rightly observes that

sanctification ... does not consist exclusively in a series of a new kind of acts. It is the making the tree good, in order that the fruit may be good. It involves an essential change of character. As regeneration is not an act of the subject of the work, but in the language of the Bible a new birth, a new creation, a quickening or communicating a new life, ... so sanctification in its essential nature is not holy acts, but such a change in the state of the soul, that sinful acts become more infrequent, and holy acts more and more habitual and controlling.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, believers should not conceive of holiness as the reformation of external behaviors, in which people bend their will to perform duties for which they have no Godward motive; rather, believers must recognize that sanctification consists fundamentally in the miraculous inward transformation of the affections. To use Hodge's metaphor, it is not taking fruit and stapling it to the tree branch but is rather rooting the branch in the vine so that the fruit is borne via the believer's vital union with Christ. While the holy person certainly does what God commands, he does so because he loves God and loves what God loves. Sanctification is the spiritual transformation of the mind and the affections that in turn redirects the will and the actions.

**The Author of Sanctification.** Since sanctification is not fundamentally external but internal and supernatural, its author must be God. Consistent with this, Paul states that "it is *God* who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The God of peace equips his people to "do his will" and works in them "that which is pleasing in his sight" (Heb. 13:20–21). For this reason, Scripture often employs the passive voice in key texts on sanctification, commanding believers not to transform themselves but to *be transformed* (e.g., Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). As Berkhof concludes, sanctification

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871–1873; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 3:226.

e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., "for example")

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“consists fundamentally and primarily in a *divine* operation in the soul.”<sup>69</sup> More specifically, Scripture identifies the Holy Spirit as the member of the Godhead who is the divine agent of sanctification (Rom. 1:4; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:17, 22–23; 1 Pet. 1:2).

**The Means of Sanctification.** While sanctification is properly said to be an internal work of the Spirit, the believer is not to be idle. Scripture is replete with exhortations and imperatives to pursue holiness. Paul commands the church to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” precisely because God is at work within them (Phil. 2:12–13). Peter declares that, on the basis of the work of Christ, believers have been granted “all things that pertain to life and godliness,” and have “escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet. 1:3–4). And he follows these precious indicatives with a rousing call to action: “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue” (2 Pet. 1:5). So far from being an excuse not to work, God’s sanctifying work in believers is the very ground of our efforts. We are to “strive for ... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13), to “flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18), to “pursue righteousness” (2 Tim. 2:22), and even to “cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

Thus, while believers cannot directly effect the inner transformation of sanctification for their souls, and while sanctification is properly said to be the Spirit’s work, believers are not passive in sanctification. Instead, the Holy Spirit effects his sanctifying transformation in the hearts of believers through the use of means that must be appropriated. The Scottish Puritan Henry Scougal provides an effective illustration:

All the art and industry of man cannot form the smallest herb, or make a stalk of corn to grow in the field; it is the energy of nature, and the influences of heaven, which produce this effect; it is God “who causeth the grass to grow, and the herb for the service of man” (Ps. 104:14); and yet nobody will say that the labours of the [farmer] are useless or unnecessary.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, though God causes grass to grow and makes the land produce crops, only a foolish farmer passively waits for the land to yield its produce by divine fiat. Instead, he acknowledges that God brings forth fruits and vegetables from the earth by means of a farmer’s labors. Similarly, in and of himself, the believer is just as powerless to effect holiness in his heart, for it is the work of God. Yet only a foolish person waits passively

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<sup>69</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 532, italics added.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man: Real Religion* (1677; repr., Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 78–79.



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for his heart to spring forth in righteousness by divine fiat. Instead, the faithful Christian acknowledges that God brings forth the fruit of holiness by means of the believer's labors. Scripture's repeated calls to effort, action, and obedience are commands for believers to put ourselves in the way of those channels of sanctifying grace that the Spirit employs to conform Christ's people into his image.

The means of sanctification include the following:

1. reading and meditating on the Word of God (Pss. 1:2–3; 19:7–11; 119:105; John 17:17; Acts 20:32; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Heb. 4:12; James 1:23–25)
2. praying (Ps. 119:37; Luke 11:9; Phil. 4:6–7; Heb. 4:16; James 4:2; 1 John 1:9)
3. fellowshiping with the saints in the context of the local church (Prov. 27:17; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:11–16, 25; Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25)
4. interpreting the experiences of God's providence according to Scripture (Rom. 8:28–29), especially the experience of trials (Ps. 119:71; Rom. 5:3–5; 8:17; Phil. 3:10–11; Heb. 12:10; James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:3–7)
5. keeping the commandments of God (John 15:10)

Sanctifying grace flows through all these channels, and so it is the responsibility of Christians to put themselves in the way of these blessings. Though believers cannot perform the divine operation of sanctification on their own souls, they must nevertheless pursue holiness by availing themselves of the means by which the Spirit of God accomplishes this divine operation.

**The Dynamics of Sanctification.** The dynamics of sanctification speak to how sanctification actually works. Why does reading and studying the Word of God sanctify? How is prayer a means of grace? Why does fellowship with other believers push the people of God to greater holiness? Paul writes, "We all, ... beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed" (2 Cor. 3:18). As believers in Christ behold his glory as revealed in the Word with the eyes of their heart (Eph. 1:18), they are thereby progressively conformed into his image (see also 2 Cor. 4:17–18; Heb. 11:1, 26–27; 12:2; 1 John 3:2). The foundational means of sanctification is the spiritual sight that beholds the glory of Christ. John Owen summarizes this biblical teaching:

Let us live in the constant contemplation of the glory of Christ, and virtue will proceed from Him to repair all our decays, to renew a right spirit within us, and to cause us to abound in all duties of obedience....

It will fix the soul unto that object which is suited to give it delight, complacency, and satisfaction....

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when the mind is filled with thoughts of Christ and his glory, when the soul thereon cleaves unto Him with intense affections, they will cast out, or not give admittance unto, those causes of spiritual weakness and indisposition....

And nothing will so much excite and encourage our souls hereunto as a constant view of Christ and His glory.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, when the believer apprehends the glory of Christ with the eyes of faith, the sight of his beauty satisfies the soul in such a way that he does not go on seeking satisfaction in the false and fleeting pleasures of sin. The spiritual apprehension of Christ's glory conforms believers' affections to the divine will, causing them to hate sin and love righteousness. Then, sanctified affections direct the will in such a way that it desires the righteousness it has come to love and repudiates the sin it has come to hate. Finally, the internal transformation is brought to fruition externally, as the sanctified will issues in holy living.

Therefore, as the believer avails himself of the various means by which he lays hold of the Spirit's sanctifying grace, he is to look with the eyes of faith to the transforming glory of Christ revealed through those means. The Word of God is a vehicle for the glory of God (Ex. 33:18; 34:5–7; 1 Sam. 3:1, 21). Prayer is the occasion for personal communion with God, in which the worshiper seeks God's face (2 Chron. 7:14; Pss. 24:6; 27:8; 105:4; Hos. 5:15) in order that he might behold his transforming beauty (Ps. 27:4). Fellowship in the local church is an opportunity to hear the Word preached skillfully, to sing songs of worship with sanctifying lyrics drawn from biblical truth, to pray corporately as the body of Christ, and to see the gospel pictured in the ordinances of baptism and communion. Besides this, to whatever degree Christians have been imperfectly conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18), to that degree they reflect the image of his glory to one another. Finally, obedience itself is the avenue for greater disclosure of the glory of Christ to the eyes of the heart (John 14:21). When confronted with temptations to sin, believers must reason with themselves, considering that sin never delivers the satisfaction it promises. They must consider that obedience brings fuller disclosures of the Savior, who is the source of all true pleasure and satisfaction. And out of a desire for the superior pleasure that is found in Christ, they must engage in (1) the work of mortification: putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), that is, laying aside the old self (Eph. 4:22) and the sin that so easily entangles (Heb. 12:1) and that clouds the sight of Christ's glory; and (2) the work of vivification: putting on the new self (Rom.

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<sup>71</sup> John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, *The Glory of Christ*, ed. William H. Goold (1854–1855; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 460–61.

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13:14; Eph. 4:24), that is, delightfully disciplining themselves to behold Christ in Scripture, prayer, fellowship, providence, and the obedience that brings deeper communion with him.

By fighting to behold the glory of Jesus by all the means of grace, the follower of Christ will be gradually transformed into his image from the inside out. He will therefore conduct himself in a manner worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27) and worthy of the Lord himself (Col. 1:10), working out his salvation with fear and trembling, just as Scripture commands (Phil. 2:12). As 2 Timothy 2:21 declares, “He will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.”

## PERSEVERANCE

Is salvation in Christ eternally secure? Do those who truly know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord by faith persevere in that faith to the very end of their lives? Or is there a possibility that a genuine Christian could lose his or her salvation? Can those who genuinely trust Christ for salvation later abandon their faith and thus ultimately lose their eternal life? The unified teaching of the whole Scripture answers with an emphatic *no* to each of these questions. All those who are truly born of the Spirit and united to Christ by faith are kept secure in him by God’s power and thus will persevere in faith until they go to be with Christ in death or when he returns. This doctrine is often labeled the perseverance of the saints.<sup>72</sup>

### *The Preserving Power of the Triune God*

The eternal security of the true believer in Christ is ultimately founded on the preserving nature of the triune God.

**The Sovereign Will of the Father.** First, the believer’s security is grounded in the unchanging love, infinite power, and saving will of the Father. Salvation began in eternity past, when God set his saving love on his elect and granted them grace in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 1:9), appointing Christ to be their Mediator. Scripture describes this decree as the Father giving the elect to the Son (cf. John 6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24) and predestining them to become conformed to the Son’s image (Rom. 8:29). It is impossible for those whom the Father has predestined to Christlikeness to fail to attain that end, for “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). The final consummation of the believer’s

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<sup>72</sup> For a fuller treatment of the believer’s security and assurance, see John MacArthur, *Saved without a Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation*, 3rd ed. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2011).

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salvation is so certain and sure that Paul can speak of the justified one as if he has already been glorified. All those whom God chose he also justified on the ground of the righteous work of the Son, and all those whom he justified he also glorified. It is impossible that one who has been united to Christ and granted his righteousness in justification will not be glorified as well, for the Father will not fail to carry out the fullness of his electing purpose to its designed end. None for whom Christ died is subject to condemnation (Rom. 8:31–34; cf. 8:1), and nothing in all creation can separate true believers from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35–39).

The Lord Jesus makes this very point in John 6:37–40. The Father wills that Christ lose *none* of those whom he has given him, and that every elect believer will possess eternal life and will be raised to everlasting glory on the last day. And the Father's will cannot be overturned by anyone or anything (Job 42:2; Pss. 33:10–11; 115:3; Isa. 46:9–10; Dan. 4:35), for he is not only graciously disposed to his people but is also sovereignly powerful to accomplish his desired ends. As Jesus says, "I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28–29). Using the strongest negative language available in the Greek language, Jesus emphatically declares that those who belong to Christ by faith "will never perish" (John 10:28) but will have eternal life (John 3:16). He grounds the eternal security of Christ's sheep in the sovereign power of the Father who holds them in his hand. The Father is so great and mighty that no one could snatch from his hand those whom he holds forever.

For this reason, Paul expresses his confidence that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Quite simply, God finishes what he starts. Since it was the sovereign grace of the Father—not the free will of man—that *began* the work of salvation in the lives of sinners (cf. Acts 11:18; 16:14; Eph. 2:4–9; Phil. 1:29; James 1:18), so also will God exercise that same sovereign power to bring this great work to its completion. Believers can be confident that they will persevere by the preserving power of the Father.

**The Merit of the Son.** Second, the believer's security is grounded in the merits of Christ's saving work and the efficacy of his present intercession. No one may bring a charge against God's elect, because Christ has died, has been raised, and intercedes for his own (Rom. 8:33–34). This is the ground upon which no one will separate believers from Christ's love (Rom. 8:35–39). Further, the Son's redeeming work accomplishes its design with perfect efficacy. As their substitute, the Son of God stood in the place of elect sinners on the cross and bore the divine punishment for their sins (1 Pet. 2:24). In doing so, he has fully propitiated the Father's wrath against his people (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John

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2:2; 4:10), purchasing them out of the slave market of sin with the price of his own blood (Acts 20:28; Rev. 5:9). Not only this, but the Father has also certified, by raising Christ from the dead, that his death sufficiently atoned for sin. The resurrection was the great vindication and validation of Christ (1 Tim. 3:16), verifying that the Father had approved of his completed work and that there was no more penalty left to pay, no more wrath left to bear for those who are in him. To suggest that sinners for whom Christ offered himself as a propitiation may yet suffer the eternal penalty of God's wrath is to demean the worth of his redemptive sacrifice and to contradict the Father's testimony in the resurrection. Further still, through the Spirit's application of Christ's redemptive work, the sinner is credited with Christ's righteousness in justification. It is unthinkable that the Spirit would apply only a portion of those saving benefits purchased by Christ's redemption; a soul declared righteous on the basis of Christ's work will never be stripped of that righteousness to undergo condemnation (Rom. 8:1; cf. Acts. 13:38–39).

Moreover, Christ not only has offered an infinitely worthy sacrifice on behalf of his people but he also presently intercedes for them before the Father (Rom. 8:34). He prays particularly to ensure the eternal salvation of the elect with an intercession that is always efficacious. Jesus does not save his people in a manner in which that salvation can be forfeited or lost; he saves "to the uttermost" (Heb. 7:25)—perfectly, completely, and eternally, ensuring that salvation will not be lost. When Satan had demanded to sift Peter like wheat, Jesus responded by assuring Peter, "But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus's intercessory prayer is enough to ensure the preservation of Peter's salvation, for he continues, "And *when*"—not "if," but "when"—"you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). All believers are the beneficiaries of their Great High Priest's perfectly efficacious intercession and thus are kept by the power of God (1 Pet. 1:5).

**The Sealing of the Spirit.** Third, the believer's security is grounded in the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13–14; cf. 4:30). In Paul's day, affixing one's seal to something expressed the concepts of security, authentication, and ownership. God seals his people with the Holy Spirit himself, giving his own Spirit to personally indwell each believer as a pledge of the future inheritance of salvation (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). The word translated "pledge" is a commercial term that refers to an earnest or down payment which guarantees that the rest of the promised payment will follow. God would not affix his seal of ownership to his people, causing the Holy Spirit himself to indwell them as a pledge of his earnest faithfulness to bring them to their promised inheritance, and yet fail to secure them so as to deliver fully on his promise of eternal life.



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## *The Persevering Faith of the Child of God*

While all true believers are sovereignly preserved in their salvation by the almighty power of God, his sovereignty in no way eliminates their responsibility to persevere in faith throughout their lives. Just as God's sovereignty in conversion does not mitigate the responsibility to repent and believe (Rom. 9:14–18; cf. Rom. 10:11–21), and just as God's sovereignty in sanctification does not rule out the need for sustained effort in pursuing holiness (e.g., Phil. 2:12–13; 2 Pet. 1:3–5), so also God's sovereign preservation is not at odds with the necessity of the believer's perseverance. All true believers are "by God's power ... being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). God's power is the decisive preserving force, but his power keeps his people *through faith*—that is, through the continuing, persevering faith that works through love in every believer (Gal. 5:6).

Therefore, Scripture issues numerous calls to persevere in faith, indicating that failure to persevere will result in a failure to lay hold of final salvation (Matt. 10:22; Matt. 24:12–13; John 8:31). Those who do not abide in his Word are shown to be false disciples—or "false brothers" (2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4)—who claim to belong to Jesus but fail to bring forth the necessary fruit that gives evidence of genuine conversion. Christ will "present you holy and blameless and above reproach before [the Father], *if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven*" (Col. 1:22–23; cf. Heb. 3:14). These passages clearly indicate that the professing believer must persevere in faith and obedience if he is to finally come to salvation. Scripture gives no warrant to assure professing Christians of eternal life whose lives do not exhibit the fruit of genuine faith (James 2:14–26).

An implication of this truth is that many people may give outward signs of devotion to Christ and his church who are inwardly not true Christians. Illustrated by the seed that fell on the rocky ground, some professing Christians seem to receive the Word of God joyfully. Yet they have no root, so when tribulation and persecution come, they fall away from Christ and abandon their profession of faith (Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23). Jesus warns that some who enthusiastically profess faith in Christ and even seem to exercise miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit will come to the day of judgment expecting to inherit salvation but will instead be sent away to destruction (Matt. 7:21–23). Interestingly, Jesus does not say, "I knew you once, but you failed to persevere and fell away from the faith," but rather, "I *never* knew you." Those who make even the sincerest professions of faith but who fail

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e.g. *exempli gratia* (Lat., "for example")

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to supplement their faith with the fruit of the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:5–10; Gal. 5:22–24) were never true Christians to begin with.

This is significant, because many object to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints on the basis of experiencing a friend or relative who professed faith in Christ but later fell away. Experience, in concert with several passages of Scripture that threaten final perdition for failing to persevere, suggests to them that true Christians may actually lose their salvation. However, Scripture teaches that those who fail to persevere to the end reveal that they were never true Christians to begin with. The apostle John writes, “They went out from us” — which is to say, certain people associated themselves with the church yet later departed — “but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

## *Assurance of Salvation*<sup>73</sup>

How, then, can one be assured that he is a true believer in Christ and will not one day fall away, revealing that he was never a true believer at all? Scripture calls upon those who profess faith in Christ to examine themselves. Paul urges the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter similarly exhorts the churches in his care, “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election” (2 Pet. 1:10). The apostle John dedicated his entire first epistle to the subject, stating his theme at the end: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

The authors of Scripture clearly desired that believers be assured of their salvation by examining their lives for evidence of genuine spiritual life. Consider the following eleven lines of evidence—largely drawn from the tests outlined in 1 John—by which Christians can gain assurance that their faith and salvation are genuine:

1. Fellowship with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:3; 5:1; cf. Ps. 34:8; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 2:20; Heb. 4:16)
2. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the heart (1 John 2:27; 4:13; cf. 1 Cor. 2:10, 12; Gal. 5:22–23)
3. Answered prayer (1 John 3:22; 5:14)
4. Longing for Christ’s return (1 Cor. 16:22; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3)

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<sup>73</sup> This section is adapted from MacArthur, *Saved without a Doubt*, 67–91. Used by permission of David C. Cook. All rights reserved.

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5. Spiritual discernment (1 John 4:1–6; cf. 2:12–19)
6. Acute awareness of the holiness of God and the guilt of sin (1 John 1:5–10; cf. Rom. 7:14–15; 2 Cor. 7:10)
7. Decreasing patterns of sin (1 John 3:8–9; cf. Rom. 6:14–18)
8. Increasing patterns of obedience (1 John 2:3; cf. John 8:31)
9. Rejection of worldliness (1 John 2:15; cf. James 4:4)
10. Being rejected by the world (1 John 3:13; cf. Matt. 5:10–12; John 3:19–20; 15:18–21; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12–14)
11. Love for fellow Christians (1 John 2:9–11; 3:10, 16–19; cf. John 13:35; 1 Thess. 4:9)

## GLORIFICATION

The final divine act in the application of redemption is glorification.<sup>74</sup> Glorification is the radical transformation of both the body and the soul of believers, perfecting them in holiness, and thereby fitting them for eternal life on the new earth in perfect communion with the triune God. Murray helpfully describes glorification as “the complete and final redemption of the whole person, when in the integrity of body and spirit, the people of God will be conformed to the image of the risen, exalted, and glorified Redeemer, when the very body of their humiliation will be conformed to the body of Christ’s glory” (cf. Phil. 3:21).<sup>75</sup>

### *The Consummation of Salvation*

The resurrection of the body is the consummation of our salvation, the climax of redemption, as the Spirit brings to completion the redemption that the Father planned and that Christ purchased (Rom. 8:19–23, 30). Those on whom the Father set his electing love he predestined for salvation, and these—whose redemption Christ purchased by dying in their place as a propitiation for their sins—enjoy the benefits of that redemption. In justification, they are freed from the penalty of sin, and in sanctification, they are freed from the power of sin. In glorification, they are finally freed from the very presence of sin in both body and soul (John 17:24; Eph. 5:27; cf. John 6:39–40, 44, 54). In this way,

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<sup>74</sup> This brief treatment of glorification concerns the doctrine of the resurrection from a soteriological perspective. For further discussion of the resurrection in the context of eschatology, including the timing of the events, the effect on the physical creation, and the destiny of unbelievers, see chap. 10, “The Future.”

<sup>75</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 175.

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glorification especially magnifies Christ as the preeminent source of the beauty of holiness that is reflected in his perfected brethren (Rom. 8:29).

The doctrine of glorification is essential to the Christian faith, so much so that if it were not true we would be the most pitiable of all people (1 Cor. 15:12–19). It was the hope of a glorified body that galvanized Paul to totally surrender his natural body to the mistreatment and persecution that attended a life of gospel ministry (2 Cor. 5:1; cf. 4:14–18). The “sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us,” and so believers welcome the sufferings of Christ if it means that “we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17–18; cf. Phil. 3:10–11). Therefore, while life in a world and in a body that are both cursed by sin causes us to groan, that groaning is assuaged by the eager anticipation of “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

An ageless anchor of the soul, the resurrection was the hope of even old covenant believers in Yahweh (Job 19:13–27; Dan. 12:2; John 11:24; Acts 24:14–15; Heb. 11:16). Standing on that Old Testament foundation, the reader can view the New Testament Epistles’ explicit teaching on the resurrection of the body as a welcome elaboration and development of the ancient and living hope of the people of God. Paul reveals that as the condemnation of Adam brought the whole human race guilt and corruption unto death, in the same way, union with the second Adam will cause all believers to overcome sin and death and to be made alive in him (1 Cor. 15:22, 45). This takes place “each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end” (1 Cor. 15:23–24; cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–17). Indeed, the dead in Christ and those alive at his coming will be glorified in the twinkling of an eye at his return (1 Cor. 15:51–53). At that time, death itself—the very last enemy—will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26; cf. Acts 2:24; Heb. 2:14–15; Rev. 1:17–18), which will be cause for victorious celebration:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:54–57)

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2) and bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because he, according to his great mercy, has caused us to be born again to this living hope of “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading,

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kept in heaven for [us], who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:3–5).

In the face of so great a salvation, spanning from eternity past to eternity future, the only fitting conclusion is to add our voices to the heavenly chorus—that “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9). We must cry out in worship along with them, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:10). Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

## Questions:

1. What is the “Trinitarian plan of salvation”?
2. What is the twofold cause of the atonement?
3. What is meant by “penal substitutionary” atonement?
4. Why is “obedience” the unifying principle that encompasses the facets of Christ’s atoning work?
5. What is the meaning and significance of these terms for the atonement: sacrifice; propitiation; reconciliation; redemption; conquest?
6. In what ways is the atonement “sufficient” and “efficacious”?
7. What are the various terms used to describe views regarding the extent of the atonement?
8. What does the unity of the High Priestly work of Christ indicate about the extent of the atonement?
9. What does the argument of Romans 8:29–39 indicate about the extent of the atonement?
10. How does each side of the debate over the extent of the atonement understand these texts: 1 Timothy 2:3–6; John 3:16; 1 John 2:2?
11. What is the *ordo salutis*?
12. What is the “external call”?



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13. What is the “internal call”?
14. What is the definition and significance of “regeneration”?
15. What are the key parts of “conversion”?
16. What are the components of saving faith? (Latin terms)
17. What is meant by “union with Christ”?
18. Why is “justification by faith alone” so significant?
19. What is the nature of, and the ground of, justification?
20. What is the definition and what are the key features of these terms/concepts: adoption; sanctification; perseverance; glorification?<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> MacArthur, J. (Ed.). (2021). *Essential Christian Doctrine: A Handbook on Biblical Truth* (pp. 265–359). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.