

The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching

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INTRODUCTION

By the most conservative estimates the Southern Baptist Convention has had at least 88,000 preachers over its 151 year history. Even after the growth patterns of the denomination are taken into consideration, it is still safe to estimate that during the last century-and-a-half, more than 120 million Southern Baptist sermons were preached!¹



In light of this, it is impossible for anyone to presume to summarize exhaustively the history of Southern Baptist preaching in any respect. This article is no exception. It is, rather, a survey based upon the examination of several hundred sermon-collection books in the Southern Baptist Historical Commission library.

In reading through these sermons, an interesting connection suggested itself. It is presented here not so much as a theory, but as a program for study. Could it be that the perception of lost mankind's character and capability are improving in our preaching, much as they have in our doctrinal statements? Could it be that the unregenerate are being progressively perceived as less depraved? The evidence indicates that there has

¹ In 1845, there were about 4,000 Southern Baptist churches. Fifty years later that number had grown to 18,000. In 1945 there were 26,000 and by 1995 the total was approximately 40,000. Assuming one preacher per church, and each preacher preaching for 50 years, the convention has had at least 88,000 preachers. Assuming further that a whole new shift has just reported to work at our 40,000 churches, we shall count only the 48,000 who have gone before. If each of those preached an average of once per Sunday for their 50 years of ministry, we have 2,500 sermons per preacher (M.E. Dodd is reported to have preached 18,000 times! See T.W. Gayer, "Monroe Elmon Dodd," *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, mg. ed., Norman Cox [Nashville: Broadman, 1958], p. 378). This makes a total of 120 million sermons from 48,000 preachers for our first 150 years. Of course, these are extremely conservative numbers. There are more preachers than churches and more sermons than Sunday morning sermons. And the turnover of preachers is much greater.

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been an ascent of lost man in the thinking of Southern Baptists over the course of their history.

Does preaching generate the confessions? Or do the confessions shape the preaching? Or does it work both ways? To what extent does one influence the other? While these questions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, the parallels are worth watching.

When we read the 1859 *Abstract of Principles* of Southern Seminary, we find that lost man inherits a “nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law.” Sixty-six years later, the first *Baptist Faith and Message* said men “inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin.” The 1963 revision stated that men “inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.” One wonders how a fresh revision might read in the year 2025? If the theological trajectory remains the same, perhaps in the 21st century men will be said to “inherit a nature open to sin as an option.”

While there have probably been millions of Southern Baptist sermons preached, relatively few have found their way into print. And relatively few of those have found their way into our historical library. Still, that collection makes for an interesting sample.

ANTE-BELLUM PREACHING

Ante-bellum preacher Charles D. Mallary explains the doctrines of grace in his sermon on Ephesians 1:3, 4, “The Doctrine of Election.”² This founding trustee of Mercer University defined election as

God’s free, sovereign, eternal and unchangeable purpose to glorify the perfections of his character in the salvation of a definite number of the human family by Jesus Christ, without regard to any foreseen merit or good works on their part, as the ground or condition of this choice.³

His account of depravity serves as a clear benchmark of early Southern Baptist views:

The scriptural doctrine of depravity is not that every man is as bad as he possibly can be, for there may be indefinite progression in guilt:—nor that one man is necessarily as wicked as another,—for there may be as many shades of depravity as there are sinners in the universe. But it teaches us that man, by nature, is destitute of all holy principles and desires; that there is nothing in his character which is pleasing in the sight of God; that being alienated in his heart from God,

² C.D. Mallary, “The Doctrine of Election,” *The Georgia Pulpit*, Robert Fleming, ed., (Richmond: H.K. Allyson, 1847), 176.

³ *Ibid.*, 178.

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corrupt in the very fountain of action, in the temper and spirit of his mind, all the actions that he performs, even those which are in themselves excellent and lovely, are still the service of an alien and a rebel, and consequently an abomination in the sight of heaven. Every imagination of the thought of his heart is only evil continually.⁴

In this light, he went on to observe, “The want of power is the want of will ... the sinner’s inability is the sinner’s crime.”⁵ A trustee of Mercer University from its founding in 1833 until his death in 1864, Mallary represented mainstream Baptist thinking in his day.

Virginia pastor Addison Hall joined in this grim assessment of unregenerate man in a sermon specifically addressing the topic:

The doctrine of human depravity is fundamental, and lies at the very foundation of the Christian Religion; insomuch as a practical conviction of its truth, may be considered as the first step towards the reception of the offered mercy of the gospel. By it we understand that man by nature is wholly corrupt and depraved; not only destitute of love to his Creator, but actually opposed to his laws, and at war with his perfections: that man’s whole nature and attributes, animal, intellectual, and moral, are perverted. His understanding is darkened, his imagination beclouded, his memory impaired, his reason dethroned, his will perverse, his conscience defiled, his affections estranged, his heart polluted. In his thought he is impure, in his words filthy, in his actions vile. In short, that he is ‘earthly, sensual, devilish.’ ... This humiliating doctrine is confirmed by the history of all nations and religions, whether Pagan, Mahommedan, Jewish, or Christian; else why those scenes of war, of rapine, and bloodshed, that fill the pages of history, sacred and profane?... A steadfast conviction of this doctrine is necessary, to tear away from self-righteousness man the leaf-covering of his own righteousness, and to make him see himself in all his native deformity and pollution, that so he may duly value the atoning righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶

Georgia pastor J.H.T. Kilpatrick answered a variety of objections to the doctrines of grace, He responded to those who charge that the doctrine of human depravity diminishes human responsibility:

⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁵ Ibid., 181.

⁶ Addison Hall, “Doctrine of Human Depravity,” *The Baptist Pulpit of the United States*, ed., Edward H. Fletcher (New York: Edward H. Fletcher, 1853), 133–136.

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Others, again, excuse themselves thus: they say it is their nature to sin, and they cannot see how any one can be blamed for acting according to his nature; and especially as he got this nature from another. Therefore, such persons appear to think they are quite excusable in sinning against God; purely, because it is their nature to do so; but let us try this mode of reasoning and see whether it will do. Suppose a man is arraigned in a court of justice for the crime of larceny, and his attorney or counselor urges before the court and jury, as his only plea of exoneration: that this poor unfortunate man is a thief by nature; it is his nature to steal, and that he always had been a thief at heart, &c., and moreover, his father was a thief, and this man, poor fellow, is just like his father; and therefore, he hopes the court and jury will find a verdict of acquittal for the prisoner; in as much as it is his nature to steal, &c. We ask, what do you think of such a plea as this? Do you think it would stand? Or rather, do you not think this man intended, through his counselor, to insult the court, and sink himself still lower, if possible, in the estimation of all who know him? Make the application, my dear objector, and tremble before God for having insulted him in like manner."⁷

Our first president, W.B. Johnson, similarly had little patience for the lost who refused to take responsibility for their own spiritual destiny:

Now, now, O fellow-sinners, you have it in your power to place yourselves under influences that are spiritual and saving; or under influences that are carnal and damning. You can read the Bible, or the book of infidelity; the sermon of truth, or the novel of fiction; you can attend the party of sinful pleasure, or the meeting for holy prayer; you can go to the midnight revel, or to the house of God. You can lift up the prayer of the publican, or the howl of the bacchanal. You can utter the praise of the Most High, or belch out the blasphemy of the arch fiend. How solemn the responsibilities that are upon you!⁸

Returning to Kilpatrick, we find a lack of enthusiasm for much that appears to be religious interest within lost man:

Here is a man, for instance, who is very sick, he greatly dreads to die; his physician proposes to him to take a potion of very nauseous medicine, the patient is perfectly willing, and greatly desires the medicine. We ask, Is it really, the medicine the man wants, independent of its effects? O no, the medicine itself is disagreeable; it is the

⁷ James Hall Tenner Kilpatrick, "God's Willingness to Save Sinners," *The Georgia Pulpit*, ed., Robert Fleming (Richmond: H.K. Allyson, 1847), 123–124.

⁸ W.B. Johnson, "Free Agency of Man," *The Baptist Pulpit of the United States*, ed., Joseph Belcher (New York: Edward H. Fletcher, 1853), 125–127.

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good effects of the medicine which is really the object of his desire. He wants to live, and he only desires the medicine as the means of obtaining the end. This, perhaps, unfolds the secret of your situation. If so, you are only a legalist; and it has not been religion you have been wanting all the while, but its good effects. If you will examine yourself closely, perhaps you will find that so far from having desired religion on account of what it is in its own nature, you have in reality been desiring it only as a kind of necessary evil, which you did not want, only as a means of obtaining certain wished-for ends.... We see a great many persons who appear to be greatly concerned about keeping out of hell and getting to heaven, while they appear to be very little concerned about sin and holiness.⁹

In an 1860 sermon collection, Reverend W.T. Ussery of Union University underscored the magnitude of man's lostness with these words:

It may take more power to redeem fallen man than it did to create this material world. It required the combined power and wisdom of the God-head to save man, while the Father merely spoke this world into existence.... If the great, rich and eternal grace of God is required to save the human soul, how deep, inevitable and universal must be human depravity?¹⁰

Parenthetically, we should note that Calvinist apologists were just as hard on hyper-Calvinist's as they were toward Arminians. Adiel Sherwood, who organized the theology department at Mercer and wrote the resolution which resulted in the formation of the Georgia convention, called hyper-Calvinists "anti-nomians."

In a sermon entitled, "The Covenant of Redemption," he spoke of the doctrines of grace as "the system which acknowledges God as the author of salvation, the Spirit as the agent, and Christians as the means." In his estimation, it was "the only scriptural system."¹¹ But he was opposed to hyper-Calvinism, which scorned means:

Anti-nomians have been so fearful of trenching upon the Lord's prerogative of converting sinners, or that the set time to favor Zion had not arrived, that they have attempted but little.... If they had been guided by the scriptures, they would have been "up and doing" long ago, for the same commission which authorizes them to labor in their own neighborhoods, — not only gives liberty, but presses the duty of preaching "the gospel to every creature."¹²

⁹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰ W.T. Ussery, "Grace," *Sermons* (Union University, 1860), 159, 164.

¹¹ Ibid., "The Covenant of Redemption," p. 90.

¹² Ibid.

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LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY PREACHING

After the war, toward the end of the century, there is still an allegiance to the notion of total depravity, but the preachers seem more concerned than their predecessors to mention “freedom.” Consider Thomas Skinner’s remarkable statement of depravity, of the bondage of the lost man’s heart. But then note the closing qualifier.

The unconverted sinner’s heart is fortified in his weakness, is desperately set in him to do evil, and all that converted men can do is to break upon them, as the sea breaks on the rocky shore. It is the sea that is sent back while the rock stands firm. There are scores of men who live for the flesh, and yet live in the full light of truth; men that are familiar with every statement and argument of the Scriptures; men that have known and seen much of the power of God in revivals, and yet there is within them that fixed, rooted, toughened life of sin that refuses to yield itself to any power which can be wielded merely by the hands of men.

If the Christian’s strength be in the Lord and not in himself, then the Christless person must needs be poor, impotent creature, void of all strength to do anything towards its own salvation. The holy Spirit works in the saving of a sinner without impairing the freedom of the human will.¹³

W.P. Walker offered a similar account, with a strong statement of depravity: “In this slavery the mind is blinded, that truth cannot be seen. The affections are perverted that the truth is hated, and the will is paralyzed that it cannot be obeyed.”¹⁴ Given this “helpless and hopeless” condition, Walker noted the necessity of the Holy Spirit: “with his aid we can turn to God.”¹⁵ It may be significant that he says “with his aid” rather than “by his power.”

This milder statement of the Holy Spirit’s role accords with his claim, “There is no coercion in matters of religion. God’s revelation to man is sufficient to convince his judgment, conquer his will, and win his love.”¹⁶ The listener is left to wonder what this could mean. On one level, it is surely false. Any number of people are exposed to God’s manifold revelation of himself—through the declaration of the heavens, the testimony of natural law, and the clear preaching of the gospel. Many refuse to respond to this

¹³ Thomas E. Skinner, “Conversion,” *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1894), 91.

¹⁴ W.P. Walker, “Abandoned of the Lord,” *The Southern Baptist Pulpit*, ed., J.F. Love (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), 311.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

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revelation. Or is he speaking of an elective/irresistible “revelation?” If so, then why put it so? If he means simply that no one is dragged kicking and screaming into heaven, then that is true enough, but against whom is he arguing? If it means that somehow depraved man achieves saving heights of spiritual perception so that he might choose God on his own, then he makes his earlier statement of man’s helplessness confusing.

It seems that the cords of man’s bondage are just loose enough that he, Houdini-like, can, with the Holy Spirit’s whispered urgings, swell his wrists and work enough slack to break free and grasp God.

As perplexing as this prose may be, it does show the tension involved in trying to hold to the biblical doctrine of total depravity while answering to the philosophical theme of freedom. As is noted below, some later preachers utterly abandoned the doctrine of total depravity and the tension collapsed.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY PREACHING

Shortly after the turn of the century, there are clear signs of lost man’s progress in Southern Baptist preaching. C.B. Williams, dean and professor of Greek New Testament and New Testament Theology at Southwestern argued that “man is worth saving morally and spiritually. This is his chief glory. Then let us build more churches, more Sunday schools, let us send forth more evangelists and missionaries to save this lofty being called man, spiritually and morally, in order that he may be lifted to the side of God in the Kingdom, though Jesus Christ, whose grace shall transform his character and light his life, until at last he may be like God Himself.”¹⁷

Of course, the Bible teaches that man is a “little lower than the angels,” that he is “fearfully and wonderfully made,” but it does seem a bit much to speak of salvation as lifting a lofty being yet higher.

Williams is a fascinating and disturbing character. He seemed right susceptible to modern expressions. In “The Worth of a Man,” he said “I believe in eugenics, the science of noble birth, the science which says we can produce a higher race by proper birth and by proper parentage.”¹⁸ In “Christianity for the Twentieth Century,” he embraced a popular slogan ordinarily associated with theological liberalism: “This teaching of the

¹⁷ C.B. Williams, “The Worth of Man,” *Citizens of Two Worlds* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1919), 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

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New Testament on the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man must be basal in the twentieth century Christianity.”¹⁹

Despite his qualifiers and links to Scripture, these words reveal a man who is overeager to make Christianity “relevant.” By this standard, talk of total depravity did not fare so well in his day.

In the same era, Southwestern Seminary president L.R. Scarborough suggested a good measure of freedom for lost man, building a sermon on Revelation 3:20 in the Laodicean letter, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” Despite the fact that this letter is directed toward one of the seven churches, Scarborough calls it “the simplest explanation of the plan of salvation encompassed in so brief a statement within the lids of God’s Book.”²⁰

MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY PREACHING

By the 1930’s, the Reformed perspectives which permeated earlier Southern Baptist preaching had declined in influence. Southern Seminary president E.Y. Mullins, seemingly at odds with the anthropological article of the *Abstract of Principles*, preached these words:

You may choose to believe in God or choose not to believe. Again the choice is in the highest degree momentous. You may freely will to believe in God. Indeed, when we look at the spiritual nature of man closely it becomes quite evident the he is so made that faith is the natural or normal expression of his nature. There are certain deep instincts in him which cannot be evaded. They impel us to believe in God ... in all these deeper impulses we find a vindication of his right to believe in God. Faith in God is his inalienable right. The instinct of thought and of conscience, the instinct of prayer and of suffering, the instinct of courage and of hope—all these vindicate man’s right to believe. The whole make and trend of his soul impels him to God.²¹

A “right to believe?” What a curious construction, so unlike ordinary discourse. Stranger yet is M.E. Dodd’s sermon on John 3:16, one of a series of sermons he preached on various 3:16’s. He began with “GOD SO LOVED” —did not hate. It does not say, “I believe in

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ L.R. Scarborough, “The Savior Knocking at the Door,” *The Tears of Jesus* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1922), 75.

²¹ Edgar Young Mullins, “The Right to Believe,” *Faith in the Modern World* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1930), 11–12, 21.

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you." He does. It does not say, "I trust you." He does....²² The point seems to be that God believes in and trusts mankind.

Texas executive secretary R.C. Campbell expressed similar enthusiasm in his sermon on Psalm 8:4, "God's Estimate of Man:" "God sees in us the ability to overcome our selfish desires and inclinations. It is an inspiring sight to see an individual who forgets himself in unselfish service for humanity."²³



Well, it is true that there are stirring stories of non-Christian Medal-of-Honor winners who threw themselves on grenades for their buddies; and of unbelieving parents who slaved to give their kids an opportunity for a better life. But does the Bible justify speaking so sweepingly and generously of man's capabilities at the deepest level of motivation?

W.T. Conner, longtime theology professor at Southwestern Seminary, similarly mitigated man's depravity:

Jesus regarded men as sinful—all men—but He did not believe that men were fixed in their sinful state. He knew the love of God toward men, and He believed in the possibility of winning men to a favorable response to God's grace.... Jesus did not believe, then, that man could lift himself out of his sinful state in his own strength, but He did believe that men could respond to God's grace and let God lift them out of their sins. It is true that this response was one that was won from the man by the grace of God offering to save man. Yet it was man's response. And Jesus counted on such a response on the part of sinful men. To some extent that was what He was finding. He welcomed such a response. He eagerly watched for it. He said there was rejoicing over it in the presence of the angels in heaven.

In befriending sinners, then, Jesus was not compromising with their sins. He was offering them a friendship that was calculated to win them from their evil ways.²⁴

It seems a little strange to talk about Jesus's "believing," "counting on", "eagerly watching," and "calculating." Doesn't Jesus more nearly work in the realm of "knowing" and "effecting?" Intentionally or not, Conner presents a picture of man who, while not perfect, is perfectly open to the overtures of an amiable, gift-bearing divinity.

²² M.E. Dodd, "John 3:16," *Three: Sixteens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 31.

²³ R.C. Campbell, "God's Estimate of Man," *Youth & Yokes* (Nashville: Broadman, 1938), 57.

²⁴ W.T. Conner, "Jesus, The Friend of Sinners," *The Christ We Need* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1938), 45.

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Moving into the 1940's, many other spokesmen for the liberty and even honor of lost men are easily found. M.F. Ewton of First Baptist Church, Seminole, Oklahoma, drew this boundary line:

God cannot go beyond man himself. Men are free moral agents, having the right and power of choice. Man can choose the highest heights of heaven or the lowest depths of hell. God will not, God cannot force men to love and serve Him because forced service is slavery. If men love and serve the Most High God, they will do it willingly. By the promptings of the Holy Spirit, by the faithful preaching of the Word, and by the testimony of Christian friends, the issue of eternal importance has been placed before you ... your soul will perish in the regions of the damned unless you will to do the will of God. God cannot go beyond your own heart and its desire. If you remain hard of heart and stiff of neck then there is nothing that God can do. The matter rests with you.²⁵

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Is it not more appropriate to speak of the "promptings of the Holy Spirit" in the lives of the saints? For the lost, it would seem to involve more than prompting, for they have not yet consented to be actors in Kingdom drama.

Llew Northern, in his Broadman sermon book, *Simple Salvation*, claimed,

There is a longing in every man for acquaintanceship with the divine. This quality of man's nature may not always be known, but it is universally real. The further one advances in the progressive elements of life the more he feels the need of something that cannot be defined by the ordinary rules of expression and realized by the use that is made of material accomplishments.²⁶

Now, it is easy to argue that men want security, significance, and heaven, but it is quite another thing to say that they want God as Lord. In Northern's sermon, we find little trace of the notion of man as a hardened rebel. And what could Northern mean by "advances in the progressive elements of life?" If he means "advances in spiritual sensitivity," then his statement is trivially true. If he means "advances in the arts, sciences, and civic virtues," then his statement is demonstrably false. Indeed, as men count themselves more progressive, enlightened, educated, and esteemed, they are prime candidates for spiritually ruinous pride.

Not surprisingly, the Jesus who seeks this advanced man is more supplicant than Sovereign. "In Jesus' standing at the door of the hearts of men knocking, one is struck

²⁵ M.F. Ewton, "Limits Beyond Which God Cannot Go," *Cardinal Truths* (Self-published, 1947), 48.

²⁶ Llew C. Northern, "Man's Quest for God," *Simple Salvation* (Nashville: Broadman, p. 1940), 99.

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with the valid significance of a symbol of man's character by finding that the Lord Jesus respects the privacy of the human soul. He does not batter his way into this privacy, nor resent a kind of barrier between man and him. Quite gently and lovingly he comes to the heart's door and knocks.... He would enter to cheer, to counsel, to instruct. He would have an abiding place within the heart. He will await the opening of the door."²⁷

South Carolina pastor W.P. Hall elaborated on the posture of the seeking Jesus in this fashion: "About what was Jesus optimistic? He was hopeful about His words enduring, the redemption and transformation of human personality, and the coming of His kingdom."²⁸ "If He had not been hopeful about redeeming lost men, He would not have come and sacrificed so much in order to do it."²⁹ An optimistic and hopeful Jesus? Well, yes. But should not more be said?

In another 1940's Broadman book, *Christ and Human Liberty*, Adiel Moncrief spoke of Jesus' view of man in these terms: "Belief in human liberty and in man's free institutions involves the greatest measure of faith in man. Jesus has that measure of faith in man. He believes in the boundless possibilities of mankind to become free sons of God."³⁰

Jesus has "faith in man." Had there been a denominational press 100 years earlier in 1840, it's doubtful that this expression would have received much play.

Broadman also published a 1940's collection by Zeno Wall, one in which he describes the Holy Spirit's work in salvation in these terms: "A sinner is hard of hearing. He, in fact, would never hear if the Lord did not unstop his ears. The Holy Spirit, therefore, takes the initiative in our salvation by unstopping our ears." Wall then goes on to say, "When you open your heart's door and bid the Lord to come in, you will experience something that you cannot explain."³¹

It's remarkable how strong the imagery of Revelation 3:20 plays in Southern Baptist evangelistic preaching. In this sermon, the sinner is portrayed as sitting in the house of his soul, deaf to noise of the Savior's knock. Perhaps "violating his privacy," the Holy Spirit slips in and clears his hearing. But then the question stands, why should the sinner want to answer instead of recoiling in fear or irritation, as some folks do when we go out

²⁷ Ibid., 89–90.

²⁸ W.P. Hall, "The Optimism of Jesus," *Walking With God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1940), 89.

²⁹ Ibid., 91.

³⁰ Adiel Moncrief, "Christ & Human Liberty," *The Loving Christ in the Life of Today* (Nashville: Broadman, 1941), 21.

³¹ Zeno Wall, "Experimental Religion," *Verities of the Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman, 1946), 5.

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on church visitation? Is hearing enough to prompt opening? It's not a bad image as far as it goes, but it leaves the question of will untouched.

Moving into the 1950's, we find yet other voices raised against the Reformed view of lost man. In a "Baptist Hour" sermon, Roy McClain declared that there are "no elect people."³² He pictured a wistful God who ever renews his invitation. "He puts perfume in the flowers with the hope that you will someday ask why."³³

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This God has done what he can, and now he waits hopefully for us to pick up on his cues.

Of course, one speaks of the Baptist Hour, Herschel Hobbs comes readily to mind. This venerable Southern Baptist statesman was emphatic in stressing human freedom over human bondage: "The devil and God held an election to determine whether or not you would be saved or lost. The devil voted against you, and God voted for you. So the vote was a tie. It is up to you to cast the deciding vote."³⁴

Everyone is familiar with the practice of watching election returns, waiting to see how the vote went. It's difficult to imagine God's doing this sort of thing, even if done eons in advance of the actual vote.

To close the 50's we turn to yet another Broadman Book, *Southern Baptist Preaching*. In it Carlyle Marney's sermon on "The New Birth" provides the most generous view of man yet. Speaking of inquiring Nicodemus, he said, "He is blind with the awful spiritual blindness of all men who know only religious habit. He is blind to the indwelling Spirit, blind to his freedom, to his responsibility, to his spiritual destiny, and to the inner light."³⁵ Unless Marney is arguing that the inquiring Nicodemus was already regenerate, he pictures a lost man indwelt by the Holy Spirit—one who needs a happy discovery more than a conversion.

CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

In the late 1970's, Broadman's fourth volume of Award Winning Sermons featured a sermon by Clay Warf on the prodigal son. Warf draws from William Hull in describing "the waiting of God as one that is filled with an agony compounded with fear and hope—

³² Roy O. McClain, "The Great Supper, God's Broken Heart," *Stoop and Drink* (Ft. Worth: Radio and Television Commission, 1955), 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ Herschel Hobbs, "God's Election Day," sermon preached on The Baptist Hour, 8 October, 1967, *Beam International*, 18, No. 5 (May 1967), 23–24.

³⁵ Carlyle Marney, "The New Birth," *Southern Baptist Preaching*, ed., H.C. Brown, Jr. (Nashville: Broadman, 1959), 133–134.

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each day hoping for the son's return yet each moment filled with fear that the son may destroy himself in the far country. But the fact is that no matter how close in pursuit of us God may be, he still chooses to wait until we turn and reach out to take his hand."³⁶

What are we to make of this Heavenly Father wracked with fear that his son may not return? Never mind predestination. Whatever happened to prescience?

Warf applies this parable to every person, but in what sense do lost people possess sonship, prodigal or not?

In the 1970's, Southern Seminary professor Frank Stagg continued the assault on Reformed thinking in Southern Baptist life:

The 'Achilles heel' of 'predestination,' besides its monstrous and fallacious view of God as arbitrary, is that what it offers as 'salvation' is really destruction. Were God to determine that some be 'saved' and some be 'lost,' there would be no meaningful difference between the two groups or fates. Both groups would be lost. Both would be reduced to the status of things, objects manipulated. Salvation is not salvation for a person unless personhood itself be preserved. That is why Jesus asked the cripple, 'Do you wish to become well?'³⁷

I fail to take the offense Dr. Stagg suggests I ought to take. Believing that I was an incurably self-indulgent, spiritually dead creature, I have nothing but gratitude to God for giving me a new heart and a heavenly destiny. These changes seem to me to constitute a "meaningful difference." If this be destruction, then may we see more of it!

Of course, a "person" is one who wills, who acts according to values and principles, and believers have all the personhood one could ever want, Stagg's claims notwithstanding. Stagg's lost man seems much finer than the lost man pictured the Abstract of Principles, which Stagg signed under some necessarily arcane interpretation.

NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS

In fairness, it should be noted that Southern Baptist preaching does not chart a simple trajectory from total to lesser depravity. All along the way, there have been both words of esteem for lost man's capacities and, on the other hand, dismissive judgments on those

³⁶ Clay Warf, "The God of the Lost," *Award Winning Sermons*, ed. James Barry (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 109.

³⁷ Frank Stagg, "A Whole Man Made Well," *The Struggle for Meaning* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1977), 73-74.

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alleged capacities. The question is not, then, one of discrete and exclusive eras, but of the shifting center of mass.

J.R. Graves was an early dissident from the Reformed view of man. In his 1847 sermon on the "The Sovereignty of God," he said:

The doctrine of eternal and unconditional election, and reprobation as taught by Calvin, and assented to by many professed Christians, we utterly repudiate—it finds no place in our faith and affections. It is as contrary to our reason as to our understanding of the Word of God.... Either He will save some, who disbelieve the truth, and damn some who love our Lord Jesus Christ; or He must invincibly force some to love Him and some to hate Him, so that He might damn them. Both of which suppositions are contrary to the plain construction and spirit of the Bible, and effectually destroy all human accountability and moral agency.³⁸

He went on to say that all predestination was based on foreknowledge, and then suggested that those foreknown to choose Christ were those of more worthy character.

Did He dispossess Himself for the time of His omniscience, close His eyes, and decree a certain quantity, instead of a certain character, for salvation? Impossible for eternal wisdom thus to act! What would you think of that man before whom was set a large measure full of gold coins and pieces of tin of the same size and, being freely offered all he chose, should—instead of carefully selecting the gold—should shut his eyes and be satisfied with clutching a handful of whatever kind it might be! Would an infinitely wise God thus discern between the righteous and the wicked?³⁹

So Graves compared those who would ultimately be saved to gold coins on account of their superior moral character. These are the ones with the sensitivity to recognize the worthiness of Christ, and so, naturally turn to him. Seeing their virtuous choice, God affirms this choice in advance—hence, predestination.

Graves acknowledged that the Bible teaches that the lost man is a slave to sin, but, he asks, "cannot the slave wish for freedom and release?" He goes on, "The slave may wish in vain, but the sinner has a deliverer to rescue him when he wishes. So to him the freedom of thought and of choice is still left."⁴⁰

³⁸ J.R. Graves, "The Sovereignty of God," *Satan Dethroned* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1939), 47–48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

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The problem with this image is that the master imprisons the literal slave. The spiritual slave imprisons himself.

Just as there were early Baptists who mitigated depravity, there are modern Baptists who underscore it. One could hardly imagine a more sober account of fallen man than this one offered by the incomparable R.G. Lee:

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My own definition of the grace of God is this: the unlimited and unmerited favor given to the utterly undeserving. Let us think of the strength of grace. Sin is very powerful in this world. Sin is powerful as an opiate in the will. Sin is powerful as a frenzy in the imagination. Sin is powerful as a poison in the heart. Sin is powerful as a madness in the brain. Sin is powerful as a desert breath that drinks up all spiritual dews. Sin is powerful as the sum of all terrors. Sin is powerful as the quintessence of all horrors. Sin is powerful to devastate, to doom, to damn.⁴¹

Here is the sinner's only hope, although, until quickened by the Spirit of grace, he does not know it. No man can rescue himself from the tyranny of sin. Men may reform, but they cannot regenerate themselves. Men may give up their crimes and their vices, but they cannot, by their own strength, give up their sins. Can the Ethiopian change his skin? No. Can the leopard eliminate his spots? No.⁴²

Elsewhere, Lee said, in contrast to Marney:

Nicodemus was blind and blind to the fact that he was blind. Nicodemus was ignorant—and ignorant of the fact of his ignorance. Nicodemus was dead—and dead to the fact that he was dead. Nicodemus was lost—and lost to the fact that he was lost. He did not know that unless men are converted and become as little children—not masters in scholarship, not philosophers of the academic grove—they cannot see the Kingdom of God.⁴³ Adam, the federal head of the race, plunged into sin and carried the whole human race with him.... Nothing but regeneration will save this generation.⁴⁴

Regeneration is the great change which God works in the soul when He brings it into life, when He raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought when the love of the world is changed into the love of God; when pride is dethroned and humility enthroned; when passion is changed into

⁴¹ R.G. Lee, "The Grace of God," *Heart to Heart* (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), 141.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

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meekness; when hatred, envy, and malice are changed into a sincere and tender love for all mankind.

It is the change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the mind that was in Christ. The new birth is not the old nature altered, reformed, or reinvigorated, but a being born from above....⁴⁵

It is not that the natural man is ignorant and needs instruction, feeble and needs invigorating, sickly and needs doctoring. His case is far more. He is spiritually lifeless, and needs quickening—a spiritual corpse which needs bringing from death to life.⁴⁶

The necessity of the new birth is shown in that the human heart is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9), is affected with a malady which no example can cure, no philosophy can change, no ritualistic formulas or religious ceremonies can reach and change.

I repeat, the natural man, in his unregenerate state, cannot understand the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). He is blind (2 Corinthians 4:4); he is dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1–3); his understanding is darkened (Ephesians 4:18–19); full of evil thought (Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9), and unable to please God (Romans 8:8).

Therefore, as all who believe the Word of God know, a new birth, even a birth from above, is needed because of the depravity of human nature.⁴⁷

So the unregenerate man has the eyes of his understanding darkened in respect to spiritual and saving truth. The stars of gospel truth shine brightly in the firmament of the word of God, but the lost man does not see them.”⁴⁸

And again, “The gospel is hated and rejected as foolishness until the direct power of the Spirit changes the governing disposition of the heart.”⁴⁹

Consider yet another “counter-culture” 20th century voice. J. Frank Norris’ view of man required that even saving faith must come as a gift:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

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Now the New Birth, the Regeneration act, is not a human act, it is a Divine act. That's God's side. Now, repentance and faith are graces given of God, and they are an act of the human.... Now, don't be worried, if you get one of the two, you will have the other. They are both from the human side. The Divine side is the new Birth. ... So it is, which do you have first, repentance or faith? If you have one you have the other. Both are—let me emphasize, both are gifts from God.⁵⁰

One final example is drawn from our contemporary, W.A. Criswell, who pulls no punches on the helplessness of lost man:

We are dead. We are corpses. We are born in that death. We are born in sin, even conceived in sin. All of our propensities and affinities flow in the direction of sin. We are by nature set in a fallen direction. Have you ever stood by the might Niagara? The great river falls over that precipice. It naturally does. It is uncoerced. It falls by nature. It cannot rise. It does not rise. It falls and each drop of water pushes the other over the rim of that great falls. We are set in a fallen direction.... I am bound, paralyzed between two steel rails, one, my fleshly lust and the other, my fallen will. And I stand in the path of an inevitable judgment, inexorable death. I'm like a man paralyzed between two steel rails and thundering down on me is a great chain of cars.... I can stand and preach to a dead corpse and say, "Don't you see?" But a corpse doesn't see. I can lift up my voice and say to a dead corpse, "Don't you understand?" But a dead corpse does not understand. I can say to a dead corpse, "Don't you hear?" But a dead corpse does not hear. It cannot will itself to a quickened life. It cannot choose, it cannot see, it cannot hear, it cannot think, it cannot understand. It is dead.... The initiation of our salvation, of our calling, of our regeneration, of our new birth, of our salvation is in God and not in us. Consequently, our new birth, our regeneration, our calling is a gift of God.... Now, when I read this in the Bible, and I look in my heart, is it confirmed in my experience? It is. And not only in mine, but in every man who has ever come to know Jesus as his savior. A man or a woman. Everyone of us.... Those old, great hymns of long ago were just like that. Isaac Watts wrote the song you sang just a moment ago.

Why was I made to hear thy voice
and enter while there's room
when thousands make a wretched choice
and rather starve than come?

Tw'as the same love that spread the feast

⁵⁰ J. Frank Norris, "The New Birth," *The Gospel of Dynamite* (Ft. Worth, 1933), 28–29.

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that sweetly forced me in
else I'd still refuse to taste
And perish in my sin....

In like manner, long years ago, Josiah Conger wrote this hymn,

Tis not that I did choose thee,
For Lord that could not be.
This heart would still refuse thee,
But thou has chosen me.⁵¹

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CONCLUSION

It is a pity that such preaching is more scarce than it once was. While few deny the reality of human free agency (else what sense could we make of the conscious rejection or acceptance of the gospel?), it seems that, today, the “freedom” of the lost has been magnified at the expense of their “bondage.” Unlike the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention, some have come to view lost people as discriminating shoppers, whose failure to buy is due to our failure at marketing.

It is good to note that man’s will is free in the sense that his choices flow freely from his character or nature, whether regenerate or unregenerate. But today the spiritual freedom of fallen man is being woefully overrated and, consequently, saving grace is being tragically underrated.

Let us not underestimate our own freedom to address this imbalance, to the magnification of God’s grace and the praise of His glory.⁵²

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⁵¹ W.A. Criswell, Transcribed from the cassette tape, “The Bible Kind of Salvation: Romans 9:15–16.”

⁵² Coppenger, M. (1996). “The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching.” *The Founders Journal: The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching, Summer, 25, 9–19.*