

K. C. MOSER AND CHURCHES OF CHRIST: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Given the reactions of Showalter, Wallace, and Whiteside to Moser as well as the persistent advocacy of Moser and Brewer, clearly there was a perceived difference between these two groups. The Lipscomb–Harding or “Tennessee” tradition and the McGary–Tant or “Texas” tradition were butting heads in the second generation of the life of the two papers the *Gospel Advocate* and the *Firm Foundation*. The *man or the plan* controversy was not a new phenomenon in the 1960s; rather it had its roots in the 1930s and may have been prefigured in the debate on rebaptism between the *Advocate* and the *Firm Foundation* in the 1890s. The 1960s and 1990s do not reflect a new struggle, but an old one which goes back to the emergence of Churches of Christ in the late nineteenth century.¹

My concern in this article is theological. What theological point was at stake in the *man or the plan* controversy? Why did Moser’s work receive such a negative reaction, and why was Moser so insistent and persistent? Sixty years after it was published, Moser’s *The Way of Salvation* is still the object of attack.² My purpose here is to lay bare the theological

¹ This article is a theological follow-up to the historical interpretation of the *man or the plan* controversy offered in *ResQ* 37/3 (1995) 139–57. This first paragraph is a summary of the previous article’s conclusion.

² Moser (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1932). In 1976 Fanning Yater Tant, editor of the *Vanguard*, asked Robert Turner to write a response to Moser’s *The Way of Salvation*. This testifies to the enduring nature of Moser’s book, its impact among the non-institutional segment of the Churches of Christ, and their unrelenting opposition to it. See the following articles in *Vanguard* 2: “Theology and the Gospel Preacher” (9 September 1976) 1, 14–15; “Theological Coloring Book” (24 September 1976) 1, 14–15; “The Sinful ‘Nature’ of Man” (18 October 1976) 1, 18–19; “Wrestling with the ‘Law of Sin’” (28 October 1976) 1, 11, 14; “System of Law and Faith” (11 November 1976) 1, 14–15; “The Imputation of Righteousness” (25 November 1976) 1, 14–15; and “What Must I Do to Be Saved?” (9 December 1976) 1, 14–15.

concerns of both groups so that we might recognize their similarities as well as their essential differences.

Emphasis on the Man

Moser's lifelong concern was to combat legalism, whether it arose from the left in modernism³ or from the right among his own preaching brothers.⁴ From the left he saw a denial of the atonement, and from the right he saw its neglect, which was a practical denial. Moser reflects a lifelong attempt to defend, explain, and apply the atonement of Christ in the context of the Churches of Christ. His theology emphasized salvation by grace through faith and the denial of any legal principle of justification by works. The contrasts are strong in Moser: grace versus law, faith versus works, imputed versus inherent righteousness, divine versus human righteousness.⁵ From his own theological standpoint, the Churches of Christ were in danger of, if not already, succumbing to a subtle legalism. Three topics effectively summarize Moser's concerns: legalistic preaching, legalistic justification, and legalistic sanctification.

Legalistic Preaching

What does preaching the gospel mean? For Moser, the gospel is preaching the death of Jesus for our sins and his resurrection for our justification. Preaching the gospel is preaching the atonement of Christ; it is proclaiming Christ as sin-bearer and our sacrifice. Moser claimed that he had heard and read sermons which did not proclaim the gospel even though they claimed to be gospel sermons.⁶ He had heard sermons on

³ K. C. Moser, "'The Essence of the Gospel According to Paul'—Reviewed," *Gospel Advocate* 90 (4 November 1948) 1065, 1069; (18 November 1948): 1112–3; and (2 December 1948): 1158–9. *Gospel Advocate* is hereafter abbreviated *GA*.

⁴ Moser, "Christ Versus a 'Plan'" (Searcy, AR: Harding College Bookstore, 1952).

⁵ These themes are discussed in his *The Way of Salvation*. They are also the substance of his thematic commentary *The Gist of Romans* (2d ed.; Oklahoma City, OK: Author, 1958). The following theological summaries of Moser may be substantiated by reading these two brief books.

⁶ Moser, "Are We Preaching the Gospel?" (Ardmore, OK: Author, 1937) 8. Recently, Bill Love conducted a similar historical project by surveying sermon books within the Restoration Movement, *The Core Gospel: On Restoring the Crux of the Matter* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1992). While much of the material is useful and he does give a broad glimpse into the character of preaching among restorationists, there are some significant methodological problems with the book

baptism that did not reflect on the meaning of that institution in relation to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He had heard sermons on the plan of salvation without a single reference to the gospel itself, and yet they were called gospel sermons.

The difference between Moser and his disputants is their respective definitions of the gospel. The standard definition of the gospel was that it contains facts to be believed, commands to be obeyed, and promises to be enjoyed.⁷ Consequently, preaching baptism is preaching the gospel because the gospel commands it. Further, some defined the gospel as equivalent to preaching the word so that any sermon from the NT, whether it was on ethics, ecclesiology, or eschatology, was preaching the gospel.⁸ Gospel, therefore, is anything that the NT says. In essence, gospel becomes a law with a different content from the Mosaic law.

Moser objected to this conception of gospel preaching. It mixes law and gospel. When the preaching of faith, repentance, and baptism is divorced from the atonement of Christ, it is preaching a law without a sacrifice for sin and is no longer gospel at all. Faith, repentance, and baptism are responses to the gospel, but they are not constitutive of the gospel itself. The gospel is God's saving action, not ours. It is the shed blood of Jesus as a propitiation for our sins. Faith, repentance, and baptism cannot share in that propitiation. They can only receive it. When we conceive of baptism as part of the gospel (that is, the righteousness by which we stand before God), then we have made baptism part of the atonement. The result is, according to Moser, that baptism is conceived as an act of works—righteousness whereby we achieve a standing before God based on our works in addition to Christ's work.⁹ God's part is one act of righteousness, and our part is another act of righteousness which together constitute the righteousness by which we stand before God. Thus we contribute to the righteousness by which we are justified.

which render its conclusions suspect. See my review in *ResQ* 35/2 (1993) 111–13.

⁷ See, for example, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *Number One Gospel Sermons* (Nashville: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1967) 137.

⁸ R. L. Whiteside, "Preach What?" *GA* 74 (29 December 1932) 1374. See also J. W. Chism, "Can the Gospel Be Obeyed?" *Firm Foundation* 51 (3 April 1934) 8, for whom obedience to the gospel is obedience to all the commands of the NT. The *Firm Foundation* is hereafter abbreviated *FF*.

⁹ Moser, "Preaching the Conditions as Response to the Atonement," in *The Unfinished Restoration: Eighth Annual Lectureship, Lubbock Christian College* (Lubbock, TX: Lubbock Christian College, 1965) 67–72. See also his *Gist of Romans*, viii–xviii.

Legalistic Justification

The most important contrast for Moser was the one between divine and human righteousness.¹⁰ This contrasts the grace which gives God's righteousness as a gift and a law which is obeyed to achieve righteousness or works-righteousness of itself. It contrasts a faith which receives the gift of righteousness and works which measure up to a standard of righteousness. The righteousness by which we stand before God is, according to Moser, the imputation of divine righteousness through faith in the atonement. It is not our righteousness, but God's righteousness.

Moser feared that baptism was not only isolated from the atonement, but also from faith itself.¹¹ Baptism was preached as the final step in a series of commandments as if one were climbing a ladder. Each rung on the ladder was isolated from the others as if baptism stood on its own—that it was the supreme work which itself changes the sinner into a saint. He feared that baptism was conceived as a work of righteousness which we do in obedience to law so that our baptism is an act of righteousness by which we gain righteousness, or contribute to our righteousness. We are righteous, then, only when we do something righteous, and baptism is that act of righteousness which makes us righteous with our own righteousness. This, then, was God's plan for making us righteous; that is, we became righteous when we did something righteous in obedience to the law of Christ.

For Moser, this is a mixture of law and grace. Faith is the principle of salvation, not works. Faith is the natural correlative to grace. Faith passively receives what God actively gives. Faith receives righteousness; it does not work it up on its own. Faith, for Moser, is obedience to the gospel, not to a law. It is our response to God's gracious offer; it receives God's promise. Rather than an intellectual principle of action which motivates us to be baptized, faith is trusting in Christ as Savior and submitting to him as Lord.¹²

God could, if he so desired, save by means of faith alone apart from any external act of submission since faith is the principle of salvation itself. However, when God requires an expression of faith as a condition

¹⁰ Moser, "The Righteousness of the Law Versus the Righteousness of Grace," *FF* 42 (6 January 1925) 2–3. See also *The Way of Salvation*, 113–24, and *Gist of Romans*, 17–24.

¹¹ Moser, "Where Is the Value of Faith?" *FF* 43 (11 September 1926) 2–3; (28 September 1926) 2; (12 October 1926) 2; or (9 November 1926) 2–3. Cf. *Gist of Romans*, xiii–xvi.

¹² Moser, "Is There an Analogy with Baptism in Naaman's Dipping?" *GA* 88 (5 December 1946) 1143.

of the bestowal of that grace, then God will not bestow it until faith has been expressed. The importance of baptism, then, is not that it is some act of righteousness by which we contribute to our righteous standing, or make ourselves righteous, but its meaning is derived from its nature as an expression of faith. Faith saves when it is expressed in baptism, but it is the faith that saves.¹³ Moser does not deny that baptism is a condition of salvation in the sense that baptism is a required expression of faith, but he does deny that baptism is a condition of salvation in the sense that it is coordinate with faith. In other words, faith and baptism are not equals. One is an expression of the other; and as long as it is expressive of that faith, it fulfills its proper function. When it functions independent of faith (as in infant baptism) or as an equal to faith (as a rung on the ladder of legalistic justification), then it fails to function biblically.

Legalistic Sanctification

Moser is concerned that Christianity can be made into a legal system of seeking our own righteousness just as the Jews turned the Mosaic law into seeking their own righteousness.¹⁴ The principle of justification is faith, and our view of sanctification must not undermine that principle. If sanctification is pictured as the pursuit to maintain our righteous standing through the righteousness of our works, then this undermines the principle of justification. We are righteous by God's gift of righteousness in justification, and we do not add to this righteousness by our own good works through sanctification. The purpose of sanctification is to conform to the image of Christ, to grow toward Christ, but it is not the basis of our righteousness before God. The principle of faith, not works, is the means by which we receive and continue to stand in the state of justification through imputation. By this imputation we are always perfect before God as he continually credits righteousness to our accounts through faith.

Moser opposed a view of sanctification which sees our life of faith as contributing to the righteousness by which we are saved. This would be salvation by works rather than by faith. According to this notion, when our past sins are forgiven, then we start with a clean, but blank slate. It is our task to fill the slate with righteousness, and God expects a certain standard of righteousness, or else we will lose our standing before him. In other words, staying saved depends on how righteous we are; it depends on

¹³ Moser, "The Relation of Baptism to Faith and Repentance," *FF* 43 (9 March 1926) 3. Cf. *The Way of Salvation*, 60–76.

¹⁴ S. H. Hall, *Studies in Scripture* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1931) 130: "But don't forget the *gospel of grace* can be preached in the spirit of the *law of works* that destroys hope."

being good enough to stay saved. Moser sees this as a reintroduction of the principle of works which undermines the doctrine of justification by faith.¹⁵

Moser was not opposed to works, nor did he deny the need and goal of sanctification.¹⁶ Rather, he rooted sanctification in the principle of faith rather than works. Sanctification is an expression of faith. Faith will express itself in works, and, if it does not, then it cannot be true faith. Consequently, it is not faith and works which save, as if they were coordinate, but a faith that works which saves. Faith must remain the principle because it is the only appropriate response to grace. Works are expressions of the faith which evidence our reception of the imputation of God's righteousness, but they do not contribute to the righteousness of our standing before God. However, where there are no works, then there is no faith and thus no salvation.

Conclusion

It is clear, I think, why Moser emphasized the man rather than the plan. He believed that the plan was understood as a legal system by which we achieve our own righteousness. He thought the plan had been divorced from the atonement of Christ and that obedience to the plan had supplanted faith as the principle of salvation. This development was a denial of the gospel itself and turned Christianity into a law code to which one must measure up. Consequently, Moser wanted to return to the themes of atonement, grace, and faith as a means of countering this development. He emphasized the man because it is more important than the plan and because the plan had been abstracted from the man and made into a law. As a law, it was no longer good news.

Emphasis on the Plan

The 1930s were a decade of frequent debates between denominational groups and the Churches of Christ. The denominational debaters often made the same accusations of legalism as Moser. It is no surprise, then, that Moser was considered a traitor who had joined the Baptist cause. It is also no surprise that, in the context of these debates, the plan would be given emphasis. To emphasize the plan was to emphasize what was distinctive about the Churches of Christ, and this served as a partial basis of our identity.

¹⁵ Moser, *Way of Salvation*, 35–42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52–59, 146–64.

However, this was no mere contention over a distinctive as if we were concerned only to distinguish ourselves from others. Rather, the restoration of the ancient gospel was at stake. The plan was the means by which God had determined to save humanity, and, if the plan is not preached and defended, then many will be lost. The emphasis on the plan, therefore, was rooted in a soteriological motive rather than a sociological one.¹⁷ Any negative criticism of the plan was seen as endangering the salvation of souls. What, then, are the soteriological principles which an emphasis on the plan sought to maintain? I think they are primarily three: (1) the necessity of a human response to grace, (2) the necessity of an obedient faith, and (3) the necessity of sanctification or good works. These were couched polemically as denials of rural and popularized versions of the Calvinistic doctrines of *grace only*, *faith only*, and antinomianism.

Calvinistic Grace Only

Grace only and *wholly out of grace* were red-flag words among us in the 1930s, and they still are. They express a historic position from which we wish to distance ourselves. The words are rooted in sixteenth-century Protestant themes, and we tend immediately to equate them with an unconditional predestinarianism. The phrase *grace alone* signals to some that no human response is necessary to the offer of the gospel. The terminology, it is thought, buys into the whole Calvinistic system. Grace alone, then, means believing salvation is without human instrumentality and unconditional.¹⁸ Consequently, as Whiteside suggested to Moser, one must be either an Augustinian predestinarian or a universalist.¹⁹

Of course, the point is neither to deny nor to undermine grace. Those who emphasize the plan affirm that the blood of Jesus is the only cleansing power and that mercy alone moved God to provide this grace. In terms of the meritorious ground of salvation and God's motive, grace

¹⁷ A good example of this is Charles E. Crouch, "God's Plan of Salvation," *GA* 105 (3 October 1963) 625, 631-2.

¹⁸ Bill Haberman, "Grace and Works," *FF* 106 (October 1991) 5. "Salvation comes, they teach, by grace only. If 'we do not contribute one whit to our salvation,' then there is nothing for man to do. He is entirely passive in the salvation process, and God is the sole actor."

¹⁹ Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome* (Denton, TX: Miss Inys Whiteside, 1945) 93, writes concerning Moser: "If a Universalist or an Ultra-Calvinist had penned such words, we would not be surprised."

alone saves.²⁰ God did for us what we could not do for ourselves, and he did it even though we were his enemies.

Therefore, the theological reason for avoiding grace alone terminology is not that there is no such concept in Scripture. Rather, the theological reason is to preserve the necessity of a human response. It is to preserve the active role of the sinner in appropriating God's grace. It is to preserve man's part without denying God's part. It is to preserve the role of faith.

Calvinistic Faith Only

Faith only and *faith alone* were also red-flag words. This was the major bone of contention between denominationalists, especially Baptists, and the Churches of Christ. In a polemical context the specific point of the language was to eliminate baptism from the plan of salvation. This, of course, struck at the heart of our ecclesiological identity. Baptism for the remission of sins had been a distinctive element of the Restoration Movement since 1827.²¹ To give ground here was to deny our heritage and, more importantly, to deny an explicit teaching of Scripture.

When Moser began to talk about faith as the principle of salvation and subordinated baptism to faith, he was quickly interpreted as siding with the Baptists. "Faith," he could write, "is the only thing that can save."²² Or, "Believing is the condition of gracious justification."²³ In the light of these kinds of statements, Showalter surmised that Moser did not believe that obedience was "necessary for salvation or that baptism is for the remission of sins."²⁴

The critical soteriological point was, therefore, to preserve baptism as a condition of salvation. Whatever threatened this theological point must be rejected since the premise is clearly articulated in Scripture. It appeared to many that Moser was giving all the credit to faith and did not

²⁰ Whiteside, *Commentary*, 97: "On God's side their salvation was wholly a matter of grace."

²¹ See my "The Recovery of the Ancient Gospel: Alexander Campbell and the Design of Baptism," in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins* (ed. David W. Fletcher; Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1990) 111–70.

²² Moser, "How Faith Saves," *FF* 40 (17 July 1923) 3.

²³ Moser, "Righteousness of the Law Versus the Righteousness of Grace," 2. At this point he was quoting I. B. Grubbs, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; Nashville: Gospel Advocate, reprint n.d.) 13.

²⁴ G. H. P. Showalter, "Obedience and Salvation," *FF* 51 (13 February 1934) 5.

give baptism its proper role in the plan of salvation. This was tantamount to saying that baptism was an unnecessary addendum to faith.

Antinomianism

Whenever the category of *works* is devalued, there is always the danger of antinomianism. While this term rarely appears in our literature, it is this theological tradition which was opposed when we emphasized salvation by works as well as by faith.²⁵ If we denied the necessity of works for salvation, it was feared, then not only would faith alone reign supreme, but believers would begin to behave as they pleased. What was at stake was the lordship (kingship) and authority of Christ over the lives of his people. The necessity of works must be proclaimed or else the lives of believers will degenerate into immorality, worldliness, and selfishness.

Moser objected to the notion that *faith and works* save. Faith is the principle of salvation, not works. To think otherwise would be to mix grace and law. Works are an expression of faith, but not the principle of salvation itself. It is not faith and works but a *faith that works*. Moser, then, gave preeminence to faith as trust in Jesus. This was perceived as antinomian in character because it subordinated works to faith.

The fear of antinomianism is not pointless. It is present in the NT where Peter and Jude decry the rise of ungodliness in the name of grace and liberty (2 Pet 2:19; Jude 4). However, Moser was not an antinomian.²⁶ He believed true faith would express itself in works of obedience and motivate the child of God to grow in holiness. Nevertheless, his opposition

²⁵ The *Spiritual Sword* 19 (April 1988) issue is devoted to the theme of "Freedom in Christ." The articles are couched negatively so as to oppose the principle of antinomianism, e.g., "He Is Not Free from the Restraints of Law" or "He Is Not Free to Change God's Will," or "He Is Not Free to Use His Liberty as a Cloak of Sin." On the principle of *salvation by works* and how this functions against an antinomian principle, see Robert Taylor, "Saved by Works," *Spiritual Sword* 7 (January 1976) 24–26. He writes (p. 25): "The promise of salvation is based on one's performing works of righteousness." Habermas, 5: "Saving faith requires obedience to every law of God (James 2:14–26). We do not obey our own plan of salvation but God's plan of salvation revealed by grace."

²⁶ Moser, *Gist of Romans*, 64, 67: "Conversion not only *obligates* one to live righteously, but it *prepares* one to do so. . . . If there is any difference in one's obligation to be dead to sin, the obligation has a greater emphasis under Christ. Law placed man under obligation to refrain from sin, while grace recognizes the same obligation and, in addition, crucifies 'the old man' and prepares one for a life of righteousness." See his chapter on "Sanctification" in *The Way of Salvation*, 157, where he writes "Fellowship with God is impossible while one serves sin."

between grace and law, between the principles of faith and works, was interpreted as antinomian.

Theologically, the necessity of works as obedience to the law of God must be retained in our soteriology. Rebellious disobedience reflects the heart of an unbeliever, but submissive obedience reflects the heart of faith. Since one's works evidence the heart, the works will give evidence of faith or unbelief. The evil heart of unbelief shows itself in disobedience to the law of God.

Conclusion

Moser's opponents were not wild-eyed radicals. They were believers who were deeply concerned about the above three issues. They believed that a theology of grace must maintain the necessity of a human response, the necessity of baptism, and the necessity of works in the Christian life. This focus points to the parameters of the doctrine of grace without, however, attempting to understand what grace itself is. These emphases, while important, arose in the polemical context. As Moser attempted to provide a theological exposition of the doctrine of grace, he was perceived to deny one or all three of these emphases; consequently the issues were polemical and polarized even more. Is there a way through this theological impasse?

Two Theological Grammars

When people speak two different languages, they cannot understand each other. When they use the same words for two different things, they cannot connect. Theology is, at one level, a language problem—semantics. Theologies speak different languages, and part of the goal of theological reflection is to try to understand them so that differences and similarities might be clarified. This is what I hope to do in this section.

If we say Moser has legitimate concerns about legalism and his opponents also have legitimate concerns about antinomianism, how shall we adjudicate between the two? Can these two different groups come to speak the same language?

Similarities: The Common Ground

While the man and the plan advocates are caught in a polemical exchange, they do appear to have some real formal similarities. These similarities are admitted on both sides though the similarity may be purely formal rather than material. Nevertheless, four formal similarities emerge within the polemical context.

First, both agree that the sole ground of salvation is the atonement of Christ. The only saving power is the blood of Jesus. "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!" Grace, then, is the only ground of salvation. This is God's part in the scheme of redemption.

Second, both agree that this grace is appropriated through faith. The salvation that God offers through his grace is conditioned on faith. The human response of faith is the means by which we accept the grace that God offers in his Son. All works must flow from faith, or they are without value. All works must be works of faith. Faith, then, as a principle, is the only means of salvation. Faith is both foundational and instrumental in all other responses to God's grace.

Third, both agree that gospel obedience includes submission to Christ through baptism as an expression of faith. Baptism without faith is ineffectual, and faith without baptism does not comply with what God requires. Baptism, then, is the particular embodiment of faith which God requires for the remission of sins.

Fourth, both agree that Christians are called to holiness and that those who rebel and reject that call are unbelievers. God has created his people for holiness and good works. Genuine believers will pursue that holiness under the lordship of Christ and seek to conform to the will of God in every aspect of their lives. When believers rebel or reject God's commands and insist upon their own selfish ways, their hearts have turned to unbelief. Thus they have fallen from grace.

This is the common ground between Moser and his opponents. It is the essence of our theological heritage on the doctrine of grace as we answer the question, Who is a Christian? There is no need for a perfect understanding of the theology of grace, or of the doctrine of the atonement. Neither is it necessary to have an impeccable and indubitable faith, but simply a faith that trusts in Jesus for salvation and acts on God's promises. Further, it is not necessary to have a perfect conception of baptismal theology. In addition, while no one's sanctification is perfect, the heart that seeks God and obeys him *as best he can* within his covenant of grace will find mercy.²⁷ However these four points might be applied,

²⁷ The phrase *as best he can* is a reoccurring phrase in the discussion of grace for the Christian life. Representatives of both traditions use it. Brewer, "Grace and Law (No. 8)," 633: "Being thus committed to Christ, he continues to obey him as best he can. . . . Failure to reach perfection will not mean a failure to reach heaven." Also Jerry Moffitt, "Grace and Law," *The Firm Foundation of God Standeth* (ed. William S. Cline and John G. Priola; Pensacola, FL: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1984) 262, "So we must walk in the light, following the law of Christ as best we can that we remain in that saving grace which we entered by obedience." Also Roy H. Lanier, "Walking By Faith," *GA* 96

their substance is universally present. They evidence a theological unity which binds us together as a church. This has always been our historic position. It is my hope that both the man and the plan advocates will recognize this common ground with each other.²⁸

Essential Difference

Despite this common ground, there is a real difference between Moser and his opponents. It is, in fact, what makes them two different positions. This difference is what the man or the plan controversy was all about, and it is significant. An important question is whether this material difference undermines the formal similarities that exist between the man and the plan advocates.

The essential difference is the theological framework in which the plan of salvation is conceived. Whether exegetically appropriate or not, the meaning of “the righteousness of God” in Rom 1:16 illustrates the point.²⁹ For Moser the righteousness of God is God’s imputation of

(23 December 1954) 1009, “Faith working through love is nothing more than faith obeying the commandments of God as best we can because we love God. . . . But faith obeying the commandments of God does not demand even perfect obedience to every commandment and permits, necessitates the mercy and grace of God in our salvation.” But James A. Harding, “Three Lessons from the Book of Romans,” in *Biographies and Sermons* (ed. F. D. Srygley, Nashville: F. D. Srygley, 1898) 247, questioned whether anyone ever really does the “best he can.” Only Jesus did the best he could. “It is [therefore] foolish for a man to talk about being saved by doing the best he knows how, when he has already failed thousands—perhaps millions—of times to do it.”

²⁸ Batsell Barrett Baxter, “The Man *and* the Plan,” *GA* 104 (27 September 1962) 610, 616, attempted to provide this unifying perspective in the midst of the raging controversy.

²⁹ This could also be illustrated by the manner in which Rom 4:5 is interpreted, though it is not particularly determinative of one’s position. See, for example, the exchange between Moser and Crouch. Moser, “Thoughts on Romans 4,” *GA* 89 (30 January 1947) 92–3; “Reply to Brother Crouch,” *GA* 89 (3 July 1947) 462–3; and “My Final Reply to Brother Crouch,” *GA* 89 (9 October 1947) 305. Cf. C. D. Crouch, “Faith Reckoned for Righteousness,” *GA* 89 (1 May 1947) 305; “Brother Moser Replies (?)” *GA* 89 (14 August 1947) 612; and “Review of Brother Moser’s ‘Final Reply,’” *GA* 89 (6 November 1947) 898, 903. Crouch also had an exchange with J. T. Stanfill, Jr. and Robert A. Waller in the *Gospel Guardian* (hereafter abbreviated as *GG*). Cf. C. D. Couch, “Faith Reckoned as Righteousness,” *GG* 3 (20 December 1951) 1, 5; “How Is Faith Reckoned?” *GG* 3 (13 March 1952) 2, 3; and “How Is Faith Reckoned?—No. 2,” *GG* 4 (10 July 1952) 12. Cf. Stanfill, “How Is Faith Reckoned?” *GG* 3 (7 February 1952) 10–11; “How Is Faith Reckoned?—No. 2,” *GG* 4 (1 May 1952) 3, 6; and Waller, “Review

righteousness through faith, but for others it is God's law which yields righteousness when it is obeyed. For Moser the righteousness of God is a gift of divine righteousness which is given from above, but for others it is a plan which is given from above, but worked from below so that whoever fully complies with the gospel plan is righteous by virtue of and on the basis of his compliance. Moser stressed faith in a person who gives us the status of righteousness while others stressed the plan with which one must comply in order to become righteous. For Moser we are righteous by accepting God's gift of righteousness from above, but for others we are righteous by acting righteously or by generating our righteousness from below.

Those who emphasize the plan, then, believe the gospel is God's plan for making us righteous. God has instituted a new plan, the gospel system, *the faith*, in the place of the old plan, the Mosaic law. The plan of righteousness under the OT was a system of sacrifices and obedience. The plan of righteousness under the NT is the sacrifice of Christ for past sins and obedience. Obedience as a law-keeping system which works righteousness is maintained in both systems, but it is a different law, with different requirements and different things to do. The gospel of Christ, the revealed plan of God, is a new set of requirements, a new law.³⁰

Justification is not God's gift of righteousness because "this understanding of God's righteousness emphasizes what God has done and not what man should do."³¹ God's plan of righteousness is something we must do in order to be righteous. The righteousness, then, is our own which we achieve by compliance with the plan. Our obedience is a righteousness which complies with the demands of God's new law. God's righteousness, then, means our obedience to God's plan for making us righteous. When we obey the plan, we work righteousness for ourselves.

of 'Faith Reckoned as Righteousness,'" *GG* 3 (28 February 1952) 11. A more recent example of this ongoing discussion is Ron Halbrook, "Antidote to K. C. Moser's Views on Romans 4," *Preceptor* 31 (March 1982) 136.

³⁰ This view is well illustrated by J. B. Myers, "Law, Grace, and the Righteousness of God," *GA* 122 (21 January 1982) 47, 50; "Reply to 'The Righteousness of God—A Review,'" *GA* 122 (18 March 1982) 166; and "The Basis of Grace," *GA* 123 (7 July 1983) 399–400. Guy N. Woods supports the view of Myers and endorsed his first article as "superb." Woods has published this view himself, "Grace Versus All Law?" *GA* 122 (18 March 1982) 162, 179; "Transferred Righteousness?" 675, 689; "Transferred Righteousness: A Critique," *FF* 107 (March 1992) 1, 5–6; and relevant articles in his two volumes *Questions and Answers: Open Forum, Freed-Hardeman Lectures* (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1976) and *Questions and Answers: Volume II* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1986).

³¹ Myers, "Basis," 399.

God did his part by providing a perfect plan, and now we must do our part by obeying the plan and becoming righteous. Our part, then, is to be obedient so that our obedient acts constitute our righteousness before God. *Our part* is a form of inherent, as opposed to imputed, righteousness.³²

The righteousness by which we are justified, then, is our own. This is clearly affirmed by writers of this perspective. Guy N. Woods wrote, "A simple brief definition of righteousness is, therefore, right-doing; to be righteous is to do right . . . Who is he? He that doeth righteousness. No other is. He that doeth righteousness is righteous."³³ Thus, when we *do* the plan, we are righteous by virtue of God's gracious accounting of our doing. Even though our doing is not sufficient to merit our standing, it is God's plan that, if we do X, God will count us as righteous. God has stated his standard of righteousness so that we can measure up to it. When we obey, then it is our doing that makes us righteous. Even faith is regarded as a work of righteousness which is an obedient response to God's commands. Faith is a righteous act, and, when conjoined with obedience, it is a righteous act which God counts as sufficient to place us in a right relationship with himself. We have measured up to God's standard, and this makes us worthy of justification.³⁴

Further, this right relationship with God is maintained by continually doing right. We maintain our standing with God by our righteous behavior. Even if the beginning is God's part in the sense that he gave the plan, our introduction into it and our maintenance of it is our doing. Again, hear the same writer:

Thus one in a righteous, or justified state, is simply no longer alienated from God. Because we are expected to maintain the state of non-alienation between us and the Lord there is an extension of the idea of approval in the obedience required. In this sense we *work* righteousness. (Acts 10:34, 35.) This is consistent with the basic meaning of the word since such

³² H. A. Dobbs, "Rapha," *FF* 106 (October 1991) 3, "The Bible teaches we are actually righteous because of our obedience to the commands of God (Luke 6:46–49). Our righteousness is not a play-like, or imputed, righteousness. God saves us, but his mercy and grace are conditional and require action on our part."

³³ Woods, "Grace Versus All Law," 162. After Woods published this article, while the *Firm Foundation* was under the editorship of Lemmons, a response was published by Gaylord Cook, "Imputed Righteousness," *FF* 99 (14 December 1982) 794. Further, contrast this with Harding, "Three," 247: "Let no man, therefore, comfort himself with the reflection that he who does right will be saved; for no man, in the church or out of it, does right."

³⁴ On the idea of worthiness, see, e.g., Moffitt, 259.

working is essential to the continuance of the state of acquittal between us and God!³⁵

Thus sanctification or practical righteousness is the means by which our legal status of forgiveness is maintained. While obedient faith in the baptismal act gave us a new start, now we must maintain our justification by our own righteousness.³⁶

It is important to understand that in this perspective compliance with God's legitimate demands or standards is not thought of as human righteousness, but as divine righteousness because they are divine standards.³⁷ We may do them; we may act rightly, and they are our actions. But when we do what God commands, we are doing righteousness, but not our own. Rather, we are doing God's righteousness because they are his commandments. In this context the use of Psalm 119:172 takes on meaning: "All thy commandments are righteous."³⁸ It is "God's righteousness" that saves only in the sense that it is God's commandments which we obey, but it is our doing that saves us.

Thus the righteousness of God is not conceived as a gift which God bestows, but as a plan with which we comply. The righteousness of justification, then, is our own righteousness since we have complied with God's demands. We are justified, therefore, by measuring up to God's standard, and we remain justified only as we continue to measure up to God's standard. God's plan of salvation, therefore, is not simply the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, it is the righteousness of our obedient acts in both faith-baptism and our obedience throughout our Christian life. The plan of salvation includes the whole of our Christian life, including ethics and ecclesiology.

This means, of course, that we must act righteously and measure up to God's standard in order to remain justified. This standard of measurement or the plan involves both ecclesiological and ethical duties. If we do not measure up to God's standards in ecclesiology or in ethics, then we lose our status of justification even if it is a matter of ignorance or

³⁵ Woods, "Transferred," 675.

³⁶ E.g., Woods, *Questions and Answers*, 2:189: "It is hence clear that righteousness is that state or condition wherein one is approved of God, but God approves of those only who do right (keep his commandments); therefore, to possess the approval of God and the righteousness which he requires, one must *do* right, *by* keeping his commandments."

³⁷ Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *The Gospel for Today* (Nashville: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1967) 235: "God's commands are not man's works."

³⁸ H. A. Dobbs, "More on 1 John 1:7," *FF* 108 (December 1991) 378: "In the light of this inspired declaration (Ps 119:172, JMH), it is difficult to see how anyone can be righteous short of obeying all—all-of the commands of God."

weakness or lack of opportunity. Every sin removes us from the fellowship of God.³⁹ Thus, even if we, through our own Bible study, are baptized biblically, the moment we worship with the instrument on the next Sunday we are lost. We have failed to live up to God's ecclesiological standard for the worship of the church. The moment we have a moral failure, we have failed to live up to God's ethical standard and are lost at that point unless we know we had one and confess it immediately.⁴⁰ This introduces a perfectionism into the doctrine of sanctification. We must measure up in every detail of the Christian life to maintain our right standing with God. To sin in one detail, to break the law in one point is to lose our righteous standing. In other words, we must be righteous (obey all God's commands) in order to remain righteous in God's sight. The upshot of this is to equate the immature violation of law by a babe in Christ (e.g., unintentionally

³⁹ The extremes of this position are well illustrated among the non-institutional fellowship. There has been a running debate over the past decade about what "walking in the light" means. Some argue that every sin removes one from the light, cf. Keith Sharp, "Walking in the Light," *Preceptor* 35 (March 1986) 154 [this particular issue was dedicated to this topic]; Ronny Mullins, "The Security of the Saint (3)," *Searching the Scriptures* 26 (March 1985) 346–8; Dick Blackford, "Judgment Day, the Mercy of God, and One Sin of Ignorance," *Guardian of Truth* 28 (19 April 1984) 227–28; Mike Willis, "Understanding 1 John 1:6–2:2," *Guardian of Truth* 25 (3 December 1981) 755–57 (10 December 1981) 771–73; (17 December 1981) 787–89; "Sinning While in the Light," *Guardian of Truth* 27 (6 October 1983) 578, 582–84, and Herschel E. Patton, "The Christian's Confidence," *Guardian of Truth* 28 (19 January 1984) 33, 52; (2 February 1984) 71–72; (16 February 1984) 106. The entire issue of *Faith and Facts* 9 (January 1981) is devoted to the defense of this perspective. Others argue for a more gracious position on sins of ignorance and weakness; cf. Dudley Ross Spears, "Walking in the Light," *Guardian of Truth* 28 (15 March 1984) 171–72. There have been frequent exchanges between the representatives of each camp among the non-institutional folks; cf. Robert Waters and Keith Sharp in *The Preceptor* 35 (June 1986) 234–44, and Robert Waters and Donnie V. Rader in *Searching the Scriptures* 27 (January 1986) 6–10; (February 1986) 31–35; and (March 1986) 53–58.

⁴⁰ One representative of this position is H. A. Dobbs, "On 1 John 1:7," *FF* 106 (November 1991) 27; "More on 1 John 1:7," *FF* 106 (December 1991) 379; "Demurs and Replies," *FF* 107 (January 1992) 25–26; and "Demurs and Replies," *FF* 107 (March 1992) 25–26. His basic point is that the cleansing of the blood is dependent upon keeping all the commands of God. Walking in the light is walking as Jesus walked—keeping all of God's commands. For example, "If . . . if . . . we walk in the light as he is in the light. If . . . if . . . we keep the commandments . . . all the commands . . . the blood of Christ is keeping us clean from all unrighteousness" ("More on 1 John 1:7," 379).

speeding) with unimmersion.⁴¹ This is a law principle of salvation, and no one, in the final analysis, can measure up to it.⁴²

This view of grace which I have outlined has some practical implications which may account for several controversies within twentieth-century Churches of Christ.⁴³ For example, there is the thorny problem of how far grace extends to the believer in Christ. If it is no longer faith that is the essential element, but compliance with the whole law that is equally essential, then assurance is a matter of knowing all our sins, confessing our sins, and measuring up to God's standard of

⁴¹ Dobbs, "Demurs," (March) 25–26: "Shall we say a baby in Christ may violate the law by driving too fast, but the mature Christian may not? Then the question comes, at what point in growth does a person cross over the line and have to keep the law absolutely? . . . Denominational people sometimes ask, 'What if a penitent believer is on his way to be baptized and is struck by lightning and killed, will he be lost?' If you know the right answer to that question, you have solved the mystery of the speeding baby."

⁴² Not all who emphasize the plan in opposition to Moser are willing to go as far as Dobbs; e.g., Whiteside, *Annual Lesson Commentary on Bible School Lessons* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1937) 291: "And when people walk in the light, not only is there fellowship between them, but they also have the cleansing blood of Christ. This blood cleanses such people from all sin. This would include all those sins of which we may not be conscious. God graciously blots out such sins, as well as those of which we are conscious and of which we repent; and the next three verses of the chapter show that all [people] sin, whether consciously or unconsciously, and God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, if we confess our sins. And that is a blessing for which every sincere disciple of Christ is profoundly thankful." Also, Whiteside, "The Curse of the Law," *GA* 82 (18 January 1940) 59, "In view of the above facts, we should rejoice that we 'are not under law, but under grace.' Grace *can* cope with sin. Sin is crucified in conversion, and the Holy Spirit is given the child of God to assist him in keeping the 'old man' under subjection (Rom 8:2,3,13). Grace does not demand perfect obedience. We are saved by *Christ*, not by perfect obedience."

⁴³ Another issue which might be raised here is the rebaptism controversy of the late nineteenth century. For those who hold a plan construct, submissive faith in Christ is not the bottom line in salvation, but also what one believes about the plan. We must not only comply with the plan, but we must have a right idea about it. I think this is the essential difference in the rebaptism controversy. Whereas Lipscomb and Harding focused on faith in Christ as the essential element in immersion, McGary and Tant focused on what one believed about baptism as part of the essential element. If one has a plan conception of justification, then what one believes about the plan is as necessary as faith in Christ. Consequently, if one is baptized as an expression of trust in Christ, but misunderstands the role of baptism in the plan, trust in Christ is not sufficient for the remission of sins. This makes "right belief" about baptism equivalent in value to trust in Christ.

righteousness in every detail. Assurance does not rest in whether we have a submissive faith in Christ, whether we humbly seek to obey God as far as we know and as best we can, but whether we have complied with the plan sufficiently, that is, have we kept the law well? This looks to our own works for assurance rather than to Christ; it rests assurance in our works rather than in Christ. It substitutes a law principle for a faith principle. It looks to how well we have kept the law rather than trusting in the mercy of Christ through submissive faith.⁴⁴ Of course, Christians ought to comply with God's law in every respect, but it is because of our failure to do so that we needed grace in the first place. If we substitute compliance for faith, then we have substituted law for grace; we have substituted perfection for submissive trust. Instead, we ought to place faith in Christ at the head, focus our confidence in him, and seek to comply with his will as best we can in every aspect of our lives. Assurance rests in whether we lovingly and trustingly submit to Christ as best we can and not how well we have measured up to the law.

Conclusion

While there is common ground between the two positions on grace, there is also a clear difference. The difference manifests itself in the nature of our justification in which righteousness is something we do instead of something we receive as a gift. Justification based upon one's own righteousness is inherently legalistic; it is the very definition of legalism. If it is this theology of justification which saturates the plan theory, then it is inherently legalistic. This material difference clouds the biblical dimensions of the plan theory. It obscures the biblical foundations which it holds in common with the man theory. Ultimately, if the plan theory is taken to its logical extreme (which it rarely is), it undermines the formal similarities between the two traditions and reduces to a new legalism.

The difference also manifests itself in the nature of our sanctification where the plan extends into the Christian life so that good works of various kinds are also made conditions of salvation in the same sense that baptism is a condition of salvation. In this area discussions of grace have been quite troublesome among us. We have basically agreed on who is a Christian (though the rebaptism controversy muddies the water), but we have had problems with understanding how grace functions in the

⁴⁴ For a biblical and theological discussion of this point, see my "An Historical-Theological Overview of the Grace-Works Issue," in *Grace, Works, Faith: How Late?* 1992 Annual Preacher's Forum at Harding University Graduate School of Religion (ed. Philip Slate; Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs, 1992) 5-26.

Christian's life. In the area of sanctification, we have tended to be perfectionists to the point that we depend on works rather than faith, on our perfection rather than the perfection of Christ. We have tended to depend upon sufficiently adhering to the plan, or climbing the ladder, or working out our salvation, rather than trusting Christ alone for our salvation and seeking to conform to his image. This is an area that needs careful reflection, and what we say about it will reflect the theology of grace to which we are more accustomed.

Recognizing this difference, we can easily see why Moser emphasized the man and Wallace emphasized the plan. Both would say that we should preach both. The man and the plan should not be abstracted from each other, but the traditions have a different understanding of the plan's nature. Moser rooted the plan in a faith principle which emphasizes trusting Christ alone for salvation, but Wallace rooted the plan in a law principle which emphasizes the necessity of complete obedience throughout the whole of the Christian's life. While they both agreed on the common ground outlined above, they disagreed about the nature of the plan itself. Consequently, when Moser said, "Preach the Man, not the Plan," he had in mind, "Preach the gospel, and not the plan as it is conceived by some, but preach the man and tell them how to respond to the gospel." When Wallace said, "Preach the Man and the Plan," he had in mind preaching the grace of God which provided the plan and obedience to the gospel system as a law. Moser believed that one cannot preach the gospel as a law and consequently thought Wallace was, at best, inconsistent and, at worst, undermining the gospel itself.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ My theological analysis supports my historical interpretation that the difference between Showalter and Moser (1930s) or, in contemporary terms, between Jimmy Allen and H. A. (Buster) Dobbs (1990s) is essentially the difference between Harding and Tant or Lipscomb and McGary (1890s). This difference may be summarized in this question: When one is immersed, which is the fundamental point—does he trust in Christ as his Savior, or does he believe baptism is the point of entrance into Christ? The McGary–Tant tradition would argue both are equally important (that is, it is as equally important to believe the right things about the plan as it is to believe the right things about the man) but the Lipscomb–Harding tradition would argue that trust in Christ alone as Savior is the fundamental point, whether one understands the role of baptism in the plan or not. See the discussion between Allen and Dobbs, "The Continuation of a Discussion of Grace, Law, and Baptism Between H. A. (Buster) Dobbs and Jimmy Allen," *FF* 106 (January 1991) 13–24, and "The Conclusion of a Discussion of Grace, Law, and Baptism Between H. A. (Buster) Dobbs and Jimmy Allen," *FF* 106 (February 1991) 24–29.