



# Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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## WHY THE HUMAN WILL CANNOT OVERCOME SIN A STUDY OF PAUL'S COMMENTARY ON THE 10TH COMMANDMENT

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*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*  
(Romans 7:24)

During my first ten years in Christian ministry I was committed to the power of the human will, and it proved to be one of the greatest failures in my life in ministry. That commitment dominated my counseling and preaching. I assumed that the human will was the key to everything from overcoming sin to freedom from demonic influence. I read books that went as far as speaking of the “sovereignty of the human will,” and I approved of them. I actually believed that when it came to doing something in the life of the believer, God was powerless to overcome the human will.

I was not alone in my delusion. The American evangelical movement committed itself to the power of the human will as early as the 19th century, when the teachings of Charles Finney turned the movement away from the doctrines of grace and toward the doctrine of human ability. Consider one of Finney's most famous assertions:

A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term “miracle” — something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and

nothing else. When mankind become religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were unable before to put forth. They only exert powers which they had before, in a different way, and use them for the glory of God.<sup>1</sup>

Finney taught that all humans are fully able to obey God as they are; they just need to get motivated. His influence still holds considerable sway over most evangelicals. This includes how the gospel is presented, how people are counseled, how sermons are preached, and how people think about sanctification. Whether stated or not, most people think that Christianity is about motivating people to make better decisions. That is exactly how I thought.

This delusion was reinforced in the 20th century, when psychology found its way into evangelicalism. Psychology promised to uncover the secrets of human behavior by studying everything from the subconscious mind to events in early childhood. Researchers and others proposed diverse theories about human behavior, and most of these theories found their way into the church as psychology became a requirement for students in bible colleges and seminaries. This remains true to this day. One purpose of these theories is to unlock the secrets of why peo-

ple make specific choices. In one way or another, most of the theories assume that something in a person's past is the key issue that must be uncovered. Academia, business, and government have invested an unbelievable amount of money and effort to figure out why people do not make better choices in life.

I just purchased a book entitled *Life's Healing Choices*,<sup>2</sup> by John Baker, the founder of Celebrate Recovery. The book is based on Rick Warren's series of sermons called “The Road to Recovery” that was based on the beatitudes. In the series, he interprets the beatitudes as “eight healing choices” that will lead to happiness.<sup>3</sup> (Never mind the beatitudes themselves never speak about “choices.”) Incidentally, about six years before Warren preached his sermon series, Robert Schuller published *The Be Happy Attitudes*.<sup>4</sup> Schuller uses the beatitudes to teach that if we change our attitudes we will find happiness. Baker and Warren teach that if we just change our choices we will find happiness.

But I have a question: what if, in fact, the human will (even for the Christian) is powerless to overcome sin? As we shall see, that is exactly what Paul experienced and his travail is the basis for his Romans 7 lament. The key to sanctification is not willpower, but rather the grace of God operating through the power of the Holy Spirit. Grace comes to us not from motivational books and sermons but through God's ordained means of grace.

### PAUL: “WHAT I WILL I DO NOT PRACTICE”

Romans 7 is Paul's commentary on the 10th commandment (“you shall not covet”). Some teachers try to mitigate the implications of Romans 7 by claiming that the entire chapter is about

Paul's experience before his conversion. But that ignores the fact that verses 7-13 are in the past tense, and verses 14-25 are in the present tense. As I see it, God used the 10th commandment to "kill" the self-righteous Pharisee that Paul was before his conversion. In Philippians 3, Paul states that before his conversion he considered himself "blameless" (Philippians 3:6). And we know that changed for Paul on the road to Damascus. Like the rich young ruler, Paul the Pharisee could say, "I have kept all these (several of the earlier commandments) from my youth (Luke 18:21). Convicted by the Holy Spirit, Paul had to admit he was in violation of the 10th commandment. He was a dead sinner before his conversion.

But what about *after* conversion? The tenth commandment showed Paul that sin was "utterly sinful" (Romans 7:13). Romans 7:14, 15 begin Paul's present tense discussion of his Christian life:

*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. (Romans 7:14, 15 NKJV)*

I use the New King James Version because it translates *thelo\_* as "will," rather than "desire." If that is correct, Paul states that he wills (decides) to not practice certain things but still ends up practicing them (specifically coveting). Granted, the Greek term *thelo\_* has a range of meaning that includes both "will" and "wish" or "desire." Which does Paul intend here?

Two important considerations warrant my translating this as "will." First, Paul is a passionate and motivated person. No one reading the New Testament would doubt that. Paul can mean, "I would like not to sin" or he can mean "I decide not to sin" which is the stronger meaning. It is hard to imagine Paul using the weaker term when describing his own motivation

not to sin. Second, Paul is discussing coveting (Romans 7:7), and the Greek word he uses is *epithumeo\_* which is the Greek word for "lust" or "strong desire." If we translate *thelo\_* as "wish" or "desire," then Paul would be saying "I desire not to strongly desire." If we took that to mean "I have a weaker desire not to lust than I have to lust" it would make sense. But is that what he means? It makes more sense to take it as "I resolve (make a decision) not to lust, but I still have lust." Based on these considerations I interpret Paul's use of *thelo\_* (used 7 times in Romans 7:15-21) to mean "to will."

Are they correct, those who claim that Paul can only mean his pre-Christian experience despite the use of the present tense? Consider the fact that in verse 22 Paul says, "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man," whereas in Romans 3 Paul stated of unbelievers, that "none seek after God" (Romans 3:11). That Paul speaks of his Christian experience also fits into the larger context and flow of Romans. The dilemma that Paul describes would seem to negate what was said about freedom from slavery to sin in Romans 6; but, in fact, it describes the experience of all Christians who desire to be holy but find themselves still sinning. It also sets up the glorious answer to the dilemma found in Romans 8.

That being said, Paul stated in Romans 7:15 that he hates sin, wills not to sin, but nevertheless he sins. The human will is not capable of overcoming sin. Paul continues to discuss the inability of the human will in subsequent verses. For example: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Romans 7:18 NKJV). That Paul considers the flesh to remain an operative factor for the Christian can be seen by this passage in Galatians: "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17). It is important to know that the word

"please" in the New American Standard Bible (NASB) is *thelo\_* "will" in the Greek. So Paul tells Christians that they have the same problem he described himself as having in Romans 7:18. Christians cannot do "what they will" (assuming, as Paul does, that what is willed is to be free from sin) because of an internal battle between the flesh and the Spirit.

The word "will" is found twice in **Romans 7:19**: "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." The inability of the human will to overcome sin could not be stated in starker terms: willing good and not willing evil both fail to change Paul's (or our own) practice. Paul mentions a principle or "law" of evil that thwarts decisions for good: "I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good" (**Romans 7:21 NKJV**). We can will good, but this passage says literally, "evil is at hand." The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) says this about the Greek word translated "present" in the NKJV: "In the NT only at Rom. 7:18, 21: 'to lie ready,' 'to lie at disposal,' 'to stand in the power of someone' (denoting human power and impotence)."<sup>5</sup> So evil always stands ready and we cannot simply will it away.

Paul's discussion leads to his famous lament: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (**Romans 7:24**). The irony of this is that before Paul was convicted by the Holy Spirit and converted to Christ he had entirely an entirely different opinion: "as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (**Philippians 3:6b**). How does conversion bring one from "blameless" to "wretched"? It does so by removing the blinders of self-righteousness and imparting a true desire for holiness. The Holy Spirit in the Christian gives him or her the desire to please God. But desire or willingness does not remove all sin. Progress in holiness leads ironically to a greater lament about the continued presence of sin.

## THE CHRISTIAN'S LAMENT ABOUT SIN AND GOD'S ANSWER

Teaching that willpower is capable of overcoming sin harms Christians. Some even claim the power to achieve perfection in this life. Christians desire freedom from sin because they have the Holy Spirit. When Christian leaders claim perfection and offer programs or experiences that purport to lead to perfection they seriously harm the flock. The honest Christian will be convinced of his own failure and feel hopeless. Less than honest Christians will jump through whatever hoops the leaders provide for them and pretend that they, too, are perfected. They might even achieve the state Paul had when as a Pharisee he considered himself "blameless." But they cannot be rid of sin.

We are better off joining Paul's lament about our wretchedness and reading forward to find the answer. Romans 8 is all the more comforting if we read it in the context of Paul's lament at the end of Romans 7. The answer to the lament is this: the work of the Holy Spirit that is true for all Christians. Let us begin with verse 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). During the days of my youthful errors, I read even this passage incorrectly. I understood "condemnation" to be a mental state—a state where one *feels* guilty. Furthermore, (following the King James Version longer reading), I thought that "carnal" Christians were those who felt condemnation, but spiritual Christians were ones who did not. I placed myself in the latter category and felt quite good about myself. But *katakrima*, "condemnation" as Leon Morris comments, is not an emotional term: "Condemnation is a forensic term which here includes both the sentence and the execution of the sentence. But for believers there is no condemnation at all."<sup>6</sup>

A bedrock truth for all Christians is that our sins are forgiven. Christian communion reminds us of that. Consider what Jesus said at the Last

Supper: "for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). One reason the Lord's Supper is a means of grace is that it reminds us that our sins are forgiven. Therefore we are under no condemnation. Jesus bore the full penalty for our sins and averted God's wrath against our sins when He shed His blood on the cross. That truth often weighs too lightly upon us, and we take our eyes off of it. We think we need something more practical, like help making better choices. Paul points us to the comfort that God has performed a work of grace, and our sins, which remind us that we are wretched, will never bring us under condemnation. This is objectively true; it's not just a state of mind.

The law that caused Paul's lament in Romans 7 led him to the gospel in Romans 8, and it should do the same for us. Jesus used the law to show His listeners that their need for righteousness was greater than they could imagine: "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). This shows us we have a desperate need for Christ's righteousness that we cannot achieve by religious works. Paul had the *feeling* of righteousness as a Pharisee, but not the *reality* of it. That is why I so strongly object to the aforementioned "eight choices that lead to happiness" interpretation. If one could obtain righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees by human choices we would not need the imputed righteousness of Christ. By trivializing the law, the Schuller and Warren approach to the Sermon on the Mount fails to put us face to face with the need for the gospel. Jesus and Paul, on the other hand, do.

Paul makes his meaning clear: "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but

according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3, 4). The answer to Paul's lament is what Christ did on the cross for us and what He is doing through the work of the Spirit. This work of the Spirit applies to all Christians and does not apply to any non-Christian. To interpret this passage as pertaining to elite Christians possessing some secret or having a higher order experience, as opposed to ordinary Christians who do not have that experience, is an abuse of the text. How do I know that? Paul tells us: "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9). Paul lays it out as an either/or proposition. (Notice that "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Christ" are synonymous.) If you have the Holy Spirit you are "in the Spirit," and if you do not, you are not a Christian.

Having established that all Christians are in the Spirit, let us back up a few verses and see how important it is that our minds are directed by the Spirit: "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:5, 6). Comparing this to Paul's teaching in Galatians 5 about the fruit of the Spirit or of the flesh, we can come to an important conclusion. Whatever encourages and enhances the work of the Spirit in our lives is what will bring practical sanctification, and whatever points us away from the Spirit to the flesh will harm us. To get Paul's categories correct, remember that Christians are not "in the flesh" but "in the Spirit." But from what we learn in Galatians 5, this does not mean that the flesh is entirely nonoperational for us. There is a battle.

This being the case, all Christian churches should emphasize what will direct people to the work of the Spirit and avoid that which points them to the flesh. But sadly, the evangelical movement has become addicted to the flesh. For example, two of the larger

evangelical mega-churches in our area use Theophostic counseling for their members. I have written about this before.<sup>7</sup> Theophostic counseling theory claims that Christians' present emotional responses are caused by their interpretation of first memory events. This false teaching effectively negates the one thing that Christians have that no one else does: freedom from our sinful past. Paul says:

*Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Corinthians 5:16, 17)*

Theophostic counseling subverts the ideas of forgiveness of sins and freedom from what we were "in the flesh" and points people back to the flesh. Nothing could be more toxic to Christians. We are supposed to provide the means of grace, which reassure Christians that their sins are forgiven. Instead, some of our biggest churches are pointing them to the flesh and suggesting that it determines their wellbeing. This, quite frankly, is nothing less than spiritual wickedness. Any church countenancing Theophostic Ministry, or anything like it, is in rebellion against the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need the work of the Spirit that comes to us through the Word, not a process of analyzing the old fleshly nature that was put to death (legally) at the cross.

Consider what Paul said to the Galatians: "*This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" (**Galatians 3:2, 3**). Legalism is another way churches emphasize the flesh. They create man-made rules that people are expected to make choices (use willpower) to follow. People do not need more laws. Paul

lamented that one law in particular (the 10th commandment) was sufficient to prove that the human will cannot overcome sin. We need the work of the Spirit; not more laws. Anything that a church can come up with as a plan for the Christian life that is based on human willpower is destined to fail. Evangelicalism in America today has been damaged severely by a 150-year commitment to human willpower. God neither saves nor sanctifies through willpower.

### DESIRES DRIVE CHOICES

Jonathan Edwards made a great contribution to Christian theology when he published *A careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully the work is commonly known as *The Freedom of the Will*. In my opinion, no one has ever written a book about the human will that rivals Edwards' great work.

Edwards proposed this key idea in his definition of free will: "The liberty to choose as one pleases." Edwards claimed that humans choose according to their greatest desire at the moment. This definition explains Paul's dilemma as described in Romans 7. Since "coveting" of the 10th commandment is *epithumeo* "lust" or "strong desire" in Romans 7:7 and the Septuagint of Exodus 20:17, it is by definition a great desire. Since lust is a strong desire, it will drive human choices. Paul could make a decision never to lust, but that decision could not remove "strong desire."

External behavior can be modified by creating a stronger desire. For example, a person may lust after his neighbor's wife but not act on that lust out of a greater desire to not have his own marriage fall apart, become divorced, and possibly lose his house and family. A person who lusts to steal may not act on that desire because of a stronger desire not to be caught and sent to jail. Possible punishment, penalty, or conse-

quences can deter people from acting on certain desires, but according to Edwards, they are still making their choices based on their strongest desire at the moment (to avoid consequences). This is why the 10th commandment killed Paul the Pharisee. There is nothing in the law that removes inward desires. Humans cannot keep the command not to have desires. Willpower does not remove desire.

That is why an inner work of the Holy Spirit is the only hope for sanctification. The Holy Spirit progressively gives the Christian new desires. Once the desire changes, the choices will follow. Desires drive choices; it is not the other way around. This is a rather simple concept.

Finney, writing more than a hundred years after Edwards, effectively rejected Edwards' theology and proposed the opposite. Finney took human ability to new heights, denied the sin nature, and claimed that, even in their unregenerate state, every person had the power to obey everything God ever commanded. For example:

*We have seen that the ability of all men of sane mind to obey God, is necessarily assumed as a first truth, and that this assumption is from the very laws of mind, the indispensable condition of the affirmation, or even the conception, that they are subjects of moral obligation; that, but for this assumption, men could not so much as conceive the possibility of moral responsibility, and of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.*<sup>9</sup>

Finney's claim that one must be capable of obeying a moral law in order to have praise or blame directly opposes Edwards' teaching. Edwards showed that God Himself has no option but to do good rather than evil (since God cannot sin), and God is perfectly praiseworthy. Finney's teaching is both illogical and unbiblical. God commands us to be perfect, but that does

not imply our ability to do so. God cannot command anything but what is in keeping with his own moral nature. But we are sold under sin and unable to keep all of God's commands. Paul made that so very clear in Romans 7.

Let us go back to the Beatitudes as understood by Rick Warren and Robert Schuller. Warren wrote this: "Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by sharing eight secrets of genuine happiness."<sup>10</sup> Jesus was not issuing prescriptions for happiness, but rather descriptions of the citizens of the Kingdom of God. The first and last of the Beatitudes (the term, by the way, comes from the Latin term for "blessings"<sup>11</sup> and has nothing to do with our English term "attitudes") end with, "for theirs is the kingdom of God." Those between the first and last beatitudes are promised future blessings such as, "they shall inherit the earth." Far from "secrets to happiness" or "be happy attitudes," these blessings are for people who appear to be far from blessed in the eyes of the world but have, by faith, seen that the kingdom has drawn near. As mentioned before, John Baker of Celebrate Recovery calls the beatitudes, "eight healing choices." These are not choices; they are conditions people are in because of a work of God.

For example, consider this beatitude: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*" (Matthew 5:6). To put this in perspective, consider Paul's teaching in Romans: "*as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God'*" (Romans 3:10, 11). Without a prior work of God's grace, no one even seeks God. Some claim that Paul is exaggerating and should not be taken literally. But the context tells otherwise. Paul's litany of human sinfulness in Romans chapters 1-3 is very clearly intended to be universal. It sets up the universal need for the gospel. Therefore, hungering for righteousness is neither a "choice" that leads to happiness nor a "secret" of genuine happiness. It is a blessed person's condition, caused by a work of grace that God did.

I use the example of how Schuller and Warren use the beatitudes because both have been so very important in recent church history. I claim that they and their ideas are products of a misguided evangelicalism that has been addicted to human ability for more than a century. The idea of human willpower even affects how the gospel is presented. Whether for therapeutic purposes or for saving ones, evangelicalism assumes we need the best approach to motivate people to make decisions. They believe the human will reigns supreme. Why else would someone reduce the beatitudes to choices or secrets that lead to happiness? They assume everyone wants to be happy, so they use that desire to motivate people to make different choices. The need for a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit gets little or no consideration. They do not think themselves wretched like Paul; they simply believe they just need a volitional boost by a motivational speaker.

If Edwards was right (and I believe he was), their motivational approach which is so very American, is sure to fail. If we have evil desires because of a sin nature, then we can be motivated not to act on them by the existence of external penalties. But our problem with lust itself is hopeless. Only a supernatural work of God by the Holy Spirit can change our desire at the heart level. Our desires and motivations change when our heart is changed.

### THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Martin Luther said, "The Holy Spirit comes to us through the Word." The Book of Hebrews makes it clear that the Bible is "God speaking."<sup>12</sup> A section of second Peter demonstrates this.

*"seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent*

*promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."*  
(2Peter 1:3, 4)

Notice that everything that pertains to "life and godliness" has been granted by His divine power. Such things are not obtained by human volition. Furthermore, it is by God's "precious and magnificent promises" that we become like Christ and escape the corruption of lust. This is perfectly in keeping with the teachings found in Hebrews 11. The great people of faith in the Old Testament believed God's promises. Faith needs an object, and we need to believe what God has promised. Believing leads to sanctification.

Let us go back momentarily to Romans 8. After the "wretched" lament of Romans 7, we saw that Paul pointed to the work of the Spirit. As a glorious crescendo to this, Romans 8:28-39 assures everyone who is justified (all true Christians) *will* be glorified and that there is no power in the universe that can stop it. We are safe in God's providence and love. Such are the "magnificent" promises Peter mentions. The promises of God need to be put in front of Christians continually so that we have an object for our faith (God and His promises). We need assurance that God will ultimately perfect us, and, in the meantime, Jesus is interceding for us: "*Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*" (Hebrews 7:25). We need assurance that the Holy Spirit prays within us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

Peter goes on to list eight virtues we should diligently apply (2Peter 1:5-7). But lest we think that Christian virtues are developed through willpower, Peter explains what is wrong if they are not developing: "*For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins*" (2Peter 1:9). The Lord Jesus

instituted the Lord's Supper so that we do not forget how we gained forgiveness. Pastors and elders of Christian churches are duty-bound to put the truth of the gospel and the whole counsel of God before congregations. Many, however, do not preach the gospel because they think preaching the Bible to Christians is not "practical." But Peter tells us that to forget our purification from former sins would cause us to lack Christian virtues. Preaching the gospel to Christians is practical. God uses it to bring His Spirit to them and perform an inward work of grace.

### THE MEANS OF GRACE

Going back to Romans 8 we read this: "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13). How does one put to death ("mortify" in the KJV) the deeds of the body? Church history lists many failed attempts to mortify the flesh. For example, consider medieval monasteries where monks abused the flesh in hopes of killing sin. Had those ascetic monks practiced *sola scriptura* they would have known that it wouldn't work: "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). All "self-made religion" is powerless against "fleshly indulgence." This includes any practice not prescribed for Christians in the Bible—including contemplative prayer, labyrinths, Eastern style meditation, Yoga, silence, solitude, journaling, or other extrabiblical spiritual disciplines.

Self-made religion has no power to mortify the flesh. Why? Because sanctification is by grace through faith, just as salvation is. We cannot have legitimate faith that God will use what He never ordained. There is no promise attached to any activity other than the practices ordained by God.

The means of grace are found on the day of Pentecost with the very first Christians:

*So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:41, 42)*

First they were baptized. Baptism is a means of grace because it is a practice ordained by God (Matthew 28:19). Also, Baptism reminds us of our purification from former sins (the forgetting of which Peter said would cause us to not develop Christian virtues). Paul reminded the Colossians of their baptism (Colossians 2:12) in the context of warning against self-made religion. Paul reminded the recipients of Romans of their baptism (Romans 6:2-5) in the context of teaching not to continue in sin. Baptism is a means of grace and should be understood as one of God's means of keeping gospel truth in front of us.

The next practice was "devoting themselves to the apostles teaching." The teachings of the apostles are found in our New Testament, and as the word of God are the most important means of grace. That is why it is so tragic when churches lay aside Bible teaching for the purpose of introducing something they deem more practical. In setting aside the Word of God they made sure Christians would fail to grow in sanctification. Once Christians wither on the vine for being starved of needed nutrients, these same churches hire psychologists and therapists (whose teachings are not means of grace) in order to solve the resulting lack of sanctification. And it does not work. Anything less than the forthright teaching and application of the pure word of God by pastors and elders is pastoral malpractice. God wants His sheep fed pure food: the unadulterated word (2Corinthians 4:2). It is the only thing that is healthy for them—the only spiritual diet on which they will thrive.

The next practice was fellowship.

The way I understand fellowship in the discussion of means of grace is that they are to be practiced in the context of Christian gatherings. 1John 1:7 links fellowship with one another to the cleansing from sin by the blood atonement. Fellowship is not the cause of the blood atonement, which was done by Christ once for all, but fellowship around the means of grace reminds Christians of the blood atonement and the basis for cleansing from sin. We need to gather with the Lord's flock around the means of grace.

Acts then states that they were breaking bread. Most scholars correctly believe that this should be understood as the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper, like baptism, points us to what was done for us and to the future promise. Paul said that baptism reminds us of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, which reminds us of what He did for us and the future promise of our own resurrection to immortality. Paul told the Corinthians that when they practiced the Lord's Supper, they "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." There again is a reminder of how we are saved, the future promise of Christ's return, and the final eschatological banquet when all the redeemed will dine with Christ.

The final practice mentioned in Acts 2:42 is prayer. Though some theologians do not believe prayer is a means of grace, there is good Biblical support for the idea that it is. Consider this passage: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). We find grace at the throne of grace. Individual and corporate prayer are practices ordained by God that come with the promise of grace for our needs.

When I first started teaching the means of grace I found that most Christians had never heard of the concept or even the terminology. The idea is taught in Lutheran and Reformed theology, but American evangelicalism outside of those movements either has lost the doctrine of means of grace or has never had it. We find at our church

that we must regularly teach about means of grace as new people come. Many come from various evangelical churches that had gone into the seeker movement. For the most part they had never heard of means of grace. I think the reason for this is the commitment to human willpower that has been so prevalent for so long. The tacit implication is that people are sanctified by making the right decisions rather than making the right decisions *because* they are sanctified.

### CONCLUSION

Discovering the truth about human inability is what changed my Christian life and my ministry beginning in 1986. I discovered that as I was teaching through the book of Romans. Human inability is emphasized in many places in Romans. I had spent 10 years trying to get people to make better decisions, all the while doing a poor job of giving them the means of grace they needed to truly change. When I was a young man (I am sorry to say) I was overconfident about my own abilities. I thought I could do anything I put my mind to. People used to tell me that they were intimidated by me and that I was unapproachable. One member of our congregation told me that she used to cry on her way home after she heard me preach. When asked, why on the way home, she answered, because she felt like such a failure. I spent many years counseling people and found myself continually frustrated with them. I would tell them what they needed to do, but they kept having the same failures. The problem was that my commitment was to human ability and human volitional capabilities. God was very gracious and opened my eyes to the truth that set me on a different path. I thank Him that I did not start writing until *after* that change. I would hate to have my previous ideas in print.

Dear Christian reader, consider the fact that Paul lamented his own inability to keep the 10th commandment. Consider that his answer to the impo-

tence of the human will was the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. That being the case, the only thing that makes sense is to do whatever promotes the work of the Spirit—and thereby mortify the flesh rather than feed it. What makes sense is to put yourself under the means of grace in faith, and by God's magnificent promises be diligent to see that Christian virtues as described in the Bible are developing. God's promise to you is that they will, by His grace. And even better than that, He promises you that you will be glorified and conformed to the image of Christ.

### END NOTES

1. Charles G. Finney, Lectures on Revival, Lecture 1 "Revival is not a Miracle" 9, from Master Christian Library version 8, AGES Software, [CD-ROM] (Rio, WI 2000).
2. John Baker, *Lifes's Healing Choices*; (New York: Howard Books, 2007).
3. Ibid. 4.
4. Robert Schuller, *The Be Happy Attitudes*, (Waco: Word, 1985).
5. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (3:656). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
6. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 300.
7. See CIC Issue 79: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue79.htm>
8. I explain Edwards' ideas in CIC Issue 92: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue92.htm>
9. Charles G. Finney Systematic Theology, 1878 edition, Lecture 32 444, AGES Software, The Master Christian Library Series; version 8 [CD-ROM] (Rio,WI.: 2000).
10. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2002); 228.
11. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew in The New American Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1992); 97.
12. I seek to prove this in this article: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/worldview0038.htm> It is under the worldview section of [cicministry.org](http://cicministry.org)

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