

Recovering Gospel Essentials

Part One, the Sovereignty of God in the Sinner's Effectual Call

By Jay Wegter

I. Let us show discernment—for the biblical gospel is being replaced by a modern gospel that can't save.

The church today is afflicted by a gospel of “*easy-believism*.” By *easy-believism*, we do not mean that salvation is not by faith alone. What we do mean is that saving faith is erroneously depicted as residing within the sinner's capacity. Concerning this *easy believism* and its noxious fruits, the words of Welsh pastor Howell Harris are even more true today than they were 200 years ago: *Churches are filled with folks who have a détente with sin; they are at ease under its dominion. They won't study the fruits of faith or make their election and calling sure; but turn the grace of God into licentiousness.*ⁱ

We have forgotten the necessity of deep conviction of sin. God's grace is free, but its bestowal has conditions which are set by the Holy Spirit; the Spirit prepares the sinner for grace by means of conviction (Jn 16:13). The burden of sin and wrath on the conscience is a function of divine grace because Christ's merit is only known to the poor soul in deep distress. ***Small conviction of sin will yield only slight views of Christ's blood and merits.*** There is a necessary ‘*desperate-ness*’ which must accompany true conviction of sin. It is only the destitute sinner who falls at the feet of Christ. Only those who have been smitten with the *death wound* of damnation flee to the Savior, only those stripped of all self-righteousness cry to Christ for mercy.

The unsaved ‘religious’ man has yet to receive a death blow from the law of God. He has never been thoroughly slain by the law. If he had been, he would be *dead to the law* as a source of life, and would understand that he must find spiritual life in Another, in Christ (Gal 2:19). As a consequence of being yet *alive to the law*, the idol of self is set up in the heart against Christ in His offices (*Prophet, Priest, and King*). The false professor feels that he is a good Christian before he is thoroughly condemned by the law. Only when the law slays him will he be made to feel his utter need of faith in order to lay hold of Christ's imputed righteousness.ⁱⁱ

Only the Spirit's convicting power can slay self-help. The leprous doctrine of free will is destroyed in the heart of one who has had any spiritual dealing with Christ; for Christ is the One who in the exercise of His sovereignty applies His merits to the sinner. He reveals the Father, Matthew 11:27—He is ‘the *Mediator* of a better covenant’—Hebrews 8:6. Concerning the unbeliever's spiritual impotency, 19th Century Welsh preacher, Howell Harris expresses it as follows: nature (the natural man) can't stand being stripped of all righteousness. Nature would rather despair, would rather choose Judas' noose than go to Christ on His terms! “Be merciful to me the sinner” is the hardest prayer in the world. To confess Christ from the heart is above the power of flesh and blood. So much profession of salvation today is merely an accommodation, a *lowering of the market* to what the flesh is capable of; namely a form of religion in which men have never parted with self-righteousness. As a result, carnal professors are strangers to the blood of Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ Harris has graphically depicted the sinner's deadness.

The unregenerate person lies in a deep spiritual slumber of apathy. *All his false hopes must be dashed or he will never flee to Christ.* False professors are more naked, wretched, and poor than they can possibly imagine. They have never seen their own moral bankruptcy and spiritual ruin. They seem ignorant of the fact that God only pities, forgives, and receives those who are *poor in spirit, self-condemned, and broken-hearted*. No man, apart from the Spirit's work, can *prepare* himself in this way; it is the Spirit's convicting work to harrow (plow up) the heart until it is 'mortally wounded'. No one ever came to liberty without feeling himself in bondage. No man ever believed without discovering through an evil heart of unbelief that believing is the hardest thing in the world. No one ever took up the cross of Christ in self-denial without perceiving hell, darkness, and wrath pursuing him—no man ever fled to Christ until fleeing to Christ was seen as his only possible Refuge.^{iv}

This work of grace in the conscience, pulling down all of man's false refuges, stripping him of every lying hope, and thrusting him down into self-abasement and self-abhorrence, is indispensable to a true reception of Christ. No matter how informed his judgment is, he will never receive Christ spiritually into his heart and affections, until he has been broken down by the hand of God in his soul to be a ruined wretch.^v

In terms of this 'breaking down', God's way is radically different from the "auto-soterism" inherent in modern evangelistic methods. God comes down and confounds the language of Babel; He scatters every stick and stone and pile of mortar. He does not leave one stone upon another. He is a jealous God, and will have no partner in the way of salvation.^{vi} When the quickening power of God's Spirit has passed upon a man's conscience, he is invariably brought to see himself to be morally and spiritually bankrupt. This inward sight of self, through the lens of the gospel, cuts him off sooner or later from legal hopes. In many cases the work may begin in a way scarcely perceptible—but, be sure of this, that the Lord will "bring down the hearts" of all His people "with labor." He will convince them of their lost state before Him and cast them as ruined wretches into the dust of death—without hope, strength, wisdom, help, or righteousness, except that which is given to them, as a free gift of distinguishing grace.

II. One of the most subtle, but serious errors in modern evangelism is 'decisional regeneration'—that man's decision imparts spiritual life.

"You must be born again" (John 3:7) is the great doctrine of man's need for regeneration in order to enter the kingdom of God. But the modern gospel denies the very point that John 3 intends to teach. Simply stated, the error is this: *that men are born again as a result of something they do*. The teaching of *Decisional Regeneration* departs from Scripture because it attributes to man the ability to regenerate himself. *Decisional Regeneration* in the Church must be exposed in order to save men from the damning delusion that because they have "decided," they are going to heaven and are no longer under the wrath of God.^{vii} We can and must tell men to turn from their sins and believe the Gospel, but in doing so we should realize that when a man does repent and believe, it is the result of God's prior regenerative working within him. If this were not the case, if man were capable of initiating his own salvation, then it would be impossible to escape the conclusion that men do not need regeneration at all, but possess in themselves an innate goodness which causes them to seek after God; Scripture puts this to the lie: "As it is written, there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there

is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one (Rom 3:10-12).^{viii}

The purity of the Gospel is of extreme importance because it alone is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16-17), and the true basis of Christian unity. Charles Hodge points out the danger of teaching decisional regeneration:

No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please. . . . As it is a truth both of Scripture and of experience that the un-renewed man can do nothing of himself to secure his salvation, it is essential that he should be brought to a practical conviction of that truth. When thus convicted, and not before, he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained.^{ix}

Evangelistic methods employed in Evangelical Christianity have given rise to a policy of equating salvation with a profession of faith in Christ. The result is that church rolls are filled with carnal professors whose daily lives are a contradiction of true piety.^x When folks are counseled to pray a certain prayer and then pronounced “saved,” it commonly results in the impression that the individual has been “regenerated” through a decision. Regeneration is reduced to a procedure which man performs. How differently did Jesus Christ deal with sinners. He dealt with every individual on a personal basis, not by a stereo-typed presentation.^{xi} Looking unto Jesus is the vivified soul’s response to a crucified and risen Savior. Let us not forget that repentance is a consequent of faith in God’s free love to sinners; we are not saved FOR believing, faith is not a work. Do not make a savior out of your faith. We might well ask, “Is your hope of glory laid by the hand of Christ or by your own hand? Who began religion in you?”^{xii}

Christ is only put on when our own covering is totally unraveled. No one really believes until he is an *undone sinner*—the hardest thing in the world is to take Christ alone for righteousness. That statement by Puritan, Thomas Wilcox is baffling to many modern evangelicals. Clergyman Wilcox continues: Scripture stresses that to believe, one must have a clear view of conviction of sin, of the merits of Christ’s blood, and Christ’s willingness to save one merely as a sinner. This [clear view] is more difficult than to make a world; nature cannot attain to it! It is Christ’s work to make you (His elect) believe. Saving faith is a gift. Unbelief sets up guilt of conscience *above* Christ and His merits (and puts the sinner to work in efforts at self-reformation). Unbelief fixates upon complaints against the self (and thus, places hope in personal rectification) whereas, saving faith looks away from self to Christ.^{xiii}

Because of satanic blindness to the Gospel of grace (2 Cor 4:3, 4), unregenerate man cannot comprehend the true basis of salvation, and is therefore ever prone to do the best he knows how. This is to attempt to work out his own standing before God by his own efforts. It is the natural tendency to do something of merit; whether standing in an evangelistic meeting, or walking an aisle. He may be persuaded to do the above when he has no conception of standing by faith on the Rock of Jesus Christ. He may abandon natural timidity by walking an aisle when he knows nothing of abandoning his satanic tendency to self-help, and resting by faith on that which Christ has done for His people.^{xiv}

III. Spiritually, there are but two kinds of people and two kinds of fruit.

Those born of the flesh (lost) and those born of the Spirit (saved) (Jn 3:3-8; 1 Cor

2:14-15). Jesus said that people are either like an evil tree (with corrupt fruit) or like a good tree (with good fruit) (Lu 6:43-45). A person's *nature* determines what kind of fruit he produces (Lu 6:43-44). A person must become a "good tree" before he can believe and obey the Lord. Saving faith has a moral basis. In other words, faith arises out of a man's moral state or condition.^{xv} Faith can never be divorced from what a man is and does. The natural man has a controlling bias; he hates God (Rom 5:10; 8:7), and prefers ignorance of God.^{xvi} "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor 2:14). *If a natural man cannot even exercise faith and repentance in order to change into a spiritual man, how can he ever be changed? How is one born again?*

Regeneration, the granting of a new heart, is a miraculous work sovereignly done by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptural study of man's sinful depravity reveals that what man does, wills, desires, and understands is inseparable from what he is. One cannot separate the object of a man's trust and reliance from all else he is and does. There is no such thing as an isolated act of God-pleasing faith rising up out of the quagmire of corruption, darkness and enmity (Rom 8:5-8). John MacArthur provides an excellent summary of this reality when he affirms that saving faith is neither *innate* (already present in the sinner), nor is it *inert* (separate and isolated from what a sinner is by nature).^{xvii} This all leads to a key question: "Must a person believe in order to be born again, or must he be born again in order to believe?" "Does faith precede or follow regeneration by the Spirit?" The answer to that affects one's whole understanding of the gospel message. What do the Scriptures teach?

The new birth is from God—it is sovereignly bestowed. Scripture does not attribute the cause of the new birth to us, the Bible unequivocally assigns it to God (Jn 5:21). The new birth is likened to: a *resurrection* (Jn 5:21; Eph 2:1-6); a *birth* (Jn 1:13; 3:1-9; 1 Pet 1:23); and to a *creation* (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17; Eph 2:10). In each case, the Lord is acting upon the sinner in his helplessness, deadness, and rebellion—a *dead body, a unborn babe, and a thing yet to be created.*

It is the new birth that produces faith and repentance. If indeed the new birth comes before faith, then a Christian's faith and repentance are ultimately granted by the Lord (Phil 1:29). If faith precedes the new birth, then ultimately faith and repentance rise out of the natural man. What do the Scriptures say? The new birth precedes a person's entering into the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3-5). The source of the new birth is "*from above*" (*N.T. Greek*), not from within man (Jn 1:13; 3:7). Only those born of the Spirit can respond to God. Jesus likens the operation of the Spirit (in regeneration) to the wind. The wind is invisible, sovereign, it goes where it wills; we do not control it—we only see its effects, so also the work of the Spirit in regeneration. Jesus admonishes Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, who should have known of the promise given in the book of Ezekiel of a new heart. "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ez 36:25-27). Jesus came to fulfill this promise which likens regeneration to a 'heart transplant'.

Contrary to all other religions, the Gospel of Christ is all of grace—and that grace includes the ability to come of Christ. The gospel of grace is characterized by a *free offer*—whosoever thirsts, is guilt-laden, is weary (Mt 11:28-30). Come obtain salvation without money and without cost (Is 55:1ff.). The gospel of grace is characterized by the universality of the offer; it is not

restricted to an ethnic group or to a sacred geographical region. “The gospel is to be preached to every creature” (Col 1:23). The gospel of grace is an offering of eternal salvation conditioned upon *faith and repentance*, not upon human merit, works, alms, or personal reformation (Rom 10:13; Heb 11:6; Jn 3:16; Rev 22:17).

The Scriptures teach that the offer of salvation is universal, and that human inability is universal. That is a puzzle, a conundrum, a paradox—that the offer is universal, yet the sons of men are unable and unwilling to come to the Savior. The most common error concerning the modern gospel is to assume that the freeness of the offer is meant to be a measure of human ability. “Whosoever will” is not intended to teach universal ability. The 14 point universal indictment of Romans 3:10-18 dispels the notion of ability—“no one seeks” (v. 11). The Son of God gives the ability to respond to the gospel. The gospel of sovereign grace is to be preached to the dead wills of sinful men. Yet, human depravity cannot frustrate God’s gracious purposes. The exalted Son of God gives life to whomever He wishes; He gives the ability to respond to the gospel (Mt 11:27; Jn 17:2). He gives the saving knowledge of the Father (Lu 10:22). Jesus has the authority to save everyone that the Father has given Him (Jn 6:39; 17:2).

There are two kinds of salvation calls: outward, and inward. The outward or external call is God’s summons to all unbelievers to come to Christ. This outward universal call is what Jesus had in mind when He said, “many are called” (Mt 22:14). Paul also gave this outward call when he preached on Mars Hill in Athens. “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30). The outward call is frequently rejected (Acts 17:32). The inward call describes the inward drawing of the unbeliever to Christ. It is effectual, irresistible, and is carried out by the Holy Spirit (Heb 3:1). Paul testifies that he experienced this inward call (Gal 1:15-16). Every person who is saved experiences this inward holy calling (2 Tim 1:9; Jude 1; Acts 16:14).

The inward call is the an irresistible drawing of a lost person to Christ. Jesus testified that those who come, do so because they are drawn (Jn 6:44, 65). No one is able to resist this drawing. Every N.T. use of this Greek word for draw (*helkuo*), refers to an irresistible drawing or dragging (Jn 21:6, 11; 18:10; Jas 2:6; Acts 16:19-21). The hearing of Scripture is necessary in order for the inward call to be given (Rom 10:14; Jas 1:18). ***Everyone who is inwardly called by God’s Spirit comes to Jesus.*** In our natural state, no one wants to come. Sinners resist coming the gospel way, by faith and repentance. No one comes unless he is drawn! When God’s Spirit works in a person’s heart, He opens the heart so that the person naturally wants to come. Consider the salvation of Lydia, the seller of purple, “. . . the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14b). The inward call did not force her to believe against her will. The Lord did the opening of her heart; as a result, she gladly responded to the gospel in faith. She was freed from her blinding bondage to sin so that she could believe. Her response was a work of God. Her heart was closed to the gospel prior to God’s opening of her heart.

The Scriptures distinguish between true and false faith. Scripture warns of a dead faith, of a kind of faith that cannot save (Jn 2:23-25; Jas 2:14-20, 26; Mt 7:21-23). Those with a spurious faith may assent to the facts of the gospel, but do not demonstrate the changed life that accompanies repentance. When the gospel is believed unto salvation, it is because of the Holy Spirit’s power (1 Th 1:5, Ja 1:17-18; Eph 1:19-21; Col 2:13). Saving faith is a gift from the Lord—God’s gift to us, not our gift to Him (Phil 1:29). It is not our faith that raised us spiritually, it the spiritual resurrection of the new birth that caused our faith! (Eph 2:1-3; 8-10). The gospel of grace is God’s power; it comes bringing the very divine power we lack (Rom 5:6; Ps 110:3). The gift of faith is a sovereign grant (Acts 13:44-48). The gift of repentance is always given with the gift of faith (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim 2:24-26).

Regeneration by the Spirit (the new birth) cannot be commanded or caused by man. *The new birth is not a process, it is instantaneous, and sovereignly bestowed* (note the conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus—Acts 9:1-9). God grants the new birth only in connection with powerful conviction of sin (Jn 16:8-11; Acts 2:37; Lu 18:13). Union with God can only be produced by God Himself. Only God can unite Himself to man.^{xviii} *The Holy Spirit's indwelling and operations and life-giving work are the sum of the blessings Christ purchased for His people.* Natural man is destitute of spiritual sense and perception. He has no concept of the excellency of divine truth and he has no heart affection for God. An entirely new principle must be planted in him in order for him to choose God. The devastation inherent in our guilt, moral defilement, and inability cannot will the improvement of our ruin.^{xix} Before man chooses God, there must be the implanting of a nature that loves the supernatural light of God's truth (that hates sin and loves God's holiness). The new birth produces faith in Christ alone. There must be a reception of Christ not merely by mental assent, but with the faculties of the soul. True salvation through faith is never a hope that is distributed over personal reform and religious acts.

In the Scriptures, many of the same things are represented from God as from us, in other words, God is said to convert sinners, men are said to convert or turn. God makes a new heart—we are commanded to make a new heart. God circumcises the heart—we are commanded to circumcise our hearts.^{xx} God will not believe and repent for us; the Scriptures command us to believe and repent—the repenting sinner makes an “appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ who is at the right hand of God” (1 Pet 3:21b). The moral inability of man is not an excuse to avoid seeking God in His Word. Scripture declares that these are the terms of God bestowing mercy: the command is to seek with all the heart. Don't expect to obtain salvation without seeking it! (Is 55; Lu 16:16; Rev 22:17).^{xxi} The quickened sinner is anything but passive. Declares Puritan Thomas Watson in his refutation of divine sovereignty as fatalism, “He that decreed my salvation decreed it in the use of *means*, and if I neglect the *means*, I reprobate myself. . . God has decreed my salvation in the use of the Word and of prayer.” In God's eternal love to His elect, He has established that His ‘vessels of mercy’ shall be prepared for glory *by means* of sanctification (Rom 6:21-23).^{xxii}

The urgency of the call to salvation is addressed to ruined sinners who really don't know who they are in God's plan. John Calvin, one of the greatest minds in the last 500 years notes that to suppress the truth of God is to suppress the knowledge of one's own existence—you don't know what you are in God's great plan because you have become the dungeon of yourself. Sinners ‘descend’ into themselves and find that they are in a labyrinth from which they cannot escape. The deeper they go into self, the greater the darkness and confusion (absence of meaning and purpose). Only the thread of the Word of God can lead a man out of self.^{xxiii}

God draws us to Himself with the gloriousness of the gospel—for the gospel announces that God is prepared to deal with guilty men on the ground of free favor and mercy. This is incredibly good news to defiled consciences because the conscience teaches that God is just and that He will punish sin and reward righteousness. The good news that is the gospel proclaims that God the Judge is prepared to pardon transgressions and justify the ungodly (Rom 4:5). By means of Christ suffering in the place of sinners, God is ready to take us from the curse of the Law and give us the blessedness of righteousness as an act of pure mercy. But this is good news only for those who have despaired of providing their own righteousness and favor with God (Gal 3:10-13).^{xxiv}

The gospel announces that God is just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:24-26). All sinners are invited to come—the broken and despairing, the social outcasts, felons, addicts, drunkards, the hopeless. In Christ, hell-deserving sinners are given heaven by means of the sovereignty of God’s love. God the Father has removed the grand obstacle that stood in the way of mercy—the justice of God has been dealt with by the cross. Man’s guilt under the moral government of God has met the strictest justice in the bloody death of the Son of God. Now, without doing injustice, God may deal with compassion and mercy because divine justice has been completely satisfied for all who believe (Heb 8:12).^{xxv}

Don’t look within—you won’t find merit there—God says that salvation is through His only begotten Son. Look unto Me and be saved (Is 45:22). Christ died for the ungodly—at the right time He died for the helpless—the rebellious (Rom 5:6-10). God’s boundless mercy is sovereign and free—there is nothing we can do to have a claim or obligation to receive it (Rom 9:5). Christ bids us come to Him and be cleansed and saved. Come without money—without cost (Is 55:1, 6; Rev 22:17).

End Notes:

ⁱ Edward Morgan, *The Life and Times of Howell Harris*, Need of the Times Publishers, 1998 rp, p. 71

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 74

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 24-25

^{iv} Ibid, pp. 257-258

^v J. C. Philpot, *The Heavenly Birth and its Earthly Counterfeit*, Chapel Library, p. 4

^{vi} Ibid, p. 13

^{vii} James Adams, *Decisional Regeneration*, Chapel Library, p. 3

^{viii} Richard Ochs, *Born-againism*, Chapel Library

^{ix} Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, 1970, Vol. 2, p. 277

^x Gary Hendrix, *Professing Christians Warned*

^{xi} Adams, pp. 4-5

^{xii} Thomas Wilcox, *Christ is All*, pp. 13-17

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*, Banner of Truth, pp. 22-23

^{xv} Tom Wells, *The Moral Basis of Faith*, Banner of Truth, p. 16

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to the Apostles*

^{xviii} John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, p. 160

^{xix} Ibid, pp. 163, 188

^{xx} Ibid, p. 178

^{xxi} Ibid, p. 122ff.

^{xxii} Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, Banner of Truth, pp. 69-70

^{xxiii} John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (1536 A.D), Book I.v.12n36

^{xxiv} Charles Spurgeon, “A Gospel worth dying for”

^{xxv} Ibid.