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JUST AS I WAS: THE PRESENCE OF SACRAMENTALISM IN
THE METHODS OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST REVIVALISM

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JUST AS I WAS: THE PRESENCE OF SACRAMENTALISM IN
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Date _____

For the glory of God.

For the Myricks, whose love and care have made me a better man. Your family has made

Luke 18:28-30 come alive to me, and I will be eternally grateful.

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PREFACE

While the idea for this paper started in the back seat of a car three years ago, its foundation was laid with the help of many along the way. Dr. Paul Hoskins was the man who initially stretched my mind and encouraged me to continue my schooling. I will always be grateful for the content of his teaching and the emotion he showed when he taught.

Also, as for the great professors at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I am deeply indebted to them. Two stand out in particular: Dr. Jonathan Pennington and Dr. Peter Gentry. Even in limited time with them, they changed my life forever with their teaching. Because of those two, I am not only a better teacher myself, but I am a better human being. I pray that the Lord would continue to use everything they taught me to be a better minister of the gospel.

Of course, this could not have happened without my advisor, Dr. Gregg Allison. I appreciate his encouragement, as I seriously had my doubts in the beginning, in the middle, and even leading up to the end. He kept pressing me to write. I am a fortunate man to have had him as my guide along the way.

David Denis

Moultrie, Georgia

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CHAPTER 1

A PROMISING PATH TO NOWHERE: A HIDDEN PROBLEM THROUGH YEARS OF SUCCESS

In the early 2000's, Hollywood started capitalizing on some of the newest computer-generated imagery in the world of science fiction. As audiences watched, they were captivated by the stunning visuals and storylines. One could not help but notice some repetition in these releases – especially within the apocalyptic genre. The popularity of these films soared with titles like *World War Z*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *28 Days Later*. Film studios eagerly met the public's fascination with the end of the world by releasing an abundance of apocalyptic movies. One of the studios' most successful productions was *I Am Legend*, a thriller/horror film centered on a viral outbreak caused by a cancer cure gone wrong. The virus initially appeared to heal its patients, only later to morph them into zombie-like creatures. These creatures further spread the virus from city to city, turning the entire world into monsters. *I Am Legend* functioned as a cinematic reminder of the way unintended consequences often coincide with perceived progress and innovation.

Within the Southern Baptist community, no one locks their doors at night because of any epidemics threatening to destroy the world. However, most within the denomination acknowledge something cancerous amongst their churches.¹ General

¹The following two books were recently released by the CEO of LifeWay, Southern Baptists' publishing subsidiary: Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), and Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013). In the first title, Rainer takes common problems found in many Baptist churches and shows how they will lead to the death of that church. The second title explains the basic function of a church member, which Rainer writes under the assumption that most people in Baptist churches do not know what being a church member entails. Rainer's writings are persuasive, and the mere fact he wrote them implies the dire state of affairs in Southern Baptist churches.

observation reveals little variation in behavior between members of these churches compared with those who claim no religious affiliation. In the midst of this congregational collapse, I noticed a similarity in the way many Southern Baptists speak of their salvation experience: first, when they *thought* they were saved, and second, when they were *actually* saved. While some have always given second thought regarding when their conversion happened, one wonders if the current proliferation suggests a much deeper problem. Could this trend suggest evidence of a misunderstanding of true conversion amongst Southern Baptist congregants?

Historically, church membership has played an important role in Southern Baptist polity and their understanding of conversion. Along with the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper, church membership binds the members of Southern Baptist churches in a covenant with one another.² This system supposedly delineates those whose lives show evidence of grace (believers, and also members) from those whose lives do not show any evidence (unbelievers, therefore non-members). Therefore, Baptists have offered affirmation through membership or disaffirmation in cases of church discipline.³ However, statistics in the area of church membership reinforces the existence of a problem. In the 2016 Annual Church Profile, Southern Baptist churches calculate 15,216,978 members throughout the United States.⁴ Comparing this with the total population of the United States in 2016, it would mean one out of every twenty-five

²Regenerate membership is a marked difference between Southern Baptists and most other denominations. This belief is not in denominations like Presbyterianism, who practice infant baptism and bring those children into the membership of the church.

³Though the practice of church discipline has all but disappeared in Southern Baptist life, Greg Wills' study on the history of Georgia Baptists demonstrates this has not always been the case. Gregory Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴LifeWay Insights. *Annual Church Profile Statistical*. Nashville: LifeWay, 2017, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/lifewayblogs/wp-content/uploads/sites/66/2017/06/08100243/AC P2016-combined.pdf>. Annual Church Profiles are voluntary reports submitted by the majority of Southern Baptist churches throughout the denomination. SBC entities then gather the information and put it into an annual nationwide report.

Americans stands as a member of a Southern Baptist church. Experience not only betrays these statistics, but so does other data in the same report. Under “weekly worship attendance,” the number of people who attend these same churches is 5,200,716.⁵ That number means roughly two-thirds of the entire denomination does not attend the very churches where they hold their membership.⁶ The fact this trend has continued for decades implies at least one of the following: first, churches do not see it as a problem, and/or second, churches have no plans of taking any action. However, these two implications certainly send mixed messages to a congregation about conversion. After all, if a person has no desire to attend their church while at the same time finding themselves as a member in good standing, confusion will reign.

Recent publications have addressed some of the Southern Baptist double-talk on conversion. Baptist leaders have written an increased amount of literature dedicated to the role of conversion in the life of believers. From J. D. Greear’s book *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You are Saved*⁷ to Mike McKinley’s *Am I Really a Christian?*,⁸ the amount of popular-level interest in the subject indicates something might lurk below the surface. This understanding has led to an alternative narrative for many who have grown up in Southern Baptist life, namely, the salvation many thought they had as children was not theirs until later in life.

Southern Baptists must look in the mirror and ask two important questions at this point: first, is something wrong with their view of conversion? Second, what has led

⁵LifeWay Insights. *Annual Church Profile Statistical*.

⁶One could object that this trend has always been the case and that Baptists have never been stringent on church membership, but that would be inaccurate. In the 1800s the opposite was true. Church attendance would show a small number of members but a higher volume of non-member attendees. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 14.

⁷J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2013).

⁸Mike McKinley, *Am I Really a Christian?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

to such ambiguity regarding salvation among its congregants? At first glance, no straightforward answer presents itself. With problems in so many areas, one wrestles with spotting a connection between them. Proposed solutions vary: some might conclude Southern Baptists assure people of their conversion too quickly without seeing if a person truly understands the gospel. Others might see a certain degree of recklessness with which Southern Baptists grant membership into their congregation. Still others might offer that churches have retained the language of membership while ceasing to view it as anything important enough to accurately update. However, this paper offers an even more fundamental reason.

Thesis and Methodology

I will argue many Southern Baptist churches, while focusing so intently on producing immediate conversions in the past 175 years through revivalist methods, have unknowingly adopted a view of salvation that resembles the Roman Catholic sacramental system. Instead of Christ imputing grace to the believer's account, congregants look for infusions of grace and assurance through two popular revivalistic methods – the sinner's prayer and the altar call.

Others have proposed this same link over the past 175 years – many of which are more recent⁹ but others stretch back to the beginning of the revivalist movement.¹⁰

⁹Two examples are Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 77, and Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82, no. 1 (1985): 111–27.

¹⁰The most notable early instance is the case of John Williamson Nevin, a seminary professor for the German Reformed Church in the mid-1800s. In his tract against the anxious bench, he cited his concern using a parallel of sacramentalism, calling proponents' understanding of the bench as the "the laver of regeneration, the gate of paradise, [and] the womb of the New Jerusalem." John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Chambersburg, PA: The Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844), 76. He argued that even though both the revivalists' and papists' claim that their grace inducing acts do not substitute for Christ, "in both cases the error is practically countenanced and encouraged, that coming to Christ, and the use of an outward form, are in the whole, or at least to some considerable extent, one and the same thing." He cites the only difference between what the revivalists were selling and that of the papists was that the revivalists merely followed a human invention. In Catholicism, the sacrament was a divine command. *Ibid.*, 75.

However, in each documented case, authors use the parallel in passing without much (or any) justification. Does a parallel truly exist between Roman Catholic sacramentalism and Southern Baptist revivalist techniques, or are those comments mere hyperbole?

I believe a relationship does exist and will prove it by looking in two areas. The first is the way Southern Baptists describe their methods. These descriptions find similarity to the way Roman Catholics define the efficacy of their own sacraments. The second area is the way Southern Baptists practice their methods. Their self-referential use drives church members back to performance rather than the finished work of Jesus Christ, similar to the way the sacraments function in Roman Catholic practice. This transformation in understanding has altered the way Southern Baptists view the grace of God in relation to their conversion, creating a widespread confusion among its people. Despite the multitudes of “decisions,” the methods have produced a culture of *conversionism* where many perform these sacred acts believing salvation is found in them even though they show no sign of true conversion.

In order to best examine this claim, I will examine the two of the most popular conversion-aide methods in Southern Baptist life – the sinner’s prayer and the altar call.¹¹ Particular attention will be paid to the development of these methods, from their popularization in and after the Second Great Awakening to their nearly universal use in Southern Baptist churches. After that, I will survey the development and understanding of Roman Catholic sacramentalism from three major figures: Augustine, Peter Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas. The writings of these men are then contrasted with the Southern Baptist perspective. Finally, I will examine how Southern Baptists have used and described the sinner’s prayer and altar call.

¹¹One should note these methods are not limited to Southern Baptists. Methodist, Wesleyan, Presbyterian, non-denominational, Bible Churches and many others make use of these same methods.

Only authoritative voices within the denomination are referenced in order to best represent the common use of these methods. These voices include past SBC and state convention representatives, Southern Baptist mega-church pastors, and publications produced by the SBC and its subsidiaries. Finally, I will make a proposal on the role of the sinner's prayer and altar call in the future of Southern Baptist life.

CHAPTER 2

OLD TIME RELIGION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SINNER'S PRAYER AND THE ALTAR CALL

For those who have grown up in Southern Baptist churches, many view the sinner's prayer and altar call as God-given methods, practiced since the foundation of Christianity. However, if one rewinds history, one will see how these measures are modern methodologies. While aspects or language used in the sinner's prayer and altar call might find parallels in other periods of Christianity, their use has been limited to the past two hundred and fifty years. Two figures stand above all the rest in the development and promotion of these measures: Charles Finney and Billy Graham. While Finney would provide the kind of environment for the sinner's prayer and altar call to thrive, Graham's ministry would ensure the majority of Southern Baptist churches would rely on them in their weekly services.

Charles Finney (1792-1875)

Early America marked a time of great transition in the religious life of the nation. Though young, the country had already experienced great movements of God. Puritan influence and the preaching of the First Great Awakening still echoed in the ears of Americans. Not only had an increasing competition for members developed in churches, but so had the anything-is-possible spirit of the Enlightenment.¹ It was in this environment that Charles Finney first stepped into the pulpit.

¹This idea is widely accepted by many American church historians. For a specific treatment of this issue, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

Finney's foundation for a change. Arguably no other man has had such an impact on the direction of evangelicalism in America than Charles Finney. He accomplished this predominantly through the promotion of his revivals and the methods he championed. Finney, a lawyer by trade, did not come to know the Lord until his early adult years. After his conversion, he wondered why pastors made it so hard for people to come to know the Lord through complicated preaching and drawn out processes for examining conversion. He thought of salvation as a quick process anyone could start at any moment. This understanding contradicted the common views of the time, that conversion happened over a longer period of time accompanied with an extended period of examination.² As Finney began his ministry, he sought to change this belief. But how could he do it? He would have to start by changing people's understanding of conversion.

Finney spent most of his life as an ordained, but nominal, Presbyterian. Finney had no intentions of furthering some of the finer points of Presbyterian doctrine like Original Sin and the moral inability of man.³ Finney called Original Sin

a monstrous and blasphemous dogma, that a holy God is angry with any creature for possessing a nature with which he was sent into being without his knowledge or consent...[Scripture] represents man as to blame, and to be judged and punished only for his deeds. The subject matter of discourse in these texts is such as to demand that we should understand them as not implying, or asserting, that sin is an essential part of our nature.⁴

²Finney called this belief "Old Schoolism" throughout his writings. Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1876), 236.

³In an account from his Memoirs, Finney demonstrated his rejection of many classical Presbyterian doctrines. He recalled the time where he was brought before his presbytery after some successful preaching stints. The presbytery wanted to examine Finney and his qualifications to preach in the Presbyterian church. Finney noted, "Unexpectedly to myself they asked me if I received the Confession of faith of the Presbyterian church. I had not examined it;—that is, the large work, containing the Catechisms and Presbyterian Confession. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for substance of doctrine, so far as I understood it. But I spoke in a way that plainly implied...I did not pretend to know much about it. However, I answered honestly, as I understood it..." (Finney, *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney*, 51). Finney was not unfamiliar with the doctrines they taught. Indeed, he went into the meeting expecting a challenge against his beliefs which contradicted the Presbyterian catechism.

⁴Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1878), 244-45.

Any idea that Adam’s guilt transferred to other humans seemed unfair to Finney. In his reasoning, God could not declare mankind guilty of something that “was sent into being without his knowledge or consent.” Finney’s reasoning came from his belief that sin, when referenced in the Bible, always describes a transgression of God’s law. He therefore questioned, how can a law be broken via inheritance of nature?⁵ While Finney did not recognize it, he slipped into Pelagianism – the ancient heresy which denies original sin. He thought it much more reasonable for each human to take responsibility for their own sin. In lieu of this stance, he saw every human being having the innate ability to follow God’s every command – especially the command to repent and believe in the gospel.⁶ God would not issue commands if man could not keep them.⁷

This belief contributed to Finney’s theory on conversion. He saw no need for the Spirit of God to have any particular influence over the sinner to convert him,⁸ nor to persuade or convict him.⁹ Therefore, the preacher must only “labor with sinners, as a lawyer does with a jury, and upon the same principles of mental philosophy; and the sinner should weigh the arguments, and make up his mind as upon oath and for his

⁵While Finney asks these pointed questions, they often come from an over-simplified definition of sin that does not take into account the multiple ways the Bible speaks of sin – especially sin as an indwelling presence. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), “ἁμαρτία.” BibleWorks.

⁶Before one objects to Finney’s view as just another flavor of Arminianism, Roger Olson clarifies why that assertion is not the case. He notes how Arminius, Wesley, and other classical Arminians affirm the inherited sin of Adam and the need for a “gracious ability” from God. Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 27-28. Finney saw the ability as inherent in human beings, not something needed from God.

⁷Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 325.

⁸Ibid.

⁹This statement does not mean Finney saw no role for the Holy Spirit. He certainly did. The difference lies in the fact that he saw the Spirit as a fan that blows on all men on the earth at all times, instead of a person who comes to individuals and influences them directly. An example of this is from his systematic theology on moral government: “that by the gracious aid of the Holy Spirit which, upon condition of the atonement, God has given to every member of the human family, all men are endowed with a gracious ability to obey God, which now all men possess.” Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology, Embracing Moral Government, The Atonement, Moral and Physical Depravity, Moral, and Gracious Ability, Repentance, Faith, Justification, Sanctification & C.* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1851), 501.

life...”¹⁰ Finney, a former lawyer himself, emphasized how one must merely intellectually persuade of his audience.

New theology and New Measures. Finney had redefined the problem of human sinfulness. No longer was the person in need of a new heart from God; rather, he was to “make a new heart for himself.”¹¹ No longer must a conversion experience be tested over time. Instead conversion needed to occur with immediacy. And no longer is the pastor reliant on the Spirit of God for conversion. Instead the pastor was a lawyer, or a salesman, needing only to convince the sinner to stand up or come forward. However, one cannot redefine a problem of human lostness without also changing its solution. Indeed, Finney discovered the solution to the human problem of sin in the New Measures.

Finney did not call these techniques “New Measures” because he invented them, but because they diverged from the accepted norm of his time. Other evangelists practiced these techniques during the 1800s, with much of its methodological offspring still surviving today. In Finney’s case, the New Measures included the use of the protracted meeting and the anxious bench.

The protracted meeting gathered people from different churches and towns to a campground where they would hear preaching over consecutive days. Services would often start on a Thursday and would have activities throughout the day. Each successive day would begin early in the morning (usually around 5:00 AM), and go deep into the

¹⁰Charles Finney, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Hearts,” in *Sermons on Various Subjects* (New York: S. W. Benedict & Co., 1834), 22.

¹¹This phrase is perhaps Finney’s most memorable throughout his ministerial career. He cites Ezek 13:31, “Make you a new heart and a new spirit, for why will ye die?” Not surprisingly, Finney did not trace the theme of a new heart throughout the rest of the book or he would have noted that this heart could not come from humanity itself. A change in Israel could only be successful when God removed their old heart and God himself gave them a new one – only then would God’s people be able to keep his laws (Ezek 36:26-27).

night.¹² These meetings gained fame for their emotional excitement and crowd response (e.g., loud cries, falling out of one’s seat onto the floor). The protracted meeting provided an atmosphere for the other methods to thrive – specifically the anxious bench.

The anxious bench referred to the rows of seats near the front of whichever area held the revival service. Congregants left these seats unoccupied at the beginning of the service, knowing they would have a specific use after the sermon. Upon conclusion of his message, the pastor would ask the sinner to visibly respond to a requested action in accordance with responding to the gospel.¹³ For example, “If anyone feels concerned for their soul right now, stand up!” At the designated time, those feeling anxious about their salvation (e.g., needing conversion, feeling conviction) would come to the front and sit on the anxious bench.¹⁴ The anxious bench gave the sinner an initial step toward conversion. In this sense, one of the functions of the New Measures was preparatory – to get the sinner to “break away from [his] chains” and give him or her an initial step toward conversion.

By at least 1854, the anxious bench and the area at the front of the stage evolved and become known as the “altar.”¹⁵ Thus around this time, a shift occurred from anxious bench to altar call.¹⁶ With their newfound altar, congregants flooded to the front

¹²Dickson D. Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1946), 81.

¹³Often, two speakers teamed up for these events. One would preach the sermon while the other offered the exhortation for people to come to the front. See Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 120-21.

¹⁴Finney gave a synopsis of how this practice looked: “When a person is seriously troubled in mind, everybody knows there is a powerful tendency to conceal it. When a person is borne down with a sense of his condition, if you can get him willing to have it known, if you can get him to break away from the chains of pride, you have gained an important point towards his conversion...if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything...” Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 225-26.

¹⁵A campground manual from 1854 provides a picture and a legend for setting up a campground. Assuming the author made this diagram for others to understand and follow, he labels the anxious bench and the front area as the “altar.” B. W. Gorham, *Camp Meeting Manual, a Practical Book for the Camp Ground* (Boston: H. V. Degan Publishers, 1854).

¹⁶Murray notes the obscurity around the phrase “altar call.” However, he gives certainty that those who coined the term had a Church of England background. The Church of England calls the front

more than ever. Popularity of this method spread, as did Finney's use of it. He became the most sought-after preacher in the Northeast, taking revival opportunities in large cities such as Philadelphia and New York City. With his newfound Christian celebrity, Finney spread both his influence as well as the New Measures across the country. He popularized them to the extent that most denominations (Baptists included)¹⁷ took notice.¹⁸

Billy Graham (1918-2018)

The years after Finney's ministry marked a transition in popular methods of revivalists. The same measures Finney and other revivalists used ended up spreading throughout the United States. While meeting some resistance along the way, the New Measures ultimately won over many ministers with the promise of results. Evangelists such as D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday began making use of the altar call, even though they did not share all of Finney's beliefs behind it. With Moody and Sunday, decision cards and altar counseling developed, giving evangelists the ability to more accurately deduce how many people had been saved. Moody took these techniques to Europe, while Sunday leaned heavily into moral reform in the United States. Untold numbers came to Christ during their evangelistic events, leading to the spreading influence of the altar call throughout churches. Even newspapers called for churches to adopt their methods.

However, while the altar call grew by word-of-mouth, nothing would change the landscape of religious life in America like *seeing* revival happen. Moody and Sunday

part of the building near the communion table an altar. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 185.

¹⁷The use of "Baptists" in this section is a substitute for Southern Baptists because the distinction between Southern and Northern Baptists was not made until 1845.

¹⁸Ken Keathley disagrees with this assessment. He claims the Sandy Creek Baptists popularized these methods amongst Baptists: "Many may have learned how to give invitations from Finney, but not Baptists." Curiously enough, he never gives evidence for this claim. He only offers a quote describing what Sandy Creek Baptists would do that resembled these same methods. Ken Keathley, "Rescuing the Perishing: A Defense of Giving Invitations," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (2003): 7-8. To say that a figure as large as Finney in American life had no impact on Baptists would be premature. While he is right to argue there is guilt by association in using practices Finney used, he cannot separate these methods in Baptist life from Finney as much as he would like. Finney's disciples spread all over America, and the chances his influences spread to the South are quite high.

always had limitations in their evangelism. One could only preach to however many people could fill a room. But with the invention of the television, this new mode of media gave evangelists an unlimited audience who could now see revival with their own eyes. Thus, the ministry of Billy Graham started at a time packed with promise.

The young Southern Baptist preacher from North Carolina. In the current world of celebrity preachers, Billy Graham still stands as the most well-known of all. Graham was born in North Carolina just over forty years after the death of Charles Finney. While growing up in a Reformed Presbyterian church, Graham did not get saved until he went to a revival at sixteen. His conversion experience became a meaningful marker in his life, as he eventually enrolled at the Florida Bible Institute to become a Baptist minister. Right around this time, Graham took a job as a full-time evangelist with Youth for Christ. He traveled all over the United States, climaxing in the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade.

Seeing the crowds respond to Graham, a Los Angeles media mogul ordered all his newspapers to “puff Graham.”¹⁹ By “puff,” he meant to give Graham the kind of exposure usually reserved for celebrities. From this point onward, Graham’s life would never be the same. A relatively unknown young man from North Carolina had officially become the first celebrity revivalist in the new world of television and media. In doing so, he would redefine the ways churches thought of gospel success.

Graham and his use of the altar call and sinner’s prayer. Graham found fame in large tent revivals as well as in filling sports stadiums with potential converts. Graham nicknamed these events “Crusades.” According to his website, by the time of his death Graham had preached to over 215 million people in 185 countries.²⁰ A crusade was

¹⁹Richard Greene, “Puff Graham.” *Decision Magazine*, April (2018): 38.

²⁰“Billy Graham Biography.” BillyGraham.org, 2019, <https://billygraham.org/about/biographi>

a multi-night (or multi-week) event that consisted of music and Graham's preaching. Graham spoke on a variety of issues, but regardless of the topic, the end of the service always looked the same. He would close the gathering by giving the "invitation." This invitation was no ordinary altar call, but rather functioned as the "holy"²¹ and high point of every service. This call to the front coincided with the congregation singing, "Just As I Am," a song that plucked the heartstrings of thousands as waves of people came to the front.

In calling people to the altar, Graham justified his reasons for urging people to the altar. He would reference Matthew 10:32-33 ("Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father who is in heaven"), encouraging his audience to confess Christ publicly in that moment by meeting him at the altar. This subtle shift turned the altar call from a method to a matter of obedience. All of the sudden, this demonstration gave a level of orthodoxy to the altar call, equating coming forward with what God meant in Matthew 10:32-33.

Although Graham utilized the altar call, he added a certain twist. Men and women now came forward not just for salvation, but for other reasons as well:

Give your life to Christ and make sure he lives in your heart. Some of you will give your life to Christ tonight for the first time. Others of you can come and rededicate your life and say tonight, I am going to surrender my life anew and afresh. Im going to give myself to him.... Many of you are church members and Christians, but you need to rededicate your life to God. You need to promise God that you are going to live the right kind of Christian life. You are going to be the right kind of a Christian.²²

es/billy-graham/.

²¹Graham repeatedly calls this the "holy moment" of the service. See Billy Graham, "Another Road, Another Chance." Billy Graham Evangelistic Association video, 55:02, February 15, 2014, <https://billygraham.org/video/another-road-another-chance>, 49:45-50:00, and Billy Graham, "The Power of the Cross." Billy Graham Evangelistic Association video, 56:00, February 15, 2014, <https://billygraham.org/video/the-power-of-the-cross/>, 51:20-51:30.

²²Billy Graham, "How to Live the Christian Life." Billy Graham Evangelistic Association video, 53:52, February 15, 2014, <https://billygraham.org/video/how-to-live-the-christian-life-2/>, 48:50-

One notices the change in the language. Not only did Graham bid the lost to come to the front, but he also called those who sought to “rededicate” their lives. Graham popularized this term, often describing those who had responded to the altar call earlier in life but drifted back into worldliness. It functioned as a way of confessing sin, but only generically. This new invitation category worked together with the moral resolve on the part of a person to “live the right kind of Christian life.” All of the sudden, the altar opened not only for the lost, but for struggling Christians as well.

However, Graham would not stop there. He later urged Christian doubters to come to the altar. If an ounce of doubt existed in the mind of the believer over their salvation, he would call them to the front to find the assurance they needed. Graham often strolled into the mind of his listeners, saying, “I want to know when I leave this stadium that God has forgiven me, that Christ is with me, and that Im going to heaven. ’ If you have a doubt in your mind, dont leave this stadium until youve settled it. ”²³ Notice Graham’s assumption about coming forward – it “settles” or “seals” whatever action the person performed.²⁴ Graham never defined exactly what he meant by “settled it.” Using the context of his words, it implies that coming forward demonstrates a proof of repentance.

This “settling” does not mean Graham’s counselors waited at the altar with a camera and a t-shirt, giving out salvation souvenirs to those who came to the altar. Rather, by making a decision in front of a whole stadium, Graham assumed a person was more willingly keep his commitment to God. Thus, when a person came to the altar, it

50:30.

²³Billy Graham, “How to Live the Christian Life,” 51:30-52:30.

²⁴Graham used the word “seal” and “settle” as synonyms. See Billy Graham, “Time to Come Home.” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association video, 51:10, February 15, 2014, <https://billygraham.org/video/time-to-come-home>, 42:30-43:30.

constituted conclusive evidence that a person had been born again. After all, they had taken a stand in front of thousands of people, settling their business with God.

Graham's most lasting contribution came in the development of the sinner's prayer. Graham used the sinner's prayer in order to help lost people in the process of conversion. No official sinner's prayer exists, but most versions sound like this:

Dear God, I know that Jesus is Your Son, and that He died on the cross and was raised from the dead. I know I have sinned and need forgiveness. I am willing to turn from my sins and receive Jesus as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for saving me. In Jesus' name. Amen.²⁵

Graham made great use of this in his ministry according to his associates,²⁶ even incorporating its language into his invitations. Graham stated he does not know where he got the prayer, but remembers using it all the way back in his Bible college days.²⁷

Graham used the sinner's prayer in conjunction with the altar call, training counselors at the front to pray it with potential converts. Whenever a person prayed that prayer and had a genuine spirit about him or her, that person was thought to have experienced salvation.

The use of the sinner's prayer on television and its results caused a monumental shift in Baptist churches. Graham, now the poster boy of Southern Baptists,²⁸ revolutionized the way Southern Baptists spoke of conversion and practiced their liturgy. Soon one could walk into almost any Southern Baptist church and spot the same invitation style Graham used at the end of the service. In a sense, each Southern Baptist congregation could experience the same miracles they saw on Graham's television appearances – however, now those miracles happened every Sunday morning.

²⁵*Do You Know for Certain That You Have Eternal Life and That You Will Go to Heaven When You Die?* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2004), 13.

²⁶David Lynn Bell, "Tracts to Christ: An Evaluation of American Gospel Tracts" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 56-57.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸Graham however did have his critics – many criticized him for having Catholics and other non-orthodox religious leaders on stage during his crusades.

CHAPTER 3
ROMAN CATHOLIC SACRAMENTALISM THROUGH
THE AGES: THREE MAJOR FIGURES

In order to make a fair assessment on whether or not many Southern Baptist churches have adopted an understanding of grace similar to Roman Catholic sacramentalism, one needs a brief sketch of the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments. What are sacraments and from where did they come?²⁹

The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion* (“mystery”).³⁰ While the word conveys the idea of something hidden or numinous, the church did not think of the sacraments in that way. Mysteries in the early church referred to the practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper,³¹ but in the third century, the Latin word *sacramentum* was inserted. This substitution helped avoid any kind of confusion with the *mysterion* of pagan cultic rites. As with many practices in the early church, most Christians did not take time to explain them, but instead assumed their meaning. Over the next thousand years, a theology of the sacraments developed. Church leaders formalized these into creeds and catechisms. Three men in particular provide the foundation of thought regarding the sacraments, each contributing to the Catholic sacramental understanding: Augustine of Hippo, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas.

²⁹Because of the differing schools of Roman Catholic thought, the answer is not straightforward. However, when discussing the Catholic understanding of the sacraments, it will be done from the Thomist tradition.

³⁰See 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:4, 5:32; Col 1:26, 2:2, 4:3; and 1 Tim 3:16.

³¹“The Didache,” ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox, trans. by M. B. Riddle, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), xii, ix.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

At the time of Augustine's birth, the Roman Empire had already changed its attitude towards Christianity. It no longer functioned as the persecutor, but now worked as its proponent. More than ever, theologians started rising to prominent places in society. Few figures seemed less likely to find a path to ministerial fame than Augustine. In his younger years, Augustine ran headlong into all kinds of immorality. However, his frustrations ultimately led him to turn to Christianity.

From the time of his conversion at thirty-one, Augustine taught on many Christian doctrines. His manual *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* comes closest to defining the sacraments. Here Augustine writes how sacraments are “[visible] signs of divine [or sacred] things.”³² While that description seems like a simple and airtight definition, one finds broad applications even within Augustine's own writings. If the sacraments were visible signs of sacred realities (specifically those acts which reflected or prefigured the cross work of Christ), then it makes sense that Augustine saw sacraments littered throughout the pages of Scripture. For Augustine, the question was not “what was a sacrament?” but rather “what was not a sacrament?” Even throughout the OT, he attributed sacramental significance to countless ceremonies or salvific events. Augustine sees sacraments even in events that do not appear to have any sacramental quality. For example, in his commentary on the creation of the woman in Genesis 2, he argues that the main point of her creation was to “assuredly [point] to mysteries and sacraments.”³³ However, while Augustine did not see a limit on the number of sacraments, he did see them separated into two categories. The thoughtful theologian

³²Augustine, “On Catechizing the Uninstructed,” ed. Philip Schaff, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887), 26.50.

³³Augustine, “On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis,” ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 83.

drew a sharp distinction between the sacraments in the New Covenant versus the ones in the Old Covenant.

He believed the New Covenant sacraments were “greater in efficacy, more beneficial in their use, easier in their performance, and fewer in number than their OT counterpart(s).”³⁴ If one thought that Augustine saw the sacraments as merely signs, one must notice his reference to their “efficacy.” Rather, Augustine indicated the performance of the sacraments accomplished something in the very act itself. So, in one sense, the sacraments functioned as symbols, but in another sense, a divine reality existed underneath those symbols.

From here, Augustine developed his famous classification of sacraments: *sacramentum tantum* (the sign by itself), *res tantum* (the reality the sign represented), and *sacramentum et res* (the sign and the reality together). Therefore in the case of water baptism, Augustine would say the following:

Table 1. Sacrament: Water baptism

<i>Sacramentum Tantum</i>	<i>Res Tantum</i>	<i>Sacramentum et Res</i>
The actual act of a person being submerged in water (the sign by itself)	The baptized person being washed by Christ in the baptismal waters (the reality the sign signifies)	The spiritual washing given through the baptism of the individual through the physical act of water baptism

In the case of baptism, the *sacramentum tantum* is the actual act of baptism, the priest submerging the baptizee in water. The *res tantum* is that which the sign signifies, or one might say the spiritual reality behind the sacrament. In this case, the burial of the person with Christ into a watery grave and rising to new life. The *sacramentum et res* is the two

³⁴Augustine, “Against Faustus,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol.4, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Richard Stothert (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887). XIX.13.

realities brought together. The priest would say the baptismal formula (“I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”) resulting in Holy Spirit’s stirring the waters, transforming the physical matter into a watery grave. Here the baptized person receives grace in his burial with Jesus Christ. Augustine hints at a certain effectiveness to the act, but that left a question: what actually caused the ritual to have its effect? Was it the holiness of the priest that brought about the desired end, or was it the act itself? It took the Donatist controversy for Augustine to finally answer that question.

The Donatists were those who considered themselves the faithful remnant who did not recant their Christian beliefs under the persecution of the Roman emperor Diocletian. After these persecutions ended, the church encountered a crisis since so many of its ministers had renounced Christianity during their suffering. Now that these ministers had repented, could churches re-instate them with the ability to administer the sacraments? The Donatists said, “no!” They argued the stumbling of these Christian clergymen would taint the sacraments and withhold their efficacy. Augustine countered, arguing the sacraments function *ex opere operato*. This understanding assumed the efficacy of each sacrament depended not on the holiness of the clergymen (*ex opere operantis*), but rather on the performance of the sacrament itself. Therefore, a sacraments performance (*sacramentum tantum*) necessarily brought about the intended result of grace in the life of the person (*sacramentum et res*).

Peter Lombard (1100-1160)

Even while Augustine wrote volumes on doctrines like the sacraments, no systematic treatment on them existed until almost seven-hundred years later with the French theologian Peter Lombard. Lombard was born in northwest Italy before leaving the country to study in Paris. Lombard later became the bishop of Paris as well as a prolific writer.

Even in Lombard's writings, one can see a distinctive Augustinian flavor:

“What is properly called a ‘sacrament’ that which is a sign of God’s grace and the form of invisible grace in such a way as to carry its image and to be its cause. Therefore, God instituted the sacraments not only for the sake of signifying, but of sanctifying as well.”³⁵

In the first clause of his definition, Lombard has an almost identical understanding of a sacrament as Augustine, the main difference being Augustine’s “sacred thing” is now identified as “grace.”

However, Lombard continued defining where Augustine stopped. He said this sign of grace does two things: it carries the image of the grace and functions as its cause. In regard to the first aspect, the sacrament symbolizes the divine act which grace brought in the life of the partaker. To go back to baptism, the sign carries the divine image because water contains a natural idea of washing. Therefore, water functions as a fitting symbol for God to use because it represents cleansing from sin. The second function of the sacrament was instrumental, causing grace to flow to the believer. This instrumentality meant, by the sacrament’s performance, God initiated the process of sending his grace to the believer. By analogy, the sacrament functioned as the lever by which the church could commence God’s giving of grace. After all, Lombard reasoned that God had obligated himself to act in accordance with these signs. Far from any kind of enchantment, the priest’s words would cause the Holy Spirit to transform mere elements like water and bread into grace-imparting instruments. This reality gave importance to the Catholic Church, as it was the one in charge of dispensing the grace.

As much as Lombard agreed with Augustine, they separated on the number of sacraments. Eventually Lombard proposed the number seven:

Let us now approach the sacraments of the New Law, which are baptism, confirmation, the bread of benediction, penitence, extreme unction, ordination [and]

³⁵Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, book III, dist. 1, chap. 4, no. 2, 2:33. trans. Guilio Silano. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2007-2010.

marriage. Some of these offer a remedy for sin and confer helping grace, like baptism; others are just for remedy, like marriage; others strengthen us through grace and virtue, like the Eucharist and ordination.³⁶

So Lombard keeps the Augustinian distinction of Old and New Covenant sacraments. He specifically references these as sacraments of the “New Law.” However, he gives comprehensive list of these: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist (bread of benediction), penance (penitence), extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. While all seven allow grace to flow to the believer, Lombard suggests some variance between the kind of grace each bestows. For example, baptism provides a kind of “helping grace,” where marriage seems to provide a lesser amount of grace and is just a “remedy” (for lust). So, within these seven sacraments, some distinction exists in the kind of grace each sacrament provides. One cannot underestimate the importance of this list. The Catholic Church holds to the same seven in their official catechism.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

As influential as Augustine and Lombard are in Roman Catholicism, one figure towers above the rest in sacramental dogmatics: Thomas Aquinas. At nineteen years old, Thomas entered the Dominican order where he began a more in-depth study of theology. He later attended to Lombard’s *alma mater*, the University of Paris. Aquinas gained fame for his ability to think and write at a level much higher than his peers. Part of his teaching legacy involved his writings on the sacraments.

Aquinas viewed the sacraments as a unified organism which caused both the healing and deification of the individual.³⁷ He saw three major reasons God gave sacraments to human beings:

³⁶Ibid., dist. 2, chap. 1, no 1, 2:239-40.

³⁷For an excellent overview on this concept, see Matthew Levering, “Aquinas on the Sacramental Life,” in *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb and David A. Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 81–99. Note the way “deification” here does not mean that human beings become God, but rather they are formed more into his image.

The first is taken from the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible... Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments. The second reason is taken from the state of man who in sinning subjected himself by his affections to corporeal things. Now the healing remedy should be given to a man so as to reach the part affected by disease... for if man were offered spiritual things without a veil, his mind being taken up with the material world would be unable to apply itself to them. The third reason is taken from the fact that man is prone to direct his activity chiefly towards material things. Lest, therefore, it should be too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions, bodily exercise was offered to him in the sacraments, by which he might be trained to avoid superstitious practices, consisting in the worship of demons, and all manner of harmful action, consisting in sinful deeds.³⁸

Aquinas saw the first reason as rooted in human nature. Because humans are embodied beings, they need created (or as he says “corporeal and sensible”) things to lead them to spiritual realities. This belief functions as a hallmark in Catholic theology; God not only uses natural things, but humanity needs God to use natural things. Without them, they cannot understand the grace of God. Thus, the transference of grace through the sacraments *requires* some created substance. Gregg Allison calls this idea the nature-grace distinction of Roman Catholic theology – that God must use natural substances to impart grace.³⁹ Thus, in Aquinas’s thought, God has no other option but to use natural things to impart grace.

Aquinas gives his second reason as corresponding to humanity’s fallenness. Because the human body is fallen,⁴⁰ God would exercise a felicitous means of justifying humanity. In other words, he gives them a cure specifically related to their disease. Since the natural body poses the problem, he gives the human being a solution founded in

³⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part III, question 46, chap. 4, answer 1. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 4 parts (New York: Benzinger Brother, 1947).

³⁹For his comments on this concept and a corresponding evangelical perspective, see Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2014), 46-56.

⁴⁰Aquinas relied on the Aristotelian distinction where the human body was the source of the problem. The mind was free from original sin, but the body and its lusts dragged the whole human downward into sin.

nature. God uses elements that human beings can touch and feel to distribute grace. In this way, God attacks the human problem of sin at the level the sin affects them.

Aquinas's last reason finds its reasoning in God's protection of the believer from superstition. God would give humanity physical means of grace so that man would not succumb to the temptation of idolatry. In many ways, because man can see the sacraments, they protect his heart from getting distracted by the spiritual error of false faiths.

In the above three reasons, one can see how Aquinas viewed the sacraments as necessary instruments to bring grace to the believer. The performance of these sacraments ultimately make the person whole, justifying him in the sight of God. It is in this area many notice the major Protestant/Catholic divide on the issue of justification. Protestants like Luther would later say Christ *imputes* his righteousness to the believer. Imputation, an accounting term, means for one to take the balance from one account and transfer it to another account. This transfer was not dependent on any physical action or natural material. Faith functions as the only instrument in imputation. Contrary to this, Aquinas saw righteousness in terms of *infusion*. Thus, righteousness gets infused into the believer *through* the material world. Therefore, God needed something else to serve as an instrument besides faith, hence the need for the sacraments.

Roman Catholicism Today

The overview of the writings of Augustine, Lombard and Aquinas illuminate the Roman Catholic understanding on the sacraments. One cannot underestimate the contributions of these men – for the Catholic Church still leans on them today. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁴¹ the official statement released by Rome detailing the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, describe the sacraments in the following light:

⁴¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1995).

Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work....This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the actions being performed"), i.e. by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or by the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them. The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.⁴²

In this official statement, the reader hears the echoes of these three theologians. The sacraments "confer the grace they signify," they are "efficacious" because Christ works in them, and they work "*ex opere operato*." These descriptions pertain to every sacrament in Catholicism. Hence the importance of a sacrament like the eucharist – by partaking of the bread and wine, one eats the actual flesh and blood of Christ, infusing them with the grace to continue in their Christian walk. By partaking in the sacrament, God guarantees grace to the believer and gives them what they need to stay among the faithful.

Rome does not depart from the stances of Augustine, Lombard and Aquinas on the sacraments. Instead, it traces the doctrine of these men to their logical conclusions. In the case of Aquinas, the Church states how the sacraments "are necessary for salvation." This statement reminds one of the nature-grace distinction mentioned earlier and how the sacraments remain necessary for the salvation of humanity. For God must use natural instruments to impart faith since faith alone cannot function as the only instrument. This nature-grace distinction functions as the main marker of sacramental theology.

With a clear picture of Roman Catholic sacramental theology, it can now be contrasted with Southern Baptists' view regarding of the sacraments. In doing so, the understanding will equip a person to examine if hints of sacramentalism are present in Southern Baptists' revivalist methods.

⁴²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1127-29.

CHAPTER 4

A NOT-SO-SUBTLE DIFFERENCE: WHAT BAPTISTS BELIEVE AND WHAT BAPTISTS ACTUALLY SAY

From the last section, we traced the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments specifically through three major figures and their contributions to sacramental theology. The sacraments in one sense functioned as signs that point to divine realities. However, the Roman Catholic understanding finds its distinction in how it views grace. God infuses grace to a person through the performance of the sacraments. Thus, the sacraments are signs, but they are not merely signs. They act as instruments which bring the very grace they symbolize. These instruments are needed because of the nature-grace distinction found within Roman Catholic theology – the belief that God needs to use nature to bring grace to human beings.

But what do Southern Baptists believe about the sacraments? In one sense, a person will notice Baptists never speak of them. The word “sacrament” almost never finds its way into most Baptist liturgies, but the reason for this needs unpacking.

What Southern Baptists Believe: Doctrinal Stances on the Sacraments

Comparing what Baptists and Roman Catholics believe about the sacraments brings out two problems: the first challenge comes in the arrangement of Southern Baptist polity when compared with that of Rome. The Catholic Church has a certain hierarchy of individual parishes, priests, bishops, cardinals, and finally the Pope. The entire structure functions as an organism, with each parish part of and accountable to the greater whole of the Catholic Church.

The same is not true for Southern Baptists. Southern Baptist churches view themselves as autonomous and democratic, having no formalized commitment to one another or to any higher structure than itself.⁴³ The ramifications of this structure means Southern Baptist churches partner with one another solely on a voluntary basis. Based on this kind of polity, no official doctrinal stance on the sacraments exists. In addition, Southern Baptists have no voice or author who can speak on behalf of all Southern Baptists, like the Pope in Roman Catholicism. The *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M) would represent the closest equivalent.⁴⁴ However, when one reads the 2000 version of the BF&M, they will notice an absence of sacramental terminology:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ.... Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believers faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believers death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lords Supper. The Lords Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.⁴⁵

When referencing baptism and the Lord's Supper, the BF&M opts for the language of "ordinance." This omission was no accident. Those who helped pen the BF&M could have easily inserted the word "sacrament."

Historically, Protestants and Catholics alike have utilized the word "sacrament" after the Reformation – even those who find themselves at complete odds with Roman Catholicism's view of grace. And yet, here you have an intentional decision

⁴³*The Baptist Faith and Message*. (Nashville, TN: Lifeway, 2000), vi.

⁴⁴Even the BF&M is not a systematic treatment of beliefs. Where in Roman Catholicism, the church has *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which details where the Catholic Church stands on issues, the BF&M takes broad stances. As a comparison, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* draws lines, saying, "This is exactly what we believe about x." The BF&M draws circles, saying, "You can still be a Southern Baptist church if you believe these minimums."

⁴⁵*The Baptist Faith and Message*. (Nashville, TN: Lifeway, 2000), vi-vii.

to avoid it. The reason? Because Southern Baptists wanted to distinguish themselves from Roman Catholicism's view of sacramental efficacy. In a commentary on the BF&M released by Southern Baptists' flagship seminary, Brad Waggoner clarifies the reason for the word's absence:

Based on this and other passages, Southern Baptist scholars have strongly held that baptism is a public expression of an inward reality of having been unified with Christ. His death represents our death to self, and his resurrection represents our having been raised new creatures who are no longer under the curse and enslavement of sin. In other words, we have viewed baptism as an act of obedience (which is why we refer to it is an ordinance) and as a symbolic event (which is why we have rejected the term sacrament). The Southern Baptist understanding of baptism stands in conflict with the official doctrine of traditional Roman Catholicism and even some Protestant groups who teach that in the act of baptism there is the impartation of grace *ex opere operato*, without preexisting faith. This belief that grace is imparted to the subject of baptism is why it is called a sacrament.... As Southern Baptists we have historically rejected any notion of sacramental grace in baptism as this idea runs counter to the clear doctrine of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.⁴⁶

According to Waggoner, the BF&M avoided using "sacrament" because of the theological baggage associated with it. He notes the term has an idea of infusing grace to the person receiving it (*ex opere operato*), therefore the authors of the BF&M opted for "ordinance."

Waggoner never explained what he meant by "ordinance," but Peter Gentry – the author in this next article in the BF&M exposition – defines it as a "symbolic [act] which [sets] forth primary facts of the Christian faith and [is] obligatory for all who believe in Jesus Christ."⁴⁷ He also gives the qualifiers for what constitutes an ordinance. First, an ordinance must be commanded by the Lord in the Gospels. Second, it must be passed on to the apostles as seen in the letters to the churches. Third, it must be practiced

⁴⁶Brad Waggoner, "Baptism, BF&M Article 7a," in *An Exposition from the Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Towers (2001): 24, <http://d3pi8hptl0qhh4.cloudfront.net/documents/bfmexposition.pdf>.

⁴⁷Peter Gentry, "The Lord's Supper, BF&M Article 7b," in *An Exposition from the Faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Towers (2001): 24, <http://d3pi8hptl0qhh4.cloudfront.net/documents/bfmexposition.pdf>.

by the early church and recorded in Acts.⁴⁸ This statement by Gentry brings the Southern Baptist view into focus. The ordinances are limited to “symbolic acts” that reflect the salvation God has accomplished in history.

With its rejection of *ex opere operato* and its heavy emphasis on symbolism (both within the commentary and in the BF&M itself), the pre-dominant Southern Baptist view most closely resembles the theory of sixteenth-century theologian Ulrich Zwingli – the memorialist view.⁴⁹ In this view, the ordinances functioned as symbols and have no efficacy in themselves. In a sense, God uses them as object lessons which reflect what he has done in the past. When someone performs the ordinance, they recall the salvation God accomplished through the cross and vicariously look forward to the final salvation he will bring in the future.

The second interesting aspect of the above stance only appears when one compares it with the 1925 version of the BF&M: “A church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ.”⁵⁰ The 2000 edition adds the word “two.”⁵¹ Again, Southern Baptists wanted to make a subtle statement about their antipathy towards even the idea of sacraments. They purposely place themselves at odds with Roman Catholicism, claiming only two ordinances and not seven sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

⁴⁸Gentry, “The Lord’s Supper,” 24.

⁴⁹The other two main views on the Lord’s Supper are spiritual presence and consubstantiation. For a comparison of these views, in addition to the memorialist and transubstantiation understanding, see Russell D. Moore et al., *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁵⁰*The Baptist Faith and Message*. (Nashville, TN: Lifeway, 1925), xii.

⁵¹The change was originally made in the 1963 version. *The Baptist Faith and Message*. (Nashville, TN: Lifeway, 1963).

What Southern Baptists Say: Hints of Sacramentalism in Revivalist Methods

With such contrasting views on the sacraments/ordinances, one can see the divide between Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists. Even in the language of how they describe the sacraments, Southern Baptists traditionally show an antagonism toward any kind of sacramental understanding. However, with such a tacit denial of the sacraments, could the denomination that so strongly denies their efficacious reality practice something similar, just with differing instrumentality?

This question leads one to examine Southern Baptists' use of the sinner's prayer and the altar call. The best place to begin such an examination is by looking at the language of those who promote these methods. These references will include sermons, books, evangelism-aide material, and other popular level resources. Several reasons call for the use of popular level resources instead of more scholarly works. First, they provide insight into what the majority of Southern Baptist churches are saying, since these materials are purchased and re-distributed by those churches to their staff and members.

Second, because of the autonomy of each church, not every congregation falls completely in line with the BF&M. The resources examined were produced to help churches, but the authors wrote them to sell to the broadest audiences, including churches that might have disagreement with areas of the BF&M.

Third, these materials help because of their colloquial verbiage. If one found a sacramental understanding in Southern Baptist methods, it would show up in these materials before it would ever appear in a doctrinal statement. In formal theological statements, organizations purposefully distinguish themselves from what they do not (or should not) believe. One would never find any hints of sacramentalism there. Thus, in viewing the colloquial ways Southern Baptists speak of the sinner's prayer and the altar call, one will see the assumptions that undergird these two methods.

Before exploring the issue, one must stress an important caveat: neither the sinner's prayer nor the altar call are inherently wrong, sinful, deceiving, or sacramental in

themselves. The sinner's prayer has nothing in it that denotes it as necessarily "unbiblical." Likewise, one cannot condemn a person for calling congregants to the front of a stage. One does not necessarily have to view these acts as sacramental, but herein lies the claim of this paper: although these two practices do not *have* to be understood sacramentally, the way many speak of them often displays a level of sacramentalism. Large numbers of people stand for and against the use of these means in the life of Southern Baptists, and people on both sides have either marginalized, misunderstood, or even insulted the other in an embarrassing fashion.⁵² So what follows will not add to the theological mudslinging, but will simply raise awareness and offer a call for change.

The language of sacrament. So much of the modern use of these two revivalist methods trace back to a healthy desire for evangelism: churches desiring to train congregants to share their faith on a regular basis. This training often has happened through denomination-sponsored materials distributed to the 40,000 churches associated with the SBC. Two of the more popular materials used in the past twenty years are the *Do You Know for Certain That You Have Eternal Life And That You Will Go to Heaven When You Die?*⁵³ tract and *The Net*⁵⁴ discipleship guide. Both are produced by the North

⁵²David Engelsma provides an example on one end when he says the altar call is "the most atrocious abomination before God and man." David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1994), 125. An example a non-offensive mischaracterization of the other view point comes from Steve Gaines. He implies from his thoughts on the sinner's prayer that those who reject the use of the sinner's prayer believe God's grace can hit someone like a "bolt of grace." His implication is that someone can be saved without being exposed to the gospel or even thinking about the gospel. That is a mischaracterization of the Reformed viewpoint. To be fair to Gaines, he was referencing a quote from Louie Giglio who used a poor choice of words in describing a conversion experience. See Steve Gaines, "Is the Sinner's Prayer Biblical?," (lecture, at The John 3:16 Conference, Atlanta, GA, 2013, 38:00-45:00. Gaines preached this same lecture at his own church, although with some variation. Steve Gaines, "Is the Sinner's Prayer Biblical?," Youtube video, 53:58, April 24, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9f mVdGr7t4>. In this clip, he clarifies and elaborates on items he mentioned in the conference. Any future references to the first lecture will be *Sinner's Prayer Atlanta* while the latter lecture will be *Sinner's Prayer Memphis*.

⁵³*Do You Know for Certain That You Have Eternal Life and That You Will Go to Heaven When You Die?* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2004). For the sake of brevity, this tract will be referred to as "*Eternal Life*."

⁵⁴*The Net: Evangelism for the 21st Century*, Mentor Handbook (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2000). Future citations will be abbreviated "*The Net*."

American Mission Board (NAMB), an extension of the SBC that seeks to plant and revitalize churches in North America.

The *Eternal Life* tract, while one of many options, remains the most popular Southern Baptist-produced tract in history.⁵⁵ Tracts are illustrated booklets often less than thirty pages designed to help Christians share their faith with others. These small works often contain a comprehensive gospel presentation by discussing some major tenants of Christianity.⁵⁶

Because of their ease of use, Southern Baptist churches have a long history of tract ministry. But how does the *Eternal Life* tract describe the sinner's prayer in its own words, and does it attribute any efficacy to the prayer itself? Where the tract calls for a response, it tells of a person's need to repent of their sin and then asks three questions: "Does what you have been reading make sense to you? Is there any reason you would not be willing to receive God's gift of eternal life? Are you willing to place your faith in Jesus Christ now and turn from your sin?"⁵⁷ It then gives a partial citation of Romans 10:13 ("For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'") followed by telling the lost individual "you need to ask the Lord Jesus to save you" by praying the sinner's prayer.⁵⁸

A couple of things to note at this point: first, the tract assumes the sinner's prayer constitutes a valid way to "call on the name of the Lord." This statement is re-

⁵⁵David Lynn Bell, "Tracts to Christ: An Evaluation of American Gospel Tracts" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 8-10. Bell cites that by 2004, the tract had sold over 25 million copies. That number would make it the fourth-best selling tract all-time behind *The Four Spiritual Laws* (2.5 billion as of 2004), *Steps to Peace With God* (see Bell's problem with calculating the exact number), and *This Was Your Life* (100 million as of 2004).

⁵⁶Most modern tracts have the following content in varying orders: (1) God is holy, but loves mankind, (2) mankind is sinful, (3) man's sinfulness is a problem when he tries to stand before a holy God, (4) Jesus Christ is the only answer for human sinfulness, (5) mankind's need to respond to God's gift of salvation, (6) a call for the person to accept this free gift in praying the sinner's prayer.

⁵⁷*Eternal Life*, 12.

⁵⁸*Eternal Life*, 12-13.

affirmed on the next page when the tract tells the reader to “*Call on the name of the Lord* (emphasis mine), in repentance and faith, using these or similar words of your own; and Jesus *will* become your Savior and Lord.”⁵⁹ Secondly, the tract implies the prayer results in the salvation of the one who prays it. The next paragraph confirms this with the heading, “Welcome to the family of God,” and then explains, “if you sincerely prayed this prayer, you have just made the most important decision of your life. *You can be sure you are saved and have eternal life* (emphasis mine).”⁶⁰ To accompany its claim, the tract issues the reader an “eternal life birth certificate” to assure the person of their born-again status.⁶¹

Dealing with the first assumption, Steve Gaines is among those who make use of the sinner’s prayer and accept it as an instrument to call on the name of the Lord based on Romans 10:9-13. Gaines, pastor of the megachurch Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and the 2016 president of the SBC, gave the following commentary at the John 3:16 Conference in 2013:

You see, a veteran Senior Pastor understands the wisdom of using a sinner’s prayer. Over the past 30 years, I’ve been a Senior Pastor...and I’ve often talked with many who thought they were saved...but eventually they came to believe they weren’t really saved.... I’ve led them to do what they needed to do.... I led them to repent, believe, and trust in Jesus, and call upon his name. But never once...did I belittle the method of calling on the name of the Lord using a sinner’s prayer as the reason that they really didn’t get saved at an early age.⁶²

Gaines makes it clear the sinner’s prayer works as a valid instrument of calling on the name of the Lord. He uses the example of congregants he counseled who had concluded they were not saved when they first prayed the sinner’s prayer. Gaines saw it as his pastoral duty to have them “call on the name of the Lord” again⁶³ by using the sinner’s

⁵⁹Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 20.

⁶²Gaines, *Sinner’s Prayer Atlanta*, 25:15-26:19.

⁶³Gaines would likely argue he does not lead them to call on the name of the Lord *again*. In all

prayer, highlighting as well that a person cannot get saved without praying it (or something like it).⁶⁴

John F. Hart, a professor at Moody Bible Institute, writing in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, submitted an article in 1999 named “Why Confess Christ: The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9-10.”⁶⁵ He examines not just Romans 10:9-10, but also the whole of chapter 10 including verse 13. In it, he persuasively argues how these verses cannot mean what sinner’s prayer proponents claim it means (i.e. that the prayer is an instrument by which God saves a person). His argument stems from three major points among others. First, other parts of the Bible, and even Romans itself, remain silent on the issue. This argument might seem based on silence, but with something so crucial, would it not make sense for Paul to mention it somewhere else? Looking at the Gospel of John, we see how faith saves a person apart from making any reference to confessing Christ.⁶⁶ John even specifically describes a person who knew God, but because of fear did not “confess” openly (John 12:42). Paul also says nothing about it in the section on justification in Romans 3-5, nor does he mention it the rest of the book. Second, when Paul uses the word “salvation” (σώζω) in Romans, it never references salvation from God’s wrath in hell. Paul typically uses “justification” (δικαιοσύνη) for that concept.

fairness, he would claim something faulty happened in the first prayer (either they did not understand something about the gospel, or they did not genuinely pray the prayer). I tried reaching out to Dr. Gaines so that he could read this paper and clarify his comments (and any other areas where I might have misunderstood him), but his current ministry schedule graciously forced him to decline the offer.

⁶⁴Gaines elaborates on this statement later in his message when he lays out the things one must do to be saved. He concludes a person must follow a four-step process to be saved. First, one must be “exposed to the gospel,” second, one must “repent of...sin,” third, one must “believe in Jesus,” and four, one must “receive Jesus as Lord and Savior by calling on His name in prayer – can’t get saved if you don’t” (Gaines, *Sinner’s Prayer Atlanta*, 42:03-42:20).

⁶⁵John F. Hart, “Why Confess Christ: The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9-10,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 12, no. 23 (1999): 3-35.

⁶⁶Again, this observation is not to say those who use the sinner’s prayer reject the idea that a person is saved by faith.

Instead, he uses salvation to describe God’s deliverance from the present effects of sin⁶⁷ or in the way most Christians think of the term “glorification.”

One can find an example of this at the end of the book. Paul states “for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed” (Rom 13:11). He refers not to justification in this use of σῶζω, since it cannot simultaneously be “nearer” to a person and yet be a reality. In other words, Paul sees σῶζω as the final day of salvation in Romans, not the moment a person believes in the gospel and is justified by Christ’s death.

Thirdly, Hart shows “calling on the name of the Lord” describes something believers do in their walk with God. Hart’s data proves true in every use of the phrase and its related expressions (e.g., “calling on the Lord,” “calling on his name,” etc.) in the OT – from where Paul gets the Romans 10:13 citation. Abraham called on the name of the Lord years after God counted his faith as righteousness (Gen 26:25). Elijah called on the name of the Lord (1 Kgs 18:24-27). The Psalmist calls on the name of the Lord (especially Psalm 80:18 which implies God must first breathe life into him before calling on the name of the Lord is a possibility).⁶⁸

Hart shares the findings of Hodges and Dillow as well, who examined all the NT uses of calling on the name of the Lord. They found the same results – calling on the name of the Lord is an action done by Christians after their salvation, not by non-Christians who desire salvation.⁶⁹ Hart demonstrates how even Romans 10:14 rules out any kind of sinner’s prayer in verse 13. Paul asks, “How can they call on him whom they

⁶⁷See Rom 1:16 and how it links to the *present* wrath God pours out in the following verses.

⁶⁸Hart, “Why Confess Christ?,” 19.

⁶⁹Ibid., 20-21.

have not believed?” The presumed answer Paul infers, “They cannot!” Paul concludes that a person must be a believer before he can call on the name of the Lord.⁷⁰

Certainly some would object to Hart’s point with fervency. After all, can one illustrate salvation any better than a sinner on his knees calling out to the Lord for mercy? That kind of image is both accurate and appropriate, but it does not take into account the full weight of Hart’s argument. In expositional hermeneutics, words mean what they meant to the original audience.⁷¹ When a person raised in the revivalist culture hears “call on the name of the Lord,” they automatically picture a lost person crying out for salvation in the sinner’s prayer. But Hart argues when a person in the church at Rome read this letter for the first time, they did not have this image in their mind. Instead, the phrase signaled God coming to the aid of the Christian, thus helping them to live a godly life in times of persecution, struggle, and doubt.⁷²

Indeed, no accounts in the entire Bible tell of an unbeliever “calling on the name of the Lord” for salvation. The phrase is always used in conjunction with someone who has known the Lord for an extended time. While this fact does not preclude a person crying out to the Lord for mercy and asking for salvation, the words Paul wrote can only mean what they meant at the time of his writing and in the context of the entire canon of Scripture. In short, Romans 10:13 references believers, not unbelievers. Therefore, to take a verse addressed to believers and instead use it to claim the sinner’s prayer is a

⁷⁰Hart, “Why Confess Christ?,” 18.

⁷¹This statement does not take into account double-fulfillment, where God works in similar ways and gives past events additional significance. The following use of “calling on the name of the Lord” does not qualify for double-fulfillment.

⁷²Hart cites how the word is used in the NT based on the findings of Hodges and Dillow: 1) it is used to ask for divine aid in time of need. 2) It is used as a legal metaphor which means to “appeal” to someone, implying the Christian has a legal right to appeal to their Savior. 3) The phrase is used to describe public worship of Jesus. 4) It refers to disciples (“those who call on the name of the Lord”). 5) The phrase was used to show Jesus was Lord over believer’s sorrows (Hart, “Why Confess Christ,” 20-21).

means for accomplishing salvation does not hold any weight in light of the biblical evidence.

The very fact that Gaines and others with him argue the sinner's prayer works as an instrument to call on the name of the Lord for salvation remains just as concerning. The sinner's prayer, after all, cannot be an instrument according to Protestant theology. Faith is the lone instrument of justification (hence the Protestant rallying cry: justified by grace *through* faith). Although Gaines does not recognize it, the very fact he introduces another instrument automatically confirms he has slipped into a subtle form of sacramentalism. After all, that stance remains the overarching concept in sacramental theology – grace needs an instrument *other than* faith to flow to the believer. It needs a human action or a natural substance through which God will infuse grace. The moment one introduces another instrument along with faith (regardless of whether that instrument is seen as contributing to salvation or not), one has adopted a form of sacramentalism.

With the first claim from *Eternal Life* undermined (the sinner's prayer functioning as a way to "call on the name of the Lord"), the second (when a person prays the prayer with genuineness, they are converted) claim loses much of its luster. In some ways, the second claim relies on the truth of the first claim. Common experience indicates the falsity of the second claim. Out of all the people who prayed the sinner's prayer and show no evidence of being born again, can one really conclude every single one of those people lacked genuineness? Even amongst those whom Gaines said he counseled, he never addressed why these people return to his office to repeat the prayer again. Why do so many people pray the sinner's prayer and remain unchanged? Because the sinner's prayer does not automatically mean a person is born again. Sure, the Lord has probably saved many around the time this prayer was prayed, but salvation cannot correspond to the genuineness or the level of knowledge in the person.

The *Eternal Life* tract demonstrates a troubling use of the sinner's prayer. The tract has so much certainty that a person is born again from uttering this prayer that it

issues a birth certificate fully assuring the person of their new status in Christ. If this kind of confidence in the performance of the action sounds familiar, it should. It rings of how the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church describes the efficacy of their sacraments:

This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the actions being performed"), i.e. by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or by the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister.⁷³

Notice the similarity in the actions – in Roman Catholicism the performance of the sacraments bring grace to the recipient. If one compares that with the claim of the *Eternal Life* tract, one finds an eerie similarity.⁷⁴

At this point, those in the revivalist tradition typically object, saying, "No one believes the performance of sinner's prayer in itself saves anyone." But that objection misses the point. Roman Catholicism does not see the sacraments themselves as saving anyone. Rather, they function as the instruments by which God's grace flows to the recipient, presupposing faith in the process. Catholic scholar Reginald Lynch describes the procedure:

But that efficacy is not something in the material things but flows from the very nature of the sacrament as a visible word. The sacrament only has an efficacy because it is Christ's word, the word of faith that is preached...when such a sacrament functions within the believing Church, the power of the sacrament is always effective.⁷⁵

Therefore, just as Roman Catholics place qualifiers on the sacraments in pre-supposing faith and the words of a priest, Southern Baptists do so as well with the idea of sincerity.

⁷³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1995), 1128.

⁷⁴For a complete evaluation on the tract's presentation of the gospel, see Bell, *Tracts to Christ*, 221-28. Bell notes the tract's sacramental understanding of the sinner's prayer prevent it from being a quality tract.

⁷⁵Reginald Lynch, *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition*, Thomistic Ressourcement Series (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 13.

But both highlight the same idea – actions work as instruments which God uses to infuse faith into the believer. Though the instruments are different, they achieve the same function. As Lynch states, “the power of the sacrament [or sinner’s prayer] is always effective.”

One might think of the verbiage of *Eternal Life* as a rare case or a mistake by the publisher.⁷⁶ But examining other literature yields the same result, especially in the world of evangelism training programs. Similar in their content with gospel tracts, churches utilize evangelism training programs to teach congregants how to share their faith. The main difference between the two: the tract acts as a visible guide a congregant uses in a conversation, while an evangelism training program encourages the trainee to memorize a presentation without an aide. Southern Baptists have produced or sponsored several of these, but one especially popular at the beginning of the century was *The Net: Evangelism for the 21st Century*. Under its decision and follow up section, the training program calls for a “commitment question”:

“If you would like to become a follower of Jesus by turning away from your sin and trusting in Jesus alone as your Lord and Savior you can do so right now by inviting Him into your life through prayer. Would you like for me to lead you in that prayer?” If he says “no,” do not respond with “You reprobate, you are going to hell!” Gently explore why he is unwilling.... It is acceptable and imperative for evangelizers to encourage lost people to decide then and there whether or not to accept Jesus. However, clarification is essential to avoid confusion. Basically, this gives the witness one more opportunity to explain how a person receives Jesus Christ. This is a crucial time to say the least. Before the individual prays the sinner’s prayer, he must understand what he is doing. The witness should summarize what the person must do by sharing the following truths: 1. Turning away from sin, which is repentance. 2. Placing trust in Jesus alone for forgiveness and eternal life.⁷⁷

Here one sees the same kind of confusion found in *Eternal Life*. The person sharing their faith asks the lost person if they would like to become a follower of Jesus. This following

⁷⁶It is worth noting NAMB has re-published *Eternal Life* multiple times even amongst unfavorable critiques. David Lynn Bell, “Tracts to Christ: An Evaluation of American Gospel Tracts” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).

⁷⁷*The Net*, 128-29.

entails “turning away from your sin and trusting in Jesus.” So how does one do that? According to *The Net*, the lost person accomplishes this feat “by inviting Him into your life by prayer.” One cannot help but notice the instrumental preposition “by” used in that context. The instrument that carries this grace appears to be a prayer. The prayer is specifically identified in the next section as the sinner’s prayer.

The more interesting aspect of how *The Net* describes the sinner’s prayer comes when a person declines the offer to accept Christ. “If he says, ‘no,’ do not respond with ‘You reprobate, you are going to hell!’” One must note two observations regarding this statement: first, it should be taken light-heartedly and appears to be an attempt at jesting in order to emphasize the need for staying levelheaded while sharing the gospel. That lesson is important and an admirable one to teach. Secondly, at the very least, this statement reveals something about how the authors understand the role of the sinner’s prayer in the minds of its readers and trainees. These two groups see its performance as the action that brings salvation to the person – hence the need for the explanatory comment. At the most, this same understanding exists in the mind of the authors as well. The latter case appears more probable based on the authors statement in the follow-up section:

After someone prays the sinner’s prayer, give him the opportunity to thank God for his salvation. You will never hear a sweeter prayer than when a new Christian talks to his Father for the first time. Three helpful resources for immediate follow up include, “Let the Celebration Begin,” “Let the Celebration Continue,” and “Beginning Steps” (available from LifeWay Christian Resources).⁷⁸

Again, the authors give no explanation on the relationship between the sinner’s prayer and the salvation received, even though they make a point of insisting “there is no magical sinner’s prayer. God is more concerned with the desire of our heart than the words on our lips.”⁷⁹ However, *The Net* makes certain if the person prayed this prayer,

⁷⁸*The Net*, 129.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

they are indeed a “new convert.”⁸⁰ Hence the names of the materials the person who prayed will received (“Let the Celebration Begin”). Although *The Net* claims nothing magical happens with a sinner’s prayer, something indeed does happen. Its performance, even without any further conversation or examination, allows the person to grant the person a hundred-percent assurance of their new life in Christ.

At this point one might object. They might even cite other material that indicates the sinner’s prayer or altar call has never been understood sacramentally. Lifeway’s *Share Jesus without Fear* provides an example of one of these evangelistic training materials.⁸¹ In the response section, the authors describe a potential evangelistic encounter. They encourage the trainee to ask the person to invite Jesus into their heart and then lead them in the sinner’s prayer. The authors then clarify,

You must not assume that the lost person understands such things as praying a sinner’s prayer, signing a card, or walking an aisle during an invitation in a worship service. It is not the “sinner’s prayer” that saves the lost person. He needs to know that he is saved by deciding to trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.⁸²

One could think this clarification undermines any argument claiming that sacramentalism exists in the practices he mentions (“praying the sinner’s prayer,” “signing a card,” or “walking an aisle”). But if no sacramental understanding lived in the minds of leaders and congregants, why would the authors bother to clarify their stance with this statement? Authors use clarifying statements when confusion rests in the mind of the reader. The very reason *Share Jesus without Fear* needs this kind of statement is because a genuine misunderstanding about these actions has occurred (and in all likelihood, still occurs). Lifeway’s publishers even chose to bold the text and repeat it in the right margin of the

⁸⁰*The Net*, 130.

⁸¹William Fay and Ralph Hodge, *Share Jesus without Fear* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 1997).

⁸²*Ibid.*, 43.

book. The combination of the statement's existence and the emphasis on the page scream of a misunderstanding about the sinner's prayer.

The cases of the *Eternal Life* tract and *The Net* discipleship guide demonstrate the problems associated with the sinner's prayer. However, these problems seem routinely missed or downplayed by the proponents of these systems. Steve Gaines, teaching on the legitimacy of the sinner's prayer, claims no one believes the sinner's prayer saves anyone.⁸³ Ken Keathley, who occupied the Assistant Professor Theology chair at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, agrees in his defense of the altar call: "No gospel preacher worth his salt even hints that a person is saved by the act of going forward. Gospel preachers make clear that salvation is not in any public act or repeating any prayer. Salvation is in Jesus Christ."⁸⁴ Keathley instead points the blame somewhere else.

Many who are saved later in life have testified of going forward earlier and wrongly identifying salvation with the handshake of the preacher (shorthand for the altar call). Yet it is not the practice of the invitation that is at fault. Rather it is the anemic theology of the one giving it. It is not helpful when biblical words like repentance and faith are replaced with phrases like "getting connected with God." When salvation is replaced with therapy, the result will be false converts whether an altar call is given or not. The answer is...to preach sound doctrine. Let's not throw the methodological baby out with the theological bathwater.⁸⁵

Keathley's comments prove more revealing than they initially seem. The assumption behind his comment admits an error exists. He alludes to the problem mentioned at the beginning of this paper – the widespread misconception about conversion. This confusion encompasses not only people who deserted churches while still considering themselves Christians because of a stroll down an aisle or the repetition

⁸³Gaines inserts this conclusion quickly in the middle of a quote. Gaines, *Sinner's Prayer Atlanta*, 21:50-21:58. He says "we all believe" the sinner's prayer does not save anyone. One could make a case the "we" he uses means only the people in the room, but no reason exists to limit it to only his listeners. After all, he speaks at the conference on behalf of those who affirm the use of the sinner's prayer.

⁸⁴Ken Keathley, "Rescuing the Perishing: A Defense of Giving Invitations," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (2003): 14.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

of a prayer. It also includes their befuddled relatives who persuade themselves these grandchildren, fathers, or nieces must be saved because they remember the sincerity by which they walked that aisle earlier in life.⁸⁶ However, he concludes the problem lies not in the altar call but rather the inept pastors offering it.

Keathley does not detail how he came to this conclusion, nor does he give any evidence to support it. His conclusion makes an assumption that the cause has stemmed from watered-down theology in the recent past (hence his frustration with the term “getting connected with God,” a phrase popularized only in the twentieth century). But one must wonder how Keathley can say that with a straight face. From the Second Great Awakening on, this problem has plagued churches in America. Graham acknowledges the widespread nature of the problem in 1957.⁸⁷ Even Charles Finney went so far as to call the great body of his converts through the New Measures a “disgrace to religion” because of their lack of piety.⁸⁸ For Keathley to treat the problem as if it were fundamentally recent seems intellectually untenable. But what should one make of both his claim and Gaines presupposition that no one believes the sinner’s prayer is efficacious in itself?

Both Keathley and Gaines assert the problem exists in outlying churches or among pastors who misunderstand the methods. But those claims do not square with the statistics and common experience in Southern Baptist churches. It does not match what one finds in many of the evangelism training programs and tracts produced by Southern Baptists – even when those same materials clarify a “magical prayer” does not exist. The

⁸⁶No citation is listed for this idea, but anyone who has spent extended time in a Southern Baptist church knows this experience is prevalent. These largely unregenerate people are designated as Christians who “know better” or “were not raised like that.”

⁸⁷Billy Graham, “How to Live the Christian Life,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association video, 53:52, February 15, 2014, <https://billygraham.org/video/how-to-live-the-christian-life-2/>, 47:00-49:00.

⁸⁸This quotation comes from an out-of-print copy of the *New York Evangelist* in 1836. For segments from it, including this quote, see William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 147.

very fact their materials need these comments again and again highlight the fact a problem exists. Even if no one says they believe the sinner's prayer saves anyone, functionally the belief is present. As much as Keathley and Gaines would like to suggest, no one is whispering in the woods trying to convince people of the sacramental quality of these methods. Rather some of Southern Baptists' own materials have helped do some of the sacramental legwork.

While Southern Baptists use language reminiscent of sacramentalism, other commonalities exist between the two systems. In the next chapter, one will see not just the ways congregants speak about the sinner's prayer and altar call, but the way many use them. In these practices, one will find another similarity between the Southern Baptist methods and Roman Catholic sacramentalism.

CHAPTER 5

GOING BACK TO THE WELL: THE SELF-REFERENTIAL QUALITY OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST REVIVALISM

As seen in the last chapter, *Eternal Life* and *The Net* represent a consistent approach Southern Baptist agencies have taken in their conversion-aide materials in recent memory.⁸⁹ But are these areas the only place one finds this language? Not hardly. The sinner's prayer and the altar call have appeared in the majority of ministries associated with Southern Baptists, both on a local church level as well as on the State Convention level. But one is left to wonder how Southern Baptists *practice* these methods. To examine its use on a state level, one should look at an influential Baptist state convention like Georgia as a representative of the whole.

The Georgia Baptist Mission Board (GBMB) is not only the second largest of all Baptist state conventions in the United States, but it also releases detailed publications of its ministries and has an abundance of written resources on them. In a detailed report of their 2017 ministries, the GBMB announced the impact they had across the state of Georgia. They measured results in the following ways:

⁸⁹For similar evangelism materials produced by Southern Baptists, see the evangelism training program *F.A.I.T.H.*. Bobby H. Welch and Doug Williams, *A Journey in Faith*, ed. Sharon Roberts, Facilitator Guide (Nashville: LifeWay, 1998), 154-56, 174. 1985 *Commitment Counseling Manual* and *Personal Commitment Card* produced by the SBC. David Bennett, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 192. In regard to *F.A.I.T.H.*, it provides two prayers for the potential convert to utter: the "Salvation Prayer" as well the "Commitment Prayer." The content of the second prayer assumes the first prayer always results in salvation. The Facilitator Guide tries to soften the sacramental quality of the prayer by calling it a "meaningful expression." However, the title of the prayer (the "*Salvation* Prayer," which the potential convert clearly can see), its content (the same as the sinner's prayer), and the suggested responses to the prayer tells a different story. It looks less like an expression and more like an effective cause.

Table 2. 2017 Mission Georgia statistics

Ministry	Results
Tent Ministry	857 salvations, 205 rededications
MOVE (Youth Evangelism Conference)	700 decisions for Christ
SuperWOW/Impact (Youth Summer Camps)	102 salvations and 300 decisions
Baptist Collegiate Ministries	262 salvations and 2,696 total conversions
Appalachian Backpack Ministry	2,000 professions of faith
WMU	29 first-time salvation decisions and 7 surrendered to follow God's calling
Men's Ministry	129 professions of faith, 19 salvations, 200 rededications
Conference Center Ministry	300 people received Christ
BCM Summer Missionaries	2,280 salvations, 136 calls to full-time missions and ministry
Summer Student Missionaries	50 professions of faith

Source: *Impact of the Mission Georgia Offering Across Georgia* (Duluth, GA: Georgia Baptist Mission Board, 2018) accessed December 1, 2018, [https://missiongeorgia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018MissionGeorgia_Impact Sheet.pdf](https://missiongeorgia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018MissionGeorgia_Impact_Sheet.pdf).

From reviewing the above information, several things appear evident: first, Southern Baptists use an abundance of categories to gauge results. Salvations, first-time salvation decisions, conversions, professions of faith, receivers of Christ, and rededications. The article includes all different groupings and assumes the reader will know what they mean. Second, this kind of verbiage is typically what one finds when looking at those committed to the sinner's prayer and altar call. But what differentiation is there in these terms? Much of the language references the same thing: becoming a Christian. But at this

point one should pause and think. Salvations and professions of faith make perfect sense, but what about “29 first-time salvation decisions?” How does that first-time decision compare to second or third-time salvation decisions? The fact that this statistic exists (again, the Georgia Baptist Mission Board produces this statistical sheet for a vast audience, so the verbiage is common) highlights a serious misunderstanding. It assumes people will make these salvation decisions again and again (hence the label “first-time decision”).

As the list goes on, one can see with increasing clarity the altar call functions as a spiritual shopping mall for Southern Baptists – a place one goes for all kinds of spiritual wants and needs. One visits the altar for salvation, for a generic and unspecific repentance (re-dedication), to go into the ministry, to be called to missions, or to make any spiritual “decision.” However, these repeated trips to the altar call into question exactly how Southern Baptists use the sinner’s prayer and the altar call.

As already discussed, a huge difference exists between Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists in their views of grace. While both claim to see grace in Christ’s work on the cross, they do so in different ways. Roman Catholics see this grace as an outpouring of Christ’s continual cross-work. The paramount example of this understanding is their view of the eucharist, seeing the body and blood as a re-presentation (not representation)⁹⁰ of Christ’s death on the cross. His sacrifice both happened in real time as well as continues at each re-presentation of the eucharist.⁹¹ While Roman Catholics see grace as ongoing, the opposite is true with Southern Baptists. They view Christ’s cross-work not as continuing, but as finished. Therefore, instead of

⁹⁰There is a stark difference between these two words. A representation is something merely symbolic. A re-presentation is bringing Christ’s death back into this moment. See Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2014), 306-07.

⁹¹This concept explains Rome’s stance of transubstantiation in relation to the eucharist – the bread and wine are actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

going back to the sacraments again and again to receive the grace necessary to cover sin and enable obedience, Southern Baptists see Christ's death as something in which they rest. Now, rest does not mean laziness in living out their faith, but rather placing one's hope and assurance of forgiveness in Christ's work instead of their own works. So, while Roman Catholics receive grace and assurance only by going back to the sacraments again and again, Southern Baptists receive grace and assurance in the finished work Christ accomplished two-thousand years ago.

Assuming this historic Baptist belief, one would think Southern Baptist congregants have plenty of assurance to pass around the proverbial table. That reality is not the case. J. D. Greear, the current President of the SBC, suspects the problem lies in the way many Southern Baptists speak of the gospel:

I have begun to wonder if both problems, needless doubting and false assurance...are exacerbated by the clichéd ways in which we...speak about the gospel. Evangelical shorthand for the gospel is to “ask Jesus into your heart,” or “accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.”⁹²

Notice Greear takes issue with the shorthand ways Southern Baptists speak about conversion. He highlights two of the most popular concepts used when speaking of the altar call and sinner's prayer – “[asking] Jesus into your heart” and “[accepting] Jesus as Lord and Savior.” Greear, whose church does not use the altar call nor are they staunch advocates for the sinner's prayer, finds company with others in seeing a problem.

Frank Cox, pastor of an Atlanta mega-church and former President of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, describes the situation in similar language when speaking to his congregation about doubting their salvation.⁹³ Cox starts by referencing three people: first, a woman who kept responding to the altar call even after she was already

⁹²J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know For Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2013), 7.

⁹³Frank Cox, “Dealing With Doubting One's Salvation,” North Metro Baptist Church video, 40:47. February 18, 2018. <http://www.northmetro.net/sermon/dealing-with-doubting-ones-salvation>. One should note Cox's church, North Metro Baptist Church, also hosted the John 3:16 Conference where Steve Gaines defended the sinner's prayer and the altar call.

saved. She “accepted Christ” over and over and again, each time wanting to be re-baptized. After numerous occurrences, he tells the woman, “Honey, we’ve got to get this settled...you see, you don’t have to get saved once a year!”⁹⁴ The second was a girl who came forward at the altar call during a summer camp. Her mother insisted she was already saved because she had prayed a sinner’s prayer earlier in life. The third, his own youngest daughter, responded to the altar call again in the sixth-grade because she did not “understand everything [she] needed to understand”⁹⁵ when she came forward at six years old. But Cox also gives intriguing commentary which normalizes this experience.

I’ve watched that same scenario year after year in many people’s lives, where they come to a revival time and the evangelist is hot and they gave their life and they prayed a prayer and yet they continuously struggle with doubts about their salvation.... Now I want you to understand that there are those who are here this morning that say.... “One day I feel saved and the next day I feel lost.”⁹⁶

He goes on to prescribe what people in this situation should do, however he never asks two key questions: why does this high level of anxiety and doubt persist and why is this scenario so widespread?

Cox acknowledges the problem these two questions pose, but never asks them. With regards to the first question, he treats the problem as an intellectual one. People ought to know that coming forward again and again does nothing for them. One can see this presupposition in his comment about the first woman and how she did not need to get saved once a year. He cannot understand why this woman keeps coming forward, despite the fact he explained the details of salvation to her again and again. But according to the Atlanta megachurch pastor, this woman does not represent an anomaly (thereby acknowledging the second question). He professes how many Southern Baptists have the same problem (“I’ve watched that same scenario year after year in many people’s lives”).

⁹⁴Cox, “Dealing With Doubting One’s Salvation,” 4:30.

⁹⁵Ibid., 7:05.

⁹⁶Ibid., 4:45-5:30.

In a level of irony, amongst those who use these revivalist methods while constantly preaching “make this decision so that you can *know that you know* you are saved,” one finds a vast level of uncertainty and lack of assurance. What could explain the above situation in Cox’s church, along with the problem Graeer listed in his assessment?

The answer lies in people’s understanding of the sinner’s prayer and the altar call – but not in their intellectual understanding. Congregants might know with their minds that nothing supernatural happens just by praying a prayer or by going to the altar, but factual knowledge is not the only way human beings know something. We know through experience and through affections as well. While the mind might reject any kind of sacramentalism in these two methods, the heart clearly relishes the concept. In doing so, the acts produce added assurance (or at worst justifying grace) in the heart of the actor. One can see this understanding in the second situation Cox listed with the young lady at a summer camp. While trying to keep the mother away from the daughter, Cox could not recognize the problem. The woman’s actions hint at a sacramental view of the sinner’s prayer and the altar call, hence why her daughter’s salvation at that summer camp could not have been an option in her mind. After all, her daughter had already performed that act and settled her account with God.

Now one might balk at such an idea, saying, “I did not know it was wrong for congregants to doubt their salvation. After all, 1 John 3:20 assumes moments when a believer’s heart might condemn them. These congregants are just settling business with God, not performing a sacrament.” This objection has a degree of validity, but only if one equates the doubts in 1 John with the doubts many Southern Baptists experience. However, two reasons exist for doubting such a link. First, churches almost exclusively use the sinner’s prayer and the altar call in a self-referential system of conversion and sustenance. Congregants are called in the invitation, birthed with the performance of the sinner’s prayer, then sustained and encouraged in additional performances of the altar call.

Common experience confirms this formula. A person could walk into a Southern Baptist church and ask a congregant about the assurance of their salvation, and the overwhelming majority of people would reference their decision at an altar call or a sinner's prayer. When a congregant seeks salvation, they turn to the methods. If they doubt their salvation, the person must re-dedicate their life by turning to the methods. When a congregant seeks assurance, they turn to the methods. When a congregant wants *re-assurance*, they turn to the methods. Thus, the methods work self-referentially, always turning the congregant back to the methods themselves. It is as if they were God's appointed means to bring grace and assurance.

Again, this understanding sounds much like Roman Catholicism's view of the sacraments. Joel Carpenter makes this exact point in comparing American Fundamentalists of the 1900s (into which he lumps Southern Baptists) with sacramental Christians (Catholics):

Unlike sacramental Christians, for whom the holy presence of God comes most commonly in the Eucharist... [the altar call became] the high and holy moment of the fundamentalist church service, the time when miracles happen. For many fundamentalists, the experience of walking the aisle was so inspiring that doing it once was not enough. Surely people might feel encouraged in their faith and be charged with holy joy when others responded to the gospel, but there was nothing like experiencing it personally. Since conversion happened only once, fundamentalists developed ways for... Christians to 'come forward' more often. By broadening their altar call into an invitation for believers to receive further assurance of their salvation, to dedicate or rededicate their lives to God, to surrender themselves to God's service, or to testify to a 'definite call' to a particular field of service, fundamentalists found a way to meet their thirst for holy moments. 'Going forward' became a fundamentalist sacrament.⁹⁷

Carpenter notes how Fundamentalists almost developed an addiction to those moments of walking down the aisle. However, salvation only happened one time. He notes the further development of ways for which a person could go to the altar. These "high and holy moments," are still active today in Southern Baptist life.

⁹⁷Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 77. Carpenter's list of altar call activities is not comprehensive as it does not include its outlier uses. The altar call has found limitless applications.

Secondly, the assurances offered through the altar call and sinner's prayer diverge from the assurances given by the apostles. The majority of Southern Baptists place their assurance in their act of commitment during the two methods, hence the response given by most when asked about their conversion.⁹⁸ Notice how the writers of the NT give a contrasting view when discussing assurance in the life of a Christian:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor 1:4, 7-9)

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ...and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Cor 1:20-22)

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you... in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phi 1:3, 5-6)

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy. (Jude 24)

These verses represent some of the most widely used verses on the theme of assurance. Each writer, whether Paul or Jude, seeks to re-assure his readers about their salvation. Two observations stand out. First, absent from their comments on assurance are any appeals to the decision these congregants made. Nor will one locate any trace of Paul and Jude telling congregants to look at the front of their Bibles for date inscribed on its cover, assuring them their decision was genuine.⁹⁹ For someone who urged people to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith as much as Paul did, he demonstrates a remarkable

⁹⁸Despite their responses, most Southern Baptist congregants do not see God as divorced from their salvation – that would be a mischaracterization. Rather they see their decision as the way they repented and had faith. However, the emphasis still remains on the decision *they* made. God might have saved them, but he saved them based on the decision they made. Therefore that moment of decision is crucial.

⁹⁹Again, one cannot find any citation for this practice, however the experience is so common in Southern Baptist churches that not citation is needed.

silence regarding their role in salvation as the basis of assurance. Second, notice what is present in their comments on assurance. Each verse places the assurance of the believer in the power of God. First Corinthians 1:4-9 mentions how “God is faithful” and will “sustain [them] to the end.” In Second Corinthians 1:20-22, God not only “establishes” the believers in Corinth but “seals” them. In the Philippians passage, Paul credits God’s starting and finishing power as the means that will bring this church to the appointed day of the Lord. Jude likewise reminds his audience about God’s ability “to keep [them] from stumbling” and to usher them into His glory. One can see how the Bible offers assurance, but not in the genuineness of the decision or the comprehensiveness of one’s knowledge. Rather, the Bible roots assurance in the character and power of God.

All of a sudden, one can see the concerning side effects Southern Baptists experience in their sacramental use of the sinner’s prayer and altar call. Since congregants use the methods with sacramental underpinnings, where is the most likely place they will go to find assurance? They would go to the same place where they found grace – in methods themselves. Therefore, instead of curing the problem of assurance by rooting it in the firm hand of God, these self-referential practices exacerbate their anxiety. Congregants can always “mean the prayer” more, or “go down to the altar” one more time. However, the problem never leaves and enough is never enough. As long as a congregant’s assurance remains rooted in their performance – even if they acknowledge their salvation came through faith – no lasting assurance will ever reside in the believer.

As mentioned before, neither the sinner’s prayer nor the altar call in themselves demand a self-referential system. Nothing about them calls for placing assurance in the actions themselves. However, if churches sow the sacramental wind with these methods (which prior evidence suggests they have), they should expect to reap the whirlwind of anxiety (which current evidence suggests they are). A misunderstanding of these two means creates a vicious cycle that promises peace and rest, but only gives temporary relief either before the next crisis, or before the next verse of *Just As I Am*.

CHAPTER 6

BLAZING A NEW SAWDUST TRAIL: A WAY FORWARD

One of the lasting images of Southern Baptist revivalism was the use of the sawdust trails in old revival meetings. Billy Sunday, one of the most famous Southern Baptist evangelists of all time, made prolific use of these. Before congregants entered the service, saw dust was thrown on the ground to hold dust as well as act as a sound barrier. The phrase “hitting the sawdust trail” became colloquial for responding to the altar call. One could follow the sawdust down the aisle, leading a person to make a decision for Christ at the altar. In light of the evidence showing a vast majority of Southern Baptists unknowingly holding a sacramental understanding of the sinner’s prayer and the altar call, the question remains: where does this sawdust trail lead Southern Baptists now?

The State of the Sinner’s Prayer and Altar Call in Baptist Life

Should Southern Baptists continue to make use of these two methods? The answer to the question might not be so simple. Many have shown their support for the sinner’s prayer and the altar call, treating the continuation of these acts as non-negotiables.¹⁰⁰ Others have demonized these two practices, as if they represented skeletons in the closet needing to be discarded.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation: A Practical Guide for the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004).

¹⁰¹David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1994).

Many have broached this question in the past decade, and opinions land all over the map. Wayne Grudem affirms their use, saying of the sinner's prayer that it "does not in itself save us, but the attitude of the heart that it represents does constitute true conversion, and the decision to speak that prayer can often be the point at which a person truly comes to faith in Christ."¹⁰² R. Alan Streett argues for their continued use based on historical precedence, believing the sinner's prayer and altar call have their origins in the history of God's dealings with the world.¹⁰³ Paul Chitwood in his dissertation of the sinner's prayer argues for the removal of the sinner's prayer:

Like a spreading cancer not yet detected, however, the prayer as it is often used has a poisoning effect that few seem to have diagnosed. Many may be noticing the symptoms, but the cause goes undetermined. When more of us begin to realize that our approach to conversion, including the Sinner's prayer, is directly responsible for the predicaments of unrepentant absenteeism and unregenerate membership, we will be on significant step closer to a cure.¹⁰⁴

To compare one of these cherished methods to cancer seems extreme, but Chitwood (now President of the International Mission Board, mission sending agency of the Southern Baptist Convention) marks it as the primary cause behind many contemporary church ailments. Which of these conclusions represents the truth in light of the overwhelming evidence of a sacramental understanding in the measures?

Some general observations about the sinner's prayer and the altar call might help answer this question. First, neither the sinner's prayer or the altar call are inherently sinful. Since one can find no command against them in the Bible, one should not use the

¹⁰²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 717.

¹⁰³Streett, *The Effective Invitation*, 55-109. Street's argumentation provides some fanciful conclusions. He continually makes the same fallacy throughout his book, equating anything that sounds like an invitation or a prayer with the altar call and the sinner's prayer. Erroll Hulse gives a fair critique of Streett's fast and loose interpretation history: He "imports the method, as well as our modern evangelical culture and outlook, back into history. So extravagant are some of Streett's suggestions that you can almost envisage Constantine himself making his way down the aisle to grasp the hand of a crusade evangelist while the choir sings, 'Just as I am!'" Erroll Hulse, *The Great Invitation: Examining the Use of the Invitation System in Evangelism* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986), 89.

¹⁰⁴Paul Harrison Chitwood, "The Sinner's Prayer: An Historical and Theological Analysis" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 136.

adjectives “evil” and “wicked” regarding them. Can people use them in evil and wicked ways? Absolutely, but that evil comes from the manipulative preacher and not the methods themselves. Because of this distinction, the methods cannot fall into the category of sin/not sin, but of wise/unwise. Second, both the sinner’s prayer and the altar call have a remarkable amount of misunderstanding attached to them. Supporters of these two methods either downplay such confusion or deny it altogether. However, the evidence will not allow a person to continue claiming “everyone knows uttering a prayer or walking an aisle does not save a person.” Either a partial or full-blooded sacramentalism exists in Southern Baptists’ understanding of these two methods.

The Wisdom of Charles Finney

In light of these three observations, Charles Finney might have the strongest words of wisdom. In his *Lectures on Revivals*, he offered some final warnings about one of his own methods, the protracted meeting. For the man who paved the way for the sinner’s prayer and the altar call more than anyone else, his words carry much weight:

Be watchful against placing dependence on a protracted meeting, as if that of itself would produce a revival. This is a point of great danger, and has always been so. This is the great reason why the Church in successive generations has always had to give up her measures – because Christians had come to rely on them for success.... Avoid adopting the idea that a revival cannot be enjoyed without a protracted meeting. Some Churches have got into a morbid state of feeling on this subject. Their zeal has become all spasmodic and feverish, so that they never think of doing anything to promote revival. When a protracted meeting is held, they seem to be wonderfully zealous, but then they sink down to a torpid state til another protracted meeting produces another spasm. And now multitudes in the Church think it is necessary to give up protracted meetings because they are abused in this way. This ought to be guarded against, in every Church, so that they may not be driven to give them up, and lose all the benefits that protracted meetings are calculated to produce.¹⁰⁵

In defending protracted meetings against those who think their misuse justifies their rejection, Finney agrees with his dissenters at some level. He acknowledges the wisdom

¹⁰⁵Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 9th ed. (London: R. Griffin & Company, 1839), 225.

of giving up certain means of evangelism. He notes how this pattern has occurred throughout Church History, when people come to rely on measures themselves or when high levels of confusion and abuse exist around methods. He even admits the same can be true for his own measures. Hence why Finney so passionately argues for churches to exercise caution, otherwise they would “be driven to give [protracted meetings] up, and lose all the benefits.”

By Finney’s own logic, both the sinner’s prayer and altar call have reached that level. As beloved as these two methods might be, Southern Baptists should place them in a safe and shut the door. In doing so, they can rejoice how the Lord used those methods to save many, mourn over the countless souls who used them to deceive themselves (or were deceived by manipulative evangelists/preachers), and look to the future with hope that God will continue save others as Southern Baptists continue preaching the gospel.

A Way Forward

While giving up the measures would help the sacramental understanding to diminish amongst congregations, certain adjustments can be made for those who refuse to give them up. In light of this paper’s findings, many could consider removing the use of the phrase “accepting Jesus” or “receiving Jesus.” Although the Bible might use words like “accept” and “receive,” the revivalist culture has imported a different meaning to these words.¹⁰⁶ Those two words, when tied to the action of coming forward, smacks of sacramentalism. Instead, one can opt for phrases like, “If you are curious about a relationship with Jesus, come down and we would love to speak with you,” or, “If you would like to know what it would look like for you to repent of your sins, we would love to speak with you at the front in a couple of moments. Please make your way down right

¹⁰⁶Steve Gaines, “Is the Sinner’s Prayer Biblical?” (lecture at The John 3:16 Conference. Atlanta, GA, 2013) 42:25-43:40. Gaines notes how the Bible uses “accept” and “receive” in certain situations, but does not account for the loaded baggage those words carry in his own view. He might be using the same words, but the concepts behind them are worlds apart.

now.” Second, when someone responds to an altar call, do not present them to the congregation right away as a Christian. Continue speaking with them after the service and in the coming days in order to understand them and why they came to the front. Third, conduct membership interviews in a church so that pastors can know with greater clarity whether the respondents understand the gospel.

A new sawdust trail awaits Southern Baptists. While it might not include the classic tunes of a Billy Graham crusade, the sinners prayer, or the altar call, hope does reside in the future. However, no future will ever come unless part of the past is appreciatively released. The only question left to ask about this new trail: will Southern Baptists be brave enough to walk it?

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ABSTRACT

JUST AS I WAS: SACRAMENTALISM IN THE METHODS OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST REVIVALISM

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This paper will argue that Southern Baptists in the revivalist tradition have unknowingly adopted a sacramental understanding in many of their methods and practices. The two methods specifically addressed are the sinner's prayer and the altar call. Chapter one will give an introduction to the subject as well as lay out the thesis and methodology.

Chapter two will look at two of the major figures in the development of revivalism. The first, who many consider the father of revivalism, Charles Finney, and the second, Billy Graham.

Chapter three and four will mark a shift in the book as it will compare the ideas of sacramentalism in the Roman Catholic Church to the ordinances in Southern Baptist churches. For the section on Roman Catholicism, three major figures will be examined: Augustine, Lombard, and Aquinas. One will then see how the work of those three functions within the Roman Catholic Church today. Regarding the section on Southern Baptists' ordinances, one will see the official doctrines laid out regarding the ordinances in the Baptist Faith and Message. However, these will be contrasted with the ways Baptists speak of two means in particular: the sinner's prayer and the altar call. These means appear to take on a sacramental quality in the life of many Southern Baptists.

Finally, chapter five will look at how the use of the sinner's prayer and the altar call leave the individual revisiting these events over-and-over again. This ultimately

leads to a crisis of assurance within individuals. Chapter six will provide suggestions for how to move forward in an age where many have misconceptions about the sinner's prayer and the altar call.

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