

“THE MAN OR THE PLAN” DISCUSSION REVISITED

By Dub McClish

Introduction

In the early 1960s I was a young preacher, not long out of Abilene Christian College. I well remember the lively brotherhood discussion of “the Man or the plan” controversy (actually, it might be better styled, “the Man **instead of** the plan”). It arose from the accusation made by some brethren that preachers had generally been too “negative” and “dogmatic” and had emphasized “the plan” (i.e., regarding the plan of salvation, worship, church organization, et al.) too much and the person of the Lord and “grace” too little.

Reuel Lemmons, editor of *Firm Foundation*, opined in an editorial in 1962 that those who thus argued (who at the time he styled the “liberal left”) were seeking to foist a dangerous theological shift on churches of Christ. He predicted that, with the easing of the anti-ism controversy in the 1950s, the next battle would be with liberalism, signaled by those who were contending for less emphasis on the “plan” and more on Jesus and grace.¹ (Ironically, Lemmons, over the ensuing quarter century, moved so far leftward that he became one of those “liberal left” voices he earlier decried. Alton Howard gave Lemmons’ liberalism new life when he inaugurated *Image* magazine to give him a continued editorial platform after his dismissal from the *Firm Foundation* editorial chair in 1983.)

The K.C. Moser Factor

However, the push for “the Man instead of the plan” (essentially advocating a “grace only” approach to salvation) did not begin in the 1960s; it only revived at that time. Likewise, the veritable explosion of “grace only” advocacy among liberal preachers, authors, and professors among us in the 1980s and 1990s (as I will quote below) also has longer roots than the 1960s discussion.

John Mark Hicks, Lipscomb University Professor of Theology and Harding Graduate School of Religion Adjunct Professor of Christian Doctrine, chronicled these roots in his article, “K.C. Moser and Churches of Christ: an Historical Perspective.”² Hicks has for years been solidly among the Rubel Shelly-type “grace only” advocates, and his article confirms what I (and others) have known for a long time: In the Lord’s church, K.C. Moser (1893–1976) was (and through his writings, still is) the principal fountain of the “demote-the-plan-of-the-Man” contention of the 1960s and of the ever louder “grace only” advocacy since the early 1980s. The Hicks article provides additional interesting documentation of a few influential brethren who endorsed and encouraged Moser and his views and whose names may surprise some.³

Hicks pointed out that Moser began early in his writing career (mainly for *Firm Foundation*, 1920–34) to attack his perception of “legalistic” preaching relating to grace and the plan of salvation. In forty articles from his pen in this period, almost half of them treated the themes of grace, atonement, faith, and works and their relationships to each other. He attached the “Man or plan” concept to his ideas on grace at least as early as

1932 in a *Gospel Advocate* article titled “Preaching Jesus.”⁴ Moser’s article drew an immediate rebuttal from R.L. Whiteside, a staff writer for *Gospel Advocate* at the time.⁵

By 1932, Moser had all but ceased writing for *Firm Foundation* (likely due to Editor G.H.P. Showalter’s disagreement and weariness with his hobby) and had begun writing for *Gospel Advocate*. That same year The Gospel Advocate Company published Moser’s first book, *The Way of Salvation*, which incorporated material from his articles. C. Leonard Allen, an ACU-related liberal, summarized the intent of Moser’s book as a correction of a “displacement of the cross and God’s grace” in our preaching and our concepts.⁶

Wallace, Showalter, and Whiteside

It is a stunning irony that The Gospel Advocate Company published Moser’s book. Foy E. Wallace, Jr., who had nothing but antipathy for Moser’s “grace only” agenda, was editor of *Gospel Advocate* when the book was published. Had he controlled the company’s book publication division, it seems certain that Moser would have had to go elsewhere to get his book published. Upon its publication, Wallace criticized Moser’s book editorially.⁷ The book apparently generated little notice at first, except for Wallace’s negative review. In another irony, on January 1, 1933, Moser was appointed (likely by Leon B. McQuiddy, the *Advocate*’s owner—surely not by Wallace) to edit the “Text and Context” department of the *Advocate*, where he did not last long.

Forty-five years later, in his last book, Wallace was still much concerned about Moser’s book, doctrine, and name in connection with his (Wallace’s) years as Editor of the *Advocate*. He related that Moser’s attempts to “inject his peculiar ideas on

‘repentance before faith’ and the ‘conditions’ of salvation...so contrary to the gospel” also provoked opposition from the other staff writers, men “known to be the strongest men among us—H. Leo Boles, F.B. Srygley, R.L. Whiteside, C.R. Nichol and others of like stature.”⁸

That same year (1933), R.L. Whiteside began a series of articles in the *Advocate* on Romans, responding to and answering material in Moser’s *Way of Salvation*. These articles later formed the basis of Whiteside’s *New Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Saints at Rome* (which I have long believed to be among the best ever written on Romans). The following quotes from it illustrate how dangerous and without Scriptural basis the erudite Whiteside considered Moser’s doctrine:

To me it seems inexcusable that a person should so misunderstand Paul as to draw the following conclusion: “Indeed, it seems to be difficult even at the present time for many to grasp the idea of righteousness that does not depend on human effort.” Surely the author did not properly consider the import of his words. If a Universalist or an Ultra-Calvinist had penned such words, we would not be surprised....

If people would quit arraying the **commands of God** against the **grace of God**, they would have a clearer vision of the scheme of redemption. God’s grace is in every command he gives.⁹

The following year, *Firm Foundation* Editor, G.H.P. Showalter, bluntly expressed his view of Moser as a traitor to the cause, who had embraced Baptist doctrine.¹⁰

Wallace also noted in his 1977 comments on Moser that the Baptist debater, Ben M. Bogard, whom so many brethren debated in the first half of the past century, endorsed Moser's book in his (Bogard's) periodical and taunted brethren with it when debating them. Any who have read much from Moser and from Bogard must admit that Bogard was fully justified in claiming Moser's book for his cause. Is it not strange that Baptist Bogard could recognize Baptist doctrine in Moser's book, but some influential brethren could not and still cannot? Wallace also related that, when Moser came out with his book, both Showalter and Whiteside

...exposed his "saved by the man, not by the plan" and "salvation by faith" hobby as being contrary to the gospel plan of salvation, and being no more nor less than denominational doctrine.¹¹

Brewer, Thomas, and Mattox

Hicks documents the fact that G.C. Brewer, prominent preacher of the past century and also an *Advocate* staff writer under Wallace, praised the Moser book. Brewer advised readers to read it more than once and called it "one of the best little books that came from any press in 1932."¹² While Wallace rightly judged Moser's doctrine as borrowed from the denominations, Brewer viewed it as an antidote for what he perceived to be "legalism" among brethren. In 1937, Moser published a booklet titled, *Are We Preaching the Gospel?* In it he accused brethren of preaching an "abstract plan" of human works rather than grace received through faith. Brewer also promoted this booklet.¹³

Moser produced yet another booklet in 1952, titled *Christ Versus a "Plan"* (published by Harding College Bookstore, incidentally). As one should expect by now, if Moser wrote it, Brewer promoted it. Accordingly, Brewer indicated in his autobiography that he praised and promoted this tract and its theme.¹⁴ That same year the late J.D. Thomas, Director of the Abilene Christian College Lectureship, invited Brewer to speak on the program. Thomas purposely assigned him the topic, "Grace and Salvation" because he agreed with the "man-instead-of-the-plan" theology of Brewer and Moser and wanted to promote it in Texas. Brewer apparently accomplished Thomas's goal and made his own mark on the grace/works theme in his speech. Richard T. Hughes relates that Thomas told him in a 1993 interview that he counted Brewer's lecture a "pivotal turning point" in doctrine for the church.¹⁵ Doubtless, if nothing else, the sermon lent some credibility to Moser's unrelenting theme.

Moser's final book was *The Gist of Romans*, a brief commentary (thematic, rather than textual), published in 1957.¹⁶ It was somewhat of a distillation of his assaults on alleged "legalism" among brethren over the previous thirty-five years. Brewer died of cancer in 1956, and thus never saw Moser's last book. Some unknown benefactor made a copy of this book available to me (as I presume he did to all Bible majors at ACC) in 1957. Obviously, someone(s) wanted to influence young would-be preachers with Moser's doctrine (Thomas, then head of the Bible Department, may well have been the benefactor, given his doctrinal kinship with Moser).

In 1964, F.W. Mattox, president of Lubbock Christian College and long-time friend of Moser's, called him out of retirement to join the school's Bible faculty. He taught there for eight years, giving him countless opportunities to influence young

people and giving him credibility and a platform he had not previously enjoyed. Hicks reports interviewing Jim Massey, who taught with Moser at LCC, during which Massey stated that Moser, because of his doctrine, was called “the Baptist preacher” on the LCC campus.¹⁷ This appellation fully accords with the above-referenced comments of Wallace and Whiteside. While I find Moser’s LCC reputation comment accurate, I find it far short of amusing.

The Dormant Seeds Sprout

Seeds can lie dormant for years or even centuries, awaiting just the right conditions to germinate and spring to life. This characteristic inheres in the Gospel “seed” (Luke 8:11), and, unfortunately, in the “seed” of error as well. In his book, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church*, C. Leonard Allen, a dedicated change agent, avers: “The efforts of Moser stand directly behind some of the theological shifts occurring among contemporary Churches of Christ.”¹⁸ Allen should know—as I believe he does. This being so, to read Moser is to read source material for some of the wild and heretical statements concerning grace among us over the past forty plus years. Compare the following statements with some of Moser’s (and Baptist Bogard’s!) quotes and/or emphases referenced above:

Nobody has any right to preach anything other than the Gospel of pure grace.

We are saved by grace plus nothing. You are saved by faith period. There is nothing you can do to be saved (1982, excerpt from sermon, the late Glen Owen, at the time an elder, Highland Church of Christ, Abilene, TX).

If one is to be saved, it must be totally by grace.... I was brought up on the “Christian duty” concept. All facets of discipleship became one’s duty. And when a person forsook the Lord, he was “out of duty.” Such a concept is foreign to the New Testament (1984, the late Cecil Hook, author, *Free in Christ*).

Why are we afraid of grace? Why must grace always be explained?... Are we focusing upon God’s grace or man’s performance?... Too many believe, “Do your best and God will do the rest.” This is blasphemy, but it dies hard.... Any retreat to law is a denial of grace.... Grace and law are mutually exclusive (1984, Charles Hodge, author, *Amazing Grace*).

I believe deeply that the New Testament teaches that salvation is a free gift of God period. You are saved by grace alone (1989, Randy Mayeaux, at the time preaching at Preston Road Church of Christ, Dallas, TX, but later left and started his own denomination).

It is a scandalous and outrageous lie to teach that salvation arises from human activity. We do not contribute one whit to our salvation (1990, Rubel Shelly, preacher, Family of God at Woodmont Hills, Nashville, TN, church bulletin).

At the heart of my own belief is the conviction that we are saved by grace. What do I mean by this statement?... There is no human part of salvation! (1991, Randy Mayeaux).

I spent too many years of my Christian life not knowing what grace was. The only thing I knew for sure was that “we” didn’t believe in it (1991, Jim Hackney, Midtown [now Heritage] Church of Christ, Fort Worth, TX).

Our salvation arises entirely and only from grace.... It is entirely of grace through faith.... My salvation is on grace alone. Not by anything I’ve added to it. He didn’t do 98% of it and I have to add 2%... (1991, Rubel Shelly).

To say that we are saved by Christ’s work plus our work is to suggest that the work of Christ at the cross was inadequate. To say that God does 99% and we do 1% undermines what Christ did at the cross (1991, Denny Boultinghouse, then editor, *Image* magazine; he obviously took some notes on Shelly’s foregoing pronouncements; he just missed the percentages).

We are saved by grace plus nothing.... God does it all.... We keep trying to place conditions on our receiving it (1991, Jim Hackney).

[Grace is] the only thing that does save you.... Our works have nothing to do with our salvation (1991, Randy Fenter, then at MacArthur Park Church of Christ, San Antonio, TX).

Salvation is not a human achievement but the free gift of God.... Can you see that there is absolutely nothing you can do to heal our alienation? (1992, Bill Love, author, *The Core Gospel: On Restoring the Crux of the Matter*).¹⁹

Response and Conclusion

No one can believe the Bible and not believe in salvation by grace. However, liberals cannot find even a hint of “grace **only**” doctrine in Scripture as some now teach, though some of those who do so may have seventeen terminal academic degrees. While contemporary change agents got it from Moser and his generation, Moser did not originate it. Its roots reach all the way back to John Calvin’s theology from the sixteenth century.

If salvation is by grace alone, then why are not all saved? God wills that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and His saving grace has appeared to all men (Tit. 2:11). Yet, the Lord said that few will be saved (Mat. 7:13–14). As Whiteside indicated concerning Moser’s doctrine, the “grace only” doctrine quoted above is little more than thinly disguised universalism.

Some of the liberals, unlike strict Calvinists, at least concede (in their modified, semi-Calvinism) the requirement of faith in the sinner. However, by stating the necessity of the “work” of belief (the Lord thus labeled it, John 6:28–29) they unravel their entire “grace-only, no-works, no-conditions, no-law” heresy. To allow even **one** condition undercuts their “grace only” premise utterly.

One verges on irrationality to contend simultaneously for two “exclusive” factors of salvation. The late B.B. James, my father-in-law, worded this contradiction well:

As strange as it may seem, [Baptist] preachers will use Ephesians 2:8 in an attempt to prove the doctrine of salvation by faith only. I have heard others use the same Scripture in an effort to teach salvation by grace only. Paul Said, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves” it is the gift of God.” Obviously, if one is saved by **faith only** or by **grace only**, it

could not be by grace through faith (unless, of course, grace and faith are the same thing).²⁰

As indicated by several foregoing quotations, Baptist preachers are by no means the only ones advocating Moser's "grace only" heresy. One who says in the same breath that salvation is "by grace plus nothing," then adds "by faith period," and further pontificates that "there is nothing you can do to be saved" needs a caregiver. "Grace plus nothing" excludes faith. "Faith period" excludes grace. And if man can do nothing to be saved, who does the believing?

The charges by liberals are false that any of us are "afraid of grace," that we do not believe in it, or that we do not understand, preach, or emphasize it. All who preach "the whole counsel of God" both believe in it and preach it. Every sermon that mentions the Christ, the church, the cross, inspiration, repentance, Heaven, Hell, and yes, even baptism and the law of Christ, declares and emphasizes the grace of God. Rather than **excluding** all of the foregoing (and many other matters, including works of obedience on our part), God's grace and mercy **include** them. The problem liberals have with faithful brethren is not that we do not preach grace, **but that we do not preach their Calvinistic perversion of it.**

Scriptural accuracy includes "the Man **and** the plan." Men who choose one in favor of the other are apostates. Our Lord, by self-imposed limitation, cannot/does not save apart from His plan (Acts 20:32; Rom 1:16; 2 The. 1:7-9; Tit. 2:11-3:5; et al.). The plan is but a lifeless, powerless, human instrument apart from the crucified, risen, enthroned Savior. There is no such thing as "grace only" salvation. Salvation is free in

that we cannot earn or merit it. However, it is not free from the standpoint of God-given conditions men must meet to receive it.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Reuel Lemmons, "The Shifting Current," *Firm Foundation* 79 (17 April 1962): 242.
- ² John Mark Hicks, "K.C. Moser and Churches of Christ: an Historical Perspective," *Restoration Quarterly* 37:3 (1995): 139–57. Most of the documentation that follows is found in the Hicks article.
- ³ Hicks wrote a sequel to the aforereferenced article, titled "K.C. Moser and Churches of Christ: a Theological Perspective," *Restoration Quarterly* 37:4 (1995): 195–211. Both articles are available for reading/printing at http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1990s/index.html
- ⁴ K.C. Moser, "Preaching Jesus," *Gospel Advocate* 74 (1 December 1932): 1283.
- ⁵ Robertson L. Whiteside, "Preach-What?" *Gospel Advocate* 74 (29 December 1932): 1374.
- ⁶ C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1990): 123.
- ⁷ Foy E. Wallace, Jr., "The Way of Salvation," *Gospel Advocate* 74 (21 April 1932): 494.
- ⁸ Wallace, *The Present Truth* (Fort Worth, TX: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Pub., 1977), p. 1036.
- ⁹ Whiteside, *New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome* (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Pub. Co., 2004 reprint), pp. 93, 97.
- ¹⁰ G.H.P. Showalter, "The 'Faith Alone' Idea," *Firm Foundation* 51 (3 April 1934): 4.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² G.C. Brewer, "Read this Book," *Gospel Advocate* 75 (11 May 1933): 434.
- ¹³ Brewer, "Are We Preaching the Gospel?" *Gospel Advocate* 79 (26 August 1937): 798.
- ¹⁴ Brewer, *A Story of Toil and Tears of Love and Laughter: Being the Autobiography of G. C. Brewer, 1884-1956* (Murfreesboro, TN: DeHoff Pub., 1957), pp. 91–101.
- ¹⁵ Richard T. Hughes, "Are Restorationists Evangelicals?" *Varieties of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 125. Thomas specifically invited Brewer for this purpose. Interview with J. D. Thomas, August 3, 1993.
- ¹⁶ Moser, *The Gist of Romans* (Delight, AR: K.C. Moser, 1957).
- ¹⁷ Hicks Interview with Jim Massey of Melbourne, FL, July 6, 1993.
- ¹⁸ C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1993), pp. 169.
- ¹⁹ The quotations on "salvation-by-grace-alone" were harvested from a variety of sources (e.g., church bulletin articles, sermon transcriptions, articles in periodicals, books, etc.).
- ²⁰ B.B. James, *Studies in Acts*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1985), p. 391.

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