

# God's Part and Man's

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Excerpted from *Paths to Power*

Online Editor's Note: This article, a chapter from a short book entitled *Paths to Power*, was written in the 1950s. It answers an error that was young in his day but that has grown enormously popular in ours. The reader should note with care how long the devil and the demonic have been sowing the seeds of the now popular hyper-grace error. N.G.

Failure to distinguish the part of God from the part of man in salvation has prevented countless seekers from finding peace, and left whole sections of the Church of Christ powerless for long periods of time.

Let it be boldly stated that there are some things which only God can do, and for us to attempt to do them is to waste our efforts; and there are other things which only man can do, and for us to ask God to do them is to waste our prayers. It is vain for us to try to do the work which can only be done by sovereign grace; it is equally vain for us to implore God to do what has been commanded by sovereign authority.

Among the things which only God can do, of first importance to us is the work of redemption. Atonement was accomplished in that holy place where none but a divine Saviour could come. That glorious work owes nothing to the effort of any man; the best of Adam's race could add nothing there. It was all of God, and man could simply have no part.

Redemption is an objective fact. It is a work potentially saving, wrought for man, but done independent of and exterior to the individual. Christ's work on Calvary made atonement for every man, but it did not save any man.

Salvation is personal. It is redemption made effective toward the individual. Salvation is the work of God in the heart, made possible by the work of God on the Cross. Both the once-done work of redemption and the many-times-multiplied work of salvation are in the class of things which only God can do. No man can forgive his own sins; no man can regenerate his own heart; no man can declare himself justified and clean. All this is the work of God *in* man, flowing out of the work which Christ has already done *for* man. Universal atonement makes salvation universally available, but it does not make it universally effective toward the individual.

If atonement was made for all men, why are not all saved? The answer is that *before redemption becomes effective toward the individual man there is an act which that man must do*. That act is not one of merit, but of condition. And it is an act of eternal importance to us because its non-fulfillment prevents us from receiving the effective work of Christ in personal salvation. This act of appropriating salvation is one which *only man can do*.

The orthodoxy of our day is afraid to face this truth. We have been schooled in the doctrine of grace, and we fear to state things so baldly lest we rob grace of its glory and detract from the finished work of Christ. But it is a mistake to speak softly on a subject so vital to the soul. We should get the distinction clear and then be as bold as the truth compels us to be. We need not fear that we shall steal away the glory of God by honoring the truth He Himself has revealed. Failure to distinguish God's part from man's has resulted in mental confusion and moral inaction among Christians. Assurance and power require that we know and do the truth as revealed to us in the Sacred Word.

In the things-which-God-cannot-do category is this: *God cannot do our repenting for us.* In our efforts to magnify grace we have so preached the truth as to convey the impression that repentance is a work of God. This is a grave mistake, and one which is taking a frightening toll among Christians everywhere. God has commanded all men to repent. (Acts 17:30) It is a work which only they can do. It is morally impossible for one person to repent for another. Even Christ could not do this. He could die for us, but He cannot do our repenting for us.

God in His mercy may “incline” us to repent and by His inworking Spirit assist us to repent; but before we can be saved we must of our own free will repent toward God and believe in Jesus Christ. This the Bible plainly teaches; this experience abundantly supports. Repentance involves moral reformation. The wrong practices are on man’s part, and only man can correct them. Lying, for instance, is an act of man, and one for which he must accept full responsibility. When he repents he will quit lying. God will not quit for him; he will quit for himself.

When stated thus frankly everything seems obvious enough, and we may wonder how reasonable persons could expect someone else to relieve them of their personal obligation to repent. In practice, however, and under the pressure of strong religious emotion, things are not so plain as one might suppose. The fact is, the “all has been done, you can do nothing” emphasis has caused no end of confusion among seekers everywhere. People are told they must surely perish because of what they *are*, not because of what they *do*; what they do does not enter into the picture at all. And furthermore, they can do nothing in the direction of salvation; even to suggest a thing is to offend God: is not the horrible example of Cain enough to prove that? So they are tossed helplessly between the first Adam and the last Adam. One did their sinning for them and the other has done everything else. Thus the nerve of their moral life is cut and they sink back in despair, afraid to move lest they be guilty of sinful self-effort. At the same time they are deeply troubled with the knowledge that there is something seriously wrong with their religious lives. The remedy is to see clearly that men are not lost because of what someone did thousands of years ago; *they are lost because they sin individually and in person.* We will never be judged for Adam’s sin, but for our own. For our own sins we are and must remain fully responsible until they have been brought for disposition to the Cross of Jesus. The idea that we can delegate repentance is an erroneous inference drawn from the doctrine of grace wrongly presented and imperfectly understood.

Another thing God cannot do: *He cannot believe for us.* Faith is a gift from God, to be sure (Eph. 2:8-9), but whether or not we shall act upon that faith lies altogether within our power. (Jas. 2:17) We may or we may not, as we choose. True belief requires that we change our attitude toward God. It means that we not only acknowledge His trustworthiness but go on to trust His promises and obey His commandments. That is Bible faith; anything less is self-deception. Where God is the object of faith He cannot be the subject also. The repentant sinner is the subject, and as such he must put his faith in Christ as his Saviour. This he must do for himself. God may help him, He may wait long and be patient, but He can never take his place and do the act for him.

The day when it is once more understood that God will not be responsible for our sin and unbelief will be a glad one for the Church of Christ. The realization that we are personally responsible for our individual sins may be a shock to our hearts, but it will clear the air and remove the uncertainty. Returning sinners waste their time begging God to perform the very acts He has sternly commanded them to do. He will not argue with them; He will simply leave them to their disappointment. Unbelief is a great sin; or more accurately stated, *it is an evidence of*

*sins unconfessed.* Repent and believe is the order. (Mk. 1:15) Faith will follow repentance, and salvation will be the outcome.

Any interpretation of free grace which relieves the sinner of responsibility to repent is not of God nor in accordance with revealed truth. Nor is God responsible to help us to repent. He owes us nothing but justice. The only man who actually gets his just desserts is the man who dies in sin and goes unblessed to judgment. All others are objects of unearned mercy. To wait for God to help us to repent, or to believe that He is morally obliged to do so, is to misunderstand the whole plan of salvation.

Just what has all this to do with the lack of power in our churches? Very much indeed. Millions begin their religious lives without understanding their moral duty to God. They try to believe without having first repented. They try to have faith without intending to bring their lives into moral conformity with the will of God. Consequently they are not clear about anything. They are full of doubts and hidden perplexities. They are secretly disappointed with their lives, and are for the most part joyless and without enthusiasm. It is hard to extract much delight from uncertainty.

There is no use exhorting such would-be Christians to seek power; no use talking to them about the surrendered life. They simply cannot understand it. They listen to the sermon and then go their way, waiting in vain for God to do the things He has commanded *them* to do. Until this is corrected we can hope for very little power in our churches.

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