

Sleight of Hand?  
Thomas P. Johnston, Ph.D.  
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A sleight of hand takes place when a magician, unbeknownst to his audience, takes an object that is in one hand and moves it to the other. Usually the sleight of hand takes place when the audience's attention is purposefully drawn away by secondary movement or action.

The Bible appears to be fairly clear that the power of God unto salvation is vested in the gospel:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

This same idea is repeated elsewhere, speaking of the “word of the cross”:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

Further, this same power of God is vested in the word of God:

“For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

So, from these verses, it is imminently clear that the power of salvation has little to do with the receptivity and/or innate abilities of man. Rather, the emphasis of the Bible as to the power of salvation is set squarely upon a powerful gospel, as found in the Scriptures.

But, sometime in the early history of the church, a sleight of hand took place on this very point. The question shifted from the power of the gospel and the power of the word of God to the ability and/or inability of man. Following this shift (sometime between Cyprian and the Second Council of Orange of 529 A.D.) theological discussion of salvation focused almost uniquely on discussing man's ability or lack of ability.

There were some consequences to this unfortunate shift of focus:

- Anyone who said, “Whosoever believes will be saved” (John 3:16), was categorized as a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian (or Arminian), focusing on the ability of man, rather than on the power of the Gospel;
- Anyone who said, “None seek after God” (Rom 3:10), was categorized as believing in the total inability of man, thus labeled an Augustinian (or Calvinist), forgetting that the power of God to bring light into the darkest heathen heart is uniquely vested in the gospel of Christ.

The Evangelical branch of the church was thereby manipulated into the corner by a Lose-Lose debate, which still goes on today. A coy distinction was identified, skillfully described, and widely propagated to make the Bible appear to be at odds with itself. Scriptures alone, faith alone, and grace alone for salvation were set aside for only a few years shy of a millennium of church history!

Was it not off the lips of the Evil One that came the words, “Has God indeed said” (Gen 3:1)? A powerful temptation it was indeed! Did not this same Evil One tempt Jesus saying, “For it is written” (Luke 4:10)? Pitting Scripture against Scripture appears to be a trademark of the Devil. Interestingly, Jesus countered Satan by citing some powerful words penned by Moses, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God’” (Luke 4:12; Deut 6:16).

Therefore, in the study of the theological development of the early church, secondary-issues, such as Christology, has so dazzled the eyes of scholars, that they miss the forest for the trees. There is no focus on an all-powerful gospel in early church theology. Rather, scholarly debates (passed down to the present) focused on the Trinity, Christology, and various shades of anthropology. A shift definitely took place:

FROM: Power of the Gospel → TO: Views of Anthropology

Shrewd theologians early in the history of the churches enacted a sleight of hand for those who would watch and listen. And today, shrewd theologians continue to enact the same sleight of hand before the dazzled eyes of their students. The framing of the debate is subtly shifted away from God clearly working through His power word by the power of His Holy Spirit. The debate elusively shifted to various gradations of man's ability to save himself or his inability to do so. And for icing on the cake, those who are Sacramentally-oriented stand to the side and preen, as they look at Evangelicals sparring with one another over a secondary issue, which debate they themselves had originated, as described in the Second Council of Orange.

Looking at this issue from a Great Commission perspective is most important. A displaced emphasis on anthropology has forced each side of this sinister debate to approach unbiblical positions:

- On one side of the issue, those seeking to remove any part or portion of the conversion process from man's volitional response, investigate and remove ways in which evangelizing may rely on man to respond to the gospel, automatically classifying them as Pelagian, for example:
  - The Altar Call
  - The Sinner's Prayer

In their admirable desire not to focus on the human, that is exactly what they are made to do: focus on the human—and diligently seek to remove its soiling influence.

- On the other side of the issue, those seeking to find in man any ability to respond to the God, outside of the sole power of the gospel preached, give man far too much innate goodness and ability; sometimes even losing the primacy of the spiritual, and rather relying on:
  - Man-made marketing methods and human persuasive techniques
  - Building bridges to all forms of secular human logic and thought whenever possible

In their admirable desire to affirm the biblical teaching and example of human involvement in salvation, they leave out the absolute preeminence of the gospel proclaimed.

The problem with shifting the debate to anthropology had quite a destructive impact on the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

And yet, the sleight of hand of this debate has had such an impact due to the skillful authors of the 529 A.D. Second Council of Orange. In a fatal blow to evangelizing and evangelists in the Western World of the time, the divines of the Second Council of Orange devised and communicated a plan by which:

- Grace was bestowed upon the unknowing infant through the sprinkled or poured waters of Baptism.
- Because the child was unknowing, therefore the act of baptism had to be all of God. Use of the word “predestination” linked to infant baptism further confused the issues involved.
- A special power of salvation was thus vested in the sign or symbol of the water,<sup>1</sup> after the proper words and prayer of the priest; hence there resulted a strange type of sinner’s prayer by third person proxy.<sup>2</sup>
- Further, once the child was baptized, it was felt that he had already responded to the gospel, and needed no further response. He had the complete ability to do the will of God because of the Holy Water sprinkled or poured on his head.
- In fact, if any man sought to share the gospel with this baptized person and imply that he was not saved, even though he was baptized as an unknowing child, that person was doubly a heretic.

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<sup>1</sup>“Every doctrine concerns things and/or signs.

“While considering the contents of the Old and New Law again and again by diligent chase [indagine], the convenient grace of God has hinted to us, that a treatise on the Sacred Page is [versari] chiefly about things and/or signs. For as Augustine, the egregious Doctor, says in the book *on Christian Doctrine*: ‘Every doctrine is of things, and/or signs. But even things are learned through signs. But here (those) are properly named things, which are not employed to signify anything; but signs, those whose use is in signifying’” (Peter the Lombard, *Four Books of Sentences*, Book One, Distinction One, Chapter One, Paragraph One; available at: <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/lombardus/opera/lsl1-01.html> [online]; accessed: 16 May 2006; Internet).

<sup>2</sup>“XXVII. *Of Baptisme*. Baptisme is not only a signe of profession, and marke of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from other that be not christened: but is also a signe of regeneration or newe byrth, whereby as by an instrument, they that receaue baptisme rightly, are grafted into the Church: the promises of the forgeuennesse of sinne, and of our adoption to be the sonnes of God, by the holy ghost, are visibly signed and sealed: fayth is confyrmed: and grace increased by vertue of prayer vnto God.

“The baptisme of young children, is in any wyse to be retayned in the Churche, as most agreable with the institution of Christe” (Church of England, “39 Articles of Religion”; from: <http://www.episcopalian.org/efac/1553-1572.htm>; accessed: 21 Oct 2004).

Further, if anyone believed that man of his own freewill could respond to the proclamation of the gospel without first having received baptism, he was sorely misinformed and mistaken. The

Second Council of Orange of 529 A.D. was very clear on that issue:

“CANON 13. Concerning the restoration of free will. The freedom of will that was destroyed in the first man can be restored only by the grace of baptism, for what is lost can be returned only by the one who was able to give it. ...

“CONCLUSION. And thus according to the passages of holy scripture quoted above or the interpretations of the ancient Fathers we must, under the blessing of God, preach and believe as follows. The sin of the first man has so impaired and weakened free will that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought or believe in God or do good for God’s sake, unless the grace of divine mercy has preceded him. ... And we know and also believe that even after the coming of our Lord this grace is not to be found in the free will of all who desire to be baptized, but is bestowed by the kindness of Christ....

“According to the catholic faith we also believe that after grace has been received through baptism, all baptized persons have the ability and responsibility, if they desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul. We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God, but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema.”<sup>3</sup>

So, receiving baptism equals receiving grace. Likewise, double-predestination was condemned by the Roman clergy, just as predestination was about 50 years before at the Council of Arles.<sup>4</sup>

Further, outside of baptism man’s freewill is too impaired, even to respond with a hearing of faith to the gospel preached (Gal 3:2, 5). Evangelizing was eliminated from the Great

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<sup>3</sup>Second Council of Orange; available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/orange.txt> (online); accessed: 5 June 2009; Internet; or also available at: from [http://www.reformed.org/documents/canons\\_of\\_orange.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/canons_of_orange.html) (online); accessed: 5 June 2009; Internet.

<sup>4</sup>“Your correction is the salvation of all, and your decision [is] a remedy. This is why I esteem your sovereign remedy to exonerate myself by accusing my past errors and to return to innocence by a salutary confession. From now on, according to the recent statutes of the venerable council, I condemn with you this opinion:

“That says that the work of human obedience does not have to be united with divine grace;

“That says that after the fall of the first man the freedom of his will was totally destroyed;

“That says that Christ our Lord and Savior did not undergo death for the salvation of all;

“That says that the foreknowledge of God violently compels men unto death, or those that are lost are so by the will of God;

“That says that after having legitimately received baptism are dead in Adam whosoever sins;

“That says some are assigned to death, and others are predestined to life;

“That says that from Adam until Christ none of the Gentiles were saved by the first grace of God, meaning that by the law of nature, looking to the coming of Christ, by virtue of the fact that free will was lost in the first father....” (“Council of Arles, 473: Letter of Submission of the Priest Lucidus”; in Heinrich Denzinger [cited as DS], et al., *Symbolae et definitiones de la foi catholique*, 38<sup>th</sup> ed. [Paris: Cerf, 1996], DS330-335; translation mine).

Commission, and all that was left for salvation, according to the Second Council of Orange, was baptizing.

With this being the official Roman Catholic view, it is no wonder that we rarely read of any New Testament evangelism prior to the Protestant Reformation or the First Great Awakening! And on top of it, the Second Council of Orange remains a historic focal point in understanding the division between Calvinists and Arminians over anthropology.

Perhaps the only answer to this debate is a return to the power of God's Word and the power of the gospel proclaimed! Consider, for example, the statement of German Pietist Philip Jacob Spener, penned 40 years prior to the First Great Awakening in the U.S.:

“The Holy Spirit works with, by, and in the Word of God to bring men to illumination, conversion, and the new birth.”<sup>5</sup>

As wrote the Apostle Paul:

“For the worde of God *is* liuelie, & mightie in operation, and sharper then anie two edged sword, and entreth through, euen vnto the diuiding a sonder of the soule & the spirit, and of the ioynts, & the marie, and is the discerner of the thoghtes and intentes of the heart. Nether is there anie creature, which is not manifest in his sight: but all things *are* naked & open vnto his eyes, with whome we haue to do” (Heb 4:12-13; The Geneva Bible, 1560).

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<sup>5</sup>Philip Jacob Spener, *Theologische Bedencken* (Erster Theil. Mit Chur-Furstl. Brand. Freyheit. Halle, in Waysen-Hauses, 1700), 159; cited in Arthur P. Johnston, *World Evangelism and the Word of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), 30.