

**The Gracious Separatist:  
Moral and Positive Law in the Theology of James A. Harding<sup>1</sup>**

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The distinction between moral and positive law is significant for understanding the soteriology and ecclesiology of James A. Harding.<sup>2</sup> This distinction enables Harding to be a “gracious separatist.” His understanding of soteriology is rooted in the gracious character of God regarding moral law, but his ecclesiology is anchored in the explicit positive commands of God. While struggles with the moral law are graciously handled in his soteriology, violations of positive law are sternly condemned. Christians, as a community, struggle

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<sup>1</sup>A version of this paper was originally presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Christian Scholar’s Conference on July 16, 1999, Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas.

<sup>2</sup>Harding, James Alexander (b. Winchester, KY, April 16, 1848; d. Atlanta, GA, May 28, 1922). Married Carrie Knight in 1871 (d. 1876); married Pattie Cobb in 1878. Graduate of Bethany College (1869); school teacher, Hopkinsville, KY (1869-74); itinerant evangelist (300 meetings of two to ten weeks) and debater (50 debates; including four published ones: *Harding-Wilkinson*, *Harding-Nichols* [2] and *Harding-Moody*), Winchester, KY (1875-1891); co-founder and President of Nashville Bible School in Nashville, TN (1891-1901); founder and President of Potter Bible School in Bowling Green, KY (1901-1912); itinerant evangelist (1912-1922). Contributing and associate editor, *Gospel Advocate* (1882-1890); editor, *The Way* (1899-1903); co-editor, *The Christian Leader and the Way* (1904-1912); co-editor, *Gospel Herald* (1912-1915). His final years were marred by frequent blackouts and senility due to poor circulation. Harding was the father of the Bible School movement among Churches of Christ and its theological mentor. Oriented toward grace, a dynamic understanding of special divine providence, and the personal indwelling and enabling work of the Spirit, his theology had an eschatological (historic premillennialist) and pietistic (Bible reading, prayer, attendance at the Lord’s Table and tithing as “means of grace”) impulse. The Kingdom of God is advanced through evangelism rather than through political (opposed voting) and military (advocated pacifism) action. Ecclesiologically, he was a separatist who regarded immersion, instrumental music, and missionary societies as decisive lines of communion. Cf. Lloyd Cline Sears, *The Eyes of Jehovah: The Life and Faith of James Alexander Harding* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1970). Some of his articles are available at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/people/jharding.html>.

against sin in relation to the moral law, but they separate from those who violate God's positive law. Consequently, Harding is a "gracious separatist."

The distinction between moral and positive law is not Harding's invention. It has a long pedigree in historical theology and was a widely used category in nineteenth century America. For example, Charles Hodge, the Princeton theologian who shaped orthodox American Presbyterianism, used this distinction. He referred to "moral" laws as those "permanent relations of men" that arise out of the character of God and the nature of things (thus, a form of natural law). But "positive" laws "derive all their authority from the explicit command of God." So, while moral laws are those which obligate human beings due to the nature of things or the nature of God, positive laws refer to "external rites and ceremonies." As a result, "the criteria of such laws is that they would not be binding unless positively enacted." Consequently, there is a fundamental difference between moral and positive commands. Moral laws are obligatory "in their own nature," but positive laws are obligatory solely by the explicit command of God.<sup>3</sup>

In good Reformed fashion, Alexander Campbell also employed this distinction. For example, Campbell used it to describe the nature of the Fall:<sup>4</sup>

That the temptation to disobedience might be weak, and the motive to obedience strong, single, and pure, the precept given here was simple, positive, and clear. It could not be a moral precept, because other reasons than simple submission to the will of his Lord and King might have co-operated and prevented that display of pure loyalty by which his character was to be tried and his future fortunes governed. It was therefore a positive law. The requisition was so little as to present the least conceivable restraint upon

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977 reprint), 3:267, 269.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1950 reprint), 13.

liberty of thought and of action, and yet it was the most infallible test of his loyalty.

Moral obligations have crutches. There are inducements, inclinations, and natural propensities. But a positive law is an absolute test of loyalty. The significance of the positive command, then, is that it is unencumbered by the crutches of moral obligations and it gives a clear indication of the loyalty of the person involved. Adam violated a positive law. He failed the test of loyalty.

Campbell also used this distinction as a hermeneutical tool. He distinguished between moral and positive laws in the Old Testament. For example, capital punishment functions as a moral law in the Old Testament that is grounded in the creation of humanity in the image of God, but the ceremonies and sacrifices of the Old Testament are positive laws linked to the Mosaic covenant. While the “light of nature” may give evidence of moral laws (as in the case of capital punishment), it cannot reveal positive laws.<sup>5</sup>

A priesthood, altars, victims and sacrifices could not have existed without positive law. The distribution of animals into clean and unclean with regard not to food, but to sacrifice, presupposes very clear and positive enactments. Neither Abel, nor Seth, nor Enoch, could have pleased God, or walked with God, without law. The light of nature could not have originated altars, victims and priests.

Benjamin Franklin, the mid-nineteenth century Indiana preacher and editor of the *American Christian Review*, also used this distinction. Since he had a significant influence on Harding’s early theological formation, he is of particular interest. Harding’s father, J. W. Harding, was closely associated with Franklin

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<sup>5</sup>Alexander Campbell, “Is Capital Punishment Sanctioned by Divine Authority?” *Millennial Harbinger* (March 1846) 313, 323-24. The article is available at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/capital.html>.

for whom he arranged meetings in and around Winchester, Kentucky.<sup>6</sup> James Harding began reading the *American Christian Review* at the age of 10 when the paper began weekly publication (1858) and read it continuously until Franklin's death in 1878.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Harding was weaned on the writings Benjamin Franklin.

The most convenient place to see Franklin's articulation and application of the principle of "positive law" is his sermon entitled "Divine Positive Law."<sup>8</sup> Positive law is, according to Franklin, "the highest test of respect for divine authority" since it "tests" the condition of the "heart" as it penetrates "deep down into the inmost depths of the soul." Obedience to positive law "rises above mere morality...into the pure region of faith."<sup>9</sup> Disobedience to positive law reveals the "*spirit of disobedience*."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is a damning disobedience. Examples of positive law include blood on the door-posts (Exodus 12:1-13), touching the ark (1 Chronicles 13:11), Abraham sacrificing Isaac (Genesis 22), Naaman immersing himself in the Jordan (2 Kings 5), the ritual for tumbling the walls of Jericho (Joshua 2), and immersion in water for the remission of sins (Mark 16:16).<sup>11</sup> Franklin's sermon ends with the following call for obedience through immersion.<sup>12</sup>

Baptism is the test of his belief on Christ—the trial of his loyalty to the King. Here, at the entrance of the kingdom, the question comes before

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<sup>6</sup>Earl Irvin West, *Elder Ben Franklin: Eye of the Storm* (Indianapolis, IN: Religious Book Service, 1983), 253-4, 303-5.

<sup>7</sup>Harding, "H. V. Bethel's Letter," *The Way* 4 (29 January 1903) 338.

<sup>8</sup>Benjamin Franklin, "Positive Divine Law," in *Gospel Preacher: A Book of Twenty-One Sermons*, vol. 2 (Cincinnati: G.W. Rice, Publisher, 1877), 193-217 and available at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/bfranklin/tgp2/TGP209.HTM>.

<sup>9</sup>Franklin, 193.

<sup>10</sup>Franklin, 194.

<sup>11</sup>Franklin, 194-217.

<sup>12</sup>Franklin, 215-6.

him of *obedience* in a matter of the most trying nature—*obedience* to a command where he can see no reason for the *obedience*, only that *the King requires it*. If he stops at this first formal act required of him, and refuses to *obey*, what may we expect of him at any subsequent time? If the very appointment intended to test his loyalty, try his faith, and develop the spirit of obedience in him, shall be set aside by him, what ground have we for expecting obedience of him in the future?

Thus, both Franklin and Campbell understood the distinction between moral and positive law along the same lines as traditional Reformed theology (illustrated by Hodge). This distinction was widely acknowledged in the conservative quarters of 19<sup>th</sup> century American theology. James A. Harding adopted it to articulate both his soteriology and his ecclesiology.

### **The Gracious Harding**

In the second issue of *The Way*, Harding commented that it is "right and appropriate" that *The Way* should discuss "grace through faith" at the beginning of its publication.<sup>13</sup> This signals the centrality of the theme for Harding. He rejected any law principle as the means of justification. "There is no hope," he wrote, "that any of us can be justified by the deeds of the law (whether Gentiles under law in the heart, Jews under law of Moses, or Christians under law of Christ)."<sup>14</sup>

Obedience to the moral law has no function in justification, according to Harding. Otherwise, one would be saved by works. Harding was quite adamant about this point. "It is clear," he wrote, "that we do not secure our

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<sup>13</sup>James A. Harding, "By Grace Through Faith," *The Way* 1 (23 February 1899) 18.

<sup>14</sup>Harding, "Grace," 19. Cf. p. 18: "The writer of this believes that the justified are justified by grace through faith apart from works of law; that they are not in God's sight, justified by deeds of law--of any law, ancient, or modern, human or divine; that this is a 'wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort'." See also his "Three Lessons from Romans," 242-52, in *Biographies and Sermons*, ed. F. D.

salvation by our works,--that we do not pay for it, either in whole or in part, by the things we do; it is of pure grace."<sup>15</sup> In his debate with the Baptist Moody, he attempted to make this clear:<sup>16</sup>

First, then, let me remark that we are not justified by law, nor by deeds of law, either in whole or in part, but by grace. To be justified by law, it would be necessary for a man to keep a perfect law perfectly all the days of his life. [Jesus] fulfilled the law (which had to be fulfilled that man might be saved), and thus became 'the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.'

Harding's point is that there is no amount of moral obedience that can justify sinful human beings before God. The moral law has no role in justification. Acts of moral obedience are "works of righteousness," that is, they are righteous works to which we are morally obligated. Once we sin, it "becomes impossible" for one "to be saved by works of righteousness" or "works of law" (obedience to moral law). However, even though "we are saved by pure grace," we still "must do certain things to be saved."<sup>17</sup> These are the "works of God" that we must do. For example, we must be immersed in water in order to be saved. But baptism is a positive law, not a moral one (as will be noted below). The "works of God" are interpreted positivistically rather than morally. They are tests of obedience rather than modes of sanctification.

Regarding the moral law, however, God's grace is free. Grace alone saves rather than obedience to moral law. This is true even for Christians since they need grace as much as the alien sinner. Due to the "weakness of the flesh," we sin as often as other saints in Scripture under both the Old and New Testament.

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Srygley (Nashville: Srygley, 1898) available at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/jharding/TLFBR.HTM>.

<sup>15</sup>Harding, "Grace and Works," *Gospel Advocate* 25 (25 July 1883) 474.

<sup>16</sup>J. B. Moody and J. A. Harding, *Debate on Baptism and the Work of the Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1955 reprint), 220.

Indeed, in spite of his daily desire to be holy, Harding believed that “perhaps hourly, and sometimes many times in an hour, in some of these ways I sin.”<sup>18</sup>

Harding further explained himself:<sup>19</sup>

Now, under Judaism the principle which obtained was, ‘Do and live.’ As no man could do right, no man could find life. Under Christianity no man can do right anymore than he could under Judaism. The commandments of the decalogue, except the fourth, are just as binding as ever. Who, after reading the sermon on the mount, can imagine that the standard of right is in any wise lowered? But by the death of Christ a provision was made for our weaknesses and imperfections which did not exist under the law. The Christian has precisely the same sort of struggle as did the faithful Jew in trying to do the will of God....but in Christ there is no condemnation; in him all these shortcomings are overlooked; in him our sins are blotted out...Everything, therefore, depends upon our being in him.

God understands our moral failures because he knows our weaknesses due to the fall of Adam. “From Adam’s fall,” Harding noted, “we all inherit enfeebled bodies” through which Satan “more easily” approaches us.

Consequently, the moral law cannot be “obeyed perfectly.”<sup>20</sup> No one can obey the moral law because we are all scarred by the weaknesses of the flesh.

Therefore, Christians, just like alien sinners, are unable to save themselves or keep themselves saved by obedience to moral law.

In Christ, grace covers our sins and moral failures. The believer is secure. Those who are in Christ are saved and those who are outside of Christ are lost. “God will hold everything against us we do that is wrong, whether it be in ignorance, weakness or willfulness, if we are not in Christ. If we are in Christ

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<sup>17</sup>Harding, “Grace and Works,” 474.

<sup>18</sup>Harding, “What I Would Not, That I Do,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (11 July 1883) 442.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Harding, *Debate on Baptism*, 256.

and abide in him, he holds nothing against us.”<sup>21</sup> There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. This grace is not dependent upon some kind of law or works principle. It is not even based upon “doing our best.” Harding objected strongly to the language of “doing our best.” He rebuked one writer who used the phrase:<sup>22</sup>

I have yet to meet the man who does the best he knows. If Brother Clark’s definition is correct, there are no Christians; for, of all men, Christ is the only one who did the best he knew how. What we need is a Savior to save people who have not done the best they knew, to save sinners; and Christ came to do that.

If “being in Christ” is the main thing, is there any condition for remaining in Christ? If it is not perfect obedience to moral law, or even doing the “best we can” in obedience to moral law, then what is the criterion for remaining in Christ? Is the security of the believer conditioned upon anything? Harding answered:<sup>23</sup>

Everything, therefore, depends upon our being in him. The Christian remains in Christ just as long as he “wills to do his will;” as long as he strives earnestly and prayerfully against the world, the flesh, and the devil. As soon as he wills to do wrong, as soon as he deliberately enters upon a course of wrongdoing, he passes out of Christ. He then not only with the flesh but also with the mind serves the law of sin. I doubt if it is possible for such a man to return to the fold. It seems to me, he has sinned willfully.

Since not only our initial forgiveness, but also our continual security is based on grace rather than law, “wherever an [immersed believer] is, if he is daily, diligently seeking the truth, if he is promptly walking in it as he finds it, we may expect him to be saved...But for the man who is contentedly abiding in

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<sup>21</sup>Harding, “Scraps,” *The Way* 4 (26 February 1903) 401.

<sup>22</sup>Harding, “From Exchanges,” *The Way* 2 (April 1900) 50.

<sup>23</sup>Harding, “What I Would Not, That I Do,” 442.

error there is no such hope."<sup>24</sup>

We would misunderstand Harding if we reduced this to some kind of antinomian grace where good works are unnecessary to the Christian life. On the contrary, Harding insisted that while “for his good works no man shall be saved, but if there be no good works, it is a sure sign that there is no genuine faith and no real religion.”<sup>25</sup> Good works are evidential rather than instrumental. They are not the means of salvation (only faith is), but they are the evidence of faith in a person’s life. Consequently, the Christian must be dedicated to God’s way of life and yearn for his ways. “Every man,” Harding wrote, “who is heeding the voice of Jesus, who is striving to follow Christ, is himself constantly growing in meekness, and is hastening the day when the meek—that is, the humble, mild, gentle, peaceable—shall inherit the earth.”<sup>26</sup>

Harding understood the security of the believer, then, as a matter of grace rather than perfect moral obedience (moral perfection), or even how much one has progressed in sanctification, or whether one has done the best they could, or how well one has intellectually understood Christian doctrines. The assurance of the believer is secured in Christ through faith, and faith means a dedication to do the will of God, a yearning to seek God’s ways at every cost. The faith that saves is a faith that consecrates itself to God’s service “with [the] full purpose of heart to follow [Jesus], regardless of the consequences or the cost.”<sup>27</sup> The faith that “pleases God” is the faith “that sorrows for sin, that loves and trusts the Lord, that, with full purpose of heart, is determined to follow Christ, and that does

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<sup>24</sup>James A. Harding, “Questions and Answers,” *The Way* 4 (17 July 1902) 122.

<sup>25</sup>Harding, “Pardon For the Erring Christian,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (15 August 1883) 522.

<sup>26</sup>Harding, “Peace, Unity,” *The Way* 1 (June 1899) 82.

follow him."<sup>28</sup>

Harding, however, counseled that believers should avail themselves of the "means of grace" that will "transform a poor, frail, sinful human being into the likeness of Christ."<sup>29</sup> The four "means of grace," based upon Acts 2:42, are Bible study, tithing, attendance at the Lord's table and prayer.<sup>30</sup> He added: "He who faithfully uses these means unto the end of life can not be lost; he who neglects any of them endangers his soul's salvation."<sup>31</sup>

This understanding of faith reveals why Harding did not think a defective understanding of baptism's design undermined God's act of forgiveness there. The "faith which is a prerequisite to baptism," Harding contended, "includes a belief in the resurrection of Jesus and a resolve from the heart to follow wherever he may lead."<sup>32</sup> Faith is a heart commitment to follow Jesus and as long as one has that commitment then one may be scripturally immersed. They do "not have to wait to know everything before" they "can do anything."<sup>33</sup> Harding summarized his point in response to Austin McGary of the Firm Foundation:<sup>34</sup>

I have yet to learn that an act of loving, trusting obedience to Jesus Christ is not acceptable to him, simply because this loving, trusting servant of the Lord has some defective theory concerning the design of the command...The understanding that is essential to salvation is not an absolutely faultless understanding, for then confessedly no one could be saved, but it is such an understanding as will enable one to do his commandments.

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<sup>27</sup>Harding, *Debate on Baptism*, 77.

<sup>28</sup>Harding, *Debate on Baptism*, 116.

<sup>29</sup>Harding, "Scraps," *The Way* 4 (26 February 1903) 401.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Harding, "Questions Concerning the Way to Heaven," *The Way* 4 (12 February 1903) 369-71 and "How are we saved? A Reply to the Liberty Baptist," *The Way* 4 (9 April 1903) 498-500. This is a frequent topic for Harding.

<sup>31</sup>Harding, "Scraps," *The Way* 4 (26 February 1903) 402.

<sup>32</sup>Harding, "What are the Prerequisites to Valid, Scriptural Baptism," *Gospel Advocate* 29 (17 August 1887) 513.

<sup>33</sup>Harding, "Scraps," *Gospel Advocate* 29 (12 October 1887) 652.

<sup>34</sup>Harding, "Reply to Bro. McGary," *Gospel Advocate* (26 January 1887) 49.

It is important to understand that the command to be baptized must be obeyed, but one's faith is sufficient if one is baptized in order to obey even if one does not understand the design of baptism. Faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to the command are sufficient.

Why is obedience to the command sufficient even though there is a misunderstanding of its design? The rationale, at least partly, is that baptism is a positive command. Since positive commands depend solely upon the explicit will of God, their significance is in the obedient act rather than in the understanding. Just as it was relatively insignificant for Adam to understand why he should not eat of one particular tree, so it is relatively insignificant for a believer to understand why he should be baptized. What is sufficient is that the believer is obedient whether or not the command itself makes sense. Baptism, as a positive command, is a test of loyalty rather than a reflection of moral transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Thus, one may have an imperfect (even false) understanding of baptism's design and meaning, but there must be exact compliance with the positive law. One is immersed as a test of faith and loyalty, not as a matter of correct understanding.

This insistence on immersion, as the concrete expression of faith in compliance to a positive command, also grounded Harding's separatism to which we now turn.

### **The Separatist Harding**

While Harding taught a gracious approach to moral law, he saw positive law as a clear dividing line. Positive laws test one's loyalty to Jesus. As a result, positive law separates the loyal from the disloyal. For Harding, immersion was

the difference between being in Christ and out of Christ. Consequently, Harding's separatism is rooted in this principle: "If you are in Christ Jesus you must be *separated* from those who are out of Christ."<sup>35</sup>

### **Separation from Sectarians**

Immersion in water functions as the dividing line between the church of Christ and sectarianism as well as between the church and the world. One who has lovingly and trustingly been immersed in obedience to Jesus Christ is a member of the church of Christ. Harding received anyone<sup>36</sup>

as a Christian into [his] fellowship who desires it, if he did believe with his whole heart (intellect, affections and will) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; that God raised him from the dead; who acknowledged Jesus as his Lord; who was baptized because he believed Jesus required it; and who is determined by the grace of God to follow Jesus in all things according to the teaching of his word.

To do anything less would be to "become even more bitterly sectarian than many of those who are in sectarian bodies" even while we are "opposing sectarianism."<sup>37</sup> All immersed believers, then, are members of the church of Christ. They are in Christ and all others are outside of Christ. Consequently, we remain separate from the unimmersed, that is, those outside of Christ.

Harding was involved in a rather lengthy give-and-take on the question of the unimmersed in the pages of the 1883 *Gospel Advocate*. Harding offered no biblical hope to the unimmersed. "That these people," he wrote, "are not in the

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<sup>35</sup>Harding, "A Much Neglected Doctrine," *Gospel Advocate* 29 (23 March 1887) 178 (emphasis mine).

<sup>36</sup>Harding, "P. B. May's Question," *The Way* 2 (May 1900) 70.

<sup>37</sup>Harding, "Sect Baptism," *The Way* 2 (September 1900) 133.

kingdom is evident to us.”<sup>38</sup> Even though “salvation is of grace, and it is also through faith,” it is also equally clear that “God has made it dependent upon conditions with which man must comply; and no man, who does not comply with these conditions, has a Scriptural reason for believing that he has been, or ever will be saved.”<sup>39</sup> “Doubtless,” Harding said in his debate with the Methodist Nichols, “there are immersed Methodists who are entitled to the name Christian. No matter how excellent and amiable a man may be, he is not entitled to the name Christ until he has been properly initiated into the church of Christ. Unimmersed people have not been so initiated.”<sup>40</sup>

Harding did not see any inconsistency between saying, on the one hand, we are saved by grace through faith, but that, on the other hand, we are saved on the condition of immersion. To demonstrate his consistency Harding constantly pressed this question: “Was Naaman, the Syrian, cured of his leprosy by grace through faith?”<sup>41</sup> Here is his own answer:<sup>42</sup>

It is all right for sinners to pray; every convicted, penitent sinner will pray; and if he prays the prayer of faith, God will answer his prayer, too, just like he did the prayer of Israel, by showing him what to do to be saved; just like he showed Naaman what to do to be cured. And, if he obeys God like Naaman and Israel did, he will be saved from his sins just as certainly as they were from their troubles; and his salvation will be by grace through faith, not by his works.

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<sup>38</sup>Harding, “Should Unbaptized Sectarians be Called Upon to Lead the Prayers of the Lord’s House?” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (22 February 1883) 118. Harding, “Questions and Answers,” 121, “I extend no hope to him” [unimmersed].

<sup>39</sup>Harding, “How Are We Saved? A Reply to the Liberty Baptist. No. 2,” *The Way* 5 (30 April 1903) 547.

<sup>40</sup>Harding, *The Harding-Nichols Debate* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1947 reprint of the 1888 debate), p. 77.

<sup>41</sup>Harding, *The Debate on Baptism*, p. 546.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 548.

Baptism is a positive work of God, that is, it is a positive command to be obeyed. Faith obeys such a command as a test of loyalty, not as compliance with a moral command by which we save ourselves by our own moral righteousness. Thus, we are saved by grace through faith at baptism because baptism is a test of genuine faith. It is a positive command rather than a moral command. It is, therefore, a work of God rather than a work of righteousness.

Harding believed that the clarity of this command was unavoidable. "If a man does not understand the baptismal question, in this country," he argued, "it is because he will not, not because he cannot understand. It is not the Lord's fault; he made the matter plain enough."<sup>43</sup> As a clear positive command, it demands obedience rather than debating. Ignorance is no excuse.<sup>44</sup>

While Harding could offer no biblical hope to the unimmersed, he preferred to remain silent about those who would be immersed but could not, or those who have never been taught about immersion. In his debate with Nichols he commented on these exceptions:<sup>45</sup>

And so we, whom Mr. Nichols persist in calling Campbellites, conclude that those who can obey and will will be saved, those who can obey and won't will be damned, and those who would obey and can't (if there be any such on earth) with cheerful hearts we leave to the 'uncovenanted mercies' of God, being glad to know that he is just and good, loving and merciful, and that in every case he will do right:--unless we can help them to obey; in that case we do it at once.

Harding left some unimmersed—those who are unimmersed through no fault of their own or because they could not be immersed for whatever reason—to the mercy of a just and good God. "We know," he wrote, "too little of what

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<sup>43</sup>Harding, "Should the Unbaptized," 118.

<sup>44</sup>Harding, "Does Ignorance Excuse Them?" *Gospel Advocate* 24 (30 November 1882) 758.

God is doing in giving men light and inducing them to work in it, to decide upon such matters."<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, the positive command of God is clear and it provides a definitive line of demarcation between those in Christ and those outside of Christ. We cannot permit the "dictates of human wisdom" to decide what that line is because God has already determined it.<sup>47</sup> The church must preserve this line and remain separate from sectarians.

This means that we must exclude sectarians from participating at the Lord's table and from leading our assemblies of worship. "Let us be consistent, brethren," Harding exhorted, "and call upon church members only to conduct and participate in the ordinances of the Lord's house."<sup>48</sup> If we welcome "anybody and everybody to assist in our service in the Lord's house, we break down the distinction between the church and the world, between Christianity and sectarianism."<sup>49</sup> If we call upon sectarians to lead prayers in our worship assemblies, "in so doing we make the impression upon others that we regard them as Christians, and that we consider their churches branches of the church of Christ."<sup>50</sup> Harding would not even receive, much less solicit, financial support from sectarians. "I will not allow my child to beg from my enemy; neither will I receive money from the enemy of my Father."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Harding, *Harding-Nichols*, pp. 97-8.

<sup>46</sup>Harding, "Does Ignorance Excuse Them?" 758.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Harding, "Inconsistencies," *Gospel Advocate* 25 (1 March 1883) 131.

<sup>49</sup>Harding, "Scraps. The Murray Meeting," *Gospel Advocate* 28 (11 August 1886) 504.

<sup>50</sup>Harding, "Bro. McGarvey's Reply Reviewed," *Gospel Advocate* 29 (25 May 1887) 321.

<sup>51</sup>Harding, "Scraps," *Gospel Advocate* 28 (18 August 1886) 520.

Harding, then, called for a complete separation of the church of Christ from sectarians. The church should not receive the unimmersed into membership, it should not invite the unimmersed to the Lord's table, and it should not ask the unimmersed to lead prayers or to give money. The church must be separate from the sects. It can have no communion with the unimmersed.

According to Harding, the problem here is not baptism, but rather the heart. He clarified his rationale by pointing to the heart rather than the water.<sup>52</sup>

Now let it be understood I do not find fault with these people because they have not been baptized. That is not the disease; it is only a symptom; unbelief is the disease; their hearts are not right.....What right have we to call upon these people who *will not obey the Lord*, who cannot even endure to hear all of his commands repeated, to lead the services of our Father's house?

Because these believers will not obey the positive command of God to be immersed, they are excluded from the fellowship of the church. Because the command is so clear and so simple, a refusal to obey must reflect an unbelieving heart. The positive command to be immerse, then, serves its function. It provides a test of loyalty to see whose heart is genuinely interested in serving God. The unimmersed who have been taught the truth reveal their hearts by neglecting God's command. The church, therefore, can have no fellowship with them.

### **Separation from Apostates**

Harding was at the forefront of those who called for a separation from Christians who had embraced instrumental music and the missionary society. Those innovations, Harding believed, "were the first steps of an apostasy whose

advanced guard is already far gone into one of the worst forms of infidelity.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in 1903 Harding referred to the “Christian Church” as the “youngest of the denominations” and noted that it was “traveling from Christ...faster than any other one of them.” He cited as evidence Powell’s Unitarianism, Cave’s doubts about the sonship of Jesus, Lamar’s acceptance of the unimmersed and Willett’s destructive criticism.<sup>54</sup> It is no wonder, then, that by 1906 Harding is applying the injunction “do not eat with such a one” to digressives, innovators and church-dividers.<sup>55</sup> Harding called for an ecclesiological separation from the apostates.

But Harding’s separatism did not arise in 1906. As far back as the 1880s Harding desired separation. In 1887 Harding called for a withdrawal of fellowship from innovators and church-dividers.<sup>56</sup> “We cannot keep the unholy union and prosper,” Harding commented.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, 1887 may have been a significant year for Harding though he held similar ideas as early as 1883.<sup>58</sup> But 1887 was the year his home church, the Court Street Church in Winchester, KY, divided over the introduction of the organ into its worship assembly. The organ was brought in over the objection of his father (one of the congregation’s elders)

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<sup>52</sup>Harding, “Union Meetings,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (27 June 1883) 410.

<sup>53</sup>Harding, “Consistency. A Reply to J. W. McD. Moore,” *The Way* 5 (11 June 1903) 643

<sup>54</sup>Harding, “The Church of God Versus the Denominationalism,” *The Way* 5 (17 September 1903) 866. See Earl I. West, *The Search for the Ancient Order* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 2:250-91, for a summary of the historical context sympathetic with Harding’s perspective.

<sup>55</sup>Harding, “With Whom Are We Not to Eat, Nor to Have Company?” *The Christian Leader and the Way* 20 (20 November 1906) 8.

<sup>56</sup>Harding, “Shall We Obey the Lord? A Question for Bro. McGarvey in a Late Issue of the Apostolic Guide,” *Gospel Advocate* 29 (2 November 1887) 696 and “Withdrawal from the Disorderly,” *Gospel Advocate* (14 December 1887) 794.

<sup>57</sup>Harding, “Withdrawal,” 794.

<sup>58</sup>See footnotes 65 and 67.

as well as a hundred other members. James Harding spoke at the first meeting of the new church (Fairfax Church) and reminded them of Moses striking the rock, Uzzah, Nadab and Abihu.<sup>59</sup> The new church was on safe ground and had done the right thing by withdrawing from the Court Street Church. This had a substantial impact on Harding's attitudes toward innovations because he often referred to this division in the most painful terms. It certainly gave him a personal perspective on who the real dividers of the church were, at least as he had experienced it.<sup>60</sup>

Harding's ecclesiological separatism, then, was highlighted by the divisive character of the innovators. They were sowing discord among the churches, and this is one of the seven things that God hates.<sup>61</sup> "There is not, neither can there be," Harding wrote, "any greater crime than the willful, high-handed corruption of God's worship, and the consequent division of the church."<sup>62</sup>

Harding's separatism is so complete that he will neither "hold a meeting with a church that uses an organ"<sup>63</sup> nor will he call on a digressive to lead a prayer in an assembly.<sup>64</sup> In effect, they have become sectarians in their apostasy.

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<sup>59</sup>Sears, *The Eyes of Jehovah*, 80-81.

<sup>60</sup>For an example, see Harding, "Who Divides the Body?" *The Christian Leader and the Way* 20.18 (1 May 1906) 9 which David Lipscomb also printed in the *Gospel Advocate* 48 (17 May 1906) 305. Also see Harding, "Union and Harmony not in Sight," *The Christian Leader and the Way* 24 (29 November 1910) 8-9.

<sup>61</sup>Sears, p. 84: "we must never teach or practice, if thereby we separate from our fellowship the least of the children of God; otherwise we are heretics, schismatics, and thus become the worst of those seven things which Jehovah hates—namely, sowers of 'discord among brethren'."

<sup>62</sup>Harding, "The Organ Goes In and McGarvey Goes Out," *The Way* 4 (4 December 1902) 283.

<sup>63</sup>Harding, "[Untitled]," *Gospel Advocate* 27 (20 May 1885) 307.

<sup>64</sup>Harding, "A Scrap," *The Way* 5 (6 August 1903) 769. Sears, p. 91, relates the story of how E. A. Elam called on a brother Lloyd to lead prayer even though Elam himself had described him as "factionist." Harding commented: "I would as soon have thought of calling on the devil."

“I will have no more fellowship for a church claiming to be a church of Christ,” Harding declared, “that will introduce an organ and thereby drive out good brethren, than I have for a Methodist society.”<sup>65</sup>

Harding’s separatism is definitive and uncompromising. He declared non-fellowship with innovators and dividers of churches. He lamented that in the years since 1860 there are now cities where the “Church of Christ” and the “Christian Church” have “no Christian fellowship for each other.”<sup>66</sup> But this is the way it must be if the innovators persist and continue to divide churches. In 1883, Harding’s conviction had already settled:<sup>67</sup>

It is as wrong to divide a church by introducing an organ into its worship; those who do it are schismatics, and are to be avoided. Time does not blot out their sin. Nothing but sorrow, repentance, confession and prayer for them; and until they are pardoned they are not in the fellowship.

By 1911 his conviction had not changed except that he may have felt it even more deeply. Reflecting on Romans 16:17-18, Harding determined that “we ought to have no fellowship whatever, religiously, with those who have divided, or are dividing churches. Unless they repent, confess their sins, and turn resolutely from them, all Christians must mark and avoid them—or bring upon themselves the curse of an outraged God.”<sup>68</sup>

At the root of his separatism, however, is Harding’s application of positive law to ecclesiological issues. God has positively command singing and he has appointed the church as his missionary society. In Harding’s mind, whether one sings with or without the instrument was a test of loyalty. Whenever one sings

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<sup>65</sup>Harding, “Christ Came to Divide Us,” *Gospel Advocate* 27 (12 August 1885) 497.

<sup>66</sup>Harding, “Our Practice,” *The Way* 5 (13 August 1903) 786.

<sup>67</sup>Harding, “The Force of Custom,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (28 November 1883) 762.

with the instrument, one violates the positive law of God. Consequently, faithful Christians must separate from such a spirit of disobedience.

### **Reconciling Graciousness and Separatism**

“Gracious Separatist” sounds like an oxymoron, but in the theology of James A. Harding it makes sense. How did Harding accomplish this monumental task? I believe he does it with several key theological and hermeneutical distinctions.

First, the church must maintain a respect for biblical words and practices. It must continue to affirm that where the Bible speaks, we speak, but where the Bible is silent we are silent.<sup>69</sup> In order to clarify the point Harding distinguished between “theoretical” differences and “practical” differences. When it comes to differences about what the Bible teaches (such as atonement theory or Trinity, etc.), believers should “express themselves in the very words of the Bible, word for word.”<sup>70</sup> In this way believers who disagree about the interpretation and meaning of the text can unite on the words of Scripture.

The solution is the same when there are differences in practice. Harding believed unity can be achieved if we “follow the teaching of the Bible strictly, speaking where it speaks, and being silent where it is silent; *and in following its*

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<sup>68</sup>Harding, “J. W. McGarvey and a Very Dark Spot,” *The Christian Leader and the Way* 25 (5 December 1911) 8.

<sup>69</sup>Harding, “Thus Others See Us,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (1 August 1883) 487: “The key-note of this reformation was the phrase, ‘Where the Bible speaks we speak; where the Bible is silent we are silent.’ It was held that if Christians would unite, as Christ command us to do, we must return to primitive, apostolic ground; we must have the same rule of faith and practice that the apostolic churches did, and consequently, we must believe and do as they did.” See also Harding, “Which is the Guilty Party?” *The Way* 4 (26 February 1903) 402-3.

<sup>70</sup>Harding, “On the Unity of Christians,” *Gospel Advocate* 30 (21 November 1888) 2.

*directions always act in the way that is certainly right.*"<sup>71</sup> Consequently, if everyone would agree to conform their practice to the practice of Scripture, there would be unity. If everyone would but "respect the silence of the scriptures" we would preserve the "unity and harmony of the people of God."<sup>72</sup> Where there is a failure to conform to the practice of the New Testament, then there is the presumption of disloyalty to the authority of the Bible. Therefore, unity is maintained by a consistent conformity to the explicit witness of Scripture.

Second, as it pertains to the worship and work of the church (ecclesiology), Harding viewed the New Testament as a perfect law. "Under the new covenant, the New Testament is our law; we are to be guided by it in everything that we do in the worship and service of God."<sup>73</sup> Practices pertaining to the worship and work of the church require "legal power" in order to introduce them into the church.<sup>74</sup> The New Testament is "divine law" and the "rule of doctrine, faith and practice."<sup>75</sup> "Legal power" obtains when a New Testament text authorizes the practice.<sup>76</sup>

The search for "legal power" means that the New Testament must be scanned as a legal document that authorizes only what it contains. The "New Testament is a *perfect law*" so that if the New Testament does not contain it, then it is forbidden.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, Harding could read the New Testament like a

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Harding, "Will We Divide," *Gospel Advocate* 26 (2 January 1884) 10.

<sup>73</sup>Harding, "The Organ in Worship. What is the Strongest and Clearest Argument Against Its Use," *Gospel Advocate* 28 (29 September 1886) 616.

<sup>74</sup>Harding, "Bro. Allen's Authority of Permission," *Gospel Advocate* 26 (22 March 1883) 179.

<sup>75</sup>Harding, "Questions from Brother T. M. Sweeney, and Answers," *The Christian Leader and the Way* 29 (25 September 1905) 8.

<sup>76</sup>Harding, "Bro. Allen's Authority," 179.

<sup>77</sup>Harding, "Unity," *Gospel Advocate* 25 (6 June 1883) 355.

legal brief: “they distinctly specified *singing*; they very significantly left out the *playing*; they left the church what they called a ‘perfect’ guide—‘the perfect law of liberty’.”<sup>78</sup> Since the New Testament is a perfect law, then anything that cannot be authorized by explicit command, approved example or necessary inference is forbidden.<sup>79</sup> Because of the New Testament’s legal character, its silence is intentional.<sup>80</sup> When one violates that silence, it is a sign of disloyalty to biblical values.

Third, Harding applied the distinction between moral and positive law to ground his separatism. Since the New Testament is a perfect law, its instructions about baptism, music and missions have a positive (legal) character. They are God’s positive commands. God commands immersion, singing and the local church, and this excludes sprinkling, playing and the missionary societies. Harding viewed the innovations as violations of God’s positive laws for the worship and work of the church. Consequently, he understood them as loyalty tests.

Harding applied this distinction to the question of baptism in his debate with Moody in 1889. Here is his extended comment:<sup>81</sup>

While the positive law is not right in the nature of things (in so far as mortals can see), but is right because it is commanded. Baptism and the Lord's Supper under the new covenant, and the ceremonial law of the Jews under the old covenant, are illustrations of positive law...Positive law differs from moral law in that it can be obeyed

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<sup>78</sup>Harding, “The Organ in Worship,” 616.

<sup>79</sup>Harding, “Thus Saith the Lord,” *Gospel Advocate* 25 (16 May 1883) 314: “Now, there are three ways in which the Bible teaches; namely, by precept, by example, and by *necessary* inference. What is not taught in one of these ways, God does not teach; whatever is not thus demanded of men, God does not demand; whatever is not thus forbidden, he does not forbid.”

<sup>80</sup>Harding, “The Music Question. A Reply to R. R. Hamlin and Others,” *The Christian Leader and the Way* 19 (14 November 1905) 8-9.

<sup>81</sup>Harding, *Debate on Baptism*, 256-7.

perfectly. Positive law is therefore a more perfect test of faith and love, a more perfect test of allegiance to God, than moral law...For these two reasons, doubtless, God has ever been more ready to overlook the infractions of moral, than of positive law; and for the same reasons the positive is peculiarly adapted to the expression and the perfection of faith. I would not have you suppose that I think God would for a moment tolerate a willful violation of moral law. No, no; I simply mean that God, who knows so well our inherited weakness, is patient and gentle with us in our imperfect obedience to this law, and in our many backslidings from it. But positive law we can obey perfectly, and he is strict and stern in demanding that we shall do it.

The application is apparent. God is gracious toward our moral failings because he understands our weaknesses and our inability to obey moral law perfectly. He understands our sanctification will be slow and progressive due to our weaknesses. However, God is stern and unyielding in his insistence on obedience to positive law because we can obey it perfectly. Positive law has such clarity that there is no misunderstanding it. One can be immersed—the command must be obeyed as stated.

This explains why God can act with such grace and forgiveness toward the moral failings of David, but at the same time remove Saul from his kingship and instantly kill Uzzah. Saul and Uzzah “violated a positive law.”<sup>82</sup> God can bear with the moral failings of his people because of their weaknesses, but God will not tolerate the violation of his explicit positive laws. Old Testament examples testify to God’s sternness. The Old Testament teaches the church to respect the sanctity of positive law.

Harding’s application of these three hermeneutical principles to innovations in the worship and work of the church is obvious. Since the New Testament as a law contains God’s positive laws for worship, we must carefully

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 267.

follow its particulars. The worship that is pleasing to God is worship that is “done by his commandment.”<sup>83</sup> If the New Testament does not positively teach instrumental music by precept, example or necessary inference, then it is forbidden because we are guided in the worship of God by his positive law. To add to or take away from that law is to violate the positive command and thereby pollute the worship of God. To pollute the worship of God, Harding argued, is to touch the ark and invite death.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, just as God excludes all violators of his positive law from his presence, so the church must separate from all innovators who violate God’s positive law.

### Conclusion

Ecclesiology, according to Harding, is regulated by positive law (much like the ceremonial institutions of the Old Testament) rather than moral law. Just as there were severe punishments for disobedience to positive laws in the Old Testament, so there are in the New Testament. Harding’s separatist ecclesiology is rooted in an understanding of the New Testament as a set of positive laws that define the worship and work of the church. These details must be interpreted within the framework of a forensic hermeneutic—one cannot add to or subtract from God’s positive law. There is no grace for the violation of positive law because when it is violated it reveals a heart of unbelief (and there is no grace without faith). Indeed, it is an unpardonable sin because it is a form of unbelief.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Harding, “The Spontaneity of Devotions and Kindred Matters,” *The Christian Leader and the Way* 22 (1 September 1908) 8.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>Harding, “The Unpardonable Sin,” *Gospel Advocate* 28 (22 September 1886) 593-4.

However, sanctification is regulated by moral law, and Christians recognize that they do not measure up to that standard. No Christian is sinless and none even do the best they know. Christians constantly struggle against the weaknesses of the flesh. Here there is grace as long as there is a willingness to obey Christ. God accepts his people despite their moral failings because he knows their heart and their willingness to seek him.

God, therefore, is gracious toward violations of moral law because he knows we cannot keep it perfectly. Consequently, he looks to the heart of the believer. But he is stern toward the violations of positive law because he expects us to keep it perfectly and a failure to do so reveals an unbelieving heart. Apparently, for Harding, we can remain loyal to Jesus even with our moral failings, but we reveal our disloyalty when we fail to keep the positive law perfectly.

Harding distinguished between the moral life of a person and their rational ability to understand positive commands in order to obey them. In the moral life we are confronted with weaknesses that incapacitate us so that God understands our failings. However, in the intellectual (cognitive) life we do not have these same failings. We can understand God's positive law. It is clear, and when one fails to understand it, it is not because there is a cognitive failing, but because there is an unwillingness to obey. Consequently, positive law more clearly demonstrates whether our hearts are willing to serve God than does the moral law. Harding's assumption, then, is that the Fall has substantially affected our moral ability, but it has left our intellectual (cognitive) abilities untouched. Consequently, the real test of loyalty and obedience is positive law rather than moral law. This compartmentalization permits Harding to be a gracious

separatist. For those in Christ, seeking to do his moral will, God is gracious. But God separates himself from those who violate his positive laws, and if God separates himself, so must we.

This theological hermeneutic has deeply impacted 20<sup>th</sup> century Churches of Christ. It grounds the division between ethics and doctrine. We graciously understand ethical failures (e.g., the struggles of an alcoholic), but we are tenacious in excluding those who disagree with us on doctrinal issues (e.g., those who use instrumental music). Even more problematic, some collapse moral law into positive law so that the "speeding baby" (a young Christian who dies in a speeding accident) is as much in danger of hell as the unimmersed.<sup>86</sup> The only ground of assurance in that scenario is perfect obedience.<sup>87</sup>

In addition, moral law and positive law utilize a different hermeneutical method. While in ethics we might draw moral principles from narrative acts and imperatives (including the Old Testament) as we apply them to questions the text does not explicitly address, in ecclesiology we are restricted by what is explicitly or implicitly stated (excluding the use of the Old Testament because the

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<sup>86</sup>H. A. Dobbs, "Demurs," Firm Foundation 106 (March 1992) 25-6: "Shall we say a baby in Christ may violate the law by driving too fast, but the mature Christian may not. Then the question comes, at what point in growth does a person cross over the line and have to keep the law absolutely. . . Denominational people sometimes ask, "What if a penitent believer is on his way to be baptized and is struck by lightning and killed, will he be lost?" If you know the right answer to that question, you have solved the mystery of the speeding baby."

<sup>87</sup>Cf. Dobbs, "On 1 John 1:7," Firm Foundation 106 (November 1991) 27; "More on 1 John 1:7," Firm Foundation 106 (December 1991) 379; "Demurs and Replies," Firm Foundation 107 (January 1992) 25-6; and "Demurs and Replies," Firm Foundation 107 (March 1992) 25-6. His basic point is that the cleansing of the blood is dependent upon keeping all the commands of God. Walking in the light is walking as Jesus walked--keeping all of God's commands. For example, "If. . . if. . . we walk in the light as he is in the light. If. . .if . . . we keep the commandments. . . all the commands . . . the blood of Christ is keeping us clean from all unrighteousness" ("More on 1 John 1:7," 379).

New Testament is our new positive law). We have had one hermeneutic for ethics (principles), but another hermeneutic for ecclesiology (a blueprint patternism) because we have, in our own view of things, been interpreting two different laws (the moral and the positive) which require two different hermeneutics.

Theologically, we need to rethink how we understand the function of “positive law.” Do rituals serve the premise of moral transformation or are rituals independent tests of loyalty? Can we separate ethics and doctrine so neatly? Did the sabbath serve humanity or humanity the sabbath? Does ecclesiology serve Christ (i.e., his goal for humanity) or does humanity serve ecclesiology?

Hermeneutically, we need to begin to read the Bible as redemptive story rather than as a legal charter. The story includes imperatives and ethical goals, but the redemptive story grounds those ethics and it provides the hermeneutical frame for understanding both ethics and doctrine. Instead of “legal power” we should seek theocentric and Christocentric rationales that arise out of God’s redemptive history.

Like Harding, we should articulate an understanding of sanctifying grace that understands human weakness. Unlike Harding, we should exercise some hermeneutical grace regarding what Harding called “positive law.” Sanctifying grace applies to cognition as well as moral weaknesses. The grace we show in the process of moral transformation should also be the grace we demonstrate in our dialogue with each another concerning doctrinal disagreements within the body of Christ.

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