Forgiven by the Blood of Christ?

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Some sins are deemed to be worse than others. A certain disgust is understandable when Christians are confronted with the onslaught of wickedness in an unredeemed world. Too often, the news tells the tragic story of a young life taken, a woman brutally attacked, a husband who abuses his family, or another drug dealer back on the streets. Most Christians recognize that there is hope of redemption for the vilest offender. Yet, there is a remarkable untold dilemma that is hidden beneath the surface. Consider the man who takes the life of another, assaults a woman, or commits any other heinous crime. If such an individual pays their debt to society, comes to faith in Christ, and sufficient time passes demonstrating a solid testimony for Christ, is the Church prepared to accept them in a leadership position if the Lord calls them into the ministry? Should Christians embrace a pastor who committed a terrible crime before salvation in Christ?

Historically, there have been three basic approaches or positions regarding this thorny issue:

1. Reject and prohibit any person with a troubled past from ever entering any position of leadership or ministry because they have disqualified themselves, and have shown that they are not to be trusted (especially in positions of leadership). This position recognizes and stresses that redemption and leadership are two separate issues.

2. Recognize that any individual who committed a heinous crime before their salvation in Christ is fully forgiven by the blood of Christ and should be welcomed into the ministry.

3. Recognize that any individual who committed a heinous crime before their salvation in Christ is fully forgiven by the blood of Christ, but such individuals should only be allowed into the ministry after sufficient time has passed to demonstrate a testimony of faithfulness to Christ.

The purpose of this paper is to examine relevant Scripture passages to demonstrate that individuals convicted of horrible crimes cannot only find redemption in Christ, but with time
they can demonstrate that they meet the biblical qualifications required for serving in the ministry. It should be noted that this entire subject matter is an area where many Christians have allowed worldly influences to impact their thinking. This highlights the necessity of examining the issue from a biblical point of view.

**The Cleansing of Sin**

There are many passages in the Word of God that provide helpful instruction regarding the issues involved. In Ephesians 5 the Apostle Paul testified, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25-26). Jesus Christ loves the Church so much that He took the initiative and handed Himself over to death to pay the penalty of sin for His believers. To be sure, Jesus Christ went to the Cross as a willing sacrifice, and this was His supreme demonstration of His love for the Church. The idea of cleansing the Church, “with the washing of water by the word” means that He made His bride holy by cleansing her (v. 26). God the Son is without sin and so must His bride (the Church) be without sin. This cleansing is positional, or how God sees His people. Because Christ paid the penalty of sin, God now sees His people as holy and without sin. God sees His believers as having been cleansed from sin. The washing, “of water by the word” is a reference to the Word of Christ (v. 26). In other words, this is a reference to the Gospel of Christ. It is by the purifying words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that His people are washed and made clean. The reason is given in verse 27, “that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” Paul used the image of a young bride to convey the teaching that Christ will one day present the Church to Himself holy and without sin.

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In 1 Corinthians 6 we find another key passage regarding the cleansing that comes about when individuals come to faith in Christ. Verses 9-10 reveal a strong warning from the Apostle Paul, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” Notice the opening words of verse 11, “And such were some of you.” Some of the believers in Corinth used to be guilty of the vile acts that are common in the world. What had changed? Paul continues, “But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” Paul was describing what had taken place at conversion in the lives of these believers:

In this verse, Paul uses three terms to describe the conversion of the Corinthians. The tense of all three verbs indicates an action in the past that is complete. Washed means spiritually cleansed by God. Sanctified means set apart as God’s people. Justified means declared righteous by God because of Christ’s work on the Cross.

Even though many of the believers in Corinth had once been caught up in the wickedness that dominates the present fallen world, this is not who they were anymore in Christ Jesus. Again, this is positional, or how God sees us.

**Battling the Sin Nature**

In his second epistle to the Church at Corinth, Paul once again addressed this issue by teaching, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” Certain care must be taken to fully understand the intended meaning of this text. Paul was not teaching sinless perfection in this life, or the eradication of the sin nature. Nor was Paul referring to believers receiving our new glorified bodies. Instead, Paul was once more describing the positional change that takes place at conversion:

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We still have the same physical features, basic personality, genetic constitution, parents, susceptibility to temptation (1 Cor. 10:14), sinful environment (Gal. 1:4), etc. These things do not change. He was stressing the elements of discontinuity: perspectives, prejudices, misconceptions, enslavements, etc. (cf. Gal. 2:20). God adds many new things at conversion including new spiritual life, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, the righteousness of Christ, as well as new viewpoints (v. 16).

The Christian is a new creature (a new man, Rom. 6) in this sense. Before conversion we did not possess the life-giving Holy Spirit who now lives within us (Rom. 8:9). We had only our sinful human nature. Now we have both our sinful human nature and the indwelling Holy Spirit. This addition makes us an essentially new person since the Holy Spirit’s effects on the believer are so far-reaching.

This has a direct bearing on the subject at hand. There can be no doubt that a new believer in Christ has been cleansed, forgiven, and given a new nature in Christ. This is not to say, however, that every believer is now automatically walking with Christ once they are redeemed because this is where sanctification comes in. It is a disservice to new believers to fail to instruct them in the differences between their positional standing in Christ and their responsibility to walk with Christ. We must inform them that:

God never says He’ll take away bad feelings or temptations. He says instead that “with the temptation, [He] will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). The glory of God is not that you are never again tempted, but that in the midst of your trials, instead of giving in to sin, you flee to Him and do what’s right. To the glory of God you learn to say no to sin and yes to God and to His standard of righteousness.

Failure to understand this point leads to cruel bondage. We open ourselves to the suggestion that our Christian faith isn’t working and whip ourselves into the psychotherapist’s office at the first available appointment.

The truths presented so far are already at odds with two of the positions often taken when confronted with a new believer that had horrific sins before their salvation in Christ. The positional standing of believers in Christ, along with the cleansing and forgiveness of sins by God at conversion, instructs us that we must view our brothers and sisters in Christ as God now

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3 Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 2 Cor. 5:17.

sees them. This means that Christians should not be disqualified from the ministry simply because of their sins before salvation in Christ. However, this does not automatically mean that such an individual is biblically qualified for ministry. The Word of God sets forth standards for entering the ministry. Paul instructed Timothy:

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested: then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 3:1-13).

The overall pattern described by Paul is of men who have learned to walk by faith with Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:7). This is something new believers in Christ have not learned to do. It is for this reason Paul stated specifically in verse 6 that such an individual should not be, “a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6). The Greek word for novice is neophyton and means, “newly planted in the Christian community, newly converted.”⁵ New converts to the faith must not be allowed into positions of leadership because it leads to pride. Pride was the reason that the Devil fell, and it is the reason many men in the ministry will also fall. Just as the Devil was removed from his position of service to God, so it is that a prideful elder in the Church will lose his position of service because his pride will lead him into sin. This specifically teaches us the principle of the importance of waiting to put

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new believers (whether they have committed heinous sins before first trusting in Christ or not) into positions of leadership.

**An Opposing Point of View**

It has been already sufficiently demonstrated from Scripture that any sin can be forgiven by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, if a person is willing to place their trust in Him. Believers are now identified with Christ. God sees His people as holy and righteous. Unfortunately, this positional change in Christ is not correctly understood by many people today. Further, a predominant teaching that has infiltrated the Church seeks to completely undermine this positional truth of our identity in Christ. Herein is one of the many problems with psychology. The system of psychology is completely antithetical to the foundational teaching of the Word of God. This secular system of belief undermines the teaching of the Word of God that a believer is a new creation in Christ and no longer has to be a slave to sin. Instead, a person is permanently labeled as a victim of a disease:

A second major problem with psycholabels is perpetual victimization. When one accepts his label, he is forever categorized. Every experienced pastor counselor has heard these ideas expressed: “I am an alcoholic … so it’s not my fault” or “I am a codependent … so it’s not my fault” so many times that it requires great personal discipline to keep from screaming, “Accept responsibility for what you once were and rejoice in what you now are in Christ! If you are in Christ, you are a new creation! The old things have passed away! All things have become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Two of the most liberating truths of the gospel of Christ are that God forgives us for our sins and we no longer have to remain slaves to the past! We can experience cleansing and total healing through the unlimited power of God.

It is troubling to know that many Christian counselors cling tenaciously to the labeling concept and consequently make their counselees slaves to the past. When this type of labeling mindset is present in the Church it becomes a problem. The Christian with a troubled background before their salvation in Christ becomes labeled. An individual who

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struggled with alcohol is now labeled forever as an alcoholic. A prostitute or drug addict encounters the same type of labeling. It is often thought that they simply cannot change and, therefore, they should not be afforded the opportunity to serve the Body of Christ in a leadership role. This is antithetical to the message of the New Testament. Christians receive their identity from Christ, not from the labels of a secular belief system. The Apostle Paul taught, “Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16). The context helps us to understand that because of the redemption we have in Christ, believers must not judge one another based on the externals. Instead, we should recognize who our brothers and sisters are in Christ Jesus. Christians should not look at fellow believers from a worldly point of view. In other words, we should not look at people that are redeemed in Christ the same as the world does. Who you were before your salvation in Christ does not define who you are now that you are a Christian!

**Case Study from the Word of God**

Thankfully, the Word of God provides a historical narrative that perfectly illustrates the principles that have been brought forth from the New Testament. The reader of Acts is first introduced to Saul of Tarsus at the stoning of Stephen, “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:57-58). But what does it mean that the witnesses put their clothes at the feet of Saul? We are told specifically in two different places. First we read, “Now Saul was consenting to his death” (Acts 8:1). Further, Paul (Saul) himself would later testify that He said to the Lord, “They know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the...
clothes of those who were killing him” (Acts 22:19-20). Saul took part in the coldblooded murder of Stephen, but his crimes did not end there. Referring to Christians Paul stated, “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished” (Acts 22:4-5). Describing his anger with Christians Paul later said, “And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:11). This was quite the résumé of a man filled with hatred, willing to shed blood. Today, he would be given a psychological label and told that there is little to no hope for him to be able to change. Thankfully, Saul encountered the living Christ and was made into a new creation in Christ.

It is understandable that at first the Saints of Christ were afraid of Paul after his conversion. This can be seen when Ananias was first instructed to go Saul. Luke records, “Then Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name’” (Acts 9:13-14). Paul, as a new convert to the faith, ran into the same problem at Jerusalem, “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:26-27). Eventually, as Saul’s conversion to the Christian faith became well-known, he was welcomed into the fellowship of the saints.
The Principles Applied

The principles put forth in this paper can be best illustrated in the story of a young woman who began to feel the Lord tugging at her heart. She did the only thing that she knew to do; she started attending a local church. This woman was fortunate because she attended a church where the Gospel of Christ was clearly proclaimed. With time, she responded to the Gospel of Christ by trusting in Jesus as her Savior.

As a young single lady, she got heavily involved with the church. With time she started to teach Sunday school, and got involved with the choir. It was another beautiful testimony of new life in Christ, but then there was a problem. The young pastor of this church was also single, and the two of them were drawn together by their love for the Lord. With time they were engaged, and that is when the fireworks began. This woman had a troubled past before her new life in Christ. She had been involved in drugs, drinking, and at one time was a prostitute. Neither one of them had ever been married, and her testimony over the years after accepting Christ was rock solid. But problems came up because about half of the church did not think that a woman like this was suitable to be the pastor’s wife. The church began to argue and fight, and they finally decided to call a meeting. As the arguments were made back and forth the tension in the room increased. Quite understandably, this young woman got extremely upset as she sat there listening to people bring up all the things from her past. She began to cry, and the pastor stood up to speak because he simply could not take the pain that this was causing the woman that he loved. All eyes were on him as the pastor said, “My fiancé’s past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of the blood of Jesus to wash away sin. Today you have put the blood of Jesus on trial. So, does it wash away sin or not?” The entire assembly grew silent and began to weep, as they realized that they were slandering the blood of Christ.
Having come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior behind the bars of a jail cell in 1993, I can testify firsthand that within the Church of Christ the arrogance of men is often revolting. It begs the question, “How many individuals in the Church truly understand and believe the words of Scripture concerning the Gospel of Christ?” Certainly numerous examples could be given of individuals with troubled backgrounds before Christ who return to the same pattern of sin after their redemption in Christ. Men and women of all different backgrounds, including those considered to be good according to the standards of the world, will have serious moral failures after they have come to know Christ as Savior. Our focus must be on leading souls to redemption in Christ, and then also teaching believers the importance of walking by faith in Christ. Only once a believer has learned to daily walk with Christ, and is able to demonstrate a sufficient testimony of such a walk, should they ever be considered for a position of leadership.

Romans chapter 3 sheds some additional light on this on this topic. Paul wrote:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26).

Redemption is possible because Christ took the penalty of our sins on the Cross. When individuals place their faith in Him for eternal salvation, God declares us innocent and free from the penalty of our sins. A biblical worldview recognizes this positional truth about our identity in Christ. It is unfortunate that many Christians have let the world influence their thinking in this area.

Let us recognize the clear teaching of Scripture that any individual who committed a heinous crime before their salvation in Christ is fully forgiven by the blood of Christ, but such individuals should only be allowed into the ministry after sufficient time has passed to
demonstrate a testimony of faithfulness to Christ. Instead of judging our brothers and sisters in Christ for their sins before salvation, let us not be so prideful. Our sin is no better than the sin of our brother or sister in Christ, or the sin of the lost. Let us not make the mistake of questioning the ability of the blood of Christ to cleanse any man or woman from sin. Christians should make sure we never condone the sin, but let us make certain that we love just as the Lord Himself did. Our Savior was willing to humble Himself, willing to reach across the boundaries of men, willing to love those that needed redemption no matter what they looked like and no matter what they had done. This is the example for us as we point men and women to the Savior Jesus Christ!
Works Cited


