

## GETTING THE GOSPEL RIGHT

Publication of John MacArthur's book, The Gospel According to Jesus, in the late eighties reopened the debate among evangelical Christians concerning the true essence of the Gospel. What must a person do to be saved? Must one embrace Christ as Lord as well as Savior? Is repentance essential to salvation? Similarly, the publication in 1994 of "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" sparked controversy because of, among other things, the statement "we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ." Because the document was drafted by eight Protestants and seven Roman Catholics, considerable debate centered on whether that statement was an abandonment of the "*sola fide*" cry of the Reformation. Is justification solely by faith in Christ's substitutionary work on the Cross or does it involve faith in Christ via means of grace administered by the Roman Catholic Church? Besides such prominent controversies, anyone seeking to speak to others about God's salvation wants to be sure to be sure to present the terms of the Gospel clearly. Thus the question: What must a person do to be saved?

### WHAT MUST A PERSON DO TO BE SAVED?

**A person must believe (exercise faith) to be saved.** Every presentation of the Gospel invitation in the New Testament includes a call to "believe." Scores of passages in the New Testament present "believing" as the single human requirement for salvation,<sup>1</sup> e.g., John 3:36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." When the Philippian jailer asked, asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?", Paul and Barnabas simply replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." (Acts 16:30-31) Conversely, the damning sin of the ungodly is precisely their failure to believe in Jesus Christ (John 8:24, 16:9).

It is clear that the locus of this saving faith is the saving work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, on the Cross. In I Corinthians 15:1-8, the Apostle Paul proclaims the crucial elements of the Gospel: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This passage assumes an understanding of the lost and sinful condition of man (without that "bad news" there is no need for the Gospel "Good News." Cf., Rom. 3:23; 6:23) and it assumes an understanding of divine credentials of Jesus as eternal Son of God, incarnate and impeccable. That this saving faith is not mere intellectual assent, but an act of personal appropriation is indicated in John 1:12, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..." Here the act of "believing" is equated with the act of "receiving." That act of "believing-receiving" is a deliberate casting of my eternal destiny upon Jesus who died in my place to take my punishment for me and to effect my justification.<sup>2</sup>

The biblical teaching of salvation by faith is the antithesis of salvation by meritorious works. The seminal "faith without works" text in the Scriptures is Genesis 15:6, "Abram

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 1:12; 3:15-18; 3:36; 5:24; 6:29, 40, 47; 11:25, 26; 20:31; Acts 10:43; 13:39, 48; 16:31; Rom. 1:16; 3:22; 4:3, 24; 10:4; I Cor. 1:21; Gal. 3:6, 22; I Tim. 1:16; Heb. 10:39; James 2:23; I John 5:1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Morris: "Broadly we may say that [John] uses the word [the verb πίστεύω] in four ways. He uses it broadly of believing facts and the like 12 times, of believing people (or Scriptures, etc.) 19 times, and of believing 'in' Christ 36 times, while 30 times he uses it absolutely....There is nothing unusual about believing 'that' such and such things happened, nor in believing people (dative). More significant is the use of the verb with the preposition ἐν to believe "into." While it may be overpressing the use of the preposition to insist on its literal meaning yet John's idea is not unlike that of Paul when he speaks of men as being "in" Christ. Faith, for John, is an activity which takes men right out of themselves and makes them one with Christ." Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971, pp. 335-6)

believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Here is the language of “faith alone,” imputation and justification. The New Testament leaves no doubt concerning the salvation-by-faith-alone significance of this passage. Abraham’s faith is pivotal to Paul’s great argument of justification by faith in Romans 4, especially verses 2-3, “If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”<sup>3</sup> Romans 4 is reinforced by other texts of compelling clarity, e.g., Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5

**A person must repent to be saved.** The biblical word for repentance is “metanoia,” a word meaning literally “a change of mind” (about Jesus Christ). Men were called upon by the Apostles to exercise repentance: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 2:37-38) Paul explained his missionary ministry to King Agrippa in terms of repentance, “I preached that they should repent and turn to God...” (Acts 26:20) Some object that calling unbelievers to repentance is a perversion of the “faith alone” Gospel; that it is an addition of works to grace. After hearing Peter’s report of the salvation of Cornelius and his household, the conclusion of the leading Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem was, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” (Acts 11:18) These early believers understood that saving repentance was not a human work, but a gift from God. Paul agrees in II Timothy 2:25 which is an exhortation to Timothy to kindly and patiently teach God’s Word to the opponents of the Gospel “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...” Here again the origin of repentance is assigned to God. Repentance is no more a human work than is faith in Christ, indeed it is a component of faith. Chafer explains, “...repentance is not to be added to belief as a separate requirement for salvation....repentance is essential to salvation and ...none could be saved apart from repentance, but it is included in believing and could not be separated from it.”<sup>4</sup>

**A person must confess Jesus as Lord to be saved.** Romans 10:9-10 introduces the matter of confessing Christ as *Lord* to be saved, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” The “lordship salvation” debate hinges on what is meant to confess Christ as Lord.

If, by “lordship salvation” one means laying before the inquirer a code of “dos and don’ts” with the expected exaction of a promise of adherence, then “lordship salvation” is not biblical. Salvation is not a barter transaction of giving something *to* God to get something *from* God. In that case, how much must one promise to God? Who, at any point in his Christian experience, ever fully understands the implications of the lordship of Christ in his life. Even the dedicated Apostle Paul, while confessing a clear conscience before God, added the caveat, “...but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.” (I Cor. 4:4) He believed that he was fully surrendered to the lordship of Christ, but humbly acknowledged that only God knew for sure! Every day the believer discovers new horizons of life to surrender to Christ.

On the other hand, if, by “non-lordship salvation” one means that an inquirer can be saved who desires to claim God’s gift of salvation but openly rejects the divine authority of Christ in his life, than, that, too, is unbiblical. Such an attitude is at variance with the I Thes. 1:9 description of saving repentance, “...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” Simply believing in Christ as Savior is an implicit acknowledgement of His authority. The Bible calls saving faith an act of obedience.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also the use of Gen. 3:15 in Gal. 3:6-14.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. III, Dallas Seminary Press, Dallas, Texas, 1948, p. 373.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Heb. 5:9; I Peter 4:17; II Thes. 1:8

The truth lies between these two extremes. If a sinner is to genuinely receive Christ as Savior, he must place his faith in not a manmade caricature of Jesus but the true and biblical Jesus. Who is the true and biblical Jesus? He is the *Lord Jesus Christ*, i.e., He is necessarily and constitutionally Lord, Savior (Jesus means “Savior”) and Messiah (the Hebrew title behind the Greek title, “Christ,” “the anointed one of God”) In that sense, we do not *make* Christ Lord, He already *is* Lord. It is significant that “Lord” is used of Christ 747 times in the New Testament. In Acts, Christ is called “Lord” 92 times and Savior only twice. To be saved, one must trust in Christ *as He is*, not Christ *according to my definition*. Saving faith is a believing in a “whole” biblical Christ, not a humanly depreciated Christ.

Admittedly, people are saved without hearing a clear presentation of the lordship of Christ; sometimes the vocabulary of lordship may not have even been mentioned by the soul-winner. But is it not true that in these cases there is nevertheless an implicit recognition of the lordship of Christ? The new convert recognizes that Christ holds him morally accountable for his sin; Christ has the right to judge him; Christ determines the terms of salvation. All these truths are included in the simplest presentations of the Gospel and all of these are lordship issues whether the term is used or not. The degree of emphasis on the lordship of Christ in a Gospel presentation will be determined by the soul-winner’s perception of the inquirer’s heart. In the case of the Philippian jailer the message was simply, “Believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:31) while Christ’s answer to the rich young ruler’s salvation query was, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22) Christ, in this case, pressed the lordship issue because He perceived the idolatrous commitment of this young man to his wealth. Stressing the lordship of Christ is particularly necessary in cases in which the soul-winner discerns superficiality or reserve in the inquirer.

If every Gospel presentation had to be doctrinally perfect, few would be saved. Despite our sometimes stumbling attempts in sharing the Gospel, the Holy Spirit may nevertheless do His marvelous work of regenerating a lost soul. The new birth occurs not because one has pronounced the correct formula, but because God, in response to a man’s faith (paradoxically initiated and empowered by God<sup>6</sup>) creates spiritual life, transforming the individual from a child of darkness into a child of God. “God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his...’” (II Tim. 2:19) This reassurance should surely not promote laxity in our witness but rather remind us that the new birth is God’s sovereign and miraculous act.

Timothy G. Walton  
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<sup>6</sup> That God is the originator of faith is necessitated by the spiritual deadness and blindness of the unregenerate. Cf. John 6:44, 65; Rom. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:1.